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## Identity and Game

An Attempt at a Sociological Interpretation of Milan Kundera's Story *The Hitchhiking Game*

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts a sociological interpretation of the interaction between the characters from the story *The Hitchhiking Game* by Milan Kundera. Applying different perspectives connected with interpretative sociology, the paper shows how and to what degree the social actors redefine their roles and identities within a social context. The social context changes in accordance with the game the actors undertake. The relation between them is analyzed on the two levels of personal identity and social identity, both of which refer to the two temporal sequences, before and during the game. In trying to show and explain an identity conflict (personal identity versus social identity), the structural theory, specifically the concept of the latent binary opposites in the actors' interaction which express the nature versus culture conflict, is employed. The paper seeks to reveal the most basic rules governing individuals' behaviour and shows how fragile their relationships are. A "personal social world" can be destroyed by an apparently innocent game.

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"In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality"

*Robert Ezra Park*

"We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be"

*Kurt Vonnegut*

### Introduction

Many years ago, when I read Milan Kundera's *The Hitchhiking Game* for the first time, I had the impression that it was a very "sociological" story with much in common with that branch of study. I was not able to analyse the story in terms of sociological theories; I simply "felt" this. Now that I have become familiar with modern sociological perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, I have returned to the story in order to verify whether my impression was correct.

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For the purposes of this essay I have accepted the thesis which dates from the findings of G. H. Gadamer, is now commonly accepted in modern hermeneutics and according to which no interpretation of a literary work can be independent from the cognitivizing subject. The only conclusion we can reach is an approximation to an understanding [Gadamer 1977]. Therefore, I think that my interpretation of Kundera's story is one of many possible interpretations. I do not claim "objectivity" or "truth" because everybody has a right to understand the sense of this story in a different way. At the same time, no one has the right to evaluate my interpretation as "better" or "worse".

For the purposes of this article I will use elements of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, dramaturgical analysis, with a small admixture of structural anthropology. I am aware of the differences between these theories and perspectives. In my opinion, however, these differences are caused by different academic traditions; yet in point of fact, all these visions of the social world have more in common than they do differences. Common to all of them is a denial of positivistic sociology, naturalism and "macro-social idolatry", and a focus on what is going on between individuals – on interaction, communication and the process of objectivation of one's subjective social reality.

I would like this article to become a test of the explanatory possibilities of the mentioned theories. I am interested whether, if applied to problems they did not invent for themselves and which perfectly fit the area of their concerns, they will reveal hidden springs of human interaction.

For the reader who may not know Kundera's *The Hitchhiking Game*, I will give a brief outline of the story before turning to the main body of the article.

### **The story**

A girl and a boy were going on their first vacation together. She was a little old-fashioned: shy, modest and often jealous of the boy, who valued her most of all because of her purity. In his eyes this was what distinguished her from other women. The girl sometimes dreamed of being lighthearted, self-assured, bold and seductive like other women. She was afraid that women like this might be more attractive for the boy and that one day they could take her lover away from her. However, the boy was like a careful guardian to the girl and said that he had had enough of superficial flirtation.

The car was running out of gas, so the boy drove to a gas station and the girl "took a little walk in the meantime", and then waited for the boy on the highway. When the boy's sports car appeared she began to wave at it like a hitchhiker. The car stopped, the boy leaned toward the window and, like an unknown driver, asked the hitchhiker where she was headed.

The game between them started at this moment. The girl began playing her role as an artful seductress – by which she was fulfilling her hidden desire – a hitchhiker looking for a love affair. The boy began to play the role of a gallant seducer. However, the girl suddenly realized with fear excited by jealousy that the boy was acting in a way which had always alarmed her. He was flattering and flirting with an unknown woman (not with her but with an unknown hitchhiker). She felt she had caught the boy out being unfaithful and had proved his guilt. The boy noticed anger in her face and tried to stop the game. He put his arm around her shoulders and said her name. But the girl, blinded by jealousy, misunderstood his intentions, repulsed him (or actually the unknown driver) and said that

he was going a bit too fast. The girl was reasonable and, a few minutes later, regretted her stupid suspiciousness, but the boy, insulted by the girl's refusal to be herself and stop the game, wanted to get his own back on the hitchhiker. He stopped flattering her and started to play the tough guy – self-assured, willful and ruthlessly macho – he had never been, but had often wanted to become. At last, he had a chance to play the role of his dreams. Meanwhile, the girl adjusted to the situation and assumed the role of a coquette.

The boy and the girl were going to the Low Tatras, while the hitchhiker wanted to go to Banská Bystrica, her fictitious destination, but when the car came to a major crossroads the boy turned off in a completely different direction. The surprised hitchhiker was promised protection... *“The game all at once went into a higher gear. The sports car was moving away not only from the imaginary goal of Banská Bystrica, but also from the real goal, toward which it had been heading in the morning. (...) Fiction was suddenly making an assault upon real life. The young man was moving away from himself and from the implacable straight road, from which he had never strayed until now”* [Kundera 1978: 12].

The boy and the girl drove into an unknown town and decided to spend the night in a hotel. The game went on. While the driver was trying to get the key at the reception desk, the girl, who was waiting in the car, had the idea that other women might have also waited for the boy in the same way. However, this time this idea did not hurt her. She was almost delighted that since she had become one of those indecent women she was so jealous of, she was using their weapons and cutting them all out. She believed that in using the ability to be all women she could captivate her lover. The conversation between the hitchhiker and driver during supper in a shabby restaurant lost all pretence of innocent flirtation and proceeded to the extremes of rudeness. The girl was shamelessly seducing the unknown man and he, caddishly, like the real “demoniacal man”, responded to her call. However, the boy did not stop seeing “his” girl in the lighthearted hitchhiker and her perfect metamorphosis started to irritate him. He was angry at how well the girl was able to become a lascivious woman. He started to suspect her of really being like the type of women she was pretending to be. Indeed, in his mind, how else could she transform herself so easily into this kind of women? The boy thought: *“What she was acting now was she herself; perhaps it was that part of her being which had formerly been locked up and which the pretext of the game had let out of its cage. Perhaps the girl supposed that by means of the game she was disowning herself, but wasn't it the other way around? Wasn't she becoming herself only through the game?”* [Ibid.: 16]. The boy had the feeling of being present while his girl was seducing a strange man. He was becoming more and more angry, but simultaneously the more the girl withdrew from him psychically, the more he wanted her physically.

The girl rose, replying directly to the boy's question that she was going “to piss”, thus breaking the barrier of shame and violating the taboo. When she walked through the room, some intoxicated men commented on her body and this gave her pleasure. Seeing it, the boy became more vulgar in his speech and mannerisms. He did not hide his intentions and let the girl go with him to their room. In the small room he looked at the defiant hitchhiker searching for the familiar features of the girl he valued so much. *“It was as if he were looking at two images through the same lens, at two images superimposed one upon the other with the one showing through the other. These two images showing through each other were telling him that everything was in the girl, that her soul was so*

*terrifyingly amorphous, that it held faithfulness and unfaithfulness, treachery and innocence, flirtatiousness and chastity. This disorderly jumble seemed disgusting to him, like the variety to be found in a pile of garbage (...) It seemed to him that the girl he loved was a creation of his desire, his thoughts, and his faith and that the real girl now standing in front of him was hopelessly alien, hopelessly ambiguous. He hated her” [Ibid.: 21].*

The boy felt hatred toward the girl and longed to humiliate her. He ordered her strip and when she refused he took a banknote from his wallet and offered it her. The girl felt that they were passing through a border they should not pass, but she did not have enough strength to put a stop to the destructive game.

When, after the provocative striptease, the girl was standing in front of the boy completely naked, she hoped that the game would end. She thought that in stripping off her clothes she had also stripped away her mask. An expression of embarrassment and shame appeared on her face, an expression which was natural to her. However, the boy, with fury and hatred, did not notice this change. He wanted revenge, not on the hitchhiker but on his girlfriend! He wanted to treat her as a whore. He did not know how to do it, so he used ideas from films and literature. He forced the girl to climb on a small table (which was to replace the imagined shiny top of a piano with a woman in black underwear and blackstockings) and issued his orders. She had to salute, wiggle her hips, dance and sit down. Finally, he had violent intercourse with her – without kissing, without emotion and without love.

Then, the game was over. The girl and the boy were lying beside one another in the dark in such a way that their bodies would not touch. *“The girl’s hand diffidently, childishly touched his. It touched, withdrew, then touched again, and then a pleading, sobbing voice broke the silence, calling him by his name and saying, ‘I am me, I am me...’ The young man was silent, he didn’t move, and he was aware of the sad emptiness of the girl’s assertion, in which the unknown was defined in terms of the same unknown quantity. (...) There were still thirteen days’ vacation before them” [Ibid.: 25].*

### **Kundera in the mirror of sociology**

I think that the crucial factor to be analyzed in order to understand the events from Kundera’s story is the problem of identity. Successive turns in the plot, changes of masks and modulations of interaction between the girl and boy are tightly connected with the identities of those social actors and are precisely reflected in them. I accept H. Bausinger’s definition of identity, according to which identity is the whole body of the subject’s personal constructs which they refer to themselves. This entirety is not a mere sum of the elements but is to a large extent an integrated system. The elements of this construction of one’s self are based on identification with other persons and groups, and with selected social structures such as values, norms and artefacts [Bausinger 1983: 337]. To put it simply, I understand the identity of a social actor as an arrangement of their auto-definitions, the system of ideas which define who they were, who they are and who they would like to be.

Before I go on to meritum, I will discuss the notion of a social role which, in a sense, “naturally” precedes the problem of identity. In defining the role I follow P. Berger and T. Luckmann. They refer the role to the socially objectivated form of an action which takes place in the context of a certain knowledge, common to a particular social grouping, the action in which a person and other individuals are treated as exchangeable types [see

Berger and Luckmann 1991: 89-96]. As Berger writes, *“In a sociological perspective, identity is socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed”* [Berger 1963: 98]. A certain social role is connected with a defined identity. This means that each change of the performed social role generates a change in an individual’s identity [see Berger and Luckmann 1991: 194-200].

Simultaneously, my analysis will use the interactionist model of identity, in which identity is defined as a product of interaction, and interaction as a permanent process. In this dynamic concept of identity I would like to emphasize the assumption about the feedback between the subjective self and the looking-glass self, i.e. ideas one has about oneself and which signal to partners in interaction, and ideas of oneself which are inferred from the behaviour of others. The impression that a partner of interaction perceives one in a particular way reinforces one’s conviction that one matches this perception and, on the other hand, one’s strong idea about oneself increases the probability that one’s partner will perceive one the way one perceives oneself [see Piotrowski 1985: 64-66; Boksanski 1990: 88-94].

In my opinion, both concepts – the one wherein identity is closely associated with a concrete social role, and the one which points to interaction as the basic factor determining identity – complement each other perfectly. An individual assumes a mask and performs a particular social role which gives them a proper identity, and then, during interactions, through so-called interpretative procedures (i.e. the stable cognitive schemes), a local “agreement” concerning the sense of an action takes place, a definitional consensus which fixes the individual’s identity, is generated. E. Goffman writes *“this self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it”* [Goffman 1990: 244-245].

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The girl and boy were two social actors who were not able to master the game they had started. Here it is useful to differentiate between analyses of interaction. On the one hand, there is interaction as the “game” which is performed by actors who are completely conscious of the fact of performing, that their behaviour is produced and who also take into account the expectations and reactions of a partner. On the other hand, there is interaction as a “performance” in which there is no obligation to be conscious of “acting” and the behaviour of partners can be perceived, both in reference to the interactor and to oneself, as “natural” [see Goffman 1990: 76-82; Tittenbrun 1983: 181-186].

Up until the moment when the girl decided to play the hitchhiker and the boy the strange driver, their interaction was a “conventional performance”, in which the actors played the role of lovers, roles which provided them with a defined identity. From the moment the game was initiated, however, the roles which had been played up until that point were changed into those of the hitchhiker and the (initially) kind driver. The new roles provided them with new identities. It was not, certainly, a mere replacement of the old identities by the new ones, but a kind of diffusion, an overlapping of both identities, which became the reason for their tragedy. The identities which were connected with the roles of the hitchhiker and driver were not immutable and rigid, but were constantly re-interpreted. It is significant how, as a result of the constant process of re-defining the

situation, the gallant driver and flirtatious hitchhiker were step by step approaching the culturally defined boundaries of their roles, transforming themselves into the characters of a brutal, coarse conqueror-man and a vulgar vamp-woman. Language also plays a significant role in re-defining a situation and building different semantic fields, i.e. classificational schemes which generate a collection of meanings, for different things, phenomena or persons, which order one's social experiences. The semantic fields of the words "love" and "flirtation" are quite different; hence this sudden transformation of the nature of relations between the girl and boy caused so many tensions [Berger and Luckmann 1991: 49-61].

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Here, a slight complication must be introduced. I think that the disturbances which emerged in the interaction between the boy and girl were caused not only by the simple change in their roles, which led them to a kind of identity schizophrenia, but also by the "structural jump" in the area in which identity manifested itself.

I now turn to E. Goffman's concept, in which he distinguishes three "incarnations" of a social actor's identity (they should not be treated as types or levels of identity). Those three "incarnations" of identity are social identity, personal identity and self identity.

- *Social identity* refers to the area of highly stereotyped categories which are based on socio-cultural patterns of classifying persons who are recognized as members of a particular group.
- *Personal identity* arises in the area of close and intimate interaction, and is tied up with an aspiration to treat a partner in interaction in terms of their non-recurring nature and the recognition of their unique individualities.
- *Self identity* consists of all the auto-definitions of an individual [Bokszanski 1987: 75-78].

I think that the last "incarnation" of identity will be the least useful in my analysis.

It can be observed that the relationship between the boy and girl was connected first and foremost with the sphere of personal identity. These young people treat each other not as "social types" but as peculiar and unique partners. In this area, the girl's identity is perceived (and therefore amplified) by her interactor in the context of such qualities as shyness, timidity, and purity. The boy's identity is characterized in his girl's eyes by responsibility, protectiveness and delicacy.

The relationship between the hitchhiker and driver was completely different. In order to perform their new roles the girl and boy had to use the stock of social categorization, knowledge which they had internalized through the process of socialization, which prompted them as to what the behaviour of a hitchhiker who chases men and a driver who has nothing against a "small adventure" should resemble. The alternation of roles transported the centre of gravity of their interaction from personal identity to social identity. This can be illustrated by the following scheme.

The relation between actors before they started the game:

	GIRL	BOY
PERSONAL IDENTITY	+	+
SOCIAL IDENTITY	-	-

The relation between actors during the game:

	HITCHHIKER	DRIVER
PERSONAL IDENTITY	-	-
SOCIAL IDENTITY	+	+

However, as I stated above, the new identities do not necessarily replace the old ones. They can settle near them or rather “on them”. Hence, the real arrangement of roles and identities during the game could be different:

	GIRL HITCHHIKER	BOY DRIVER
PERSONAL IDENTITY	- +	- +
SOCIAL IDENTITY	+ -	+ -

Here, there is a role conflict and a double identity conflict. This mixture, extremely dangerous for the coherence of human relationships, necessarily destroyed interaction and, most importantly, made identity uncertain. Even more, the described conflicts could be of a deeper, latent character. There are a pair of very basic binary opposites in the story’s structure and in the characters’ behaviour which had a pre-defined hidden and unconscious sense of the interaction [my intuitions are based on C. Lévi-Strauss’ hypotheses which are to be found in Lévi-Strauss 1972: 71-80].

Its external manifestations are visible if we compare the behaviour of the actors before and during the game. Before the game, the boy was protective and the girl innocent. During the game, the driver became aggressive and the hitchhiker a vamp. Before the game, we could observe male-female relations which were channeled by culture while during the game, unrestricted female-male behaviour gained the advantage. The elementary and primary contradiction between culture and nature is revealed here. This can be illustrated by the following scheme:

	HER	HIM
NATURE	vampishness (hitchhiker)	aggressiveness (driver)
CULTURE	innocence (girl)	protectiveness (boy)

Using a different pair of metaphors, we can say that the nature versus culture conflict, manifest in the experiences of the two lovers, was also a collision of the Dionysian and Apollonian myths. The Dionysian myth tells of sensual pleasure, the source of which is letting off steam, pleasure which is brief and often leaves a sediment of guilt (because generally finding an outlet for one’s energy is connected with the rejection and violation of social norms and morality) but which is extremely strong, indeed total.

In the Apollonian myth, pleasure is not as sensual. Its main source is the experience of beauty which is like the soft wash of tides on the shore. It does not have the strength of a tempest but, in the long run, its impact is deeper and more effective. Harmony, modesty and wisdom are the most important qualities of the Apollonian myth [Nietzsche 1990].

The love between the boy and girl was flourishing under the patronage of Apollo, and, within his guardianship, bore wonderful fruits: attachment, confidence, care, and responsibility. Unfortunately, the devil or consumer society of the end of the 20th century was not whiling away its time. It prompted their souls with the diabolic temptation of conformism, of being like "everybody else", i.e. an adjustment to the cultural models of "normality". The pressure of uniformity made the girl lament her innocence and generated the desire to be like an attractive "dragon-fly". The boy felt "uncomfortable" performing the "old-fashioned" role of protector and dreamed of being a demoniacal seducer.

We should ask whether the situation described by Kundera is realistic, i.e. whether a situation like this could happen in reality and not only in the world of fiction. The author responds to this question: *"Even in a game there lurks a lack of freedom; even a game is a trap for the players. If this had not been a game and they had really been two strangers, the hitchhiker could long ago have taken offense and left. But there's no escape from a game. A team cannot flee from the playing field before the end of the match, chess pieces cannot desert the chessboard: the boundaries of the playing field are fixed. The girl knew that she had to accept whatever form the game might take, just because it was a game. (...) Just because it was only a game her soul was not afraid, did not oppose the game, and narcotically sank deeper into it"* [Kundera 1978: 20].

Paraphrasing the famous W. I. Thomas' theorem, one can add that when social actors define their game as real, the consequences of the undertaken game are always real, regardless of whether they are right or wrong. As Goffman would say, one cannot free oneself from the micro-social rules of a scene, one lacks free will, and when one performs a role one becomes its slave. One is but a performer of the character who was one's task [Goffman 1990: 244-247].

A game may be dangerous both for its participants and the entire social scene. Actors are menaced by disorganization or even the disintegration of their identity, and the scene is menaced by destruction of the performance. A game which reveals the artificiality of performance and which makes actors aware of the fact that they are just actors, not free human beings who behave naturally, may, through this de-mystification, destroy the obviousness of the "Lebenswelt-performance". A game is like cancer. Just as cancer cells do not stop themselves because their unlimited growth will cause the destruction of the whole body, and with it, they themselves, so a game does not take into account the fact that its success can demolish the whole theater. The roots of social order are based on human interaction; therefore a stoppage of discourse may mean the "destruction of the world".

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At several points, both the boy and girl tried to negotiate a return to the "normal" definition of the situation, but unfavorable circumstances seemed stronger [Halas 1987: 114]. Unexpected events undermined the frame of their relationship. As Goffman writes, *"I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of or-*



ganization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify. That is my definition of frame” [Goffman 1986: 10-11]. The frame organizes meanings of particular events and responds to the question “What is going on here?”. These “carbon-copies” of previous experiences mediate in communication between individuals. We can see in Kundera’s story a conflict of frames. The frame which accompanied the boy-girl relation was different to the one in which the hitchhiker-driver relation took place. Moreover, the former was to some extent produced by the lovers themselves while the latter is a completely social and stereotyped construction.

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The plot of Kundera’s story can also be described in terms of the breakdown of the most comprehensive, the highest level of legitimation of the institutional order and the individual’s biography. Here I mean the symbolic universe, which Berger and Luckmann define as “*bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality*” [Berger and Luckmann 1991: 113]. One of the most crucial functions of the symbolic universe is re-establishing order in the individual’s subjective perception of their experiences; in particular, the so-called marginal situations, i.e. those which are not included in the reality of everyday existence in society. Berger and Luckmann give examples of marginal situations such as dreams and reveries [Berger and Luckmann 1991: 114]. I think that it is possible to extend this category to games: games are a peculiar “practical” attempt to make dreams of being somebody else real. An efficient symbolic universe should allow one to return to reality and to the subjective individual’s identity. Berger and Luckmann write that “*the symbolic universe establishes a hierarchy, from the “most real” to the most fugitive self-apprehensions of identity. This means that the individual can live in society with some assurance that he really is what he considers himself to be as he plays his routine social role, in broad daylight and under the eyes of significant others*” [Berger and Luckmann 1991: 118]. The boy and girl found themselves alone in a marginal situation which they had initiated. They were neither “*under the eyes of significant others*” nor “*in broad daylight*” and the pressure of uncommonness and extraordinariness “produced” by the game exploded the symbolic universe.

### Conclusions

Milan Kundera’s story is a typical tragedy of our times. It shows the “mechanization” of human behaviour, the syndrome of “insatiability”, the advantage of non-authenticity, *das Man*, over the pursuit of originality and making one’s peculiarity real.

In my article, I sought to show some complications of Kundera’s story by using elements of certain sociological visions of the social world. I “exploited” the concepts of social role, identity, interaction, the definition of situation, game and performance. I discussed the issue of semantic fields, structural oppositions, frames and the symbolic universe; the whole arsenal of sociological weapons. Did this measure up to expectations? The right of appraisal belongs to the reader. In my opinion, nevertheless, this sociological apparatus (probably not always graceful and elegant) made it possible to raise some “curtains” and come closer to the “truth”. For me, the truth is the appeal of “recognizing oneself” and discovering the rules which control human behaviour. This knowledge is necessary for that consciousness of one’s limitations without which there is no freedom.

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