

Bernardo Kucinski

Stops: **Brazil, Poland, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States**

(1937-)



Bernardo Kucinski, or B. Kucinski, was born in 1937 in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. He graduated in Physics (1968) and earned a doctorate in Communication Sciences (1991) from the University of São Paulo (USP), where he was a full professor in the Department of Journalism and Publishing at the School of Communication and Arts (ECA). Between 2003 and 2005, he served as an advisor to the Presidency of the Republic of Brazil during the administration of Lula da Silva. He is the author of works on politics, economics, and journalism, such as *Abertura: a história de uma crise* [*Opening: the history of a crisis*] (1982), *A ditadura da dívida* [*The dictatorship of the debt*] (1987), *O que são Multinacionais* [*What are Multinationals*] (1991), and *Jornalismo na era virtual* [*Journalism in the virtual era*] (2005).

His debut in the literary field occurred only at the age of 74 with the book *K.: relato de uma busca* [*K.: Chronicle of a Search*]. In addition to this, B. Kucinski is also the author of other works that deal with traumatic episodes in Brazilian history, such as *Você vai voltar pra mim e outros contos* [*You will come back to me and other stories*] (2014), *Júlia: nos campos conflagrados do senhor* [*Júlia: in the Lord's burned fields*] (2020), and *O congresso dos desaparecidos: drama em prosa* [*Conference of the disappeared: drama in prose*] (2023). He also dedicated some pages to stories that reflect on contemporary issues, such as *Pretérito imperfeito* [*Unfinished past*] (2017) and *A Nova Ordem* [*The New Order*] (2019).

K.: Chronicle of a Search was published in 2011 by Expressão Popular, later reissued in 2014 by Cosac Naify and in 2016 by Companhia das Letras, was translated into eight languages

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and shortlisted for the São Paulo Literature Prize and the Portugal Telecom Prize (now Oceanos). In this work, the author interweaves fiction and reality to narrate a story which has wounds that remain open both on a personal and collective level: the disappearance of his sister, Ana Rosa Kucinski, during the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985).

This novel can be read as a memoir, where gaps are filled through a fictional game that encompasses a multitude of textual genres and varied narrative viewpoints. Of the twenty-nine chapters that comprise it, fifteen are narrated in the third person and revolve around K.'s search for his missing daughter, while the remaining chapters present different perspectives: some chapters are narrated by victims, while others are narrated by military figures from the dictatorship. Only in this way was the author able to organise a tragic and violent past, the dire consequences of which tend to be mitigated by sympathisers of the movement.

The political disappearances during the military dictatorship in Brazil, whose whereabouts have never been satisfactorily revealed, expose a national amnesia marked by a significant indifference of the population to the crimes committed during that period. Set in this context, B. Kucinski's first literary book focuses on a family story: the disappearance of his sister and the father's relentless search for his daughter's whereabouts. To the Brazilian horror another atrocious event of the 20th century is added: the persecution of Jews in the early 20th century and the Shoah. After all, this father was forced to emigrate from Poland in 1935, specifically from the streets of Wloclawek, where he had been dragged by the Polish police for being part of a Jewish workers' movement and accused of subversion. Furthermore, years later, the remaining Kucinski relatives in Poland were decimated by the Nazis.

If the displacement of character K., coinciding with the forced mobility of the author's father, Meir Kucinski, was due to political persecution and the fact he was Jewish, in Brazil, the promise of a new beginning and better days is dissolved in the face of the barbarity committed by the military against those they considered subversive: the communists. Thus, because of political struggles and ideologies, the protagonist finds himself, once again,

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compelled to the diasporic experience, forced into both real and symbolic displacement in the quest for more information about his daughter.

The disappearance of Ana Rosa, referenced only by the initial A. in the novel, is indicated through her elision in language. She appears only as a spectral shadow that hovers through the pages, haunting the characters, especially the father who must deal with a situation revealing his ignorance in the face of the most unusual, yet real, circumstances. The Kafkaesque intertextuality present in *K.: Chronicle of a Search* is justified in this way. Beyond the allusion to the author's surname, K. refers to Joseph K., the character in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*: both K. in Kucinski and K. in Kafka delve into murky waters in a futile search for the truth. Rebelling against the system, they recognise that "The State has no face or feelings; it is opaque and perverse. Its only crack is corruption. But sometimes even that closes for higher reasons. And then the State becomes doubly evil, for its cruelty and for being unattainable" (Kucinski 2022: 23).

This is the reason that compels K. to the diasporic experience. Faced with evil, he finds himself displaced once again: first, he must leave his comfort zone to try to discover who his daughter had become; then, in the face of fruitless attempts for valid information from national institutions, K. must again emigrate with the hope of obtaining some kind of news that could bring him comfort.

The father's search begins at the university where his daughter was a professor at the Institute of Chemistry at the University of São Paulo. In a context of repression and informers lurking, he encounters more suspicious and fearful glances than answers. Seeking A.'s superiors seemed an even worse mistake. Thus, like a detective piecing together scattered and disjointed clues, K. continues his attempt to reconstruct his daughter's story. He discovers the vastness of her hidden, second life at a meeting of the families of the disappeared when his suspicions are confirmed: A. was involved in clandestine resistance against the dictatorial regime. Guilt and regret are now added to his concern, for not being present when his daughter needed him, for not suspecting what she was doing. He then begins to blame himself and his love for Yiddish literature, this "corpse-language," which

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made him absent from A.'s life.

In a Kafkaesque scenario, K.'s search becomes even more perilous, as he is transformed into a symbol – “the icon of the father of a political ‘disappeared’” (*idem*: 98) – on the one hand, he feels protected, for in the face of his public and media presence, nothing could be done to him. If it were, it would be akin to an admission of the violence perpetrated by the dictatorial regime whose crimes were denied. On the other hand, he realises he is even more vulnerable to the “adverse psychological warfare” (*idem*: 74) practised by the military, which consisted of gaslighting the enemy, an effective form of torture.

Throughout his search for his daughter, K. is forced to undergo a kind of symbolic displacement, confronting the agents of a failed justice system, increasingly willing to cover up their crimes. Therefore, alongside the symbolic displacement, he must add a real displacement: if the country that had welcomed him when persecuted for being Jewish now persecutes him and blames him for having a communist daughter, he is left with no choice but to emigrate once again and seek support from international authorities.

Seeking help in the process of searching for news about his daughter, K. had been to Amnesty International in London, appealed to the Red Cross in Geneva, petitioned the Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States (OAS), and finally turned to the American Jewish Committee, questioning its representative for not publicly criticising the Brazilian dictatorship. The geographic crossing proves ineffective: the militants of the clandestine struggle in Brazil disappeared without a trace. Therefore, after passing through the “America of steel and oil fortunes” (*idem*: 62), K. is troubled by a bitter thought: perhaps, if he had chosen North America instead of South America, the tragedy that struck his daughter might not have happened.

The diaspora in *K.: Chronicle of a Search* is conceived through the experience of the father himself, Meir Kucinski, a Polish Jew who was forced to emigrate after being convicted in his home country for conducting communist propaganda through his activity in Paolei-Zion, the Workers of Zion Party. To the traditional concept of diaspora, associated with divine

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punishment that condemned the Jewish people to exile and suffering, an expanded sense is added, including those who find no resting place or dwelling anywhere. Perhaps, for this reason, continuing the paternal lineage (Meir Kucinski was an award-winning writer in Yiddish), Bernardo also ventures into literary paths. After all, if memory does not offer redemption for a traumatic past, literature can be, at least, a form of survival. Derived from various traumas and constant displacements, this novel becomes, therefore, a tomb for B. Kucinski's missing sister.

K.: Chronicle of a Search has the challenging task of dealing with a traumatic past promoted by the military dictatorship. Therefore, by transforming memory into literature, even when faced with more gaps and questions than answers, B. Kucinski, through his novel, entrusts to the other, in this case, the contemporary reader, the critical knowledge of a recent past in national history marked by suffering and mourning. In this way, even as many deny Brazilian history, this work turns its reader into a kind of witness, ensuring that the past is never forgotten.

Quotations

"K. heard everything, astonished. Even the Nazis, who reduced their victims to ashes, recorded the dead. Each person had a number, tattooed on their arm. They recorded each death in a book. It's true that in the early days of the invasion, there were massacres, and later as well. They lined up all the Jews from a village next to a ditch, shot them, threw lime on top, then soil, and that was it. But the goyim from each place knew that their Jews were buried in that hole, knew how many there were, and who each one was. There was no agony of uncertainty; these were mass executions, not a sinkhole of people." (*K.: relato de uma busca*: 29)

"Some time later, captured and "disappeared" by the military, he left, as his only possession, a revolutionary library of over two thousand volumes, mostly expropriated. Interestingly, on

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the first page of each one, he had signed his name in bold and fast letters, along with the date of expropriation.

Did I want to demarcate ownership? No. It doesn't make sense. Perhaps he knew, yes, and always knew, that the books would be the only traces of his revolutionary vocation, small tombstones of a yet non-existent grave." (*idem*: 60)

"[the rabbi says to K.] What is burial if not returning to the earth what came from the earth? Adam, adamah, man and earth, the same word; the body slowly decomposes, and the soul slowly frees itself; that's why, among us, it is forbidden to cremate or embalm, forbidden to use metal coffins, forbidden to seal with nails, and so many other prohibitions. A burial without a body makes no sense.

[...]

K. feels with unusual intensity the correctness of this precept, the urgency to erect a tombstone for his daughter, as one year of her loss is completed. The absence of the tombstone is equivalent to saying that she never existed, and that was not true: she existed, became an adult, developed a personality, created her world, graduated from university, got married. He experiences the lack of this tombstone as one more disaster, an additional punishment for his indifference to what was happening to his daughter right under his eyes." (*idem*: 86-87)

"When weeks turn into months, he is overcome by fatigue and cools down, but he doesn't give up. The father searching for his missing daughter never gives up. He no longer has hope, but he doesn't give up. Now he wants to know how it happened. Where? When exactly? He needs to know, to measure his own guilt. But they tell him nothing.

Another year, and the dictatorship will finally agonise, so it seems to everyone; but it won't be the agony preceding death, it will be metamorphosis, slow and self-controlled. The father searching for his missing daughter will still stubbornly hold the enlarged photograph at the top of the mast, but sympathetic glances will be scarce. Other flags will emerge, more convenient, other looks. The icon will no longer be necessary; it will even be annoying. The father of the missing daughter will persist, defying common sense.

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A few more years and life will return to a normality from which, for most, it never deviated. Old people die, children are born. The father who sought his daughter no longer searches, overcome by exhaustion and indifference. He no longer raises the mast with the photograph. He ceases to be an icon. He is nothing more. He is the useless trunk of a dry tree.” (*idem*: 98)

“It was as if the essential were missing; it was as if the words, though chosen carefully, instead of revealing the fullness of what he felt, on the contrary, concealed or amputated the main meaning. He couldn’t express his misfortune in the limited semantics of the word, in the overly precise cut of the concept, in the ordinary use of the idiom. He, an award-winning poet of Yiddish, couldn’t attain the desired transcendence through words.

[...]

Gradually, K. became aware that there was a greater impediment. Of course, words always limited what one wanted to say, but that wasn’t the main problem; his block was moral, not linguistic: it was wrong to make his daughter’s tragedy the object of literary creation, nothing could be more wrong.” (*idem*: 145)

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