

A story without a plot, and the paradox of a private/public man: Lessons on masculinity from Patočka, Levinas, and Wenders

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Jan Patočka. Emmanuel Levinas. Wim Wenders. Gender roles. Masculinity.
Phenomenology and film.

This article explores masculinity through the lens of Jan Patočka's philosophical insights, based on Czech writer and dramatist Ivan Vyskočil's texts about masculine-powerful "mastodons", Wim Wenders's film *Perfect Days* (2023). We use an analysis of Levinas's enigmatic concept of *la caresse* (the caress). This concept is rooted in Levinas's understanding of intersubjectivity and the non-invasive relationship with the other and used to explore its implications for gender roles and how they are changing. In order to understand this specific shift, the article contrasts perspectives on public and private spheres, highlighting Patočka's critique of societal power dynamics and victimhood. The analysis of Wenders's film underlines his critique of traditional gender norms, reflecting contemporary discourses on masculinity and identity in terms of the revolt of existential care and *passivity*, which is the opposite of the traditional masculine gender role, which also formed the construction of the analyzed stories.

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In 1963, the philosopher and phenomenologist Jan Patočka wrote an essay for the magazine *Divadlo* (Theater) about the plays of Ivan Vyskočil, a writer and psychologist who, as a young theater artist in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and together with other artists, revived an otherwise moribund Czechoslovak culture with his works for small stages. At that time, *Divadlo* served as a platform for various changes in culture and at the same time “an ideological opposition against the uniform closed model of the world built by communist ideology and political practice” (Šormová 1988, 7). Its rise corresponded with the rise of Czech theater: “A circle of distinguished figures with a common ability to engage in unprejudiced critical thinking, original thought, and theoretical dispositions, established itself around the magazine” (7). The magazine retained its free-thinking and theoretical orientation until it was banned in March 1970.

The *Divadlo* magazine not only captured – as the name suggests – the situation of the theater, but also straddled the media, bringing together creators of the 1960s who needed to break away from the monolithic existence prescribed by the postwar ideology. Therefore, it was quite logical that the magazine’s editorial staff turned, among others, to the leading figure of Czech non-Marxist philosophy – Jan Patočka. Although his reflections were always connected to specific theater productions, they went far beyond them, giving them a more general theoretical dimension and placing contemporary theater in broader social contexts.

Patočka’s essay dealt only with a few years of Vyskočil’s works, namely the plays he created during his association with the Reduta Club, and with such writers as Václav Havel, Jiří Suchý, and Miloš Macourek.¹ It was at Reduta that the socialist-realist theater was transformed beyond recognition – a program built on a subversive mix of sketches, jazz (and later rock) music, beatnik poetry, and pantomime. Patočka was less interested in this subversive aspect than the philosophical themes on offer, which, according to him, were also in need of radical transformation. Patočka characterized the Ivan Vyskočil Theater, later known as the Nedivadlo (Non-Theater), as existential and performative. The very nature of the plays defied the classical structure and habitual dramatic situations. As Patočka aptly describes: “Vyskočil’s works tend to have a *fortissimo* at the beginning or somewhere in the middle, followed by a strange turning point, as if pivoting around a certain moment, a dead point, after which there are no more fireworks. The point on which the work focuses is somewhere else”² (2004, 184). Vyskočil was not only significant for him because he crossed the boundaries of both the dramatic form and of theatrical norms, taking the aspect of dialogical action (*dialogické jednání*) beyond the proscenium and penetrating into the audience. For Vyskočil, dialogue with the *other* was key, whether it be with another actor or an observer of the play. The play thus took place in front of the audience as well as with its participation. This *other* was thus at the center of the performance, not at its periphery. According to Patočka, Vyskočil literally studied dialogical situations that often involved struggle, bluster, or an effort to humble oth-

ers and show off before them, to conceal, cover up, or deceive. However, dialogical action was often connected with absurd scenes and situations, by means of which he (individually and collectively) sought to escape these arrogant *affronts*, and to find a human relationship to the world that was not totalized or deformed. This also explains why nonsense, grotesquerie, and imagination played such an essential role in his works:

We know already that fantasy, as philosophers teach us, is actually the ground on which one gets at the very essence; fantastic variation, variation in fantasy, teaches us to hold on to that which cannot be changed, excluded, replaced, without the thing itself being lost. And it is precisely Vyskočil's fantasies, pranks, and leaps of the imagination that serve as thought experiments for penetrating into this essence, our given human reality, the reality of man in his world.³ (184)

Notwithstanding the fact that Patočka's reflections then turn to the fundamental questions of philosophy, drawing on sophisticated concepts proper to the field, the essay is not a straightforward philosophical text. In the same way as Vyskočil's unique experiments, the essay is an event, one that takes continuously in a kind of double dialogue: that is, as dialogical action both on the stage and in the audience (or with an imagined reader). It is a dialogue about dialogue, a search for a subversive movement to interrupt the seemingly unchangeable structures of our world.⁴

In particular, what Patočka sees in the absurd, non-dramatic, and non-sense qualities of Vyskočil's works, by which the playwright conveys a distinctly different relationship to the world, is a decentralization of power: here, the actor no longer controls the audience, instead acting out those humorous and embarrassing moments in life that do not lead to the usual (theatrical) catharsis. From there, Patočka expands his description of Vyskočil's work to the *fate* of the defenseless, i.e. those who have seen through the principles of power and who no longer wish to participate in it – those who *choose* to be powerless. This leads in turn to a discussion of the nature of power, what power as such actually consists in, who is powerful and who is unable to renounce his position of power, even when it completely engulfs him, when it turns him into a monster – a *mastodon*, as Patočka says.

Patočka's 1963 discussion on the specifics of Vyskočil's artistic experiment will also serve as the point of departure for our reflection on a work in a completely different medium, and of a completely different historical period, namely the German director Wim Wenders's 2023 film *Perfect Days*. It may seem odd to connect Patočka's reflections on Czech drama to a German-Japanese film co-production that premiered exactly sixty years later. For us, however, it seems that Patočka's basic interpretative framework is remarkably contemporary, just as Wenders's film, conversely, seems to involve a return to traditional values. But the observations of the phenomenologist on theater have everything to do with the nature of power and man within a mutual and exceedingly seductive relationship. In today's era of increasing forms of power and the violence that arises from it, we would like to reflect again on the nature of the *mastodon*, or rather on how one can escape its influence and the vicious circle of violent power, how one can enter once more into dialogue with the other, and how to revive the fantasy that helps us rebuild our relationship with human reality. *Perfect*

Days is just one example⁵ of how to be, speak, and see in the face of the paradox of the way we name and depict the world.⁶

Two other philosophers, both working in the field of phenomenology, are also influential here: Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Both consider how to escape from the power of the formative structures of language and from the power of metaphors, which serve precisely in a “usury of language” that further confirms the speaker’s power. In what follows, we consider Levinas’ attempts to compel language to avoid making any claims to being-in-itself. It is no coincidence that themes – or more aptly, perhaps, *strategies* – of love, care, and kindness appear here, these being relational in nature and not involving the exchange of “meaning”.⁷

PERFECT DAYS I: THE STORY WITHOUT A PLOT, A GAZE WITHOUT A VANISHING POINT

The film *Perfect Days* follows the protagonist Hirayama through the course of his daily routine, “observing” him at work, on lunch breaks, and during his free time. The producers’ original intention was to shoot a series of commercials for the Tokyo Olympics (“The Tokyo Toilet”) using public toilets designed by architects from around the world. While the toilets were completed, the films were never made, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, a team of Japanese advertising and industrial companies later approached the director Wim Wender with a proposal to adapt the original concept into a feature-length film about a character who works as cleaning man for these modern toilets.

Wenders began by turning to Japanese film, in particular the works of Yasujiro Ozu, and to Japanese culture of the 1970s (a subject that continues to interest him). Zen minimalism, Japanese social and cultural patterns, and the elements of film language meet here with the values of the Western world and with the formal elements that characterize American art film in particular. We are not interested here in the story of how this film was produced, nor in its aesthetics or reception. Instead, our intention is to see *Perfect Days* as an example of a certain attitude towards the world, in the same way that Vyskočil’s plays serve as an example for Patočka.

If we have deliberately avoided the formulation that Wenders’s film *tells* the story of its protagonist, that is because it tends instead to *show* the events that make up his day-to-day life. Hirayama has few spoken lines, dialogues are sparse, and the film is largely without a plot, developing as a function of the time of day, Hirayama’s duties as they come, and the systems that govern our lives. With regards to narration, we do not find any radical breaks here, no dramatic changes of mood. These happen rather under the smooth surface of monotonous routine. The major events that shape Hirayama’s story – his past and present life – are not included in the plot of the film. Likewise, the internal drama that we suspect lurks somewhere in the background occasionally surfaces, is glimpsed, left unspoken, and covered over by another development in the (non)plot. The (non)narrative structure here is not linear, but circular, so that scenes, situations, and shots return in a slow and regular rhythm, similar to the protagonist’s routine actions and rituals: getting up in the morning, brushing his teeth, putting on his uniform, buying the same drink from the vending machine

in the courtyard, leaving in his van, listening to old cassettes on his way to work, cleaning toilets, visiting the public bathhouse, dining out, reading, and finally falling asleep. On weekends, he takes care of flowers, rides his bicycle, takes his photos to be developed, visits a woman in a bar, and has a drink. The various interruptions by other characters have little effect on these rituals – or rather, Hirayama does not allow them to. Everything past (old media, art, and customs) returns in the present, disparate times overlap, notwithstanding Hirayama's mantra that "next time is next time, now is now". We might say, rather, that everything remains the same.

The tendency of the film to *show* can be identified on several levels. Just as Vyskočil emphasizes dialogue that goes beyond the theatrical space, here too the gaze (as a substitute for dialogue) leaves the space of the fictional world and extends to the imaginary viewer. The gaze is therefore double, with the viewer observing Hirayama as he himself observes. Hirayama is portrayed as practically mute, preferring to watch the world around him, his observation is empathetic, curious, the "gaze"⁸ in and of itself, without meaning or clear purpose. Hirayama does not judge, does not control, does not make sense of the world around him or subordinate it to his life. His gaze is disarmed, just like that of the viewer, who can hardly understand the protagonist and his story, much less control, judge, or gain power over him.

This aspect of an unmotivated and powerless gaze is further underscored by the recurring scenes in which Hirayama, as part of his routine, goes to the park on his lunch break to take photos of trees. It seems to matter little what he photographs, and the photos themselves often lack any clear composition, content, or meaning. This is in part because Hirayama does not look into the viewfinder, aiming the camera randomly and pressing the shutter button without forethought or rational control – a way of creating images that presents a certain paradox within the context of the film. The resulting photographs combine the properties of the camera, the haphazard quality of the natural setting, and the physicality of the photographer. In this way, while they may still enact a certain concentration of the gaze, they also bring into play a kind of *haptic visuality* that denies the dominance of the gaze (its way of taking possession of things and people). It is this decentralization of vision, this shift towards an open perception of the world around us, that may be understood as one way to renounce power, to move away from the center of the perspectival layout of the world, to disavow unambiguous meaning and embrace multiplicities. In contrast to one who actively controls others, Hirayama is depicted as a passive character, carefully working on the border between public and private space, observing but also comprehending through other senses. The film, similarly, does not convey a clear narrative, tending instead to transfer the dialogic structure to individual images and provide atmospheric flow in the place of drama.

THE MASTODON

Let us now return to Patočka's essay on Vyskočil, and his views on power and who wields it. Patočka draws here on his metaphor of the power-hungry mastodon, a creature that turns gradually into a blind, mechanical monster. We find the model of this figure in the lecturer from *Autostop* (by Ivan Vyskočil and Václav Havel), but

it may be applied to anybody who deigns to represent power, order, truth, and the system. In theater, as in other artistic disciplines, one of the ways this “mastodony” is manifested is in the organization of a play around a compact graduated narrative, characteristically seeking to clearly and unambiguously convey a certain content and meaning, to the detriment of all other formal aspects of the medium and of a multiplicity that would otherwise blur boundaries (i.e. between possible meanings, etc.). In the world of fiction, the mastodon may acquire power over the story to become the “owner of the word” who gives meaning to what is said. Mastodons cannot see anyone but themselves, while their desire for more and more power destroys everything that deviates from their views. Vyskočil and Havel chose the title *Autostop*, one may argue, because it shows it is precisely this kind of mechanized power that must be stopped.

Against the mastodons, which, on the surface, commonly appear in the attractive guise of a Faust, Patočka sets – and the gender dimension here is significant – various “Gretchens”. A woman is not typically endowed with power or meaning, so a man that commands both can easily manipulate and abuse her. This gender duality of power/powerlessness is only a superficial stereotype, but it serves Patočka all the better to explain and understand the functioning of power as such, to show how it is possible for a man to be transformed into a non-human dictator who exceeds the limits of human existence. Patočka thus seems to have followed up on Tomáš G. Masaryk’s *Moderní člověk a náboženství* (1934; Eng. trans. *Modern Man and Religion*, 1939), in particular in his passing reflections, in the context of modernism, on the weakness of the “titan”.⁹ Drawing on the example of the relationship between Faust and Markéta (Gretchen), Masaryk follows Gretchen’s submission to Faust’s power, which is disguised as love. The essential thing is that Faust’s abuse and abandonment of Gretchen, his inability to see her as other, is a symptom of his inability to accept responsibility over his own existence or for his own carnal desire, which he thus masquerades as intellectual superiority. Masaryk’s titan is not the only possible expression of masculinity – indeed it is only ever a parody of masculinity, or, more aptly, of humanity.¹⁰

Paradoxically, the mastodon (or Masaryk’s titan) is a rather weak and cowardly monster, constantly seeking to make sense of itself – or, as Patočka says, a “unified meaning” – even though this meaning can be monstrous and is often accompanied by violence against others. This process of making sense is itself fundamentally brutal: “The initial meaninglessness [...] compels us to continuously and relentlessly attack this foreign thing, until our life is able finally to envelop it, to place it in context, to pull it into our ‘realm of goals’”¹¹ (Patočka 2004, 185). We constantly conquer meaning, as Patočka says, imposing meaning on things. In this way, our projection, our imagination makes the world appear useful, but only ever in the sense that it is useful *to us*. And yet “what has no meaning is not actually meaningless” (185). In spite of this, it still seems that we need meaning: “For in its intention, meaning is unity, but in its reality it is fragmentation, plurality, and disharmony”¹² (185). Fortunately, one can escape from this circle of meanings and its totalizing unity. Opposing the mastodon is someone who escapes all of this – someone who accepts disunity,

absurdity, non-meaning, someone who is powerless and defenseless, and it is his or hers strength:

This defenselessness is the only possible way to preserve pure humanity in a world dominated by the struggle of mastodons and mechanized by their organization and automation. The victims cannot defend themselves: that would make them like mastodons. However, they can appeal to the spark of humanity that lies dormant in everyone, even in mastodons; they can appeal to this dormant potential, appeal for solidarity.”¹³ (188)

The defenseless one, according to Patočka, is not able to make an institution of themselves, not able to create such an institution as a functional mechanism with clear goals and meanings. This would only turn them into mastodons: “What else is left for him, therefore, but hope as a principle, a renewed appeal, testimony, shouting out that orphaned defenselessness as an act?”¹⁴ (188) Defenselessness and powerlessness can therefore be interpreted as a state in which we realize what it means to live in non-meaning, to accept that life does not have to be meaningful or meaningful to us, that it surpasses us with its multiplicity, color and diversity. The position of the “defenseless victim” does not express something negative, without any possibility of being in opposition to the mastodons, as long as we do not attribute this negativity to it. Indeed, the very notion of the “victim” expresses a view of affairs from the position of power, like that of “mastodons” who approach powerlessness with pity (*lítost*). But pity, as Patočka points out, is only a kind of *eleos*, a fear that we ourselves might end up in the position of the victim. Later Patočka developed this concept further, not only in his political philosophy but also in his other reflections on theater.¹⁵ In Patočka’s interpretation, passivity and the refusal to fight back are not the same as defeat; on the contrary, they can actively serve as an appeal to the awareness of otherness. And it is art that can revive this kind of passivity, one that is not merely weak or ineffectual, but which allows us to open ourselves to that which exceeds us. For Patočka, the key to interpreting Vyskočil is his theorization of the mode in which the “protagonist”, perceiving a “mastodon situation”, consciously and actively chooses to become defenseless. *Autostop* – *auto-stop* – is precisely this kind of appeal for us to resist mechanization, institutionalization, and automation. (Rather than conveying any sense of machine repetition, the etymology of *auto* – *αὐτός* or *autos* – speaks to the possibility of individual opposition, that is, of being oneself, of being on one’s own, of having the choice *not* to actively participate in a struggle for power).

PERFECT DAYS II: THE ANTI-MASTODON

Returning to Wenders’s *Perfect Days*, it seems clear – already in our introductory description – that the protagonist of the film is powerless, passive, and defenseless, that he completely renounces, in other words, any possibility of becoming a mastodon. In one scene, the appearance of Hirayama’s sister seems to manifest the fragments of his past and of his background story. From what we are shown, we may infer that she is a successful, well-to-do woman. It is she who tries to impose her views, opinions, and lifestyle on Hirayama, but he quite consciously rejects it. It is precisely in regard to this kind of gesture that we may understand the nature of Patočka’s

(ethical and philosophical) appeal: to accept non-sense, otherness, what exceeds us, an appeal to humanity.

We have already seen how *Perfect Days* inverts various oppositions (between sight and touch, for example, or individual dimensions of time). The same can be said for the way it deals with certain stereotypes: it is notable, for example, that the position of power is occupied by a woman, not a man. While the female character stands for wealth and a rational, pragmatic worldview, her male counterpart is portrayed as someone who has dedicated his life to serving the public, demanding nothing from anyone and influencing no one. As seen through the lens of Patočka's thesis, however, it is he who has seen through the principles of power, who is impervious to them, accepting existence in itself. He strenuously (and thus actively) resists anything that might disrupt this acceptance. His world, which may seem dull and repetitive at first, perhaps even automated or mechanized, is actually full of small surprises and unforeseen events. Rather, it is the character of Hirayama's sister, who ostensibly lives a "better" life, that represents mechanization.

Some reviews of *Perfect Days* have raised the criticism that Wenders largely avoids depicting social reality, or that his film appropriates a foreign culture. While we cannot agree with such criticisms, they do reveal something about the film. Perhaps the most powerful gesture a film can make today is precisely to step out of the circle of power, to consciously avoid social values, prestige, the power of money and social rankings. From this perspective, Wenders' film thus consists in a non-aggressive reflection on the social stratification of the world and its political struggles. While the *anti-mastodon* is active in relation to the world and in its concern for the other, for everything non-human, it remains passive in the struggle for power. This form of *active passivity* even shapes the way the film is shot. Franz Lustig's camera is often static, changing slowly from one framing to another, looking at a situation from multiple perspectives. Again we see how rather than narrating, *Perfect Days* shows and observes. While this is a dominant aspect of the film's form, it does not draw attention to itself, becoming visible only at those moments when it depicts shadows or dreams. The photos Hirayama shoots in the park, his dreams, these are depicted by means of various experimental procedures and with more developed exposition. It is here, and not in the sparse dialogue, that Hirayama's inner world comes to the surface, appearing "in itself" as the being of the protagonist, a being-in-itself without meaning.

LA CARESSE

Approaching Wenders's film through these various dualities – passive/active, power/powerlessness, mastodon/protagonist – inevitably calls to mind the works and preoccupations of Emmanuel Levinas, a thinker who also seeks out the possibilities of "Being per se", and how to overcome the need of asserting one's power over the other.¹⁶ After World War II and the Holocaust, this Jewish philosopher – as if to preserve himself – tried to restore confidence in himself, but also in the notion that there might still be an Other, someone or something that is not oneself, in whom or in which one can still place one's trust. We find this especially in the works *Le Temps et l'autre* ([1947] 1979; Eng. trans. *Time and the Other*, 1987) and *Totalité et infini* :

Essai sur l'extériorité (1961; Eng. trans. *Totality and Infinity*, 1979), where he tries to formulate how to be open to the other, to see his face again, to undertake dialogue with him – a dialogue that may have no other meaning than that it is taking place. The question is how to be with the other, to touch the other without violence, to approach the other without seeking to possess him or her.¹⁷ Here too, Levinas proposes a certain degree of passivity, of powerless action, in which the other

can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very *unforeseeableness* of his reaction. He thus opposes to me not a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole, but the very transcendence of his being by relation to that whole; not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. [...] The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent.¹⁸ (1979, 199)

Philosophical language is conventionally meant to convey specific meanings, to name, rationalize, and abstract. This would make it unsuitable, one could infer, for describing profoundly affective processes and bodily experiences. For Levinas, however, language flows like a river – as language *per se*, as if he were calling forth words to revive our lost ability to be with others, to emerge from the depths of the body as a consolation. In his way of writing, words seem extraordinary and mysterious. They come unexpectedly. They burst into the light, as if they wished not to be words but encounters and touches. There is no reason for them to be disembodied; they can have “powers of welcome, of gift, of full hands, of hospitality”¹⁹ (205). They want us to forget all the daily commands, requests, pleas, explanations, instructions: “Language does not group symbols into systems, but deciphers the symbols”²⁰ (182). It is often not clear how to understand his words (Levinas himself writes about language “at the limit of nonsense”, about waiting for “words never uttered” in a “world absolutely silent”²¹ (94). Our ordinary speech is intended for external, objective needs, for inclusion in a certain whole, for the possibility of existence in various systems that give the appearance of meaning. However, according to Levinas, language that is essential is intended primarily for the Other:

The language by which a being exists for another is his unique possibility to exist with an existence that is more than his interior existence. The surplus that language involves with respect to all the works and labors that manifest a man measures the distance between the living man and the dead – who, however, is alone recognized by history, which approaches him objectively in his work or his heritage.²² (182)

In this way, Levinas adds, we are able to expose ourselves to a situation in which we are without any ambition to own something and somebody, in which we glimpse the face of the Other and perhaps manage to be with the Other, without seeking, this time, to appropriate, subjugate, or incorporate the Other into the self.

The situation that Levinas describes with language “recurs” in his concept of *la caresse* (the caress): the relationship of love and kindness that expresses itself through the bodily, loving touch with which we approach the other. This touch, although associated with desire, does not involve an appropriation of the Other: “It is not that

the caress would seek to dominate a hostile freedom, to make of it its object or extort from it a consent”²³ (258). On the contrary, touch gives the other certainty, and conveys to oneself knowledge of the other. In the bodily contact then occurs the unexpected mystery of breaking the boundaries of subjectivity. The conflict of the self with the world outside, which is outside this self, is transformed into an encounter of touch and acceptance. Levinas’ notion of *la caresse* cannot be reduced to a physical or erotic encounter. It should be seen, on the contrary, as a loving touch akin to language at the limit of nonsense and being per se.

PERFECT DAYS III: OUTSIDE WORDS

While the use of language in *Perfect Days* is sparse, it does play an important role, though Hirayama himself rarely speaks. The other figures, especially Hirayama’s colleague, talk to him too much and too often, and he usually does not respond. It is as if dialogue was not given to them as an option for relating to others. Hirayama tends to communicate by different means: through a particular look, gesture, facial expression, or body posture, through music or photography, or through play. The film thus transitions to another kind of language, which is visual and phenomenal, part filmic, part verbal, but in each case devoid of explicit sense and meaning. The importance of the imagination is once again emphasized here, at times bordering on an absurdity that is capable to penetrate to the essence of things.

Hirayama’s dull ritualistic behavior is interrupted throughout the film by other characters he encounters, characteristically in non-dialogical situations. His daily routine is first interrupted by the arrival of his niece, who has come to Hirayama and his simpler “old-fashioned” world of her uncle to get away from her rich mother. While the meeting of these two characters includes more dialogue than elsewhere in the film, everything adheres to the logic of the fictional world. This pattern is broken in the scene where they ride their bikes together through the city. At this point, the camera abandons the static framing and geometric regularity that we have seen to this point and starts moving. We approach a certain degree of “hapticity” that exceeds mere visuality, an affectivity that defies the strict logic of practical systems that we place ourselves in through our everyday actions. This disruption of unity also takes place when Hirayama meets with a female colleague who is so fascinated by a cassette recording of Patti Smith that she steals it. After a while, she returns it, and here again, instead of meaningful conversation, the characters listen to the cassette together, moving closer to one another to the point of touching. This scene without words underscores the power of kindness, without reproach and without negativity. The most significant scene in this sense takes place towards the end of the film, when Hirayama meets the ex-husband of a woman with whom he has had a very personal, intimate relationship, but which has never reached erotic fulfilment. The man, who is dying, wants to leave his wife to Hirayama. Rather than proceeding through dialogue to clarify power positions, the men begin to play a game, the goal of which is to find out whether the overlap between two shadows is a darker shadow. This senseless action allows them to open up to the other, to perceive one another as equals. This absurd game also allows Hirayama to remain in a passive role. Hirayama

does not have to express pity for a person who is on the brink of life and death, does not have to accept “the gift” that the dying person has prepared for him out of pity, can go beyond a pragmatic rational choice and remain in the position of someone who does not want to possess anyone.

CODA: “TUBE” IN A SNOWDRIFT

The episodic structure of the film is interconnected by several motifs. One of these involves another game. Hirayama finds a lost boy near the toilets and helps him find his mother. From this brief encounter, an unusual bond is forged between them, and they start playing tic-tac-toe together. Every day, one of the players makes a move on a piece of paper, hiding it in the toilet so that the next day the other player can take his turn. It is a kind of silent conversation between the man and boy, an instance of meaningless and purposeless communication whose “active passivity” serves to disrupt all normal hierarchies. An imaginative dialog, the look into the face of the other, is probably reaching the central appeal by Patočka and Levinas which is described above: the appeal of exit from the circle of power, from the circle of exchange and usurious linguistic games. The game played remotely represents how communication may effectively take place outside of language, a relationship per se, a standstill within the essence of what we are, since “to be καθ’αυτὸ is to be good” (183).

Let us return finally to Patočka and the closing passages of his essay on Vyskočil, as if the movie’s public toilet cleaner had heard a message from a “tube” thrown into a snowdrift:

And so the last word for now is perhaps that “tube” thrown into the snowdrift and the wind [...], that utterly forsaken history of misery, of constant loss, of wandering, of such infinite homelessness that paths, landmarks, signs, distances, and goals no longer have any meaning for them, and which still does not stop hoping, hoping for the response of other hearts, for breaking this spell, for the touch and encounter – for what else would it be necessary to throw away this tube in which the record of its history is kept? Perhaps that contact will be slow, strange, dispelled by a wave of the hand and repulsion – “someone has been fooling around here”, are the words of one of the discoverers – but why are those who have read those strange pages now embracing one another so tightly?²⁴ (2004, 189)

In *Perfect Days*, this image finds its counterpart in that piece of paper used to play tic-tac-toe across time, across generations, without purpose or meaning. For us, it speaks above all to a certain form of philosophical text that defies the power of language, that rejects the compulsion to deal in unambiguous meanings. But it also speaks to the form of a film that lets us see without necessarily having to understand: a sensitive form that demonstrates how even in passivity we can find the hidden activity, strength, kindness, care, openness and sensitivity, which we are so much in need of today.

Translated by Peter Gaffney

- ¹ See also Vojtěch 2023.
- ² “Vyskočilovy práce mají spíše fortissimo na začátku nebo někde uprostřed, po něm následuje často zvláštní rozlom, jakoby přeshlapování na místě, mrtvý bod, po které se již nepořádá žádný ohňostroj. Pointa, na kterou jsou zaměřeny, je někde jinde.” Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Czech are by Peter Gaffney.
- ³ “Víme však, že fantazie, jak nás poučují filozofové, je ve skutečnosti půdou, na které se proniká k podstatě; fantastická variace, variace na fantazii, učí nás podržet to, co obměnit, vyloučit, nahradit nelze, aniž by se ztratila sama věc. A právě také Vyskočilovy fantazie, vtipy, skoky, jsou myšlenkové experimenty za účelem k proniknutí k podstatě této, dané lidské reality, reality člověka ve světě.”
- ⁴ “First, a situation must be created that reforms the audience in a certain way. [...] This can be done in various ways – one of the ways that I consider unacceptable is what I call ‘pastoralism’: If I proceed on stage with the idea that I have the upper hand over the audience, and that I would like to instruct, educate, and inspire them, everything comes out false and this is clear by the lack of involvement. In this way one can have an evening of interesting ideas, perhaps, but people only react to the ridiculous ones, to fragments, and the audience remains is generally deaf to the rest. One must work hard to avoid pastoralism, given that everything tends to lead to it” (from an abridged recording of Ivan Vyskočil’s long interview with Jana Patočková; see Rut 1996, 127).
- ⁵ One could point to any number of films and filmmakers with this quality (Jim Jarmusch, for example). In the present study, however, we are concerned not with analyzing specific films or providing insights on the history of cinema, but with formulating general questions and answers.
- ⁶ Jan Patočka’s thought system does not stand entirely apart from established positions and structures but represents a certain impulse to expand or transcend them – an impulse that is evident in Patočka’s language itself. The game *Autostop*, which we return to later in this study, also expresses the unacceptable side of our linguistic communication, which tends to degenerate and is based on power structures.
- ⁷ On the problem of the “usury of language” see Milesi 1995. This problem is also a core question of Derrida’s philosophy
- ⁸ It is a great temptation to use *the gaze* for watching man, today. The problem is that the notion *the gaze* after Laura Mulvey is considered to be powerful, not powerless, not active, but passive (Mulvey 1975).
- ⁹ Patočka addresses Masaryk’s criticism of “*titanism*” in a number of places, e.g. Chvatík and Kouba 1991 – though his notion of the “mastodon” is similar in many ways, i.e. Patočka 1989. See also James 2021.
- ¹⁰ On this interpretation of Gretchen in Masaryk’s philosophy, see Heczková 2004.
- ¹¹ “To prvotně neosmyslené [...] vyzývá nás k pokračujícím, neúporným útokům na toto cizí, až se našemu životu podaří konečně je obalit, zařadit do souvislostí, zatahnout do naší, říše cílů.”
- ¹² “Ale co nemá smysl, není ještě nesmyslné [...]. Neboť smysl je ve svém úmyslu jednota, v své realitě vždycky roztržštěnost, pluralita, nesoulad.”
- ¹³ “Tato bezbrannost je jedině možný způsob záchovy čistého lidství ve světě ovládaném boji mastodontů a zmechanizovaném jejich organizací a automatizací. Oběti se nemohou bránit: tím by se přidaly mastodontům. Mohou však apelovat na jiskru lidství, dřímající v každém, i v mastodontu, mohou zavolat, pokusit se o solidaritu.”
- ¹⁴ “Co jiného mu tedy zbývá než naděje jako princip, obnovené volání, apelování, dosvědčování, vykřikované té osiřelé bezbrannosti jako čin?”
- ¹⁵ Patočka (1967) opposes Antigone to Kreon, who is the type of “mastodon” and whose active rationalism is the progenitor of our “mythologies” and manipulations with the other. His major work *Kacířské eseje o filozofii dějin* (1975; Eng. trans. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 1996) depicts the active position of the “victim”, his specific kind of shift in perspective, and the development of arguments for a new political position of the individual. On the concept of victim in Patočka’s philosophy, see also James 2021 and Učnick 2011.
- ¹⁶ This text is dedicated to Andulka, a diligent reader of Levinas who found practical applications for his theses throughout her life.

- ¹⁷ Levinas's thinking about "the Other" could be depicted as patriarchal. His famous criticism of Simone de Beauvoir made very difficult to see the feminine perspective, but we could take inspiration from the interesting source *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (Chanter 2001). Our interpretation of Levinas is based on his own struggle within language and especially his elusive and enigmatic concept of *la caresse*, which is connected "somehow" with femininity. The similar dynamic we have used in our feminist interpretation of Nietzsche's love of truth and Derrida's concept of *différance*, which enables deflect language and stretch the stereotypes, unearth new possibilities. See Heczková 2001.
- ¹⁸ "Mais il peut m'opposer une lutte, c'est à dire opposer à la force qui le frappe non pas une force de résistance, mais *l'imprévisibilité* même de sa réaction. Il m'oppose ainsi non pas une force plus grande – [...]. L'infini paralyse le pouvoir par sa résistance infinie au meurtre, qui, dure et insurmontable, luit dans le visage d'autrui, dans la nudité totale de ses yeux, sans défense, dans la nudité de l'ouverture absolue du Transcendant" (Levinas 1961, 173).
- ¹⁹ "des pouvoirs d'accueil, de don, de mains plaines, d'hospitalité" (Levinas 1961, 179).
- ²⁰ "Le langage ne group pas les symboles en systèmes, mais déchiffre les symboles" (Levinas 1961, 157).
- ²¹ "Un monde absolument silencieux, indifférent à la parole qui se tait" Levinas (1961, 66).
- ²² "Le langage par lequel un être existe pour un autre, est son unique possibilité d'exister d'une existence qui est plus que son existence intérieure. Le surplus que comporte le langage par rapport à tous les travaux et les oeuvres qui manifestent un homme, mesure l'écart entre l'homme vivant et l'homme mort, le seul cependant que l'histoire – qui l'aborde objectivement dans son oeuvre ou dans son héritage – reconnaisse" (Levinas 1961, 158).
- ²³ "Non pas que la caresse chercherait à dominer une liberté hostile, à en faire son objet ou à lui arracher un consentement" (Levinas 1961, 235).
- ²⁴ "A tak je posledním slovem zatím snad ona tuba hozená do závěje a větru [...], ta bezmezně opuštěná historie siroby, stálých ztrát, bloudění, tak nekonečné bezdomovectví, že pro ně cesty, mezníky, návěští, vzdálenosti a cíle přestávají mít jakýkoliv smysl, a která přesto nepřestává doufat, doufat v ohlas v jiných srdcích, v zrušení toho zakletí, v dotyk, a setkání – neboť k čemu by bylo jinak třeba vyhazovat tubu, do níž je uložen zápis této vlastní historie? Snad bude ten kontakt pomalý, divný, zaháněný máchnutí ruky a nevolí – 'tady někdo blblnul' jsou slova jednoho z nálezců –, ale proč ti, kdo přečetli ty podivné listy, se nyní tak pevně objímají?"

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