

Bond University  
Research Repository



## Jirí Menzel and Jan Patočka on sacrifice

Brennan, Daniel

*Published in:*  
Screening the Past

*Licence:*  
Unspecified

[Link to output in Bond University research repository.](#)

*Recommended citation(APA):*  
Brennan, D. (2016). Jirí Menzel and Jan Patočka on sacrifice. *Screening the Past*, 41.  
<http://www.screeningthepast.com/2016/12/jiri-menzel-and-jan-patocka-on-sacrifice/>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

For more information, or if you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact the Bond University research repository coordinator.

2016

# Jirí Menzel and Jan Patočka on sacrifice

Daniel Brennan

*Bond University*, [daniel\\_brennan@bond.edu.au](mailto:daniel_brennan@bond.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://epublications.bond.edu.au/fsd\\_papers](http://epublications.bond.edu.au/fsd_papers)



Part of the [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Brennan, D. (2016). Jirí Menzel and Jan Patočka on sacrifice. Retrieved from [http://epublications.bond.edu.au/fsd\\_papers/490](http://epublications.bond.edu.au/fsd_papers/490)

This Journal Article is brought to you by the Faculty of Society and Design at ePublications@bond. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty of Society and Design Publications by an authorized administrator of ePublications@bond. For more information, please contact [Bond University's Repository Coordinator](#).

## **Jirí Menzel and Jan Patočka on Sacrifice**

Daniel Brennan (Bond University)

[dbrennan@bond.edu.au](mailto:dbrennan@bond.edu.au)

Daniel Brennan lectures in ethics and the philosophy of film at Bond University. His research to date has been primarily focused on defending a liberal and agonistic political philosophy, which is developed in my book *The Political Thought of Vaclav Havel*. This project is concerned with the political impact of actions which are not usually deemed to be political, otherwise known as non-political politics. My focus is on how these kinds of non-political actions can be considered as meaningful acts of resistance in oppressive conditions. Daniel has published articles on the work of Hannah Arendt, Jan Patočka, and Iris Marion Young amongst others.

## Jirí Menzel and Jan Patočka on Sacrifice

*This paper puts the Czech New Wave film-maker Jirí Menzel into a philosophical discourse with the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka. Essentially the paper argues that an examination of Menzel's films offers a criticism of Patočka's understanding of the role of the dissident sacrifice. The two films explored are the 1966 film *Closely Watched Trains (Ostre sledované vlaky)*, and the 1969 film (although not released until 1990 due to censorship) *Larks on a String (Skrivánci na niti)*. These two films make a succinct argument for problematizing the dissident's sacrifice. Patočka argues that the dissident sacrifice is an act which is meaningful in itself. Menzel makes his criticism by adding a deal of ambiguity to the actions of the dissident, and this ambiguity places a question mark over the meaning of the sacrificial act and its effect.*

Two of Jiri Menzel's films, the 1966 film *Closely Watched Trains (Ostre sledované vlaky)*, and the 1969 film (although not released until 1990 due to censorship) *Larks on a String (Skrivánci na niti)*, both show a dissident sacrifice. This paper argues that the depictions of dissident sacrifice problematize the description of dissident sacrifice in the philosophy of Jan Patočka. Patočka's thoughts on sacrifice are important for understanding Czech dissent, especially after the 1968 Soviet led invasion of Czechoslovakia, hence the creation of a dialogue between Menzel's films and Patočka's philosophy is important.

For Patočka, being a sacrifice allows one to bestow meaning on one's life through the confrontation with one's death. The sacrifice makes life meaningful as the dissident takes responsibility in a specific moment and a specific place for something larger than himself.<sup>1</sup> Avazier Tucker claims that a reading of Patočka on sacrifice is necessary to understand the contours of Czech dissidence.<sup>2</sup> There is clearly a sense of martyrdom about Patočka's

dissident which fits with other analyses of martyrdom in expressions of dissent in Czechoslovakia. Robert Pynsent locates a martyr complex in historical Czech notions of national identity.<sup>3</sup> He finds across Czech history a messianic complex around the blood sacrifice of various national Czech heroes. In the morning following the first wave of police violence against protesters at what would become the Velvet Revolution, Prague citizens lit candles at the stones which were covered in blood.<sup>4</sup> Patočka understands a dissident sacrifice to be a death for the whole of life rather than for a single person's life of comfort – the dissident could perhaps be called a martyr.

In Patočka's 'The "Natural" World and Phenomenology', published in 1967, Patočka explores the importance of conflict for the creation of meaning. Patočka introduces the idea, later developed in the 1975 book *The Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, that conflict allows one to shake off the mundane every-day and discover how one can live more responsibly.<sup>5</sup> He writes

Thus at the centre of our world the point is to reach from a merely given life to the emergence of a true life, and that is achieved in the movement that shakes the objective rootedness and alienation in a role, in objectification...<sup>6</sup>

What can be achieved through putting oneself in conflict with whatever power has a grip on the ordinary machinations of everyday life, is a release from ideological coercion. Later in the *Heretical Essays* Patočka develops this idea to refer specifically to dissidents. A dissident sacrifice is depicted in *Closely Watched Trains*, and in *Larks on a String*, and in both films the idea that the sacrifice has made life meaningful or even that the sacrifice has moral significance is highly erroneous. This is not to say that Menzel and Patočka were engaged in dialogue themselves. I am putting them in dialogue. Patočka's thinking is seminal for Czech

dissidents, and Menzel's films are masterpieces of the Czech New Wave movement which had many dissident members, hence it is a logical step to compare and contrast how both figures understand sacrifice.

The Czech word for sacrifice is *oběť*. Lubica Učník explains that the word has a polysemy which is exploited by Patočka.<sup>7</sup> Učník explains that *oběť* entails 'sacrifice,' 'victim,' and 'casualty.'<sup>8</sup> This manifold meaning is important for two reasons. Firstly, Patočka imagines the sacrifice of the dissident as comparable to that of a casualty of the First World War. Secondly, Patočka is also spelling out that in a state of war, citizens are used as sacrifices (as they become victims of a bombing or of a totalitarian regime); hence a greater understanding that death is an intrinsic part of life as it is one half of the meaning of life might turn the dissident towards an orientation that a life not lived well, is not worth living.<sup>9</sup> The ambiguity in *oběť* is also well employed by Jirí Menzel in the two films analysed here; in *Closely Watched Trains*, the protagonist is both a victim of war and a sacrificed dissident (or at least he becomes a dissident), and in *Larks on a String*, the protagonist is again a dissident who makes himself a sacrifice, and simultaneously he is a victim of an unjust totalitarian regime. Yet in both cases the sacrifice seems to be somewhat hollow rather than fulfilling.

Film is an important tool for illustration in philosophy, in that certain films, or scenes, or techniques, can be useful in helping to explain a certain philosophical problem by way of illustration. However, there is more to film's contribution to philosophy than this. Films can make arguments by themselves. More than that, films can make arguments which are at times better than those made in more traditional mediums.<sup>10</sup> In other words, film can do philosophy. Through the juxtaposition of images, the employment of narrative, the exploration of themes and many other tools at film's disposal, the medium of film can make arguments. Robert Sinnerbrink argues that "the philosophical contribution [that] film can make is more akin to showing rather than saying: to questioning, reflecting, or disclosing through vivid

redescription salient aspects of a situation, problem or experience”.<sup>11</sup> I agree with this assertion, and will argue here that Menzel’s ability to create characters with many facets to their identity, reveal, through aesthetic reflection, philosophical arguments. Also the variety of interpretations that Menzel’s films allow similarly unfold as philosophical arguments that question, and reflect on philosophical questions. Sinnerbrink argues that the only way to fully demonstrate that film does do philosophy is to offer a contestable philosophical interpretation of a film.<sup>12</sup> This is what I will do here. But more than simply interpreting film as philosophy by exploring a film and showing it to be philosophical; a central aim of this paper is to have a film enter into a philosophical dialogue about the nature of sacrifice with a key theorist of sacrifice, Jan Patočka.

### **Patočka on Sacrifice**

Patočka’s account of sacrifice in the last *Heretical Essay* is built around the sacrifice of the soldier in World War One.<sup>13</sup> For Patočka, the front line combatant is gifted a terrible freedom through their experience of the front. While at the front the front-line combatant leaves behind all of their worldly concerns as they face the horrible reality of the front - they are free from all of the forces which brought them to the front line. They are free from considerations of responsibility, from attachment to others, from the stresses of life, even from the future. Patočka admits to being influenced by the writings of Ernst Jünger who describes his previous pre-front life as being like another life.<sup>14</sup> The freedom that the soldier has is a freedom to weigh up what is really worth living for without being shackled by mundane concerns.

Patočka describes this freedom as a “self-surrender which can call humans away from their vocations, talents, possibilities, their future.”<sup>15</sup> The passions and concerns which led the soldier to the front are forgotten - all that is left is life itself. In other words, the soldier at the

front is hardly likely to be considering their future career or their love of cycling whilst engaged in combat. For Patočka the life of the front is orientated towards death. This is crucial because for Patočka life away from the front forgets that all life is orientated towards death.<sup>16</sup> Patočka describes life and death poetically as day and night. Life in the day is concerned with the things of life, whereas the night is the death that encompasses, and, to an extent, defines the day. A key feature of the absolute freedom of the front is the realisation that “life leans out into the night” through struggle and conflict.<sup>17</sup> This is important for Patočka because the risk to life in the front-line experience shows that life is more important than the mere concerns of the day. Hence, the experience of the front gives a transcendent meaning to life. All of the concerns of the day are put aside and for Patočka the upheaval of life at the front reaches into the night to make the sacrifice of the combatant an “authentic transindividuality.”<sup>18</sup> The death of the front line combatant is a death for life itself, not for an individual life.

For Patočka, the dissident can achieve the same absolute freedom that the front line soldier possesses - where one cannot retreat back into the world of the everyday. This is achieved by “shaking” one’s attachment to the mundane. Patočka calls the dissident and the soldier shaken because for them the world of the everyday has become problematic. They have seen the flimsy foundations that the world they live in is made from, and have decided to act. According to Patočka the dissident does not act out of a sense that a specific system would be better than the current one. For example, in the Czech context, they do not act to bring about the end of socialism and the instalment of democracy. Rather the dissident sees the world itself as a problem. That is when one reaches into the night (risks one’s life), democracy, socialism, fascism, in fact all political orders are shown to be problematic. Taken this way, the sacrifice of the dissident is for life itself, not for a version of life worked out with the concerns of the day. The sacrifice shows the world as a problem; and more importantly, the

sacrificed dissident finds meaning in the sacrifice by rejecting the concerns of the day which attempt to cover over the problematic interactions in the world. Reaching into the night is then, for Patočka, an attempt to bring a sense of the good into the world. The good is a more authentic account of life.

By sacrificing the attachment to the everyday, the dissident is rewarded with a freedom that, as Edward Findlay points out, “makes us aware that we are not, and need not be, beholden to mere life.”<sup>19</sup> For Patočka, this letting go of our attachment to mere life makes us responsible. When we reach into the night and see our life not merely as a series of individuated events, but as a connected whole that is historical, and plural, in that our actions influence others, then we become aware of our responsibility to others. The dissident who sacrifices themselves in dissent is thus acting for others. As Findlay notes, “Responsibility makes sacrifice no longer an individual event, but something undertaken for all.”<sup>20</sup>

The point I want to draw out of Patočka’s depiction of sacrifice is that there is a necessary repulsiveness at the mere things of life. Patočka argues that any real peace in the world will only come through sacrifice. He writes, “Humankind will not attain peace by devoting and surrendering itself to the criteria of everydayness and of its promises. All who betray this solidarity must realise that they are sustaining war and are the parasites on the sidelines who live off the blood of others.”<sup>21</sup> To call non-dissidents parasites is extreme; but Patočka really is arguing that being a sacrifice, or being willing to be a sacrifice, is the only way to be responsible. Lubica Učník, in explaining Patočka on sacrifice, points out that for Patočka confronting our death (turning towards the night), reveals to us the futility and finitude of a life lived for things.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, to think about sacrifice is to think about life as non-caculable, non-controllable and irreducible to things.<sup>23</sup> “To acknowledge the role and importance of sacrifice is to acknowledge that someone may be willing to relinquish his life rather than to live a life defined solely by needs and desires, forgetting that there is something

more to life than mere possession”<sup>24</sup> Patočka is hoping for a community of dissidents who share this knowledge. He terms this community and their shared understanding the solidarity of the shaken. These people act under persecution and mockery from those who still live in the day.

### **Jiri Menzel and Sacrifice**

Jirí Menzel is one of the most famous exponents of the Czech ‘New Wave’ of cinema. The New Wave, or the Czechoslovak film miracle, is a term applied broadly to a range of different film styles and referring to an array of differing films made by Czech film makers in the 1960’s. Experimenting with many styles from surrealism to *cinéma verité*, the Czech New Wave is hard to explain in terms of a single stylistic element that unites them.<sup>25</sup> Encouraged by the Government policy of relaxing state censorship of art, enacted by the President Alexander Dubcek, the film makers enjoyed a degree of freedom previously unknown. The Prague Spring as it was known was Dubcek’s attempt to make “socialism with a human face.”<sup>26</sup> Censorship became less restrictive and pockets of more liberal art and philosophy emerged which criticised the government, the manner in which Czechoslovak citizens lived or prominent ideas.

The result was a flurry of creative cinema highlighting the inhuman or dehumanising face that stood behind the scenes of normal life. By analysing a small section of society, the film-makers made comments about the larger whole.<sup>27</sup> For example, Milos Forman’s 1967 film *The Fireman’s Ball* (*Horí, má panenka*) comments on Czech society through the microcosm of a rural fire-brigade’s ball and Karel Kachyna’s 1970 banned film *The Ear* (*Ucho*) makes shows a paranoid husband and wife in their own home, afraid of secret recording devices and surveillance which may or may not be there. The result is a scary and scathing picture of the paranoid and trust-less life of ordinary citizens. The Soviet invasion of August 1968 put an

end to the freedom of the film makers, and the resulting period of “normalization” saw the tightening of censorship to very restrictive levels (*The Ear* is one of the films to fall victim to normalization). Menzel straddled the shift from the openness of the Prague Spring, to the restrictions of normalization (even being stung by the censors for his first film after the invasion, *Larks on a String*, which caused him to lose the right to make films for a brief period).

Menzel rose to international prominence in 1966 with *Closely Watched Trains*, which received the *Academy Award* for the *Best Foreign Language Film*, Menzel has continued to be a prominent film maker in the Czech Republic. Both *Closely Watched Trains*, and *Larks on a String*, are literary adaptations. The original stories were penned by novelist Bohumil Hrabal, and Hrabal collaborated closely on set with Menzel during the production of the films. It is to Menzel’s credit that Hrabal claimed to be more satisfied with the film version of *Closely Watched Trains* than he was with the novel.<sup>28</sup> Both films also feature Václav Neckár as the protagonist, and in each case, the notion of sacrifice is explored through his character. Hence this analysis will largely focus on Neckar’s characters.

Neckár, in *Closely Watched Trains*, plays a young apprentice train dispatcher, Milos Hrma, in a small rural village during Nazi occupation. The film focuses largely on his attempts to lose his virginity and consequently there is a great tension between the seeming enormity of the war and the loss of national sovereignty, and the seeming inconsequential nature of Milos’ obsession with sex. However the tension between the two “world views” (of sorts) is quite complex as the characters whose attentions are caught up in the war seem as absurd in their obsession as Milos is with his own plight. Menzel’s friend and renowned author Josef Škvorecký comments that it is the dialectic between the political and the more mundane sexual concerns that achieves a lot of the films power. For Škvorecký the film highlights the fear that political force has regarding the power that mundane concerns have to possibly upset

political power.<sup>29</sup> This is most clear in the symbol of an antique couch found in the station waiting room which gets ripped on two occasions when workers are engaged in sex acts on it.

for Škvorecký the couch's tearing it is the defining moment of the film.<sup>30</sup> It is clearly an important component in the anti-political aesthetic of the film. The couch is clearly an antique and a prize possession of the station. As the kind of couch the aristocracy would have, it is also out of place in the station. Hence it has an interesting presence in the mis-en-scene as something that has come from a more authoritative place. The couch is torn twice, each time by characters who ignore the aura of the couch and satisfy their pleasure. The station master is audibly upset at the couch's torn coverings but he is powerless to stop the rips from occurring. Škvorecký points out that the censors, in their push for socialist-realism, were blind to the reality that the audience wanted to see sex.<sup>31</sup> Sex pervades life, and a political force may try to push a view of a 'clean' life, such as a beautiful antique couch; however the real situation is that sex is not far from the minds of a large part of the audience. Hence for Škvorecký the tearing of the couch has a lot of political significance in its flaunting of the official view on good taste.

*Closely Watched Trains* takes Milos's journey seriously despite the comic nature of many scenes. Milos is not humiliated or ridiculed, rather we get a sympathetic eye into the ordinary troubles of an ordinary adolescent. The fact that there is a war does translate to a need to abandon the everyday concerns. For Menzel, these small plights matter. They are intrinsic to the human condition and not merely the stuff of comedy. The well-known Czech film critic Jan Žalman, wrote in 1967 that,

in Menzel the Czech Cinema has gained a filmmaker of considerable individuality. "We all know that life is cruel and sad. What's the point of demonstrating this in films? Let us show how brave we are by laughing at life.

And let us not consider that laughter to be an expression of cynicism but rather of reconciliation.” Perhaps it was these words of his that earned Menzel’s films the label of “smiling humanity.” Yet Menzel not only smiles, he as often as not laughs outright. And his humanity would remain an anaemic concept if we were to ignore his interest in human sexual behaviour, which is so typical of Menzel.<sup>32</sup>

Milos eventually is brought into the world of sex by a beautiful and compassionate resistance fighter, Victoria Frei, who arrives at the station to bring the sexually confident train dispatcher Hubica a bomb to be planted on an ammunition train the following day. Hubica convinces Victoria Frei to initiate Milos into the world of sex and following the encounter Milos is transformed. He exudes confidence and when his train dispatcher friend cannot place the bomb, Milos volunteers to do it himself. Milos had been told of the plan to destroy the train and the film shows a child-like Milos making the noise and hand gesture of an explosion. Milos looks more the child and less the freedom fighter in this moment.

In the film’s final sequence, with bomb in hand Milos walks past Masa, the love interest of Milos, who at that moment is there to be with Milos. Milos has been momentarily caught up in the grand political vision of resistance and his desires have changed. He walks past Masa saying he will be back. Taking stock at this moment it is clear that Milos has shifted the object of his desire, he is confusing his libido with politics. Milos climbs the signal tower and drops the bomb on to the train. He is seen by a group of guards on the train and shot. Milos falls on to the train which disappears in to the distant horizon and explodes. Masa is left waiting. The tragedy of the final sequence is that Milos has been corrupted by a view of dissent as being a rupture with the ordinary and everyday, when clearly the opportunity cost is heavy. Milos both a sacrifice for the war resistance and a victim of the war, and perhaps he would have been better off just going off with his love.

In *Larks on a String* there are some interesting parallels between Neckár's character and his character in *Closely Watched Trains*. Once again he plays a sexually frustrated young man, however this time the object of his desire is frustrated not by his own shortcomings, but instead by the oppressive political situation which keeps him from his lover. *Larks on a String* is set in the years immediately following the instalment of the communist regime. The film's action mostly takes place in a scrap metal yard where former bourgeois citizens have been sent to atone for their bourgeois ways. The scrap yard is surreal, and the absurd reasons for the various prisoner's imprisonment add to the other-worldliness and tragi-comic setting. Neckár plays Pavel, a cook who refused to work on a Sunday for religious reasons and consequently has been assigned to work in the scrap yard. Other characters include a saxophonist, who has been sent to the scrap yard because the saxophone has been declared a bourgeois instrument, a Professor has said a banned thought out-loud; and a dairy-man who, due to cut-backs, has been made redundant and hence assigned to the scrap yard. In short, it is hard to see any real bourgeois crimes. Immediately adjoining the scrap yard is a similar yard worked by female prisoners. These women are watched over by a guard who struggles with his job of keeping the men and women separate (as well as struggling with other issues of his own to do with his marriage to a gypsy, which can't be explored here). The security levels for the women are far higher than the men, and a lot of the film's humour comes from attempts by the men to have some company with the women. *Larks on a String* has many sub-plots, but in this paper I want to focus on the story of Pavel, as he furnishes the best example of sacrifice in the film.

Pavel is a character who procures black market goods for the women, and he is deeply in love with one of the prisoner's, Jitka, to whom he gives the goods for her to disperse to the other female prisoners. Every time he sees her, he asks her "Isn't there anything I can do for you?" or "Is there something you want?" to which she always shakes her head in the

negative. Pavel continually finds ways to evade the guard to communicate with Jitka, and he eventually asks her if she would marry him, to which she nods in acceptance. As in *Closely Watched Trains*, Pavel transforms at the moment where he could possibly consummate his love. Jitka's agreement to be his wife is closely followed by Pavel questioning a government spokesman about the fate of some other prisoners who had disappeared in an ominous black car after they themselves had questioned the authorities. The female prisoners had made a bridal chamber in a small shed in the junk yard and just as Pavel is about to enter he is whisked away in the black car. It is not a grand moment of sacrifice, rather the audience is left feeling sad that Pavel and Jitka don't get to be together.

The final scenes jump forward some time showing Jitka, now free of the junk-yard, waiting for the return of her husband. Under her apartment, Pavel, now a political prisoner, is shown descending into a dark abyss which is presumably a mine of some sort. He is claiming to other prisoners that he can endure any punishment because his love waits for him. This scene is coupled with large emotion raising music which suggests that Pavel's sacrifice has been worthwhile; however the film continues past this point. Pavel is brought into what appears to be a mine and into an elevator. As Pavel descends, the shot of the light from the surface shows the light disappearing. Pavel, is being taken far away from his love and the triumph of dissent is seemingly no longer being celebrated.

In neither of Menzel's films do we see the dissident sacrifice make any political change. In neither film does the central character get to consummate their love with their lover. In both films, immediately before consummation, both are either victims of war, or of totalitarian oppression. It can be argued that Menzel is dubious about whether the sacrifice of a dissident makes any lasting change, or more interestingly, if it is even meaningful in itself. George Bluestone makes the point that a feature of Menzel's films is an obvious attempt to devalue anything that attempts to take itself too seriously.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps then Menzel is critical of the

dissident for taking themselves too seriously, and his films highlight the danger of such an attitude? I think that this goes some way to understanding Menzel's take on sacrifice.

Bluestone quotes Menzel “A dream fulfilled is the grave of creative activity.”<sup>34</sup> Perhaps then Menzel leaves his dissidents apart from their lovers because satisfaction in the everyday stifles the dissident’s ability to act outside of the concerns for the ordinary and every-day? My claim is that Menzel is critiquing the idea of sacrifice and ultimately arguing for a somewhat Epicurean position of political detachment. For Menzel the dissident is deluded in thinking that the moment in which he becomes a sacrifice is any more meaningful than other moments in one’s life.

### **Two Contrasting Views**

Whereas Patočka describes an attachment to ordinary life as something to be rejected, Menzel shows a deep concern and love for the ordinary and mundane. When we consider the depiction of sex in Menzel’s films Škvorecký is right to suggest that the private realm of sex is something that political authority was fearful of. In Menzel’s films the private space created through sex is depicted as an area of freedom – that is as something which can’t be touched by politics. In an interview Menzel says,

when you water your flowers, you’ve got to have that thingamajig with holes in the spout of your watering can, for dispersion. If you just poured the water straight out of the spout, the concentrated stream of water would dig up your soil, and where would you be?

Menzel is clearly is not a fan of grand sacrificial gestures and instead argues that such gestures can do more harm than good.

Compared with Patočka's notion of sacrifice, which equates the dissident with a front line soldier, Menzel's watering can analogy is a far better idea for dissent; that is, that where dissent is concerned, perhaps subtlety is more meaningful than brutality. Such a view actually reflects a movement within Eastern European dissident culture. Tony Judt has summarised this trend in his final book, *Thinking the Twentieth Century*. He argues that the experience of authoritarian socialism led some dissidents to understand that negotiation is not possible with such a regime. Hence the alternatives are to make a confrontation or to try something else – to live as if you were free.<sup>35</sup> Menzel's characters do experience real moments of freedom which is very different from the freedom that Patoka promotes. The happiness that Milos exudes the following morning after his first successful sexual encounter makes for a powerful shot. Milos is standing on the platform cleaning his ears without a care in the world. Škvorecký's claim about the power of the couch tearing scenes in *Closely Watched Trains*, could be rewritten to say that the couch tearing shows the inherent power in living as if one were free.

The mere things of life which Patočka asks the dissident to leave behind are in Menzel's films full of life-affirming beauty. The sexual frustration of Milos, and the inability of Pavel to consummate his marriage, are not treated as unimportant concerns, rather they matter. Consider the ending of *Larks on a String*; Pavel claims that his truth waits for him (referring to his wife) moments before he descends into the dark abyss. He has abandoned his attachment to mundane things such as sex and married life. His actions show a willingness to relinquish his attachment to things of life. The sacrifice itself, it could be argued, makes Pavel's loss meaningful. However, the film's ending dwells for too long in the dark abyss into which Pavel is descending, and too much time is given to dark comments by his fellow prisoners in response Pavel's claim that his wife is his truth. In other words the glowing aura of the sacrifice ends up being quite dull as Pavel is fed through the system and

ultimately, we presume, destroyed. As Pavel and the other prisoners descend into the darkness, Pavel looks up. His glance is clearly uncertain and perhaps questioning. It is now not certain that he did the right thing in questioning the authorities.

In a Patočkean interpretation of the scene, Pavel has made the sacrifice because he is responsible for bringing conflict to the status quo in order to create the impetus for change, and challenging the political authority enacts that responsibility. However, Menzel is too subtle for this. Menzel's characters are never completely privy to the total political situation to be able to know what action is and is not responsible. In other words, the dissident has a hard time locating the contemporary front. Another example from the film will make this clearer. In a scene closely preceding Pavel's descent into the abyss. One of the communist foremen and a dignitary give a sponge bath to a naked young girl. Bluestone argues that this washing is an exorcism of guilt as every time a man disappears from the yard to be placed in the prison, the foreman goes off to wash.<sup>36</sup> However, I would argue that there is something more sinister here. He is not washing himself, and he refuses to wash the old lady, instead the two Authorities are clearly exploiting the girl for their sexual amusement. Keeping this in mind, as Pavel disappears down the mine his wife has been left alone under the authority of such men. Pavel is responsible to his wife, but does that responsibility mean to act, under threat of personal risk, to try and effect a better political situation? Or does that responsibility mean to be by her side and enjoy what pleasures they can together? Perhaps in their rush to get to the contemporary front, something very important has been left behind.

In *Closely Watched Trains*, Milos never expresses any understanding that a war is even going on, yet he finds himself planting a bomb for the resistance. Cook argues that Menzel's films have a debt to the surrealist conflation of sexual and political freedom.<sup>37</sup> With this in mind Milos becomes a freedom fighter politically after being liberated of his sexual anxiety. I have above argued that Milos does transform after the sexual encounter, as does Pavel after

the marriage; but Milos is more comical than an unlikely hero. Škvorecký claims that he is an anti-hero who fits with a tradition of anti-heroes in Czech literature.<sup>38</sup>

Making the anti-hero the dissident is a way to problematize the romantic notion of a sacrifice. If the dissident is someone who has as much understanding of the world as Milos does, then can that dissident be conscious of the full implications of their sacrifice, what it's for, who is involved, and why it is necessary? Menzel's watering can analogy is an argument for a softer kind of action than one involving a sacrifice of life. The ambiguity of Milos' and Pavel's sacrifice is proof of this. Such a view is a problem for Patočka's view of sacrifice where the dissident acts like a hero, risking their life at the most opportune moment. Menzel is not so sure that this kind of meaningful sacrifice is possible. Pavel's last gaze expressing doubt suggests this. So does Milos' planting of the bomb. It is as if Milos and Pavel's sacrifices are devoid of wisdom.

In Milos' case it is clear to the audience throughout the film that Germany is already losing the war. The film continually makes reference to the change in the successes of the German army, and it is clear that the German's are not winning. In that case the Germans would lose without his planting of the bomb. Also there is a close-up of a poster in the train station warning people to be aware of the danger of Soviet Communism. In that case defeating the Nazis paves the way for Socialism's oppression of life. Menzel is colouring the interpretation of Milos' sacrifice by showing how short-sighted it is.

Another criticism of dissident sacrifice is found in Milos' origins. In the film's opening sequences we learn that Milos is descended from comic dissidents. Milos's grandfather was, in his own way, a sacrificed dissident. Working as a theatrical hypnotist, when the Germans invaded, he stood in front of the tanks arms outstretched, commanding them to stop, employing his hypnotic powers. This image can only be read as a parody of the front-line soldier believing their sacrifice will change the world. The grandfather is run over by the tank

which only halts momentarily. It is possible to claim that here the sacrifice of the dissident has as much meaning as a hypnotist standing in front of a tank trying to stop it by the powers of his mind.

Menzel's films are rarely overtly anti-regime, rather the dissent is quiet. *Larks on a String* is his most powerful political statement, and it is an anti-socialist statement, hence it is significant that as a consequence he was banned from making films for five years. Perhaps *Larks on a String* can be considered a dissident sacrifice. To make his strong point about the corruption of the regime, and the attack on the everyday, Menzel had to give up the ability to make films. But if this is a sacrifice, is it a meaningful one? I don't think so. *Larks on a String* did not get a release until 1995, hence it was not seen by Czech audiences, and Menzel returned to make more subtle films. Another consideration is that Menzel was making *Larks on a String* immediately following the Soviet invasion, hence it is likely that the new tightened censorship, and the implications of that for film makers, hadn't yet fully dawned on him. Menzel's message, when effective, is subtle. As Bluestone points out, "his films are more interested in Czechoslovakian epiphanies than in broad political gestures, or his frugal style of shooting, or his persona as a shy and diffident clown."<sup>39</sup> Where the dissident and eventual President Václav Havel went to jail; where Patočka died after interrogation about his involvement in the Charter 77 movement; where Josef Škvorecký, the writer and publisher, fled to Canada; and Milan Kundera also an author, fled to France; where fellow film-makers Jan Němec and Milos Forman fled to the U.S.A., Menzel stayed and made films that were quietly critical, but not too quiet.

Bluestone claims that Menzel, through his films, was able to poke breathing holes in the system.<sup>40</sup> Menzel's films therefore are acts of dissent, but not in the way that Patočka conceives them. Whereas, for Patočka, the dissident must reject the things of life in favour of a transcendent, or a "transindividual" view of life, Menzel shows that beauty can be found in

ignoring the authorities and focusing on what joys one can experience. Against Patočka's war on the mundane, Menzel is unwilling to relinquish an attachment to the things of life, and more importantly, he demonstrates a life-affirming value in them.

## **Conclusion**

Menzel rejects Patočka's war on the comforts of life and the everyday. Watching the absurd wedding ceremony of Pavel and Jitka, which is performed without either seeing each other, it does not lessen the presentation of love. Milos's loss of virginity is a high point in the film, as he stands on the platform cleaning his ear, and we are momentarily confused if it is Milos or his master signalman standing in such a relaxed and jovial way. The joy is found in the point that despite the war, or despite the regime, the everyday pleasures of love and sex are not only possible, but are a way of hindering the regime from exerting full control over the individual. In other words, Menzel waters the ground of dissent by celebrating the ordinary and everyday small victories over the system, and appealing to the things of life, or to some of the things of life which can make life not only bearable but full of beauty as well.

Jirí Menzel's films can represent a meaningful consideration of Jan Patočka's ideas on the sacrifice of a dissident. Where Patočka sees the dissident as a front line combatant in a state of war, Menzel adds another facet to the dissident, questioning their own estimation of their role. His two films, *Larks on a String* and *Closely Watched Trains* have dissidents as their protagonists whose sacrifice can only be understood ambiguously. The ambiguity is what calls Patočka's thoughts into question. Even though the sacrifice is ambiguous in its meaning, juxtaposed against the celebration of ordinary human sexuality, Menzel leans towards rejecting the meaning and significance of a dissident sacrifice. Menzel's positive presentation of mundane concerns is grounds for reconsidering Patočka's attack on the ordinary things of

life, as perhaps Menzel's films show what a sacrifice might be for, if a sacrifice is indeed what is required of the dissident, and that is not entirely clear in either film.

If Menzel is making an argument in his films about sacrifice it would look like this: the dissident who offers themselves as a sacrifice can't have their bravery called into question; instead a better project of dissent would be to understand that great sweeping movements of history are never changed by an individual sacrificing themselves. The system that is antagonistic to the dissident barely pauses in its movement as it chews up the dissident leaving behind those for who the dissident sacrificed themselves. Perhaps the dissident sacrifice is similar to that of Milos' grandfather, standing in front of a tank, arms outstretched, fooled into overestimating the scope of their agency. Menzel, in showing human sexuality growing in an environment as harsh and oppressive as the junk yard in *Larks on a String* puts a question mark over the dissident who leaves that behind, to descend into the dark abyss. Perhaps I can say that had they stayed with their loved ones, Milos and Pavel would have a better truth than the one they sacrificed themselves for.

---

<sup>1</sup> Eddo Evink "Patočka and Derrida on Responsibility" in A.-T. Tymieniecka (ed.), *Analecta Husserliana LXXXIX*, (Houten: Springer 2006), 307-321.

<sup>2</sup> Avazier Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Pynsent, *Questions of Identity; Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (London: Central European University Press, 1994), 190.

<sup>4</sup> John Keane, *Vaclav Havel; A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*, (London; Bloomsbury, 1999), 346.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, trans Erazim Kohák Ed James Dodd, (Illinois: Open Court, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Jan Patočka 'The "Natural" World and Phenomenology' in *Jan Patočka; Philosophy and Selected Writing*, Erazim Kohak ed. And trans. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 263

- 
- 7 Lubica Učník. “Patočka on Techno-Power and the Sacrificial Victim”, in *Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology; Centenary Papers*, ed. Ivan Chvatik & Erika Abrams, (New York: Springer, 2011), 189-190.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Patočka, *Heretical*, 119-137.
- 10 See Damian Cox & Michael P Levine, *Thinking Through Film; Doing Philosophy Watching Movies*, (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 16.
- 11 Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film*, (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 132-133.
- 12 Ibid 134.
- 13 Patočka, *Heretical*, 125.
- 14 Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hofmann, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 234.
- 15 Patočka, *Heretical* 130.
- 16 Ibid 131.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Edward Findlay, *Caring the Soul in a Postmodern Age*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) p.150.
- 20 Ibid 151.
- 21 Patočka, *Heretical*, 135.
- 22 Učník “Techno Power”, 199.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (New York: W. W. & Norton Company, Inc), 687-699.
- 26 Keane, *Vaclav Havel*, 193-194
- 27 Marek Hendrykowski “Changing States in East Central Europe” in *The Oxford History of World History* ed Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 633.
- 28 Peter Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1985), 173.
- 29 Josef Skvorecky, *Jiri Menzel and the history of Closely Watched Trains*, (Boulder; East

---

European Monographs, 1982), 73.

30 Skvorecky, *Closely Watched Trains*, 73.

31 Ibid 16.

32 Jan Žalman, “Question Marks on the New Czechoslovak Cinema” in *Film Quarterly*, 21, no2, (Winter 1967-1968), 27.

33 George Bluestone, “Jirí Menzel and the Second Prague Spring” *Film Quarterly*, 44, No 1 (Autumn, 1990): 31.

34Ibid.

35 Tony Judt, Timothy Synder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, (London: William Heinemann, 2012), 232-233.

36 Bluestone, “Prague Spring” 31.

37 Cook, *Narrative*, 694.

38 Josef Škvorecký, *All the Bright Young Men and Women*, trans Michael Schonberg (Montreal: Peter Martin Associates, 1971) 169.

39 Bluestone, “Prague Spring”, 26.

40 Bluestone, “Prague Spring”, 26.