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Patočka's Concept of Style and the Aesthetic Attitude

Milan Jankovič

from the archives

The center stage of our questioning is now taken up by the “meaning” of manipulating meanings: the issue of style. In analyzing the term, one of the possibilities is to follow Jan Patočka’s discourse in his text called “Art and Time” (PATOČKA 2015, 2004b). This is how he describes the conclusion of a long and transformative journey that art (visual art, in this paper) undertook in the different historical epochs:

In the times before the Renaissance, art created an artificial style of expression, which allowed the festive and superhuman aspect of the world to shine through. The last great styles, the Renaissance and the Baroque, endeavoured to achieve the same result by means where imitation prevailed over style. The nineteenth century is aware that art is a universe of self-enclosed meaning, independent and self-sufficient; but it preserves imitation, description, and analysis of the given as an essential element of the work of art. It is the nineteenth century that created the concept of subjective art, or, rather, let tendencies develop which since time immemorial had been moving towards it. One of the consequences that had been in preparation since the Renaissance is that the layer of ideal representations, the so-called “contents” of art, is becoming fictitious, and the imitation of forms given by the senses is thus losing its original meaning. Here, one can try to substitute new contents for the old ideal ones, but these contents, drawn from everyday life and not from an area that surpasses it and gives it the fullness of being, show themselves to be something alien to art [...]. Or, by contrast, one can deal with all fictions and conventions which have been kept for external reasons; one can conceive of the artist’s undertakings as his or her attempt to achieve a radical establishment of concretely experienced meaning – and then we are on the way to the art of our times (PATOČKA 2015: 110).

A lengthy citation was necessary. It summarizes major turning points in the understanding of art, which need to be taken into account when exploring the poetics of 20th century literature. When compared to earlier epochs, there is indeed a radical departure from demonstrating an a priori, metaphysically established and universally valid meaning, and a shift towards meaning that is formed in the creative act of artistic freedom. At the same time, the essence of this act moves into the “signifying” layer, into the risky act of “signifying”, whose “signified” is only partially rooted in one’s experience with what is given, and therefore, it necessarily turns towards “open” meaning. However, if we adopt a different perspective, it may also be called “suspended meaning” (“sens suspendu”, see Barthes 1972 [1964]: 259).¹ (On a side note: in Patočka’s paper, the concept of “style” is related to whole epochs, to the macrostructure of stylistic differences. The issue of “microstructures”, or individual styles, is another matter. Our concern here is with the basic guidelines related to understanding the style of modern art.)

The experience of modern art brings us to an understanding, which is in opposition to Ingarden’s conception of a literary work of art. In other words, we have chosen a different exposure time for “meaning”. “Being in its outpouring”, “concrete meaning that arises on the basis of elements which are in themselves mute”, this is, according to Patočka, the fundamental time of a work of art, the time of “pure creation, which we participate in by participating in the work of art”. For Patočka, art in all its metamorphoses – not just modern art – is primarily a style, a language “in which human creative power is manifested, that is, an ability to allow being to manifest itself” (PATOČKA 2015: 112).

To achieve a more complex understanding of these ideas, it would be necessary to explore a few other Patočka’s texts where the issue is studied in greater depth. This concerns one of his earlier works, „A Treatise on the Past Character of Art“ (Učení o minulém rázu umění, PATOČKA 2004a). Let us mention at least a few inspiring ideas from the text. There, Patočka develops a peculiar interpretational duet. He offers a critique of the metaphysical aspects of Hegel’s system, which turn away from contemporary art and instead look into the past where art “did not communicate itself but rather something of a higher order, outside of itself; that is, something that in itself is the whole truth” (ibid.: 326). In Hegel’s phenomenology of the aesthetic attitude, Patočka also appreciates

1) Barthes’ original expression “sens suspendu” is his neologism and implies a meaning that is not fully fixed, fully coined, a meaning that hangs over us or floats in the air and defends itself against one simple interpretation. This term becomes key for Barthes in his definition of literary criticism and its role (editors’ note).

ideas which stand in opposition, those which “look into our present, as if over the head of Hegel’s system” (ibid.: 319). In confronting these two strands of thought, Patočka focuses on elements which have the ability to specify art across historical epochs. This is actually the aesthetic experience of a modern person, and from its perspective, that which used to characterize art in the past but remained unnamed can suddenly be seen in a different light. In Patočka’s interpretation of Hegel, what should be appreciated and studied in a literary work is not an unchanging quality (or a set of qualities), but instead, its preparedness to withstand time.

What is meant by this “preparedness”? It is the aesthetic stance, which manifests itself in the work of art in many different ways. However, Patočka’s analysis of Hegel suggests that the aesthetic stance is not simply dismissed as a “fallacy of absolute livingness” or a “veil that covers truth” (ibid.: 322). In his analysis of the aesthetic attitude as an antithesis to the practical and theoretical attitudes, Hegel retains certain moments where the truth of art, otherwise degraded by the absolute truth, is in fact free from its reins. Here, Hegel seems to contradict his absolutization of the “absolute truth” (most likely in the tradition of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, as the liberating interplay of reason and imagination). In the aesthetic attitude, we discover within ourselves a relationship, which does not pertain to the sphere of de-realizing realization and is liberated from it.

However, we may then ask whether this form of “breaking free from the constraints of finality” may set up a new possibility for human self-realization, distinctive from Hegel’s metaphysics. This would, according to Patočka, consist in a form of being that “provides for the revealing, phenomenalization and manifestation of beings” without requiring them to “reach the level of divine thought”. From this perspective, it would be possible to theorize an ability to “allow being to manifest itself”, which would be inherent to people and unconditioned by metaphysics. Consequently, art would no longer be an outdated method for revealing absolute truth, as Hegel claims. It would be given greater autonomy and more hope – both of which it rightfully deserves (ibid.: 337–338).

The concept of aesthetic attitude becomes even more important if we examine Patočka’s analysis of Hegel’s understanding of time. We are primarily concerned with his distinction between time and temporality. Time is described as an “inner negation”, an “outpouring point”, the present situation “of a person who always lives ahead of himself, disturbing his present moment by a future which does not yet exist, and preserving in his active, creative ‘now’ the heritage of an entire past” (ibid.: 334). The past is “that temporal aspect in both

the present and the future”, a “cancellation of self” that is manifested in every dimension of time (ibid.: 334). Time “contains in immediate unity that which is in stark contrast” (Patočka quoting Hegel from his Jena practical philosophy period, ibid.: 336). These are essential distinctions; however, how do we find our way back to the aesthetic attitude?

Hegel “discovered temporality as that which allows for beings to manifest themselves in their being” (ibid.: 337). And this is where the experience of modern art becomes relevant, according to Patočka; not necessarily in relation to Hegel’s metaphysics, but certainly in a reassessment of his phenomenology. This revision takes place towards the end of Patočka’s text: there are ideas about art as a play which is related to the play of revealing the being and it “gives access to our highest goal, which is striving for freedom” (ibid.: 343). These ideas are related to the aesthetics of modern art and its reflections (Patočka mentions P. Klee, R. M. Rilke and M. Merleau-Ponty).

Other studies written by Patočka aim in a similar direction, for instance “Time, Eternity, and Temporality in the Work of Karel Hynek Mácha” (Čas, věčnost a časovost v Máchově díle, PATOČKA 2019, 2004c) or his seminal study that formulates his understanding of freedom, *Negative Platonism* (PATOČKA 1989). Patočka’s philosophy has an affinity for art. It is there that Patočka finds the origin of “destructive creation” and revitalizing revelation, which have their source in human beings.

Translated by Matouš Hořínek

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COMMENTARY:

This study is an excerpt from a longer text by Jankovič, titled *The Process of Meaning as a Problem in Theory and Interpretation* (Dění smyslu jako teoretický a interpretační problém), first published in an anthology called *On the Path towards Meaning: Poetics in 20th Century Literature* (Na cestě ke smyslu. Poetika literárního díla 20. století, Prague: Torst 2005), pp. 821–964. The translation was made from the second edition published in Milan Jankovič: *Paths towards the Meaning of a Literary Work II* (Cesty za smyslem literárního díla II, Prague: Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR 2015), pp. 11–129. For a more detailed account of Patočka's philosophy and its influence on Milan Jankovič, see pp. 89–92 in this issue.



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