

MARTIN PLEŠTIL / 23. 10. 2025

People, the passage of time and returns in the worlds of Tomáš Vorel

In its first week in cinemas, Tomáš Vorel's *Job* (Džob, 2025) was seen by more than 100 thousand viewers.[1] This is evidence that the series that began with *The Can* (Gympl, 2007) is popular across several generations, which is largely due to the fact that director Tomáš Vorel published the films for free on his YouTube channel, where *The Can* has over 13 million views. The free accessibility now reaps its rewards. In addition to the currently lively discussion about the graffiti trilogy, the general public associates the name Tomáš Vorel mainly with the musical *Smoke* (Kouř, 1990) which also owes its renaissance to social media (a clip from the film starring DJ Arnoštek has also more than 13 million YouTube views). In connection with *Smoke*, the overused expression cult is often mentioned, but in this case it's justified. At the same time, it's probably Vorel's only title subjected to academic and professional interest. Mainly thanks to its remarkable production history, reflection of the period ethos at the turn of two chapters in our history, and its unrestrained form linked to the poetics of the Sklep Theatre. To this day, Vorel describes it as his most free film. In interviews, he often mentions the necessity of a state-funded film industry. He says that he never managed to achieve the same conditions after the revolution, he usually struggles with sponsors and budgets and his producer experience is fully reflected in these statements.[2] *Prague Cans*, thanks to short snippets circulating on social media, appeals to third generation in a row and the character of old Kolman and some catchphrases have become very popular. As much as Vorel can be considered an auteur, he sticks to networked narrative, he uses significantly stylised devices and his films cannot be categorised by genre – in its core, each film is different, although it returns to the same archetypes and possibly even characters. The transformation of

his fictional worlds and themes develop just like the thinking of the distinctive filmmaker which is fully apparent in the resulting films.

Over the years, Vorel has become a pure pragmatist. He discussed the meaning of his films in a terse and laconic manner. In an interview, he described his film *To Catch a Billionaire* (Ulovit miliardáře, 2009) as ‘a film about two women, one journalist and one lobbyist trying to catch a billionaire.’[3] His work is rooted in personal experience and weaves various experienced and overheard stories. He usually writes his scripts in collaboration with someone. In the case of his ‘way’ trilogy, it was Barbora Nimcová-Schlesinger, for his ‘graffiti’ trilogy, he teamed up with authentic writers and his deeply personal *The Stone Bridge* (Kamenný most, 1996) was co-written by Jaroslav Dušek. His only independent script is the feature slapstick comedy *The Imp* (Skřítek, 2005). Vorel tries to keep his finger on the pulse of the time – his ‘graffiti’ trilogy involved collaboration with rappers, he cast influencers Dominika Elischerová and Gabriela Heclová in his films *The Way Home* (Cesta domů, 2021) and *The Good Plumber* (Instalatér z Tuchlovic, 2016), he made his films freely available on YouTube, although he still respects cinemas as the best platforms for film. As an author, he doesn’t close up, but rather intensively seeks collaborators from other fields, considering actors as fully-fledged creative partners.

As an amateur filmmaker, Vorel started experimenting with the possibilities of slapstick, clumsy acting, exaggeration and absurdity already in his youth. His poetics initially stemmed from the Sklep Theatre as he was a member of the theatre. But he left the company in the 1980s before the Velvet Revolution.[4] Even though he continues to cast Sklep actors in his film and still uses the poetics, it would be shortsighted to categorise his work only in relation to the charmingly infantile and sketch-filled style of Sklep Theatre. On the contrary, Vorel tries to make each film thematically and formally unique and strives to vary the creative attributes associated with his style without neglecting significant creative elements (‘wooden’ acting, ADR as a tool to for outlining the characters, skewed camera angles and sketch nature of individual segments).

His feature debut *The Prague Five* (Pražská 5, 1988) is a kind of time capsule experimenting with a wide palette of stylistic approaches and capturing the poetics of five theatre companies. *Smoke* explores the possibilities of a musical, boasts bold

stage design and choreography and excels in work with several planes. The fragile and intimate personal confession *The Stone Bridge* toys with the tendencies of 'weakling film,' its narration is reminiscent of diary entries and its visual style balances on the edge between the imaginative world of the Charles Bridge and bare naturalism. As a pure slapstick with accelerated movement and no dialogue, *The Imp* experiments with layering gags in a feature format and *To Catch a Billionaire* is a biting farce set in the environment of top-level media machinations where Vorel highlights the exploitative aesthetics of ugliness in relation to digitally polished image. *The Good Plumber* has a surprisingly toned-down acting stylisation and tries to present a more grounded and civil form in connection with a taciturn and simple-minded protagonist who just passively cruises through the story. Trilogy *Out of the City* (Cesta z města, 2012), *To the Woods* (Cesta do lesa, 2012) and *The Way Home* (Cesta domů, 2021) follows the transformations of an individual and groups in relation to life in a village and it can be used to best illustrate the development of style and the aim to achieve bigger simplicity and pragmatism. While the first film stylistically follows *Smoke* in using tone and colour to illustrate the contrast between the city and the village and highlighting overexaggerated aesthetics, the sequels work ostentatiously with natural attributes, earthiness and artistic moderation. The same can be said about the series *The Can*, *Prague Cans* and *Job* in which the colour scheme, energy and tonality reflect the aging protagonists.

Reality experience simulation

The narration of Vorel's film follows the tradition of networked narrative.[5] The main characters cruise through the fictional world and connect individual segments or represent tools for drawing attention to global problems. For instance *Billionaire* Grossman and in particular the relationship of other characters to him create a satirical fresco reflecting oligarchization, the media world and prejudice and overall embody a perverted narrative bordering between a farcical fairytale and a nightmare about neoliberal capitalism. Thanks to their often fragmental narration, Vorel's films create an impression that we are watching mere glimpses of complex lives. We have the feeling that lives go on even after the closing credits, just as it organically existed before the film's beginning. Vorel develops the plot from one of the key and life-changing moments for the central characters, but at the same time manages to

reflect that there have been and will still be many more moments like this and that we are seeing but one of them. The plot usually revolves around infatuation or a disruption of a certain life order and these two levels often intersect. The main plot twists which we would expect to be used for building dramatic effects, take place off-screen and we find out about them from the dialogue. People disappear from the story just like they disappear from our lives.

Vorel only shows the figurative tip of the iceberg. He doesn't focus on deep psychologization, with the exception of several main characters, or on layering causality. In some respect, he's a mere observer of peculiar microworlds and subworlds. The fleeting passage of time and deliberate defiance against classic Hollywood narrative where everything is justified and shown on-screen determine his narration. News about the fatal impact of the lives of secondary characters are often imperceptible. For instance Radek – one of the two closest friends to *The Good Plumber* – is a racist, and in one scene, he asks the protagonist if he would like to go beat up a group of Romani people with him. Several scenes later, the protagonist learns from the publican that because of this attack, which happens off-screen, Radek ended up in prison. And that's everything we find out about it. It just happened, just like a lot of things that the big screen won't capture. Vorel is very well aware of that and his scripts work conceptually with this fact.

Even key plot twists important for broader context and the catharsis of the central plot lines often remain out of our sight. The plot of *To Catch a Billionaire* culminates, among other things, with a fight for control of the television. Prime minister's advisor Lehký comes to its director Egon Rázný with compromising material in an attempt to discredit Grossman and ruin him. We have an impression that the betrayal will definitely happen. However, the denouement is different, despite what we just saw and with respect to the development of the characters. We learn that Rázný eventually turned against Lehký from television reports of the public's reaction and Lehký's enraged statement that Rázný is a bastard. At the same time, we know that we're watching mostly unscrupulous and opportunistic characters. Sometimes, we simply have no clue how people think which Vorel in this case accentuates in connection with the film's satirical and biting tone. The fictional world is engulfed in irrationality and selflessness, just like ours as a matter of fact. In Tomáš Vorel's film worlds, things just happen. Without any explanation and problematization. It's this

fleetingness, the impossibility of an objective point of view and a certain ignorance that simulate the experience with our perception of reality.

This fragmentary nature is underlined by the usage of fade-outs and fade-ins. They represent a significant means of expression for Vorel's storytelling style. They accentuate the fact that what we see in the film is a mere fragment. *The Stone Bridge* uses this element in its explicit division into chapters. The world, dependent on the narrator in the form of a director withdrawn in gloomy thoughts and abject misery, unfolds through story-like segments. On several occasions, Vorel has described *The Stone Bridge* as his most personal film and he also published a director's cut of the film. Vorel's alter ego says a lot about his approach to creation. At the end of the film, the character of the director begins to write a script that matches with what we've just seen in the film. He is also criticised by the producers by insufficient clarification of certain things, unintelligibility and depressing conclusions. Although we tend to perceive Vorel's filmography as mostly comedic and playful, at their core, his stories are often hopeless and full of pain. He just sees sadness through an absurd and exaggerated lens that allows the audience to adopt a certain detached perspective which in turn perhaps encourages an even deeper reflection. If we base our assumption on numerous interviews, we find out that from a certain point of view, Vorel tries to show the audience how he sees the world. In connection to his films, it's logically often said that his worldview seeps into them too much. But that's a far too restrictive interpretation as Vorel excels in emphasising ambivalence. If a certain character is a bearer of Vorel's opinions, they always have a counterbalance. Vorel's films are far from showing the 'correct' approach to life according to their author. This fact is best demonstrated by his 'way' trilogy just as the inspirational concept of the passage of time and return to the same characters.

Countryside disillusion

Protagonist Honza, an IT guy treading water in a rigid corporate environment, where the rhythm is set by keyboard clicking and the view of the world is conditioned by programming languages, comes to the countryside to spend some time with his son. He has always had a passion for nature and thanks to meeting local herbalist Markéta, who also tries to escape from the city and finds an almost utopic refuge in a quaint village, keeps putting off his return to work. But Vorel doesn't portray the

village as idyllic. Although the protagonist is captivated by the different space-time, the village also functions according to a relatively rigid order. The men make a living by hard manual labour, despise intelligence and in the evenings, they get drunk in the pub. The women have very little to do and suffer, sitting at home waiting and hoping their husbands come home at least a little sober. This is reflected mainly by the Papoš family including Ludva's violent behaviour towards Vlasta. The villagers don't know anything else. Vorel shows the fleeting beauty of the village which is charming and has no problems only until we choose to stay in it. As a matter of fact, it can be as sterile as the uniform city offices. Some of the characters are homophobic, Papoš's son has a gambling problem and everything is covered in a thick dark haze of alcohol and ignorant boorishness. The film ends on a bittersweet note as the protagonist inevitably must return to the city while pondering 'what if.' His experience with the village subculture was almost chimerical in nature.

To the Woods brings a fundamental change and a clash. Honza and Markéta had eventually become a couple and started living together in the village. Once again, the film has no need to disclose when and why it happened or how the relationship developed. This time, the unifying element is the love between young Papoš, now an aspiring gamekeeper, and underage Anya, daughter of Honza and Markéta. Although Vorel artistically accentuates natural lyricism, the seemingly idyllic life in the countryside is affected by strong disillusion. Honza has trouble finding a stable job, the opportunities are scarce. Moreover, work in the forest is demanding and the salary is low. Most of the people are dependent on local entrepreneurs. Vorel portrays the tension and division between collectivism and individualism. Slowly but surely, the village becomes a prison for the protagonists. Honza feels the same frustration as he did in the city which he increasingly intensively considers as a possible escape. Vorel intensifies the inevitable cyclical nature of our lives which is present in the vast majority of his films. Routine and order are equally as calming as binding. An important element in Honza's transformation is alcohol. While in *Out of the City*, alcohol had a refreshing role in Honza's life as homemade brandies helped him to achieve freedom and imaginative perspective, here bottled beer and regular visits to pubs become a necessity.

In *The Way Home*, this turns into alcoholism. Living in the countryside, Honza slowly rots and alcohol is his only escape. His body is becoming weak, he's unreliable in his

job and he struggles with existential problems. The place where he was supposed to find a better life has paradoxically become his downfall. Vorel is not fatalistic in this regard, he leaves Honza space for a better tomorrow at the end. But considering previous experiences, it's probable that he will never recover from his personal pain. Papoš, as a stubborn man who works in a field and uses pesticides to support his crops, has Alzheimer's from breathing these substances his whole life. While Papoš has 'calmed down' in *To the Woods*, started to appreciate his wife more and dialled down the drinking, the illness has taken away the couple's thoughts on at least partially quiet retirement. Even the youngest of the three couples faces problems. The infatuation and youthful idyll turn into a slowly suffocating life burdened with problems in the family. The characters sink into the same cycle as the previous generation. Young Papoš spends his days working in the forest, has no time for his daughter or his wife and lets off steam with other men drinking in the pub. Anya is at home frustrated as self-realisation is hard to find in an environment with limited options. In her courses, Markéta offers ways of self-realisation to local women, at least partially. But she's perceived as a disruptive element. The men are annoyed with her seances, they cannot stomach the woman having time for themselves thanks to them. The only fulfilment and escape from routine the local women have is offered by a person rejected by the subculture including the women who are afraid and have no opportunity to leave their circle dominated by patriarchy. Honza helps Markéta and supports her because they both have an urban experience detached from the stereotypes prevailing in the village environment. In the end, young Papoš has to make a decision as a Russian oligarch buys the formerly state-owned gamekeeper's lodge and the family suddenly has to find a new place to live while the prospect of a promising future in gamekeeping is diminishing. After the death of his father, young Papoš is to take over his business, but he's reluctant. Although the ending is relatively forgiving and the protagonist seeks his roots, the experience with this village chronicle suggests that if young Papoš stays in the village with his family, he is likely to become another part of the hopeless and rigid cycle. Moreover, the trilogy is tightly linked to the changing seasons which represent more than just ornamental attributes. The cycle is intertwined with the lives of the characters, the broader context merges with the personal, natural elements directly affect the protagonists, Vorel links the weather with their emotions. All aspects of Vorel's worlds are imbued with ambivalence. Everything has its pros and cons. The central theme of the trilogy is

the age-old struggle for change while the specific unchangeability is the only and painful constant the individuals must fight.

The impossibility to grow up

That is apparent also in Vorel's other trilogy: *The Can*, *Prague Cans* and *Job*. The first episode premiered at a time when the popularity of teenage comedies peaked (*The Rafters* [Raftáci, 2006], *Crash Road*, 2007, *Experts* [Experti, 2006]), revolving around high schools and drawing inspiration from American counterparts. *The Can*, however, defies all these labels as it threads its own parallel path. It takes us into the graffiti sprayer subculture through two high school students with different backgrounds. Kolman comes from a rich family, Kocourek from a poor broken home, his mother struggles with alcoholism. Both are frustrated with their background as well as school. They find escape in writing. But their illegal passion serves as a form of defiance against life's frustration that naturally complicates their lives. The bitterness of youth permeates the sequences based on gags and explosive youth, as does the absence of male role models. Kocourek's father drank himself to death and old Kolman, swamped with work, has no time for family. *Prague Cans* embodies youthful disillusion and the strange timelessness between student years and adulthood, as captured in one of the soundtrack's songs titled *Jsme děti prázdnoty* (We're the Children of Emptiness). The protagonists want to become independent and find their purpose in life but their social background doesn't allow them to. Kolman is still dependent on his father's influence because he knows nothing else, while Kocourek has no money and a criminal record. Kolman has a secured spot at university, gets by by bribing and paying off classmates for doing the work instead of him. He's constantly looking for his place in the world in the shadow of his father. Kocourek, on the other hand, has a clear goal – he would like to make a living as an artist. When he gets an offer to make some money with his art, it's usually cheap commissions from a butcher or a strip club owner, but he despises commercialism. As for housing and job opportunities, he paradoxically becomes dependent on old Kolman. The same motifs appears in *To the Woods* where Honza's fate depends on whether rich Papoš gives him a job and lends him some money. At the end of *Prague Cans*, the two main protagonists set out abroad. Kolman to England, Kocourek to the USA. New chapters in their lives seemingly open up before them, but their roots and

broken families eventually catch up with them. Vorel once again leaves his characters in a rather bitter vacuum.

The final part of the trilogy, *Job*, finds them back in the Czech Republic again. Their experiences from abroad and the last few years are again casually mentioned in ordinary dialogue. Kolman is stuck in a corporate job and has a wife and a child. While in *The Can*, he had problems picking up girls, in *Prague Cans*, he compensated for this fact by changing partners and in *Job*, he has settled down. He does everything to not follow in the footsteps of his father, whom he had cut out of his life after his mother died. His life is no longer controlled by his father, but by a paranoid fear of becoming like him. Kocourek, who lives in an art studio, has evolved spiritually. He doesn't mind commercialism anymore, he owns a printing shop and has forgiven people from his past. In *The Can*, he used 'throat hum' to provoke his teachers, here he uses it as a source of meditation. His mother, who is increasingly unable to perceive reality, is in a sanatorium. Kocourek still tries to make it with his own art. For both heroes, graffiti is a way to escape reality. Their trouble with the law once again interferes with their everyday lives but this time with dire consequences. Kolman is internally much more addicted to spraying as it reminds him of the subjectively distorted freedom of youth and he perceives it as an act of defiance against his father. In its core, *Job* is about the inability and perhaps even the impossibility to grow up. Graffiti is the only imprint of personal freedom which the heroes aren't willing to give up despite all the problems it causes. Once again, we find ourselves in an unbreakable cycle. Sooner or later, the characters will find out that being stuck in a cycle is both a necessity and a curse. The ending is a disputation of the fact that not even an effort to turn one's life around and transform one's values or a stubborn resignation to change cannot be evaluated by the primitive methodology of right/wrong. In both trilogies, as the characters get older, the infantile playfulness slowly fades. *Out of the City* abounded with playful songs and variations of English words, *The Can* emphasised farcical nature and physical gags. It can definitely be attributed to the changes in period standards and the director's taste, but from an interpretation perspective, this fact highlights the passage of time perfectly. The same can be said about the imperfect image and technical fluctuations (primarily the colour grading and lighting), especially noticeable starting with *To the Woods* when Vorel took over the cinematography duty as well. Although the technical imperfections are probably unintentional, they

emphasise the everyday inconsistency and downfalls of the portrayed character. In his films, Vorel seems to be a pragmatic and impulsive director who values energy and the emotion of a given scene more than technical brilliance. It's the certain graphic crudeness and defiance to redundant refinement that befits Vorel's ambivalent fictional worlds. Through deliberate exaggeration and a certain artificiality, he examines pain and genuine emotions. A stylised fictional world and almost wooden acting offer a detached perspective which we can use to reflect our own reality and personal worlds. More than anything else, Vorel's worlds and characters show how the ravages of time affect us and how we're influenced by the un/changeability of our opinions and ambitions. The returns to Vorel's characters are never the same, they don't try to build on the success of previous films. His films communicate with each other constantly, revise their values and encourage us to do the same.

Notes:

[1] UNIE FILMOVÝCH DISTRIBUTORŮ. TOP 20 ČR –July 2025 [online]. Praha: UFD 2025 [quoted 2025-08-06]. Available on: <https://www.ufd.cz/top-20-cr-cervenec-july-2025>

[2] NADCAST. Tomáš Vorel | NADCAST: Díky filmu Gympl se ze mně stal multimilionář! [online]. YouTube 2025 [quoted 2025-08-06]. Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFucpT6dGq4>

[3] ČTK. Vorel: Ulovit miliardáře není o politicích [online]. *České noviny*, 15th September 2009 [quoted 2025-08-06]. Available on: <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/pr/zpravy/vorel-ulovit-miliardare-neni-o-politicich/400360>

[4] FDB.CZ. Interview: Tomáš Vorel – část druhá [online]. *Filmová databáze*, 6th October 2021 [quoted 2025-08-06]. Available on: <https://www.fdb.cz/magazin/4576-rozhovor-tomas-vorel-cast-druha>

[5] Marek Slovák, Síťové vyprávění v české kinematografii: od deviace k normě [online]. *Filmový přehled*, 20th November 2020 [quoted 2025-08-06]. Available on: <https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/sitove-vypraveni-v-ceske-kinematografii-od-deviace-k-norme>