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František Daniel

“Daniel’s lectures confirmed my belief that the art of the screenplay lies in a well thought-out exposition, skilfully constructed plot and unexpected peripeteia, in the ability to focus on all conflicts to their logical catastrophic result and in the end come up with an elegant pay-off.” [1]

The role of screenwriter has long been underappreciated in Czech cinema, just like the entire preparatory phase of filming. An experienced script editor is able to recognize if a screenplay has empty dialogue, a plot line that leads nowhere, monotonous sequences, narrative clichés and inanimate characters. By asking the right questions, he should be able to strengthen the viewers involvement, clarify the motivations of the heroes and even the development of the story from the set up, through overcoming obstacles, to the goal. In the past, we could pride ourselves in having exceptional script editors, of which at least one fundamentally influenced a host of domestic and foreign directors and screenwriters. He called Pavel Juráček his best student [2] and, without him, David Lynch would not have been able to film his breakthrough debut *Eraserhead* (1977). We are referring to František Daniel.

František Daniel, known in the USA as Frank Daniel, was born in Kolín on 14 April 1926. He obtained his Master’s degree from the Faculty of Music (he played the trombone) and was the first foreign student to graduate from the Moscow film school VGIK (The Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography). Allegedly he began to be interested in film after he fell for actress Soňa Schulzová, his future wife. Not long after television broadcasting was launched in Czechoslovakia in May 1953, he joined Československá televize (Czechoslovak Television), where he gradually worked his way up to become the head of the literary and dramatic editorial staff of the Central Television Studio. In this position, he wrote for Alfréd Radok the screenplay for the first ever Czechoslovak television film, the half-hour film noir *V pasti* (*Trapped*, 1956).

In the mid 1950s, Daniel also began to lecture at FAMU, where he substantially influenced Pavel Juráček. [3]. He worked in parallel at Barrandov Film Studio, first as a script editor, then as the head of a production group. He contributed to films such as *Zářijové noci* (*September Nights*, 1957), *Kam čert nemůže* (*When the Woman Butts In*, 1959) and *Přísně tajné premiéry* (*Strictly Secret Premieres*, 1967). He tried, unsuccessfully, to introduce the role of executive producer in Czechoslovak film production in order to have someone supervise the development of a project from the onset. He, nevertheless, held such a position in the case of the Oscar-winning tragicomedy *Obchod na korze* (*The Shop on Main Street*, 1965) directed by Ján Kádár and Elmar Klos, the core producers of the Feix-Daniel group (the script editing “dream team” comprised Jiří Brdečka, František Pavlíček, Jaroslav Dietl and Otto Zelenka).

In 1956, Daniel teamed up with Miloš V. Kratochvíl to write *Cesta za filmovým dramatem* (*The Path to Film Drama*). They approached script editing based on aesthetics and their own creative experience. The first part of the publication is devoted to the basics of screenwriting, the second to the tasks of the script editor, who should focus on the overall composition of the work. Another screenwriting manual used to this day is the 1957 *Stručný přehled vývoje evropských dramatických teorií* (*Compact Overview of European Dramatic Theories*), which summarises the history of dramatic theory starting from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, based on which Daniel built his own methodology (and he recommended to his students that they should start with Aristotle when looking for a functional narrative structure).

František Daniel promoted the “sequential approach” in film form. To draw viewers more into the story and keep their attention until the end, a film should ideally be divided into eight sequences, with each following its own development, answer certain questions, and, at the same time, ask others, thereby creating the conditions for the next sequence. In this way, the film “entraps” viewers and piques their curiosity in what will happen next. [4] In addition to emphasising the sequential nature of the film narrative, Daniel’s approach was unique also in terms of the attention he paid to viewers, whose engagement should, in his opinion, be first and foremost on every screenwriter’s and script editor’s mind.

After criticism of the liberal tendencies in the live-action films made in 1957 and 1958 by Ministry of Culture František Kahuda at the First Czechoslovak Film Festival in Banská Bystrica in February 1959, the screening of four of the most problematic films were banned [*Tři přání* (*Thee Wishes*), 1958, *Zde jsou lvi* (*Scars of the Past*), 1958, *Konec jasnovidce* (*The End of the Clairvoyant*) 1957, and *Hvězda jede na jih* (*The Star Goes to the South*), 1958] and the Feix-Daniel group was disbanded. This was followed by background checks that resulted in some artists being given a two-year ban on making feature films (Ján Kadár, Elmar Klos), others being recalled from their positions (Karel Feix, Vratislav Blažek), and others being forced to leave Barrandov Film Studio altogether. The last applied to Vladimíra Svitáčka, who joined Laterna Magika, and František Daniel, who began to lecture more at FAMU.

As an associate professor habilitated in Moscow, Daniel created the curriculum of the newly created film school and later became its dean (1967–68). His popularity among students was not only due to his relatively young age and liberal approach, but also due to the fact that he asked students to analyse new films from around the world and invited guests to the school, such as Vsevolod Pudovkin, Joris Ivens and Cesare Zavattini. He considered hands-on experience to be the most effective way to master film. In his opinion, theoretical discourse should only take place after students themselves tried to write or shoot a film.

Although Daniel was vacationing with his family in Bulgaria during the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, he returned home nevertheless. After a year, however, he realised that free intellectual activity under the new conditions was impossible. Other script editors of disbanded production groups from Barrandov Film Studio left voluntarily (Jan Procházka), were fired (Pavel Juráček) or suspended (Erich Švabík). Daniel emigrated to the USA. The Director of the Ford Foundation, Neil Lowery, who knew Daniel from a previous encounter, [5] entrusted Daniel, due to Daniel's rich teaching experience, to assess the curricula of all American film schools. Daniel was then appointed the first dean of the newly established American Film Institute. Daniel wrote the curriculum for Los Angeles-based institute, which a host of other American film schools adopted.

Daniel's lectures at the AFI were attended by the likes of David Lynch, who wanted to leave the school when he did not get a chance to film anything even after his first

year of studies. In the dispute between the conservative management of the school and the visionary young director, Daniel took Lynch's side and helped him film *Eraserhead*, for which Lynch was extremely grateful even years after. Lynch remembered his mentor as an honourable person and excellent advisor with a broad outlook. According to Lynch, Daniel's criticism was "always constructive and never purposely offended anybody. He was open about saying what he didn't like, but he did it in a way that would help you. And that cannot be said about most of the critics in the USA." [6]

Other students, however, remember how Daniel would occasionally tear up screenplays that he did not like into tiny pieces ostentatiously, leaving the remnants on the floor of the classroom for the entire seminar. Following the Lynch case, Daniel left the AFI in 1976. He was offered the position of professor at Carleton College in Minnesota, where he was to introduce a film studies programme. Two years later, he began to teach at Columbia University in New York. He was invited to the school by one of his former FAMU students, now fellow teacher, Miloš Forman.

When Robert Redford was setting his "laboratory" of new talent, Sundance Institute, in 1981, he offered Daniel the position of artistic director. [7] Daniel was in this position for ten years, during which he helped create dozens of films by independent American filmmakers. In 1986, Daniel accepted the position of dean at the School of Cinema – Television at the University of Southern California (USC). Then he established the screenwriting department, where he acquainted, e.g., Bryan Singer, Lee Unkrich (films by Pixar) and Matthew Weiner (co-author of *The Sopranos* and showrunner of one of the most awarded dramas in recent years, *Mad Men*) with his sequence paradigm.

The list of screenwriters and directors that Daniel advised how to tell a story would be long. The most important were, e.g., Paul Schrader, Terrence Malick, Sydney Pollack, Darren Aronofsky, Paul Thomas Anderson, Todd Solondz and Jaco van Dormael. Daniel headed the programme for beginning screenwriters at USC even after he went into retirement in 1990. Since the 1980s, he was also an advisor at the Rockefeller Foundation, David Rockefeller's personal consultant and a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures and Film Sciences.

In July 1990, František Daniel attended the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, at which he gave an extensive interview for *Kino* magazine. In it, he discussed the reason why he left the country after the events of 1968 (“I did not have any illusions. People were being fired and it was clear that I would be one of them.”) and summarises his method of building the film narrative: “I have long tried to find a way to teach it, and because I was originally a musician, I took inspiration from there. When someone tries to learn an instrument, they have to master the etudes. I therefore tried to divide the screenplay into parts that a person had to master unconditionally, but I was long unsuccessful with it, as a similar approach in music has a tradition that goes back a few hundred years. I finally figured it out during the daily screening of the film *Poslední růže od Casanovy* [ed. note: *The Last Rose from Casanova*] and the composer’s musical annotation. It occurred to me that what music terms etudes are in a screenplay the sequence of build-up, the sequence of resolution, the sequence of confrontation and so on. In America I added film analysis, and it began to work”

[8]

Daniel continued to help his students develop their screenplays until 29 March 1996. He died from a heart attack at the age of 69. The prolific author and inspired teacher who believed that the basis for any good film is the relatively simple situation where someone desires something and is unable to get it, [9] is buried in California’s Forest Lawn Memorial Park. One can only hope that not only American, but also Czech producers in particular, will build on his legacy in the future.

Selection of Czech publications by František Daniel:

Daniel, František, ABC scénáristiky (The ABCs of Screenwriting). Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1964.

Daniel, František, Dramaturgie (Drama Theory). Film a doba 37, 1991, Vol. 4, pp. 230–233.

Daniel, František, Kratochvíl, Miloš V., Cesta za filmovým dramatem (The Path to Film Drama). Prague: Orbis, 1956.

Daniel, František, Kratochvíl, Miloš V., *Cesta za příběhy* (The Path to Stories). Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1964.

Daniel, František, *Stručný přehled vývoje evropských dramatických teorií* (Compact Overview of European Dramatic Theory). Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1965.

Daniel, František, *Základem dobrého filmu je scénář* (The Basis of a Good Film is the Screenplay). *Kinorevue* 4, 1994, Vol. 7, p. 18.

Daniel, František, Kratochvíl, Miloš V., *Základy filmové dramaturgie* (The Basics of Film Theory). Prague: Filmová a televizní fakulta AMU, 1963.

Notes:

[1] Juráček, Pavel, *Deník (1959–1974)*. Prague: National Film Archive, 2003, p. 636.

[2] “He used to tell people that I was his best student” Juráček, Pavel, *ibid.*, p. 695.

[3] In 1957, Daniel chaired the acceptance committee at FAMU during Juráček’s entrance exams. When Juráček was his third year, Daniel prompted him to write the sci-fi *Ikarie XB 1* (*Voyage to the End of the Universe*, 1963). Věra Chytilová contacted Juráček at Daniel’s recommendation regarding the screenplay to *Strop* (*Ceiling*, 1961), and Daniel’s *Dramaturgická abeceda* (*The ABCs of Drama Theory*) was a handbook whose approach to film through classical theatre Juráček long tried to unlearn.

[4] As David Bordwell reveals in detail across his work, classical Hollywood films have used a similar principle since time immemorial. See, e.g., Bordwell, David, Staiger, Janet, Thompson, Kristin, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. Routledge, 1985.

[5] At the end of the 1960s, the American Film Institute was looking for a cure to the American film crisis even in Czechoslovakia, which called attention to itself with four films that received Oscar nominations between 1965 and 1968. Most filmmakers that the AFI spoke to mentioned František Daniel as contributing substantially to this

success, and so Daniel was in the sights of the management of this organisation even before he emigrated.

[6] Dobeš, Marek, Vaňková, Michaela; Mám rád tajemství. David Lynch dojel na konec své Ztracené dálnice v Praze (I Like Mystery, David Lynch Reaches the End of His Lost Highway in Prague). *Kinorevue* 7, 1996, Vol. 7, p. 29.

[7] In addition to his teaching experience, Daniel allegedly gained Redford's fondness through his excellent paprika chicken recipe.

[8] Bílková, Jana, Karel IV. v Karlových Varech (Charles IV in Karlovy Vary). *Kino* 45, 1990, Vol. 19 (26 September), p. 3.

[9] The precept attributed to Daniel – “Somebody wants something very badly and is having enormous difficulty getting it”, or a variation thereof – can be found in several screenwriting manuals.