

MARTIN KOS / 10. 5. 2020

# The Cathedral Builder

The personality of Karel Degl hasn't been paid much attention by researchers, even though in the domestic filmmaking environment, he was active as a director, cinematographer, co-owner of the Bratři Deglové production and rental company (together with his older brother Emanuel), laboratory technician and, last but not least, teacher at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU). Even though he was actively involved in fiction and non-fiction films since the late 1900s, working in several positions, attention is mostly focused on his cinematographic activities following the advent of sound film and his cooperation with Josef Rovenský, František Čáp or Martin Frič.<sup>[1]</sup> A possible explanation of the relative omission of Degl's role in Czechoslovak filmmaking is suggested by the memories of his peers. In these, we see two main more general narratives describing the filmmaker's personality: one of a precise and reliable technical worker, the other one of a teacher willing to share his knowledge and experience with those interested in the film medium.<sup>[2]</sup> His focus on quality technical realization of cinematography and laboratory works helped in shaping the perception of Degl as a honest filmmaker, but still rather a craftsman without pronounced artistic ambitions. It must be noted though that even Degl himself contributed to this perception to a certain extent, not claiming his authorial credit even though he was significantly influencing the creative process in several cases.<sup>[3]</sup> One of the main aims of this text is thus to at least partially shade away the existing knowledge, using the example of *The Cathedral Builder* (Stavitel chrámu, 1919) to illustrate some systemic choices evidencing Degl's (rather side-lined) artistic creativity.

*The Cathedral Builder* greatly illustrates Degl's then attitude towards the attribution of authorship. In the credits, he is named as a co-director together with Antonín Novotný, an employee and later director of The City of Prague Museum (Muzeum hlavního města Prahy) focusing his research on the history of life in Prague.<sup>[4]</sup> Very

probably, this was a similar type of cooperation as in the case of the 1918 *For a Girl* (O děvčicu), a folklore film on the border between fiction and non-fiction taking place in Moravian Slovakia, with Josef Folprecht, an expert on this region, involved in screenwriting and directing. For both films, Degl engaged non-film experts on the matter in the production process, probably to guarantee mainly the historical or regional authenticity. These then presumably supervised the costumes or props, but it was Degl who probably made the creative choices related to directing actors or staging the space. At the same time, the only cinematographer mentioned in both films' credits is Jindřich Brichta. However, in his memoirs, Brichta notes that his teacher supervised him in shooting *For a Girl*, and it was only in *The Cathedral Builder* where he first worked independently.<sup>[5]</sup> However, since the latter film contains some trick shots with which Degl had quite some experience,<sup>[6]</sup> we can assume that at least in these moments, he was involved in the camera work as well. Last but not least, he was – based on the documents from the film preparation period – also involved in screenwriting works, even though the credits mention Vladimír Šrámek and Jan Emil Koula as the screenwriters. Degl presumably gave their original and rather generic text comprised of three acts and a series of successive scenes a more specific form of a literary screenplay, proposing a narrative structure divided into four parts. In accordance with the then narrative conventions in European cinematographies, each part corresponded to one film reel.<sup>[7]</sup>

It is the segmentation of the plot which shows that Degl didn't focus solely on the technical aspects of the style of work (such as lighting or camera focusing), but that he also convincingly learned the then screenwriting principles related to narrative structure. Dividing the film into four acts didn't only mean a mechanical segmentation of the film material based on the film reel length for cinema projections. On the contrary, it significantly shaped the internal logic of the story since the reel in that case represented a structural unit allowing for a specific rhythmization of the narrative. As evidenced in the following paragraphs, *The Cathedral Builder* makes use of this segmentation on several levels: by systematically placing important moments at the end of the reels, it achieves a specific narrative dynamic; it repeats certain established motifs and space-time patterns in cycles; it moves from strictly successive events featuring the main hero towards a parallel presentation of actions by groups of characters.

The plot is based on the story of Petr Parléř, who allegedly made a deal with the Devil when building a Gothic cathedral to successfully accomplish the most ambitious architectural project of the time. Spending his free moments with the mason's daughter Alena, the builder tries to prove to his envious teachers that his solution is the right one. However, the construction becomes Petr's obsession, resulting first in Alena's death and then – also due to a construction workers' revolt initiated by one of the teachers – in Petr's decision (made under the whisperings of the Devil) to burn down the scaffolding supporting the cathedral vault. In the end, the main hero dies as well, driven out by an angry mob to a steep rock and falling from it, exhausted.

The plot, briefly summarized here, is originally divided into several episodes which are built autonomously to an extent, but which contain prominent motifs and events making them a coherent whole. The first part follows after a preamble presenting all the important characters together with the actors; Petr is then granted permission from Charles IV to start working on the cathedral. In the introductory episode, the young man is first confronted with his envious teachers and their mistrust towards his construction plans. Still bearing their warnings in mind, he then visits his beloved Alena, at her father's house. The lovers' walk together concludes the part. The beginning of the next segment shows Petr's inner struggle with doubts about his course of action. Wandering lonely through the half-built cathedral, he exclaims with determination that he would complete the task assigned to him, be it with the help of the Devil. In a strange state of mind, he again heads to Alena, but before meeting her, he changes his mind and heads back. The girl sees him coming from the window, follows him and tries to stop him, but Petr leaves her because of the cathedral. In the rocks, Petr meets the Devil and makes a deal with him to complete the construction, with Alena jumping into the water and drowning at the same time, with which the episode culminates. At the beginning of the third part, one of the envious people stirs up the construction workers to revolt against the builder and refuse to build the scaffolding, while Alena's father finds the body of his daughter on the river shore. Both events result in chasing the architect in the cathedral. Appearing again, the Devil first provokes the main hero to set the scaffolding on fire with words, and then hands him a burning torch, luring him into arson. Petr then leaves the burning building, running out of town fleeing his pursuers. Even though he wakes up from his previous state of mind in the final part, Petr escapes from the mob of workers and

Alena's father to the rocks, where he finds his death without seeing that the vault didn't collapse.

The individual episodes are not only interconnected by the framework pattern of cathedral construction, but also by the important moments with which they end and which interconnect the motifs and the story on a higher level. In the introductory part, it is the menacing prediction of the group of teachers that Petr wouldn't complete the construction. This is what he reacts to in the subsequent part leading to his pact with the Devil and Alena's death at the end of the sequence. It is this event that sets the chain of events in motion in the third unit, where the revolting workers claim the main hero was responsible for Alena's death, and fires the desire for vengeance, with the workers indirectly making the young man destroy his own work. The visually attractive image of the burning scaffolding, in the collage with Petr fleeing the site, makes the last partial culmination leading to the final chase between the hero and the outraged mob and to the ultimate tragic ending. The segmentation into independently culminating acts thus makes the narrative dynamics significantly more rhythmical and leads to a stronger causal coherence. Each of the events described above not only represents the culmination of the respective part, but also moves the chain of events in the subsequent part.

In *The Cathedral Builder*, the structural principle not only manifests itself in the specific rhythm shaped by the partial culminations, but the segmentation also allows for developing the elements, motifs or settings where the story takes place, and varying their functions based on the needs of the plot. This is most apparent in the first two acts, which to a significant extent have a cyclic structure in terms of episodic patterns and spaces between which the main hero moves. Nevertheless, there are certain minor shifts in the framework structure influencing the overall narrative construction. When the preamble ends, the camera moves to Petr's home, where we see him pondering over the construction plans. Thinking for a while, the architect heads to the construction site and meets the three teachers there. They join him for an inspection of the half-built cathedral, warning him that his plans are too bold and that the vault could collapse. Petr rebuts their warnings and criticism and takes a boat to visit Alena. Even though he shows affection to her, she notices his downhearted state of mind as well. The second part starts with a title informing the viewer of the builder's unease during the night resulting from the meeting with the

teachers. After the cut, we see him devoured by uncertainty over the plans and anger. That's why he heads to the cathedral, where he decides to complete the construction even with the help of the Devil. Petr then leaves the cathedral to visit Alena and, after they meet, he makes the deal with the Devil and the girl commits suicide, as described above.

It is thus quite obvious that both parts follow the same spatial pattern with Petr moving between his home – the cathedral – and the mason's house in the rocks. In addition to the cyclic repetition of specific settings, the film also creates prominent parallels between the individual scenes, modifying their function in the overall narrative construction. Even though in both the scenes at home, we see Petr moving between the desk (in the foreground) and the windows (in the background), they create a different impression. While in the opening sequence, the architect is peacefully working at the desk, moving in good spirits to the window and looking from it – probably in the direction of the cathedral – with a satisfied expression on his face, in the repeated scene, he paces back and forth between the desk and the window frenetically, which together with his expressive gestures implying his exasperation and despair emphasizes the artist's uncertainty over the results of the construction. Similarly, there are significant shifts in the subsequent cathedral scenes. While the first scene is based on the confrontation of the young man's ambitions with the doubting approach of the old masters, coming back to the same scene, the film presents Petr (through his subjective eyes) fighting his own inner battle. The end of the second sequence is a variation of the end of the earlier scene as well. From the initial statement of the teachers that Petr would never finish the cathedral, the film moves to the hero's clearly presented conviction: „*I will complete it, albeit with the Devil!*“

Most significantly varied in *The Cathedral Builder* is the role of the mason's house and its surroundings, though, where both parts come to their conclusion. When it occurs for the first time, it can be argued that the space setting and the new characters together with the romantic relationship between Petr and Alena is rather conventional. Just like in a classic Hollywood story, there is a personal line added to the professional line of the main hero. And even though during their walk the film hints that the brooding man's work might be more important to him than his girlfriend is, we still have only a rather vague idea about the future of their relationship. The

second time we follow Petr heading to the same space, the film departs from the cyclic repetition even more markedly. Firstly, the builder doesn't even reach the mason's house and heads to the rocks instead, and Alena has to run to get to him. At the same time, the scene significantly moves forward the development of the romantic line only implied earlier, with Petr giving priority to the construction over the girl he leaves. During his lonely walk through the rocks, he meets the Devil and closes the deal with him. Even though together with the main hero, the film gradually takes us through three settings in the same order, it creatively avoids becoming a closed loop thanks to subtle variations and significant shifts both in designing the scenes and their function in the overall structure of the story. In other words, the film follows the same trajectory twice, which thanks to partial changes means something different each time in relation to the main hero, the professional objective he strives to achieve with his actions, and his personal life; and this has an impact on the plot development in the subsequent parts.

In addition to that, *The Cathedral Builder* also creatively works on the higher level of the two halves of the plot. Just like the cyclic structure of the first two parts helping to create parallels or variations between the key scenes taking place in the given settings in the first part and the repeated sequences in the second one, also in the two halves there is a certain mirroring between the functions of space in the context of the narrative and the motifs. The most obvious example would be the way both halves finish. Each culminates with the death of one of the characters falling in the rocky setting. First, the film shows us Alena committing suicide by jumping to the water, and at the very end of the narrative arc it culminates with the fall of the exhausted Petr from a steep rock. Through death in a similar setting, there is a clear parallel, with the central motif of cathedral construction playing the key role in both cases. Where Alena commits suicide at the end of the first half since Petr gave priority to his work over her love, in the final sequence, the tragic end of the main hero is a consequence of his destruction of his own work that he sold himself out to despite the girl's affection. The parallel between the two sequences is also emphasized by the Devil. He is first introduced to the viewer at the end of the first sequence in the rocks striking a bargain with Petr; the fatal meaning of this action is pointed out by cross-cutting and showing the death of the young man's beloved. In the final scene, he appears on the edge of the rock above Petr's exhausted body just

before his fall.

As for the creative choices made in the overall narrative structure and leading the viewer's attention, what is even more remarkable is the work with the characters, their activities and narrative perspectives. As already detailed above, in the first half, we almost exclusively follow Petr, his movements and actions in three settings. In the first half it is he who is the main driver of the plot, and as such he becomes the centre of nearly every shot. We almost constantly follow his actions, and when he falls out of the frame, it's usually when other characters (the teachers, Alena and her father) and their relationship to the builder is introduced, with editing subsequently cleverly following where the characters look to connect them with Petr in a coherent space. The exception first driving our attention away from Petr and playing a key role in the story is Alena's desperate jump to the water shown in a cross-cut.

Whereas in the first half Petr is defined in the narrative dynamics by his *actions*, it is mostly his *reactions* to the activities of other characters that define him in the second half. And this is also reflected in the perspective view, which moves from the main hero as the central focal point and from the cumulative organisation of events towards distracting our attention between more actors and a parallel presentation of the plot. The second half of the film thus starts unexpectedly in the context of the previous story – with a scene where Petr doesn't appear at all. From this moment on, it is the other characters who become catalysts of the story. One of the teachers first starts scaring the workers, telling them that Petr made a deal with the evil spirit and that the vault would collapse the minute they remove the scaffolding and kill them. The film next drives our attention to the mason's house, where we follow the father setting out to look for his daughter. After a cut, we find ourselves under a stone bridge, where a group of Prague inhabitants see Alena's lifeless body. The unexpected branching of the storylines, considering the previous context of the film, starts to converge again – first the action under the bridge merges with the mason's search line with the father seeing the inhabitants pulling his dead daughter up to the shore. Coming back to the site, we see Petr arriving and arguing with the revolting workers and the mason coming to inform the builder of Alena's death.

At one point, all the important storylines merge into one, which, although they immediately diverge again, significantly shape the rest of the story. The construction

workers accuse Petr of causing the girl's death, demanding his punishment, and he flees from their wrath into the cathedral. From this moment on, and in two phases, the film only switches between Petr and the pursuing mob using cross-cutting. The first phase takes place inside of the building where Petr is hiding, and the Devil entices him to set it on fire. The second phase follows the structure of the then typical chase sequences in several settings outside of the town, where the mob chases the architect, with cutaways with trick shots of the burning building. Remarkable is that until the final moment of Petr's death, the main hero is no longer an active agent, acquiring a rather passive role, and the story is shaped by characters only presented in the background so far. Even the setting of the vault scaffolding on fire, which could be considered the young man's action, is much rather an imposed reaction to the outrage of the workers, initiated by the Devil.

All the tactics described above in relation to the structure of *The Cathedral Builder* are part of a broader strategy aiming at maximum transparency in the distribution of information and coherence of the story. In addition to the organisation of scenes into a causal chain of events, this aim is also achieved through style, mainly the work with framing, editing, and lighting. As much as the work with stylistic devices would deserve an independent analysis, it is at least to be noted how the chosen methods make the story more understandable. The stylistic devices systematically drive our attention to elements or actions which are important for the story, doing so on several levels.

In the sequences relying on the depth of the space (mainly on the construction site), where we watch the scene as a whole and in several planes, the filmmakers put key elements or important characters to the foreground and to the centre of the frame to emphasize their importance as much as possible. Even though we primarily associate this method of working with space with the standards of the time in European cinematographies, the film proves that the authors knew and relatively mastered the classic montage principles as well. At certain points, our attention is driven by an analytical spatial cut, emphasizing an important object or action through a closer frame. This is for instance the case in moments where the film needs to emphasize Petr's feelings, switching from looking at the whole to a semi-detail better showing the expression on his face.



Similarly, the orientation in the story and in the frames is enhanced by the lightning. It is the lightning that highlights the importance of the cathedral scene where Petr decides to complete the construction even with the help of the Devil. In the dark interior of the building, the character is lit with sharp sidelight making the depth of the space even less prominent. Thanks to this, we can only watch the builder's figure with its expressive gestures in the centre of the frame surrounded by darkness. In this way, the film not only achieves an impressive atmosphere, but through suppressing the surrounding elements, it places the utmost emphasis on the hero and his behaviour.

As indicated above, *The Cathedral Builder* is not only worth mentioning in the context of the history of Czech film industry for its craftsmanship in trick shots. Such perception would arise from seeing Karel Degl as a technical expert, and the medieval legend about Petr Parléř's deal with the Devil would indeed be a suitable film material for using such trick shots. But the contrary is true: the film represents confident work with the story structure divided into several parts with ingenious variations and modifications of functions of the settings of the story and of selected motifs. In addition to that, what can be seen there is a systemic shift from a cumulative presentation of events with limited perspective only focusing on the main hero towards a more complex and parallel presentation of several lines of action at the same time. Yet the film consistently maintains a chain of causes and effects with coherent motifs and transparent events, which is assisted by the style as well, serving the needs of the story. Since the preserved archive materials suggest that it was Degl who was behind many of these methods and creative choices in modifying the screenplay, it may be worthwhile for us to start thinking about him in the context of the then screenwriting practice, just like Jan S. Kolár<sup>[8]</sup> did.

#### **Notes:**

[1] For instance František Rubáš claims that Degl only became a cinematographer in the true sense of the word after the closure of the brothers' company, which coincided with the advent of sound film in Czechoslovakia (which Degl didn't believe in, according to Rubáš). František Rubáš, *Vzpomínka na Karla Degla – průkopníka laboratorního*. In: Václav Wasserman (ed.), *Karel Degl – příklad mladým*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství 1957, p. 17.

[2] Worth mentioning is mainly the collection of memories edited by Václav Wasserman, a part of his series on Czechoslovak film pioneers. Cf. Václav Wasserman (ed.), *Karel Degl – příklad mladým*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství 1957.

[3] For instance in his memory of the production of *Oriental Language Teacher* (Učitel orientálních jazyků, 1918) Jan Stanislav Kolár mentions that Degl was not only in charge of the camera, as stated in the credits, but involved in directing the film as well, together with Kolár and Olga Rautenkranzová. The interview with J. S. Kolár was conducted by Jaroslav Brož, Zdeněk Štábala, Luboš Bartošek and Stanislav Zvoníček, [196?]. OS 756 1/n, Národní filmový archiv (NFA).

[4] Josef Tomeš a kol., *Český biografický slovník XX. století. II. díl. K-P*. Praha: Paseka 1999, p. 473.

[5] Jindřich Brichta, Karel Degl, můj vzorný učitel. In: Václav Wasserman (ed.). *Karel Degl – příklad mladým*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství 1957, p. 16.

[6] In 1917, he cooperated with Antonín Fencel on *The Prague Adamites* (Pražští adamité). Among other things, the comedy with a doppelgänger plot relies on trick shots, with identical characters played by Josef Vošalík meeting in one frame. Jan S. Kolár even retrospectively attributed a significant authorial contribution to Degl, claiming that it was he who came up with the idea of this trick. The interview with J. S. Kolár was conducted by Jaroslav Brož, Zdeněk Štábala, Luboš Bartošek, and Stanislav Zvoníček, [196?]. OS 756 1/n, NFA. At the same time, Degl noted in his notebook of 1914–16 several details of the young man's experiment with the stop trick. Poznámkový sešit o kinematografii Karla Degla; manuscript. NFA, f. Bratři Deglové s.r.o. (1912) 1918–1952 (1963), k. 9, inv. No. 133.

[7] Already Ivan Klimeš pointed out the intentional segmentation of *The Cathedral Builder* based on the film reels, mentioning the preserved graphic designs of credits announcing the beginning and end of the individual parts. These inform the viewer on what to expect, and summarize the story. Ivan Klimeš, *Narativ optikou projektoru. Illuminace* 20, No. 4 (72), p. 13.

[8] Even though Kolár emphasized mainly Degl's qualities as a cinematographer, in the list of roles he attributed to him in domestic filmmaking he also mentioned him as a

screenwriter, although during his entire career, Degl officially only participated in writing the screenplay for *For a Girl*. Jan S. Kolár, Vzpomínka. In: Václav Wasserman (ed.). *Karel Degl – příklad mladým*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství 1957, p. 21.