

Filip the Catalyst

(Instead of) “Laudatio”



Why “Instead of”? At least for six reasons; thus, a conventional “Laudatio” would be rather:

- a) *Hardly possible* for a career that braves any standard. Which Filip should be praised in a limited journal space? Except the young specialist in industrial automation who disappeared soon because a large palette of personalities were grafted onto, all other professional facets – from IT expert to transdisciplinary researcher and from manager to university professor – are long-lasting, rich and diverse.
- b) *Irrelevant or even boring.* What should be emphasized? Positions, titles, books, papers, classes, success stories? The long lists would do their job as usual: instead of illustrating quality, they would smother it; in short, the trees hide the forest.

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- c) *Either parochial or snobbish*. Indeed, giving the reasons for awarding him the Honoris Causa Degree in Sibiu a few years ago would sound sectorial or insular, whereas trying to present his role in the academic life of Chişinău would sound arrogant, since the readers know it much better. In any case it would distort: either by omission or by unbalanced focus.
 - d) *Strange*. For a dynamic personality, still far from the scientific apex, the occasion given by an age divisible by ten is forced to coexist with the usual references to an “Opera Omnia”. It sounds Procrustean.
 - e) *Redundant*. In this very journal much more competent authorities have done it in a high-level manner.
 - f) *Biased*. For more than a quarter-century, Florin Gheorghe Filip was crucial for my evolution; hence, I lack the minimal detachment necessary to become an acceptable *Laudator* in its earliest mediaeval meaning.

Therefore, this pseudo-Laudatio is a fuzzy blend of acknowledgment, confession, and feelings. Albeit most of the assertions below (and above too!) are my opinions, covering them with the umbrella of “feelings” gives two benefits: no need to justify them, no risk to be assessed as exaggerated. I should use this double freedom, rare for a scientific environment.

Why “the Catalyst”? Again for six reasons; the hypostasis of catalyst was chosen because it is:

- a) *Unknown*. The main cause is Filip himself: he filled the public interest with so many reports where he was *actor* – mostly protagonist – that those about his role as *catalyst* could hardly get some attention.
- b) *Seemingly uninteresting*. It is perceived somehow as a “second hand” scientific activity. For instance, in 1998 after being declared the IT person of the year in Europe, nobody cared that

a young teaching assistant from Sibiu was able to participate at a prestigious international conference only due to Filip's decisive scientific and financial support. So what?

- c) *Vital*. While in chemistry the catalyst only increases the rate of a reaction, in scientific research the catalyst is vital, I dare to say it is a *sine qua non* condition for the reaction to emerge. Indeed, exaggerating metaphorically, without a catalytic Pygmalion, few “professional Galateas” can carve themselves out of a promising yet lifeless block of scientific ivory.
- d) *Powerful Amplifier*. The leverage effect of scientific catalyse is huge, mainly when the catalyst is as polyvalent and tireless as Florin Filip was since he became scientist in 1976. As a result, the paper published in 1980 by Pergamon Press had four colleagues as co-authors. Now there are probably almost a thousand IT professionals owing their take-off to his catalyse. (Only in Sibiu – including also the “third generation” – we are about thirty.)

The last two reasons are caused by personal links.

- e) *The author is involved*. It begun in the early 80's when Florin Filip was one of the few colleagues from Bucharest and Timișoara who guided my first steps into the challenging realm of real-time programming (simple, giving me a seminal book by Per Brinch Hansen). And the process is lasting (I could mention at least ten other areas/ moments/issues where he catalysed decisively my career – but not the generated *reaction* should be focused on, here it is about the *catalyst*).
- f) *The paper is involved too*. A few months ago, this pseudo-Laudatio was supposed to be an epilogue to the preceding paper but very soon it turned the other way around: the paper was concocted almost as prolegomena to the virtues of “scientific catalyse”: the research described was not developed but triggered by Filip (simple again although “scientific catalyse” avant la lettre: he gave me the idea of the “Prigogine niche”).

Hoping that these reasons persuaded that any reference to any hypostasis of a polyvalent character has nothing to do with his age, I dare to sketch a micro-portrait of “Filip the Catalyst” – albeit a possible quite distorted one, since it is shaped from inside a very prolonged catalytic process:

The main impression (in its both connotations: “impact” and “feeling”) is that the cardinal catalyse macrofeature is *naturalness*, decomposable in four related but distinct features: *spontaneity* (mostly it is his initiative), *openness* (if suitable, a brief *pro and con* analysis), *effortlessness* (nothing seems easier), *modesty* (don’t mention it). Our first paper written together – and my first paper accepted in a conference outside Romania – is a relevant example: he asked the organizers to transfer the invitation from him to me and to give me a substantial financial help (conference fee plus accommodation), gave me some names of faculty members to start a collaboration, and finally . . . forgot to insert it into his paper list (at least, I hope that it was no other reason!). (*Nota bene*: it was just after I left the institute where he was general manager.)

What is behind the scenes of this seamless picture? A research feature important for all scientific areas but imperative for an “IT Catalyst” is “*Feeling the Zeitgeist*”. As essential *Zeitgeist*-component, the “e-*Zeitgeist*” is most deceptive because of its tremendous dynamics; to absorb it, two pillars are mandatory: a solid professional status and a superior intellectual texture. You can be successful in incremental research lacking the second or even a good professor lacking the first, but never a Filip-like catalyst. In his case the first is obvious but the second is hidden (by the way, how many IT specialists do you know who are able to talk in six languages about Scandinavian poetry?). Does it matter? It does. Whereas for any researcher a *violon d’Ingres* (I hate the word “hobby”) acts as an intellectual amplifier, for a catalyst it is an intrinsic ingredient of the scholarly structure. (Moreover, to perceive Prigogine-niches, the violin must be replaced by an orchestra.) In short, the easiness of a Filip-like catalyse is an illusion because the inexorable foundation stays hidden in the following (over)simplified implication chain: catalyse → IT excellence → Prigogine-niches → trans-

disciplinarity → anthropocentric perspective → e-Zeitgeist → Zeitgeist → intellectual excellence. Furthermore, in this tempting blend Florin Filip instilled a rather rare constituent: *tolerance*. He paid always attention to the subtle difference between catalyse and prescription. (The last inside example: despite the fact that he was the acknowledged first violin in our long teamwork, he tolerated – in the best meaning of this word – most of my minoritarian and heterodox opinions about, for instance, the sunset of object-orientation or the role of agents in decision support systems).

Certainly, like in every alchemic endeavour, there are a great deal of esoteric elements involved in the catalyse process. Maybe, even more in the catalyst persona. I enjoyed trying to unveil some of them.

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