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FILM PRODUCTION IN POLAND. STAGES: FROM AN IDEA TO THE SCREEN

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The Polish film system is characterized by a variety of forms. Michał Zabłocki, the author of the comprehensive study of the «Organization of the production of feature film in Poland», isolates two models of world cinema: a producer and a producer – director. The first one features the dominant role of the producer, which means the person who is responsible for the work of all the film departments – direction, cinematography, production management, scenography and costume design. The second one, the model which is still the most popular in Poland, assumes close cooperation between the producer and the director.

Key words: Preliminary questions; the definition of a film producer in Poland.

The Polish film system (also known as national cinematography¹) is characterized by a variety of forms. Michał Zabłocki, the author of the comprehensive study *Organization of feature film production in Poland*, distinguishes two models of a world cinema: a producer one and a producer-director one. The first one is characterized by the dominant role of the producer, i.e. the person responsible for the work of all film divisions – directing, cinematography, production management, set design and costume design. The second, still the most popular in Poland, assumes a close cooperation between the producer and the director who, as an independent artist, has a decisive influence on the final shape of the script, the selection of film crew members and the cast. Such a solution places Polish cinematography in the field of European cinema searches. It also works well for the production of niche, usually low-budget documentaries or short films, when the creation of a work depends more on the need to tell an interesting story than on the profit from its distribution in cinemas (film schools, production groups of graduates of directing and cinematography departments).

¹ On the principles of functioning of the national cinematography created in a specific country, related to the culture and tradition of its creators and their masters – see 4. E. Zajicek, *Beyond the screen. Polish cinematography in 1989 – 2005*, Polish Filmmakers Association and Film Studio Montevideo, Warszawa 2009.

The system based on the producer's total responsibility for the film, treated both as a work of art and a finished product intended to bring a profit, refers to American traditions which are strong to this day in major Hollywood studios.

In Poland, until 2005, i.e. the year when the Cinematography Act was entered into force, there was no unified definition of a film producer that would clearly indicate their rights and obligations. The producers were settled for rather vague criteria. The producer was mainly supposed to manage the funds allocated to the film production in such a way that the money was enough to complete the project and distribute the work. The need to save the money determined a number of changes, usually adverse for the final version of the film. The authors resigned from the solutions that would increase an artistic and market value of the film: stunt scenes, special effects, drone or grip shots. They also often limited the participation of stars in the cast – especially in feature films or TV series. Their unreasonably high fees were reducing the budget of the planned productions.

The Cinematography Act was to sort out the organizational, financial and production chaos in Polish films, especially those which authors had the ambition to tell a story with a universal message (distribution potential). Its most important provisions, however, were limited to a simplified definition of a producer:

The Cinematography Act defines a producer as a natural person, a legal person or an organizational unit set out in article 33' paragraph 1 of Code of Civil Procedure (namely a unit without legal personality, but when an Act grants a legal capacity, having the same rights and obligations with legal persons) that (...) takes the initiative, actually leads and bears the responsibility for the creative, organizational and financial process of film production².

The problem is that the provisions of the Act do not clearly define the producer as a person who allocates only their own funds for the production of a film. It does not appear from the Act if the producer can e.g. benefit from grants from State bodies. Polish producers complain about the lack of appropriate normative acts to facilitate establishing contacts or signing binding contracts with domestic or foreign co-producers. Until 1989, only a few films fully financed by independent producers were released in Polish cinemas. Today, the producers are increasingly looking for financial support in the institutions established for this purpose (although such bodies are constantly working on legal regulations), primarily at the Polish Film Institute (since 2005), with foreign investors, in Regional Film Funds or in the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage as well as in the Provincial Administration Offices.

The Film Commission established by Marshal Władysław Ortyl in consultation with the Polish Film Institute has been operating in Podkarpacie for four years. To some extent, the Commission co-finances the production of documentary and feature films promoting the region (each year the Sub-Carpathian Commission allocates eighty thousand PLN to support documentary productions and six hundred thousand PLN for feature films). In the first quarter of the year, the popular RFFs usually publish competition dates and conditions on their websites. Their participation in co-financing the production of a film work may not exceed fifty percent of the cost of the entire production, provided that the remaining part is financed by the producer in agreement with investors – most often private co-producers.

² Zabłocki, M.J. (2013), *Organization of feature film production in Poland*, Warszawa, p. 45.

Michał Zabłocki evaluates the Polish film industry as a *risky business*, i.e. a project subject to large losses. If we assume that the cost of producing a full-length film in Poland is on average from eight to ten million PLN, the spectrum of failure appears particularly painful, because it is burdened with legal and financial liability.

(...) obtaining various reliable sources of financing is, on the one hand, a necessity and, on the other hand, an attempt to minimize the risk of economic failure. However, the more financing entities, the more willing to share the “baked cake”, in view of the principle of division of property rights to the film according to the financial contribution. Sometimes, even a special company is appointed to implement a single project – a special purpose vehicle³.

The main producer of a film, often referred to as the lead producer, chief producer or responsible producer, does not act alone. He selects co-producers – there can be a director, a production manager or, in exceptional cases, a screenwriter (they make their financial or material contribution in the form of equipment). Zabłocki supplements this simplest system of roles with several other professions:

(...) there are also the notions of linear, creative producers with broader or narrower powers in relation to the film crew. By looking at the American industry where there are such specialties as: main producer, executive producer, supervising producer, coordinating producer, line producer (...) one can see how many types of producers exist (...)⁴.

Polish legislation does not regulate many crucial issues related to the producer's profession. Their duties can still be performed by a person who is unfamiliar with film production, but has the necessary finances to create the work. It is a good practice, especially for a young producer who appears on the set for the first time and only gets to know the law regulations, work regulations, operating standards, contract templates, and legal acts and so on to maintain close cooperation with an experienced production manager. This can prevent him from the unpleasant consequences of ignorance – especially of legal ignorance. Ewa Gębicka rightly notices that the Cinematography Act of 2005 only slightly brings order to the growing organizational chaos in Polish film production. The difficult realities of domestic film sets and the increasingly stronger position of producers require many specific solutions regulating the organization of filmmakers' work. The journalist writes about it in the article *Problems of managing the process of film production in the new media environment and the realities of Polish cinema*. It draws attention not only on the historical context of the contemporary production model, but also to the threats resulting from the increasingly stronger role of the so-called new media, which effectively take viewers from productions distributed in cinemas. The author rightly notes that a producer should, at least to a minimum degree, learn about the specifics of the work of directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, sound producers and editors, because

(...) its functions in the production chain are not limited only to obtaining money for a film or managing an individualized group of filmmakers, but also requires planning, organizing, motivating, controlling, and still programming production, conducting literary works, acquiring proprietary copyrights, estimating film costs, signing contracts with investors and distributors. In addition, the producer selects the contractors and performers of the main roles, approves the director's concept of the work, controls the course of produc-

³ Zabłocki, M.J. (2013), *Organization of feature film production in Poland*, Warszawa, p. 49.

⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

tion at all stages, secures financial liquidity, decides to accept the film and make a sample copy (...) ⁵.

In this article, the wider historical context of the emergence of the modern variety of the producing system in Poland is not covered. Michał Zabłocki and Marek Hendrykowski, among others, write about it – the latter in terms of media studies ⁶.

The stages of a film producer's work

Development

The role of the leading producer in making a fictional film, to a lesser extent a documentary or a niche short film, begins when the idea for an original work emerges. The producer should, therefore, first of all take care of purchasing the copyright to the literary material, which will be the starting point for his other activities. Acquiring the rights to the texts (the original script or the adaptation of a literary work) and the involvement of a director who will translate the scriptwriter's vision into the film images begin the period of *development*, i.e. the growth of the artistic concept of the film. This term does not appear in the Cinematography Act or other legal acts. In 2010, only some authors associated with the Polish Film Institute attempted to define the concept, which has been functioning in European cinematography for several decades:

(...) these are preliminary works leading to the production of a feature film, a documentary or an animated film – any preparation and writing of the script, script corrections, preparation of art projects, production of a pilot, production of a so-called trailer, screen tests, looking for investors and co-producers, preparing financial plans, a scenery and costume documentation (...) ⁷.

The producer, based on the script and the director's instructions, looks for sources of financing for the production of the film. They meet with investors, submits applications to the Polish Film Institute and Regional Film Funds. In the nineties, Polish artists gained the support of the Canal + station, thanks to which some works significant for Polish and foreign cinematography were produced, including *Essential Killing* directed by Jerzy Skolimowski, *Sponsoring* directed by Małgorzata Szumowska, *Fear of Height* ⁸ by Bartek Konopka and *Entanglement* ⁹ by Jacek Bromski.

Many young producers promote their films at industry events. A few years ago, an offer of Polish reviews and festivals expanded to include the possibility of presenting scripts or ideas for a film with the participation of international co-producers, i.e. the so-called *pitchings*. In Poland, it is still a new form of fundraising for artistic works – not only for films but also exhibitions and theatre performances indirectly related to the film industry.

David Pope and Alex Boden from London Film Academy advise that the producers presenting their ideas at public presentations should work closely with the rest of the production team. This way, especially young producers, who are just starting their profession, will avoid mistakes and awkward terms that contradict the film narrative.

⁵ Gębicka, E. (2013), *Problems of managing the process of film production in the new media environment and the realities of Polish cinema*, 'Managing media' (In Polish original: 'Zarządzanie mediami'), nr 1.

⁶ Hendrykowski, M (2005), *Świetliste słowa* (Translator's note: Polish title, not translated to English). Warszawa, p. 67-69.

⁷ <https://www.pisf.pl/institut/infografika/jak-dziala-pisf>

⁸ The original title in Polish is *Lęk wysokości*.

⁹ The original title in Polish is *Uwikłanie*.

British authors (a director and a producer) recommend that:

(...) the person presenting the project should speak mainly about the protagonist of the film, the place and time of the action and the genre to which a given production could be qualified. It is important to present the story you intend to tell in order to have an equal beginning, middle and end, and to devote the same amount of time to them. At the beginning, only a few succeed (...) the art of pitching is almost as difficult as the art of seduction. It is not only about speaking, but also about the ability to listen, because if potential investors are interested in the project, this cooperation may last two years or sometimes longer. It will be a marriage. This relationship is about a career advancement, not a one-off meeting. Pitching is a spectacle. It is played almost like on a stage therefore be prepared to answer the most surprising questions. It is worth having photos, posters or movie trailers with you. All this will come in handy during the presentation. It certainly will not hurt (...)¹⁰.

It happens that the beginning producers confuse *the budget with the cost estimate*. Virtual amounts, which are usually put in the cost estimate frames by the production manager, should be consistent with the real money obtained from the aforementioned institutions. Co-producers may, for example, as is a common practice in European cinematography, support the development of the project by providing high-quality equipment. The *development* period ends with determining the basic parameters of the film (a title, genre and type, the length and screen time, the limit of the entire production cost, locations, the number of shooting days, a sound recording standard, any extras, the size and technical version of the film medium as well as the limit of allocation and consumption of this medium during photos, the use of special effects and the type of music used in the work). The last element of *development* is sending the film to production or starting a business closely related to the production of a film work. Usually, at this stage, the producer already owns the property rights to the film. This means not only their full responsibility for the settlements, distribution and potential earnings of the film (ticket sales), but, essentially, a significant impact on the artistic shape of the work.

Pre-production

The next stage of the producer's and film crew's activities is called *pre-production*. It lasts several weeks. It takes place right after the final version of the script is approved, the budget is closed and the film is sent for production (the day of opening a bank account to service the film's account, signing contracts with the main producers of the work). In practice, this is the time needed to create a responsible group of contractors, i.e. professionals who will closely cooperate with each other. In Poland, they are often called film families. Some people collaborate on multiple projects.

They know each other and their predispositions, so they can guarantee that a film which will be created will meet not only the expectations of the producer/producers, but most of all the viewers. The next stages of the *pre-production* period are the selection of locations, i.e. places and facilities where the operator and their associates (a cameraman, lightning technicians, and grips) will take film pictures. They will do it at the writer's and director's suggestions. Based on the script, the director and camera operator will prepare a so-called screenplay, i.e. a detailed description of each shot, although in recent years this has become an increasingly rare practice on Polish film sets. In American film studios, this

¹⁰ www.akademiapolskiegofilmu.pl/pl/

principle has been in force invariably since the inception of Hollywood cinema, regardless of whether a high-budget production or a niche film with the participation of stars with a high artistic potential is being created.

During the *pre-production* period, all representatives of the film divisions cooperate with one another. The first shot on the set is preceded by a several-day meeting of the most important members of the shooting team, called brainstorming in film jargon. The problems are discussed hot – they may arise, for example, from underdeveloped scenarios or poorly selected film objects that will be difficult to illuminate or record sound that meets world standards.

Shooting

Shooting is the most important period of production from the point of view of the director and operator. In Polish conditions, they last even several weeks. It depends on the momentum of production – the number of locations, equipment, time needed for the film crew to travel, i.e. the logistics of the film. The duration of the shooting period is also influenced by weather conditions. The filmmakers start first shooting outdoors. Then the team moves inside. The producer is not always present on the set. During this period, their competences are taken over by the production manager and the plan manager as well as secretary. It is them who ensure the continuity of the photos according to the production schedule. Each unused shooting day (bad weather conditions, lack of equipment, indisposition of the main actor) means additional costs in the budget. Producers compensate for these losses in various ways. They mainly interfere with the scenario – they cut out some scenes, minimize the participation of stars, save on equipment. For example: instead of shots from a drone, they introduce static shots from a camera set on a hill – if objective general or total plans are needed. The shooting period is the most important stage of film production. In Polish production realities, film directors and cinematographers decide about the key artistic solutions. Their cooperation with the producer is based on trust and respect for both the individual artistic vision and the film's budget. In the United States, producers make their own strategic decisions – often to the detriment of the artistic merits of film works.

Post-production

The period of work on the film, which summarizes the previously described activities of the producer cooperating with representatives of all divisions of the film organization, is called by the filmmakers *post-production*. It lasts three to six months. It mainly includes re-viewing of digitally recorded material, editing, *post-production* of the film image and sound. It is during this period that the producer makes strategic decisions regarding the final version of the film (the model copy), supervises the editing and finishes contracts with distributors. The producer also signs civil agreements with the acquisition of copyrights to musical illustrations, with composers and music performers. These responsibilities are shared with the production manager and executive producer. All *post-production* activities account for up to twenty percent of the film's value. If the initial materials, i.e. the so-called *raw* film recorded during the shooting, do not meet the quality requirements, the producer, in consultation with the director, decides to change the original concept of the film (planned scenes fall out, some others are shortened to episodes). Decisions about the second takes are rarely made, which in Polish conditions not only increase the cost of the film, but also rarely prove themselves in the editing process, because it is difficult to combine in a log-

ical sequence some shots played in the summer with those that would be recorded in late autumn – especially if they concern outdoor scenes that are key to the film’s dramaturgy.

The *post-production* period is related to the settlement of co-production contributions and subsidies. The producer agrees with distributors on a schedule of the film’s participation in screening and festivals.

At every stage of making a film, the producer – especially in the Polish film reality – makes strategic decisions in consultation with the director. However, it often happens that their vision of the final version of the film is different. Michał Zabłocki emphasizes that the film production in Poland

(...) is an extremely difficult undertaking that must reconcile the artistic vision with the economic and organizational realities and the expectations of the entities financing them. It seems, therefore, that the key criterion of the quality of this cooperation should be the good of the project, and not the particular interests of both sides, often based on false ambitions¹¹.

Instead of a summary

The new generation of Polish producers are creative, well-educated filmmakers aged thirty-five to forty. They attend film festivals, have no complexes and willingly work in international co-production groups.

(...) in their case, what counts is good literary texts, shared ideas, good energy. These are the pillars of these little new production companies. The statements of young producers echo the former Film Groups – the road to film is always a dialogue, friendship, long meetings and talks¹².

Sławomir Idziak, Polish cinematographer and producer, adds that the final path to success and solving many problems that producers around the world are trying to deal with on filming sets are:

(...) trust the people we work with, give them freedom and let them develop creative thinking. Then the success comes. It is actually the second name of the manufacturer. There is always some kind of success in a movie. It’s good if the financial one is combined with the artistic one. But this happens far too rarely¹³.

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¹¹ Zabłocki, M.J. (2013), *Organization of feature film production in Poland*, Warszawa, p. 67.

¹² Zabłocki, M.J. (2013), *Organization of feature film production in Poland*, Warszawa, p. 67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

ПОЛЬСЬКА СИСТЕМА ВИРОБНИЦТВА ФІЛЬМІВ. ЕТАПИ: ВІД ІДЕЇ ДО ЕКРАНУ

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Польська кіносистема характеризується різноманітністю форм. Міхал Заблоцький, автор всебічного дослідження «Організація виробництва художнього фільму в Польщі», виділяє дві моделі світового кіно: продюсера та продюсера – режисера. Перший має домінуючу роль продюсера, що означає особу, яка відповідає за роботу всіх кіновідділів – режисури, кінематографії, управління виробництвом, сценографії та дизайну костюмів. Другий – модель, яка досі є найпопулярнішою у Польщі, передбачає тісну співпрацю між продюсером та режисером.

Нове покоління польських продюсерів – креативні, добре освічені режисери віком від тридцяти п'яти до сорока. Вони відвідують кінофестивалі, не мають комплексів і охоче працюють у міжнародних групах копродукції.

У їхньому випадку головне – це хороші літературні тексти, спільні ідеї, добра енергія. Це стовпи цих маленьких нових виробничих компаній. Висловлювання молодих продюсерів перегукуються з колишніми кіногрупами – дорога до кіно це завжди діалог, дружба, довгі зустрічі та розмови.

Славомір Ідзяк, польський кінематографіст і продюсер, додає, що остаточним шляхом до успіху та вирішення багатьох питань, з якими продюсери у всьому світі стикаються на знімальних майданчиках, є: довіра до людей, з якими вони працюють, забезпечення для них свободи творчого розвитку і творчого мислення. Тоді запановує успіх. Це насправді друга назва виробника. У кіно завжди є якийсь успіх. Добре, якщо фінансовий поєднується з художнім. Але це трапляється надто рідко.

Ключові слова: попередні запитання, визначення продюсера фільмів у Польщі, продюсер, фільм, кіносистема, режисура, кінематограф, управління виробництвом, сценографії.