

Screen Industries in East-Central Europe

Petr Szczepanik

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For my parents.

Věnováno mým rodičům.

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When visiting and working part time in Prague throughout the 2000s, I repeatedly heard about Hollywood films being shot in the local studios and historical sites. In the context of discussions about cultural and economic globalization, it piqued my curiosity as a subject hitherto almost entirely ignored by the academic literature. But only after visiting several filming sets and interviewing a handful of service producers (often foreigners based in Prague) and Czech crews in the spring of 2009 did I first realize how complex and far-reaching a phenomenon this was, forming a parallel industry almost entirely separated from the national media production. Observing the shooting of Lucasfilm's war movie *Red Tails* (dir. Anthony Hemingway, USA, 2012) on a hot June 2009 day on the outskirts of Prague, in semi-improvised soundstages converted from the hangars of an aircraft factory, I was struck by the rough, glitzy materiality of the process. Was this really how global Hollywood spectacles are made? Was this how media globalization worked on the ground? The original idea for this book began to take vague shape on that day.

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This book includes revised excerpts from the following essays:

Introduction and Chapter 1: 'Producing for Small Audiences: Smallness and Peripherality in the Global Media Industries', in P. McDonald (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021) (© 2021 by Routledge. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group).

Chapter 1: 'Post-socialist Producer: The Production Culture of a Small-Nation Media Industry', *Critical Studies in Television* vol. 13 no. 2 (2018), pp. 207–26 (© 2018 by Sage. Reproduced by permission of Sage Publishing).

Chapter 3: 'Transnational Crews and the Post-socialist Precarity: Globalizing Screen Media Labor in Prague', in M. Curtin and K. Sanson (eds), *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 88–103 (DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/luminos.10>) (© 2016 by The Regents of the University of California. Licensed under a Creative Commons CC-BY license).

Chapter 4: 'Breaking Through the East-European Ceiling: Minority Co-Production and the New Symbolic Economy of Small-Market Cinemas', in J. Hammett-Jamart, P. Mitric and E. Novrup Redvall (eds), *European Film and Television Co-production: Policy and Practice* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 153–73 (© 2018 by the author. Adapted by permission from Springer Nature Switzerland AG).

Chapter 5: with E. Pjajčiková, 'Group Writing for Post-socialist Television', in V. Mayer, M. Banks and B. Conor (eds), *Production Studies, The Sequel!: Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 105–20 (© 2015 by Routledge. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group).

Chapter 6: 'HBO Europe's Original Programming in the Era of Streaming Wars', in L. Barra and M. Scaglioni (eds), *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 243–61 (© 2020 by Routledge. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group).

Chapter 7: with D. Vašíčková, 'Web TV as a Public Service: The Case of Stream.cz, the East Central European Answer to YouTube', *Media Industries* vol. 5 no. 2 (2018), pp. 69–91 (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0005.205>) (© 2018 by the authors. Licensed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license).

Introduction: East-Central European Media as Digital Peripheries

East-central Europe is not a typical subject for critical discussion of media industries, globalization and digitalization. In fact, the region has been virtually absent from the cognitive map of the media industries literature. This book does not seek to fill the gap by providing a comprehensive overview of the audiovisual industries in the Czech Republic, Poland or Hungary. Instead, it argues that the peripheral, historically marginalized position of the region offers a unique opportunity for understanding the globalization and digitalization of media production in a new way. It goes beyond the traditional conceptual frameworks and narratives typically associated with east-central Europe in the film and media studies literature, such as the occasional emergence of an art-film movement, the post-socialist economic transformation or the recent politicization of news media. Instead, it is interested in the everyday reality of media production on the ground: the hands-on decision makers, people who stand in the middle level of the media industry hierarchies, responsible for initiating and managing the production processes.

The book is structured as a series of loosely interconnected case studies. What they have in common is the perspective of producers: the key agents of the regional media industries and the focal point of European and national media policies – whose agency is, however, quite limited by the scale, the position and the internal workings of the respective media markets. My research method was, broadly speaking, based on watching the producers from as close up as possible over the last decade: listening to, talking to and observing them at work or at official industry events, reading and assessing their grant applications, inviting them to my classes and sending my students to work with them as interns, occasionally even advising several of them on their theoretical dissertations, watching their projects materialize or wane, and their companies flourish or struggle, as well as trying to understand them through the eyes of other industry agents, such as directors, screenwriters, crews, distributors, broadcasting and VOD executives, and policymakers. Such a time-intensive approach did not allow me to cover the

whole of east-central Europe, the region sometimes called the Visegrad countries, in the same or even similar levels of detail.

The concept of east-central Europe – in contrast to related terms such as Eastern Europe, Central Europe or Mitteleuropa – has the analytical advantage of carrying less ideological baggage and delimiting a more defined geographical area. This book uses it in an instrumental, reductive way to refer to a cluster of neighbouring post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. These countries went through similar historical developments in the twentieth century (partly or fully belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire before 1918, being governed by state-socialist regimes from the late 1940s through 1989, and joining the EU in 2004); share a similar position in the global capitalist system and a common general type of national economy – termed an ‘embedded neoliberal’ regime of capitalism by Bohle and Greskovits (2012: 138–81); and themselves claim a common cultural and political ground within the EU (Visegrad Group 2004), despite their increasingly diverging trajectories and interests in recent years. Without venturing too far into the rich and complex debates about the borders and characteristics of this region, roughly placed between the Western European (or German-Austrian) and Eastern (Russian-Soviet) spheres of influence and situated between the Baltic Sea and the Alps, it suffices to say here that the category of east-central Europe in the narrow sense of the four so-called Visegrad countries provides an efficient comparative framework for studies of the peripherality and smallness of media industries. However, the book does not come close to a balanced picture of all the four national industries: my long-term observations of Czech producers provided me with the limited insights that this book builds on and which I could only selectively test, compare or supplement by studying examples taken from Poland and Hungary. To my regret, I had to almost completely leave out the fourth and smallest Visegrad country, Slovakia, after realizing that I was not able to find a compelling story there that would differ enough from my Czech cases and that would best illustrate one of the key areas of peripheral producer practices I wanted to cover. As a result, this book is not comprehensive in terms of its geographical scope, but it tries to be as comprehensive as possible in terms of covering different fields of producer practices that are most affected by digitalization, globalization and Europeanization.

Each of the chapters discusses a specific producer type and area of producer practice: the strategies and self-conceptions of independent producers circumscribed by the smallness and/or peripherality of their home markets; a contrasting success story of an arthouse producer who managed to overcome the limits of the peripheral market; the ‘service producers’ working on large Western projects in Prague and Budapest, vitally dependent on financial incentives introduced by the national governments; the ‘minority co-production’ that serves national

policymakers as a measure of internationalizing local producers and gaining more festival recognition; in-house producers of public service television, whose agency is limited by the top management of the broadcast organization as well as by co-producing independent producers; the regional operation of HBO Europe, which uses original local content production as a vehicle for its transnational corporate strategy; and finally, short-form online video production, which is an extremely diverse and volatile field, but promises dynamic growth in the era of mobile, 'procrastination' viewing. While quite heterogeneous and disconnected, all these cases illustrate how producers in the small and/or peripheral markets of east-central Europe are affected by and act upon the transformative forces of digitalization, globalization and Europeanization.

Media globalization and digitalization, recently epitomized by online services such as YouTube and Netflix, have been making more visible than ever the fact that the vast majority of media markets in the world are both relatively small and peripheral. These peripheries and semi-peripheries don't interact with each other so much as they receive media flows from the 'core' media powers, mainly Hollywood and other 'media capitals' (Curtin 2009). It is impossible to understand media globalization without paying close attention to these small peripheries, to the ways in which transnational media flows are facilitated, acted upon, transformed and even limited by local agents on the ground.

This book presents studies of media globalization and digitalization in one specific region where smallness and peripherality act together. But it doesn't treat east-central Europe as an isolated case. Instead, I stress the mutually constitutive relationships between the Western and Eastern, central and peripheral media industries as they manifest themselves in nationally-oriented film and TV production, international co-production, so-called runaway production, 'glocalization' of transnational subscription video on demand (SVOD) services and short-form online video.

DECONSTRUCTING THE WESTERN IMAGE OF EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN MEDIA

If noticed at all, Central and Eastern European film and television tend to be assessed in terms of political transformation, national identity or national art movements – not as commercial products, reservoirs of popular culture icons or examples of innovative business and technological solutions. Most existing monographs for international readership limit their scope to the national framework and focus on the so-called new waves, schools and other national movements of art cinema with their elite auteurs (see e.g. Hames 2005, 2010; Lubelski 2017), on national narratives and representations of the region's traumatic twentieth-century history (Cunningham 2004; Haltof 2019), or on the

interplay between media and political systems, the propagandistic use of media and political transformations during state socialism and after 1989 (Bren 2010; Štoll 2018). The democratization or politicization of media systems, high-art movements and national or ethnic identities also remain the main grids for comparative studies of media across and beyond the region (Jakubowicz 2007; Kovács 2007; Hanáková and Johnson 2010; Downey and Mihelj 2012; Mazierska, Kristensen and Năripea 2014; Połomska and Beckett 2019). By contrast, comparative and transnational studies of Central and Eastern European audiovisual media as popular cultures are very rare and have emerged only recently, rather more often in the field of television than film studies (Havens, Imre and Lustyik 2013; Imre 2016; Ostrowska, Pitassio and Varga 2017; Mihelj and Huxtable 2018).

This disciplinary division is reminiscent of the ‘ghetto of Soviet area studies’ criticized by the anthropologist of (post)socialism Katherine Verdery as a restrictive cognitive framework applied to Eastern Europe as a consequence of the Cold War. According to Verdery, the Cold War was an ‘organization both of the world and of images and knowledge about it’ whereby the Second World used to be (and to a large extent still is) approached by ‘area studies’ as opposed to the First World, which has been studied by economists, sociologists and others in the theoretical social sciences (Verderey 2002: 20). Anikó Imre, a proponent of the dialogue between post-socialist and postcolonial studies in the research of Central and Eastern European film and television, pointed to a parallel disciplinary division in the West’s image of the socialist and post-socialist cinemas, which have been reduced to examples of elite national cultures. According to Imre, this involved a paradoxical ‘mutual imbrication of cosmopolitanism and nationalism’:

The divisive ideological force of the Cold War singled out the most mobile, cosmopolitan elements of East European cultures, successful auteurs and their representative films, and designated them to be representatives of the national cinemas that together made up the Western construction of ‘Eastern European cinema’.

(Imre 2014: 128)

The traditional selective focus on elite, cosmopolitan auteurs perceived as representatives of their respective national cinema cultures, typical especially for Western festival juries, has two ideological effects: first, it reproduces the hierarchy between West and East, with the former assigned a universal perspective and the latter restricted to a national position; second, it erases the everyday reality of cultural production and consumption in the region by ignoring the

actual practices, habits and preferences of both professional communities and audiences. Drawing on Verdery's call for a closer dialogue between post-socialist and postcolonial studies, Imre argues for a shift of attention towards popular media texts such as reality TV shows that, according to her, are performing aspirational Europeanness while stigmatizing the 'racialized others', thus revealing the unacknowledged racism and power mechanisms at the core of Eastern European nationalism. This move potentially opens a wider perspective allowing for comparative studies of practices of domination in media, crossing the traditional Cold War borders while also breaking away from the limiting disciplinary categories of high art on the one hand and national politics on the other.

Due in part to the above-mentioned disciplinary divisions, film and television industries in east-central Europe are a subject that has remained even further on the margins of research trends in both the humanities and social sciences, especially in the Anglophone literature. There is not a single English-language book devoted to media industries in any of the east-central European countries, nor is there a volume covering the whole region. Books on national or regional cinemas that include chapters on 'the film industry' after 1989 resort to a bird's-eye overview of the institutional environment, box office statistics and economic conditions providing a sketchy context for discussing auteur styles or representational patterns (Iordanova 2003: 143–6; Cunningham 2004: 142–59; Mazierska 2007; Imre 2012: 425–517).

Similarly, studies of post-socialist screen media industries in east-central Europe have not looked closely enough at the actual working of film and television production or distribution. Scholars first focused on political, legal and economic aspects of privatization (Millea 1997), then on the new ownership structures and public funding schemes, or on institutional transformations and the politicization of the public-service media (Połomska and Beckett 2019), but usually avoided discussing day-to-day industry practices, cultures and agents. Until recently, the only topic where studies of post-1989 east-central European cinemas resorted to discussing industry practices had been East-West co-productions, mostly in relation to national and European public funding schemes (Jäckel 1997; Iordanova 2002). As Anne Jäckel noted in her overview of European film industries, international co-production (and in some cases foreign production services) is what has qualified small-nation cinemas as industries, which seems even more true for the east-central European region (Jäckel 2003: 60–2). However, this small body of literature lacks what is currently understood as media industry studies, specifically, critical research perspectives that take industry practices, agents and cultures as the primary subject, while using theories and methods of sociology, anthropology or political economy to uncover the power relations and hierarchies at work.

Only in the 2010s did the first academic studies – mostly published in Polish, to a lesser extent in Czech and Hungarian, and only occasionally in English – start to appear across the region, written by local researchers under the influence of new research fields in Anglo-American academia such as critical media industry studies, political economy of media, production and distribution studies, economic geography and cultural policy studies (Adamczak 2014a; Wróblewska 2014a; Adamczak and Klejsa 2015; Szczepanik 2016b; Varga 2016; Stachowiak and Strykiewicz 2018; Koźuchowski, Morozow and Sawka 2019; Majer, Orankiewicz and Wróblewska 2019; Majer and Szczepański 2019; Szczepanik, Zahradka and Macek 2020). In Poland, the younger generation of media industries scholars draws on the work of the local pioneer of production studies, Edward Zajiček (1922–2018), a long-time production executive in the state-run studios who, since the 1980s, published numerous textbooks on economic, organizational and social aspects of the Polish film production system (see e.g. Zajiček 2009). In the Czech Republic, a group of media scholars and sociologists formed in 2014 to produce the first extensive industry-wide analysis of film producer practices in the national market, on commission from the Czech Film Fund (CFF). The study focused on the pre-production process of developing scripts, assembling creative teams and financing projects, and uncovered an alarming precarization of screen-writing labour (Szczepanik et al. 2015). Loose continuations of this initiative include research into the impacts of the European Commission's Digital Single Market (DSM) strategy on local distributors (Zahradka and Szczepanik 2019). Between 2011 and 2019, a series of eight 'Screen Industries in East-Central Europe' conferences took place in three Czech cities, where many of the authors quoted above exchanged ideas. It remains to be seen whether these emerging trends are coming together to form a broader, truly cross-national dialogue that would contribute to discussions about digitalization, globalization, Europeanization and other major issues of critical media industry studies.

CINEMA OF SHORTAGE: THE STATE-SOCIALIST MEDIA INDUSTRIES

Before moving to contemporary media industries in east-central Europe, it is necessary to at least briefly touch on the history of state-socialist media as well as the 1990s transformation period, because this is what forms the common ground for further comparative research in the post-socialist era. It is beyond the scope of this introductory chapter to provide a thorough overview, whether historical, systemic or comparative; this section offers just a cursory glance at selected key issues relating to media industry practice.

The national cinema industries of east-central Europe had been quite diverse prior to 1945, and they took different routes again after 1989. But as members of the Soviet bloc, they followed similar economic, organizational and ideological

directives imported from the USSR, however differently they were adapted and implemented on the ground (Iordanova 2003: 20). Without looking into specific local differences, this section outlines a general model of the state-run film and television industries, stressing the importance of party-state ownership and ideological control, the command economy and centralized organization modelled on heavy industry.

Across the entire former Soviet bloc, film industries were nationalized en bloc shortly after the end of World War II, between 1945 (Poland and Czechoslovakia) and 1948 (Hungary). In Poland and today's Slovakia, this involved building a new infrastructure almost from scratch as well as training a new workforce, but in others, such as Hungary and even more so today's Czech Republic, nationalization involved contested transfers and reorganizations of relatively developed private enterprises, which took several years, with a great deal of the talent, middle management and technical staff retaining their positions. In the latter two countries, continuity prevailed over change and several films developed during wartime were finished and released under the label of nationalized studios with little or no change. State ownership meant that the only legal producer and distributor was the state itself, represented by state-run companies and their managers, and that all revenues, including those from screening foreign films, were channelled back into the system or absorbed by the state budget. The same applied to television, whereby state broadcasters held strict monopolies from the launch of regular transmissions (1952 in Poland, 1953 in Czechoslovakia, 1958 in Hungary) through the late 1980s or early 1990s when the first commercial broadcast channels sprang up in east-central Europe.

The political monopoly of each country's communist party, constitutionally enshrined, had a direct impact on the national film industries in terms of international exchange, censorship and approval procedures as well as hiring policies. Multilevel, unpredictable and often changing bureaucratic systems of control developed, but their real power in terms of interference in day-to-day creative and industry processes varied, dependent on the general political climate as well as the ability of the professional community to regain some autonomy. Generally speaking, the tight control of the late-Stalinist period of 1949–53 loosened in the second half of the 1950s only to increase again during the waves of political backlash against reformists: after 1956 in Hungary, after 1968 in Czechoslovakia, and after 1968 and 1981 in Poland.

The key principles of the state-socialist command economy resulted from the state's takeover of key means of production aimed at maximizing its redistributive power: vertical bureaucratic administration and central planning, with economic activity being determined by values derived from communist ideology and by coercion rather than by utility and affect (Beckert and Zafirovski

2006: 629). Instead of the forces of market-based supply and demand, the command economy was coordinated by enforcing instructions such as mandatory output targets and input quotas or administrative pricing – though the market (or even the ‘black’ market) always played a certain role in allocation – which caused systemic inefficiencies labelled by Kornai (1992: 228–301) as the ‘shortage economy’. Ethnographic studies of the ‘actually existing socialism’ provide a rare look at how the command economy was experienced on the ground by its participants on different levels of the power hierarchy. Describing the consequences of state-run firms focusing on procuring adequate supplies instead of meeting or generating demand and achieving profit, Katherine Verdery shows how managers had to pad plans and bargain with bureaucrats to secure scarce materials and labour; how workers disdained official party directives and rituals, developing an ‘oppositional cult of nonwork’; and how the ruling party’s hyper-productive surveillance apparatus reproduced docile subjects (Verderey 1996: 23). According to Verdery, the inner economic rationality of socialism was based on accumulating productive resources at the centre at any cost: not because it was more efficient in terms of cutting costs or satisfying consumer needs, but because ‘that was how it had redistributive power; and it wanted to give away the rest, because that was how it confirmed its legitimacy with the public’ (p. 26). This economic logic operated in media industries too. Film production and distribution were centrally planned within the same framework of five-year plans as heavy industry, with little regard for actual demand, and shortages of different kinds affected all sectors of the film and television industries. Revenues from the distribution of all films were centrally accumulated and redistributed across all divisions regardless of their profitability. Practices of padding plans, adjusting box office statistics, informal bargaining for concessions and circumventing party directives complicated or even thwarted efficient top-down organization while at the same time permitting a limited amount of autonomy for creative work within the bureaucratic system. Especially in the periods of partial political liberalization, middle-level managers at the production ‘units’ level played a crucial role in facilitating informal collaboration and innovation that enabled state-socialist cinemas to achieve surprising successes at Western festivals, awards and arthouse distribution (Szczepanik 2016b: 255–96).

As if only international relations (usually with the West) justified their perspective on state-socialist cinemas as industries, the most frequent subjects of historical studies that touched on industry practices in the region were foreign film distribution and exhibition (Bláhová 2011; Skopal 2014), and international co-productions, usually in relation to policies of Cold War cultural diplomacy (Siefert 2012; Skopal and Karl 2015). Historians interested in the internal workings of the state-run studios and state-socialist production systems have

mostly concentrated on (self)censorship, political pressure on auteur directors and specifically on the shifts from the Stalinist centralization to the post-Stalinist 'limited autonomy' that enabled the art-cinema movements of the late 1950s and 60s to flourish. While doing so, they have generally targeted the tense relationships between the political powers-that-be and film-makers, overlooking the state studios themselves, and especially their middle level of management, corresponding to what would have been called producers in the Western production systems. This started to change only recently with studies that have looked more closely at so-called 'units' – semi-autonomous groups of writers, directors, production managers and other personnel working collaboratively under the umbrella of the state-owned national film industries. These units are of primary interest to industry scholars because they had virtually replaced producers, who, as a profession, could not exist in the state-run industries before 1989. While the Czech and Slovak units were dissolved soon after the collapse of the communist regime, in Hungary and Poland they survived into the 1990s and beyond as state-owned production companies (see Adamczak, Marecki and Malatyński 2012; Ostrowska 2012; Szczepanik 2013c).

REBUILDING MEDIA INDUSTRIES FROM THE RUINS OF THE STATE-SOCIALIST ORGANIZATIONS: THE 1990S AND EARLY 2000S

The post-1989 transformation set media industries in individual countries apart from each other again. The most controversial issue was the disintegration and privatization of film industries including the state-run studios. Each country began experimenting with a new funding system, which would replace the pre-1990 financing, that was based largely on revenues flowing to film production directly from the integrated distribution network. (In many respects, the late state-socialist studios resembled so-called Hollywood majors from the classical era of the 1930s and 40s, which were vertically integrated with distribution and exhibition networks and whose production system was based on centralized control of all means of production and a detailed division of labour.) It comes as no surprise that the rapid disintegration and privatization of media industries in the 1990s appeared to many, especially former studio employees, as a destructive 'big bang' or 'shock therapy' whereby the free market replaced cultural objectives and ruthless private capital substituted for the party-state. Facing the disintegration of the national film industry and afraid of losing the privileged position they had enjoyed in the state-socialist system, film directors lobbied national governments to continue public funding, proposing various models ranging from a preservation of the state studios to project-by-project subsidies (Zajiček 2009: 315).

Below the surface, there was more continuity than expected: while politically discredited top managers left, and most big studios were replaced by dozens of

tiny and often short-lived production companies, many creative workers and mid- to lower-level personnel in both film and television kept working in the industry as freelancers or private entrepreneurs. Edward Zajiček notes that the Polish producer system of the 1990s was in fact dominated by production managers and especially by prominent directors, some of whom acquired producer experience as heads of the state-owned 'film units': the first group represented 35 per cent of Polish producers as of 2000, the second 20 per cent; the European independent producers as we currently understand them had yet to be trained (Zajiček 2009: 347–8). The most lucrative part of the screen-media business, namely foreign production services, was initially dominated by those production managers who had built contacts and gained experience in the state studios' international departments, which had often required (as in all areas involving East-West business exchange) collaboration with the secret police.

Unlike film studios, state broadcasters had to redefine themselves as public service media and to establish elected boards that were at least formally independent of political interference from the government or parliament. This process differed significantly between the countries in the region – from a relatively smooth and consistent transition in the former Czechoslovakia to a prolonged and contested transformation labelled a 'media war' in Hungary, where the new regulatory framework never sufficiently defined a public service remit nor created independence from the state (Lengyel 2010). After setting legal frameworks for the dual broadcasting system, commercial broadcasting was introduced across the whole region in the early 1990s, creating more pressure on the public service broadcasters (PSBs) to retain their viewership and to search for a new legitimacy. As an essential part of their new public mission, broadcasters became producers of serial programming and co-producers of independent feature films (especially in Poland and the Czech Republic), with the new commissioning practice partially resembling that of the former studio units (the resemblance being reinforced by a number of personnel transferring from the state film studios to employment in public service or commercial television).

From the Western perspective, the 1990s – a period of time roughly book-ended by the fall of the Berlin Wall and 11 September 2001 – may have seemed like a post-ideological 'end of history' decade when the Western liberal democracies finally triumphed (to use the terminology of Francis Fukuyama [1992]). For the former Soviet bloc countries, not yet part of the EU, the epoch was a time of euphoria and high hopes, but also deep anxiety about the ambivalent consequences of 'privatization', 'marketization' and 'democratization' – 'that troika of Western self-identity so insistently being imposed on the ex-socialist "other"', as Katherine Verdery puts it in her critical reflection on the anthropology of post-socialism (Verderey 2002: 21). Most film-makers lost their low-paying but

secure jobs in the state-run studios and struggled to adapt to the demands of making a freelance career, with public funding systems still waiting to be stabilized. Marcin Adamczak estimates that 12,000 employees of state-run film organizations lost their jobs in Poland in the early 1990s (Adamczak 2010: 241); Václav Marhoul, the head of Barrandov Studios in Prague at the time of its privatization, recalled that he fired about 1,700 employees (out of a total of 2,700), including all creative workers, to avoid bankruptcy in 1991 (Švoma 2007: 157).

With the sudden boom of consumption opportunities after 1989, cinema attendance dropped drastically in the early 1990s, before it started slowly growing again: in Poland from 38 million to 10.5 million between 1990 and 1992; in the Czech Republic from 51.5 million in 1989 to 31.2 million in 1992 and 8.8 million in 1996; in Hungary from 46.5 million in 1989 to 15.2 million in 1992 and 13.3 million in 1996 (Danielis 2007: 97; Adamczak 2010: 244; KSH 2020). Local audiences, confronted with an unprecedented abundance of entertainment options, appeared to be torn between nostalgia for the socialist past and the craze for American pop culture, with niche tastes struggling to find a new institutional home at festivals and arthouse cinemas.

National media industries opened to the world and embraced new technologies and business models: film distribution, dissociated from production and theatre chains, soon became dominated by a handful of companies representing Hollywood studios; the late 1990s also saw the dawn of multiplex theatres, transnational cable TV, home entertainment and the early internet boom, with the first wave of foreign investment changing the media landscape of the region (Danielis 2007). The US-based Central European Media Enterprises (CME) built its television empire across Central and Eastern Europe, including the strongest commercial broadcasters in the Czech Republic and Slovakia; HBO Europe established its offices in Budapest, Prague, Warsaw and other parts of the former Soviet bloc, and Canal+ followed in Poland; and the former state studios in Prague, Budapest and Bratislava started openly competing for American 'runaway production'.

Audiovisual legislation and policymaking struggled to come to terms with the rapid marketization of media industries and the shrinking public sector. The idea of cultural production as a pure business that deserves no preferential treatment from the state was backed by the new clique of neoliberal politicians such as Václav Klaus (the Czech prime minister between 1992 and 1997 and later the president) and other free market ideologues who shaped public policies in film and media in the former Czechoslovakia until at least the mid-2000s (Hanzlík 2020: 407). The intense anti-communist atmosphere of the time resulted in suspicion of the state's role in culture, fascination with the free market and global capital, 'the best policy is no policy' discourse, and the expectation

that the film industry should become economically self-sustaining in Poland too (Gębicka 2006: 38–42). The transformation of the industry and its public funding proceeded somewhat smoother in Hungary. The Motion Picture Public Foundation of Hungary (established in 1991) secured a higher level of continuity with the pre-1989 state-socialist system, based on democratic self-governance of the professional community; it was more stable and better funded (relative to the size of the market) than other regional funds in the 1990s and 2000s, especially after the implementation of the new Act on Motion Pictures in 2004, which introduced the first regional fiscal incentives to attract foreign investment (Lange and Westcott 2004: 174; Varga 2012). But generally speaking, it took many years of lobbying and negotiations and many provisional policy solutions in each country before a more durable consensus between the political powers and the industry communities was finally reached in the late 2000s and early 2010s – which remained in effect as of 2020. It materialized in more stable audiovisual legislation and sustainable public funding systems, while the dominant policy discourse gradually shifted from neoliberalism towards the agenda of promoting national cultural prestige and finally the ‘national mercantilist’ perspective seeking to strengthen the competitiveness of local companies (Hanzlík 2020: 408).

Local film productions for a period of time attracted a handful of adventurous private investors and banks, but they quickly realized that only a small fraction of projects break even. Direct equity investment mostly gave way to product placement and occasional sponsoring, while the bulk of private financing had to be obtained from ‘rights-based financiers’ (Finney 2015: 85) such as distributors and broadcasters; in the larger and more dynamic Polish market, though, private investment seemed to continue, limited to a subfield of purely commercial production such as Patryk Vega’s films (Strnad 2000: 34; Gębicka 2006: 121–7; Zabłocki 2018: 106–8; Majer, Orankiewicz and Wróblewska 2019: 145–52). The straightforward commercialism in national productions was epitomized by the local breeds of genre movies, while the nationally-oriented mainstream often turned to the national past for story material or drew on the traditions of socialist popular culture, creating a sense of nostalgia. But little was done in the 1990s to support and develop exportable arthouse products that would communicate with contemporary European intellectual trends or even try to shape them. Instead of critically reflecting on the new social and economic reality or even imagining alternatives to global capitalism, liberal democracy and European identity categories, which some Western scholars of post-socialism hoped to find in local cultural forms (Verdery 1997), east-central European audiovisual media have been generally nurturing national sentiments and tastes. Thus, in a way, the post-1989 regional media industries became even more provincial and peripheral than during the Cold War era, losing their state monopolies and safe

export markets in the former Soviet bloc and having their new centre of cultural power (US media) located further away than ever before.

EUROPEANIZATION, DIGITALIZATION AND THE 'RETURN OF THE STATE': THE MID-2000S AND BEYOND

Since the mid-2000s, this provincialization within the new global system of media flows has been increasingly confronted with Europeanization, which accelerated after the absorption of the countries of east-central Europe into the European single market as well as European policy mechanisms (including the 1989 'Television Without Frontiers' Directive, followed by the 2010 Audiovisual Media Services Directive) and support programmes. While the Council of Europe's Eurimages fund has helped the development of artistically ambitious East-West film co-productions since the early 1990s, it was the European Commission's MEDIA programme (entered into by the Visegrad countries between 2002 and 2004) that stimulated Europeanization of industry practices in both film and TV by funding, among others, project development and festivals. Until this time, development, a vulnerable stage in the production process, which is notoriously difficult to finance yet strategically the most important factor of future commercial as well as artistic success, had not been recognized as a specific discipline or even used as a term by regional industry representatives. The mid-2000s also saw the dawn of the (still ongoing) 'subsidy race' in the field of foreign production services. By refunding a percentage of local spending, national governments have been luring foreign producers to shoot on location and in national studios, with Prague being supplanted by Budapest as the dominant player after Hungary introduced its first incentive programme in 2004, to be followed by the Czech Republic in 2010, Slovakia in 2014 and Poland in 2019.

The late 2000s and early 2010s was a period marked by consolidation and the increasing economic and cultural influence of national film institutes and funds, which gradually stabilized their financing and started taking a more proactive role in supporting internationally ambitious projects, while also recognizing the importance of nationally-oriented commercial production: the Polish Film Institute (established in 2005 and transformed in 2012), the Hungarian National Film Fund (established in 2012 and transformed in January 2020 into the National Film Institute), the Czech Film Fund (established in 2013) and the Slovak Audiovisual Fund (established in 2009). All these public funding institutions became key coordinators of their respective national film industries, with tighter control over production processes executed by the institutes in Hungary and Poland, and looser oversight by the Czech and Slovak funds. While greatly contributing to the standardization and development of national production in each country, they also pushed for internationalization, aiming

either at cultural prestige (via selective funding) or increasing competitiveness and job creation (via fiscal incentives). This trend is illustrated by the emergence of specialized minority co-production schemes across the region (with the exception of Hungary), supporting projects which have more value in terms of knowledge transfer and symbolic capital, epitomized by international festival awards, than in terms of domestic audience appeal or foreign revenues (as noted in Chapter 4).

There are still many reasons to carefully distinguish between film and television, especially when considering all possible aspects of a medium, as identified, for example, by Lynn Spigel – as ‘technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking’ (2004: 2) – or by Hannah Andrews – ‘as systems, as codes, as technologies and as cultural forms’ (2014: 23). From the production studies perspective, though, distinguishing between film and television no longer makes much sense because cross-media working relationships are increasingly common, especially with regard to the below-the-line crafts (Caldwell 2008: 9). Although some directors, screenwriters and producers still identify their careers exclusively with either film or television, it is becoming increasingly rare. There have been several factors, starting in the 1990s and culminating since then, that have made it virtually impossible to discuss European producers’ work practices and industrial identities in television and film as strictly separate from each other: media conglomeration and convergence (see e.g. Jenkins 2005); the crucial importance of television rights pre-sales for the financing of films (La Torre 2014: 127); so-called quality television (which brought cinematic styles, production values, practices, talent and producers to TV); and the casualization of employment in the broadcasting industry, including PSBs, which involves the outsourcing of television producers’ work (Born 2004: 180–1).

In Central and Eastern Europe, all these developments came with a delay (while conglomeration in film and TV to this day remains negligible). East-central European PSBs, especially Česká televize in the Czech Republic and Telewizja Polska in Poland, have been major co-producers and co-financiers of feature films since the 1990s (as noted in Chapter 5). However, a real boom in high-end television series production started only in the early 2010s, when some of the broadcasters decentralized and started increasingly co-producing or commissioning original serial programming from independent producers. This trend was further supported by the emerging transnational pay-TV and SVOD original series production in the region, namely by HBO Europe (2010–), Canal+ (Poland only, 2012–), AXN/Sony (2014–), Showmax (Poland only, 2017–19) and Netflix (2018–). Artur Majer argues that it was this local production initiative of transnational pay-TV and SVOD services that triggered the premium TV series production involving prominent film directors and producers in Poland

(Majer, personal interview, 21 October 2020), and the situation has been similar in Hungary and the Czech Republic. At present, it is a common practice for independent producers to combine feature films with television projects for both PSB and premium TV or SVOD services, while using the same or similar practices, talent and financial sources, including public funding.

In the second half of the 2010s, the impacts of digitalization and globalization intensified with the increasing presence of transnational SVOD services and the boom in social media, but they were counterbalanced by the increasing politicization of the press and broadcasting, especially in Hungary and Poland, and by the concentration of media ownership in the hands of local oligarchs across the whole region (Polyák 2015; Połomska and Beckett 2019). The new national concentration of media, together with the revived regulatory power of national governments, often adopting populist agendas, mark what has been labelled in the media policy literature as the 'return of the state' (Flew, Iosifidis and Steemers 2016), or 'post-globalization' (Flew 2018). While politicization and oligarchization lie beyond the scope of this book, the coordinating and regulatory power of both national and European public institutions and their impacts on producers will be discussed in the following section of this introduction.

TOWARDS THE 'HIGH CIRCUMSCRIPTION' MODEL

In his book on Polish film production practices and cultures, Marcin Adamczak described the 'rhythm' of the production community as governed by two calendars: one is the sequence of the Polish Film Institute's grant calls, the other is the festival itinerary (Adamczak 2015: 52). Since the late 2000s, the Polish Film Institute (PISF), arguably the most successful of the present-day east-central European funding institutions, has been co-financing about 70 per cent of feature films produced in the country with about 48 per cent of their budget, and has contributed to the unprecedented consolidation and growth of the local production sector (Majer, Orankiewicz and Wróblewska 2019: 20–3). In 2012, PISF's evaluation and selection system changed from being a broad and heterogeneous pool of two hundred to three hundred anonymous 'experts' grading projects by points in ten to seventeen categories, to one based on discussions by a narrower group of evaluators with a higher level of personal responsibility. Six 'leaders' – chosen from among film directors of different generational and aesthetic backgrounds by the professional community as its respected representatives – pick a two-member committee from among the pool of 'experts', and together those members carry out the first-level selection of projects, to then be assessed by the six leaders and the PISF director in the second round. The committees are expected to advise production teams during the production process and their members' names appear in the closing titles of the finished films, underlining

their personal involvement and the high level of the production community's autonomy. While the previous anonymous selection system worked by quantitative averaging of grade points, the new system, governed by strong personalities, seems to prioritize more diversified, artistically distinctive films, thus supposedly contributing to the increasing festival success of Polish films, while still trying to reserve enough funding for more commercial productions with national box office potential (Adamczak 2015: 74–5).

Adamczak likens the PISF's position in the Polish audiovisual industry to the extremely influential role of the Danish Film Institute (DFI) with its hands-on film commissioners accompanying film projects throughout the process of development and production. The two institutes have both contributed enormously to consolidation, integration, standardization and internationalization of their respective national industries. While the DFI is increasingly emphasizing market-oriented criteria, PISF and other east-central European institutes and funds tend to prioritize arthouse projects, often lacking a clear marketing strategy and commercial potential, not to speak of international distribution. This has been changing recently, though, with the PISF heavily supporting international festival and Oscar campaigns and the Czech Film Fund emphasizing minority co-production. Poland and Hungary gravitate towards a hands-on, quasi-state-studio model, unlike the Czech Republic and Slovakia, whose film funds rely on hands-off committee decision-making without any continuous oversight mechanisms during the production process.

Adamczak builds on Mathieu and Strandvad's (2008) 'High Framework' model of production, derived from the institutional conditions of post-1990s Danish cinema, to sketch his own model of Polish film production. The Danish authors situated their model between two idealized poles: the 'High Concept' (Hollywood's producer-dominated, commercial-profit-oriented) and 'auteur' (Western European, director-dominated, symbolic-capital-oriented) models, referring to them in their highly abstracted forms as not really reflecting the industry complexities of Hollywood or European arthouse cinema. The 'High Framework' model's key feature is the 'trinity or dyad at the operative level in project development, the so-called "creative team" composed normally of producers, directors and screenwriters', whose participation is mandated by the DFI as the dominant actor in the field of film production (Mathieu and Strandvad 2008: 176). Adamczak applies the parameters of the Danish model to Poland more or less mechanically, stressing the vital and integrative role of PISF, while pointing to one crucial difference: the absence of close collaboration (or a systemic requirement for it) between producers and screenwriters/directors in the development stage. In his view, Polish cinema is in fact a 'director system masked as producer one', populated by directors turned producers and directors

functioning as the key reference points in the process of granting selective public support from PISF committees. After the PISF's consolidation in 2012, the system has been gradually turning into what he calls an 'expert-institutional system', governed by the PISF evaluators themselves, while preserving a powerful position for established directors (Adamczak 2015: 62, 97).

Although Adamczak's observations on the PISF's increasingly influential integrative role – as well as his observation that producers do not actually hold the power which is nominally attributed to them – prove true to an extent for all the east-central European production systems, the replacing of producers with directors or even institutional 'experts' does not hold for the day-to-day industry practices as depicted in the interviews collected for this book. Late professionalization and ambiguous professional identity, as well as low levels of both symbolic and economic capital and the resulting lack of authority as compared to Western European producers, should not obscure the crucial role of producers in initiating, managing and financing projects. It also should not obscure their irreplaceable systemic position as hands-on managers and intermediaries between the creators and the consumers, as well as between the projects and other industry actors: public funding committees, TV commissioning editors and programming boards, co-producers, sales agents, distributors, festival selectors, etc. Despite the largely non-market logic of the east-central European screen industries, none of these intermediary roles – which are inevitable for a film or TV series to get funded, to materialize and to circulate – is or can be fully performed by directors or the funding institutions alone. The data collected for this book also clearly indicate that producers are those who accumulate and control industry knowledge not only of an organizational and financial kind, but also of the institutional environment comprising public funds as well as international festivals and markets, and transnational technological and aesthetic trends. This, and their ability to efficiently self-organize in producers' guilds, gives them a better negotiating position and greater political leverage to represent their interests and to act as bridges between political power and cultural power, especially in times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. If east-central European producers – however insecure, disempowered and even precarized – are still the key coordinating actors in the process of development, production and circulation, how should they be categorized and labelled to highlight their distinction from their more autonomous counterparts in the more centrally positioned and/or larger Western European markets?

Of course, any professional agency is 'circumscribed' or delimited by a number of social forces, including cultural conventions, corporate hierarchies and cultures, and professional organizations (Havens and Lotz 2014: 15–17). But in the small and/or peripheral markets of east-central Europe, circumscription acts

upon producers' autonomy in a somewhat different way than in markets where producers command more economic and cultural power and where it is mainly market forces that delimit their behaviour. First and foremost, the autonomy of east-central European producers is specifically limited by the post-socialist heritage and late professionalization of their sector (the non-existence of producers under state socialism, the persistence of some state-socialist institutional patterns such as state studios or government-controlled television in Poland and Hungary), and the small size and peripheral position of their national markets, in all the ways described above. Moreover, decision-making power in the production systems of the region is divided between various market and non-market forces, without any clearly defined stratification or centre of command and control, and without a single operational logic: between producers and creators, public institutions, and other industry agents (such as broadcasters and distributors). Many scripts are still initiated by screenwriters-directors, often un(der)funded and unguided in the development stage, waiting for a producer to step in at a later stage just to secure financing and manage physical production. In the financing stage, public funding and public broadcasting institutions' committees arbitrarily decide about the projects' future, rendering producers dependent on their will and schedule. Finally, distribution and marketing, especially abroad, often fall outside producers' mandate, because their business model is based on producing rather than selling. Unlike Adamczak, rather than looking for another, more powerful figure to replace the producer, this book presents case studies containing concrete articulations of producers' circumscribed agency.

The term 'high' in the title of this section refers to Mathieu and Strandvad's 'High Framework' model. By replacing 'framework' with 'circumscription', I mean to stress the 'negative' aspects of the local production systems, in the sense of constraints on producer agency. As in Denmark, east-central European audiovisual public institutions operate as the 'central integrating agencies' (Mathieu and Strandvad 2008: 182), but with lower effectiveness, because their competence and authority largely extend only to evaluating projects and allocating public funds (especially in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, less so in Hungary, with Poland somewhere in the middle). Unlike the DFI, they are still in the process of harmonizing divergent goals and interests in the audiovisual field (such as artistic expression, broad audience appeal, representation of the national identity, international recognition, building a sustainable industry). Sometimes, for instance when separating automatic financial incentives from selective support, they permit or even contribute to the segmentation of the field into multiple industry sub-worlds: art house and commercial, original production and production services, nationally-oriented mainstream and Europeanized art house. There are differences among the east-central European countries, though: such

internal segregation in the industry tends to be more pronounced in countries with a weaker public funding system and more commercial production (Czech Republic) or with a vast production services sector (Czech Republic, Hungary), more integrated where the public institute adopts an interventionist approach (Poland) or where the production volume is very small (Slovakia). When compared to Denmark, east-central European institutional ‘frameworks’ don’t play such a strong coordinating role by integrating key industry agents and subfields: producers with creators, domestic production trends with (national as well as global) market demand, local producers with transnational SVOD players, and so on. Nevertheless, they still act as the main centres of gravity and gatekeepers virtually greenlighting projects for further development, funding and (co-)production – thus highly circumscribing the agency of producers. In this sense, ‘high’ means not only strong, but also coming from a ‘high framework’ of powerful public institutions.

The ultimate objective of studying the circumscribed agency of the hands-on industry actors as presented in this book is not to design a unique theoretical model for understanding the post-socialist, east-central European media industries. It is rather to open the regional media industry studies to cross-national comparative work beyond the ‘containers’ of the national, the regional and the post-socialist. The next section argues for the concepts of smallness and peripherality as apt categories for broader comparative research of the unevenness among media markets in the global media system.

THEORIZING THE SMALLNESS AND PERIPHERALITY OF MEDIA INDUSTRIES AND MARKETS

Smallness should not be confused with peripherality, because the two pertain to different parameters: size and resources in the first case, economic and cultural power in the second. Small countries (such as Denmark) might achieve a more central position in transnational flows than larger peripheral countries (such as Poland). Small media economies have recently enjoyed increased attention in several subfields of media and communication studies, namely in studies of media policy, public service broadcasting, and world cinema and its cross-border circulation. An older research tradition of studying peripheral media markets developed as core-periphery models that explained inequalities and dependencies in the world system of global capitalism were adapted to studies of cross-border cultural flows. So far, however, smallness and peripherality have not been systematically linked to propose an analytical model for studying the position and characteristics of media markets in the global media system. The recent boom in transnational media production and online distribution is an opportunity to do so and to move small- and peripheral-market theorization to the next level.

This section provides an overview of the key theoretical frameworks for studying smallness and peripherality in media markets and industries. It then suggests how small-market research could employ theories of peripherality to better understand unevenness in global digital media industries.

Rather than understanding markets in purely economic terms, media industry research, influenced by political economy and economic sociology, approaches them as socially and culturally embedded institutions co-constructed by nation states as well as supranational regulators (Cunningham, Flew and Swift 2015: 67–99). The social and cultural embeddedness of media markets is especially important for small and peripheral markets where the media are integral to nation-building endeavours. The literature on small media markets typically does not concentrate on defining small markets in general, nor does it differentiate between degrees of smallness, because smallness is a matter of relationality and context. Although various measures can be used to distinguish small markets, population and economic size (GDP) are the most basic and widely used variables, because they determine the magnitude of domestic audiences and advertising markets, infrastructures, financial resources, relative production costs and available talent pools, and also indirectly indicate dependence on imports and vulnerability to external takeovers or disruptions. Since the late 1990s, three parallel strands of research on small media markets have developed: European media policy literature on the impacts of national and supranational regulation on small markets; political-economic research on public service broadcasting and the impacts of economic liberalization on broadcasting in small countries; and transnational film studies of small-nation cinemas.

Researchers looking at media policies in small countries investigate size-specific national regulatory tendencies as well as the uneven impacts of supranational regulation on small states. They tend to presume that supranational regulations such as the European Commission's Digital Single Market strategy are usually tailored to the needs of large and powerful countries – despite the fact that small countries are over-represented in EU institutions (Burgelman and Pauwels 1992; Puppis et al. 2009; Trappel 2014). Small states are therefore expected to implement reactive and ad hoc policies responding to liberalization and globalization processes initiated in large countries. Conscious of their economic and cultural dependency and competitive disadvantages, some incline towards protectionist regulations that support domestic production and defend national culture and industry from foreign competition (especially for countries that share their language with larger neighbours), even if these measures limit media diversity in their domestic markets (Puppis 2009). Others, such as east-central European countries, have combined interventionism with liberalization, even at the cost of weakening their national production, including public

service media. Either way, authorities in small market territories lack the leverage to regulate big media multinationals, especially those of US origin. Consequently, small countries must rely on supranational regulation such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD, 2018) that introduced higher quotas on European content and instruments for national regulators to demand financial contributions from transnational VOD services. This approach locks small markets into a paradoxical situation, whereby EU media regulation empowers them to protect their markets from American giants, while at the same time limiting their culture-based protectionist tendencies (through the competition law and state aid rules), pushing them to liberalize and thus subjecting them to a marginal position within a European single market (Michalis 2014). The academic literature on regulation continues to show a significant lack of interest in east-central European states, which are predominantly small and whose adaptation to EU audiovisual policy creates specific local problems such as weakening the regulatory power of the Baltic countries to regulate Russian propaganda targeting their Russian minorities via media services registered in other EU states (Ibrus 2016).

A second body of small-market literature investigates how globalization, commercialization and the economic liberalization of European broadcasting markets have taken their toll on small country PSBs, traditionally the cornerstone of local audiovisual industries that extensively support domestic production with low international appeal. The legitimacy of small-market PSBs has been questioned after governments imposed quantitative commercial criteria for measuring their performance. Economic justifications for public subsidies based on potential 'market failure' have been challenged by the growing abundance and diversity of commercial content supply, including transnational online services. European media regulation has relied on competition law and state aid rules rather than actively supporting the role of public service media in sustaining democracy and media diversity. This economic approach proved dangerous for small country PSBs because they lack the financial resources and licence fee revenues to be competitive in the commercialized broadcasting market while still fulfilling their core public mission (Lowe, Berg and Nissen 2011). Balancing the high sunk costs of audiovisual production against lower licence fees or advertising revenues accrued from smaller populations, means PSBs in small nations see their costs per viewer increase. At the same time, PSBs in small countries with lower GDP per capita surprisingly tend to produce proportionately more domestic content (Picard 2011). This might indicate efforts to mitigate the vulnerability of the local audiovisual industries and sustain their own legitimacy regardless of the free market logic promoted by national governments and the EU. Recent illiberal developments in Central and Eastern Europe have seen numerous PSBs subjected to stricter state oversight and political pressure, with some, namely

in Poland and Hungary, even undergoing 'media capture' by dominant political parties (Balčytienė 2016). This shows the need for a more contextualized approach that recognizes different political traditions among smaller EU states and acknowledges the role of 'path dependency' (the persistence of historical precedents in shaping future developments) in national regulation.

The third area of research on small audiovisual industries emerged in the late 1990s and 2000s from transnational film studies. It was largely inspired by the work of Mette Hjort, who concentrated on the tremendous international successes of Danish arthouse cinema and Danish film policy. In a series of articles, chapters and edited volumes, Hjort proposed a typology of challenges, risks and opportunities she identified in small-nation cinemas (Hjort and Petrie 2007; Hjort 2015). While Hjort and her followers mostly use the same basic criteria as the media economists and policy scholars mentioned above (population, GDP), they are more interested in creative practices and cultural representations. By focusing on the opportunities rather than the limits of small nationhood (e.g. sustainable production methods, collaborative practices, solidarity movements), Hjort developed her model to serve progressive cultural-political agendas and potentially also knowledge transfer between various small-nation cinemas. Her writings have been enormously influential and helped attract international academic attention to various small cinemas in Europe, Asia and Africa. It also seems that different forms of innovative, internationally-oriented collaborative film practices that turn small-market limits into creative opportunities have since flourished across the continent, including what Constantin Parvulescu terms the 'New Romanian Cinema radical auteurism' (Parvulescu and Hanzlík 2020: 7). When confronted with the actual data on the commercial performance of Central and Eastern European film production in terms of its proportional contribution to international revenues, however, Hjort's model of small-nation opportunities proves over-optimistic. The export performance of small-nation film productions lags far behind the European big-five producing countries, with Central and Eastern Europe being the least successful EU region (Grece 2017a; Higson 2018).

The three above-mentioned areas all share the basic presumption that small country markets, industries and public institutions are affected by globalization, Europeanization and economic liberalization differently than their larger counterparts. These research approaches tend to focus on patterns of behaviour that occur across different geopolitical contexts. Small countries appear to be more vulnerable and reactive to external forces, finding it difficult to compete with imported content and transnational media services, while struggling to preserve a national audiovisual culture, a democratic public sphere with an independent PSB and media diversity. The audiovisual industries in small

nations are characterized by their relative lack of resources, inability to achieve economies of scale and production values comparable with those in larger markets, and, even in the era of online distribution, the export performance of their media products remains low due to limits imposed by their cultural specificity and linguistic barriers, which can often mean that trade is dependent on a larger neighbour sharing the same language. However, limited audience markets, financial resources and talent pools don't prevent them from heavily subsidizing film and television production aimed at domestic markets, and in some cases from developing strategies for innovative low-budget production aimed at specialized transnational distribution circuits. The scholarly literature offers useful frameworks for size-sensitive comparative analysis but has not gone far enough in considering different political and cultural traditions, as well as different positions in the global digital media system. Consider for example Poland and Romania, which by some measures would qualify as larger EU countries, but which also fit many criteria of small media markets, especially in terms of limited resources and exportability of audiovisual culture.

Small-market research has not yet sufficiently benefitted from the tradition of studying imbalances and peripherality in transnational media flows that started in the mid-1970s and that recently seem to be re-emerging in response to the boom in transnational VOD services and platforms of the FAANG group (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google) (Iordache, Van Audenhove and Loisen 2018). Peripherality is not measured by the internal market structure or absolute market size, but by the distance from and dependency on the 'core' or centre; it is caused by external forces rather than the inherent features of a market. Most theories of dependency and unevenness that work with centre-periphery or core/semi-periphery/periphery hierarchies draw on Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory designed to explain historical patterns of inequality in the world economy (Wallerstein 1979). Paradigms of cultural and media imperialism and their successors criticized power imbalances between hegemonic media centres (mostly the United States and Western Europe) and the 'receiving' cultures (Schiller 1976; Mirrlees 2013; Jin 2019). Neo-Marxist critiques of the new international division of cultural labour study exploitative relationships between Hollywood's centre of command and control, and the overseas destinations of its 'runaway' production (Miller et al. 2005). Political economy of the 'world media order' investigates the concentration of media power on a global scale (Winseck 2011: 38). To sum up, global media studies drawing on these traditions investigate, among other issues, the directions, ratios and uneven impacts of transnational flows of capital, content and labour to study the positions of markets in the core-periphery hierarchy of the global media industries. Core-periphery thinking and

models of one-way flows have been criticized as simplistic and revised many times, including by the proponents of cultural globalization and hybridization (Kraidy 2005), and by looking at 'cultural discount' or 'cultural proximity' as ways of explaining audience preferences for local television programmes (Straubhaar 2007), audiovisual 'counter-flows' (Thussu 2007), and 'polycentric' world cinema paradigms (Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah 2012). However, studies of imbalances of cultural flows also seem to be regaining validity in the era of transnational online distribution (Iordache, Van Audenhove and Loisen 2018; Lobato 2018: 216) and 'platform imperialism' (Jin 2017, 2019: 45–58), especially when confronted with the current treatment of small and/or peripheral markets by global VOD services and platforms.

In the era of global online platforms and EU regulatory attempts to control their impact on the European single market and on national cultures, the media industries of small nations are caught up in the tension between globalizing and nationalizing tendencies. The rapid global expansion of streaming services and social media platforms invite media industry scholars to rethink their understandings of scale and core-periphery hierarchies. The need for new measures of scale and hierarchies of centrality and peripherality is suggested by the country catalogues of transnational VOD services, their differing composition and uneven levels of investments in localization and local content production (Szczepanik, Zahrádka and Macek 2020). These developments are provoking debates over media concentration, unequal cultural power and one-way flows. The long-distance approach of 'programming from afar' as well as the focus on a global cosmopolitan class, as exemplified by Netflix and HBO, potentially clash with the trend in illiberal populist nationalism spreading across Europe (Imre 2018). The seemingly smooth expansion of transnational media services has already inspired a regulatory backlash coming in the form of quotas, financial obligations, platform liability and even soft censorship. The new AVMSD, approved in 2018 to be implemented by EU member states in 2020 and 2021, provides a legal framework for stricter national regulation of global platforms and VOD services. In European audiovisual policy, anti-American protectionism has been a well-documented common theme, from the 1989 'Television Without Frontiers' Directive to the AVMSD. But the anxieties of 'peripheral' nations facing the power of FAANG and the revival of 'cultural imperialism' debates reach beyond Europe, as illustrated by the widely criticized claim of the president of the Canadian public service broadcaster CBC who likened Netflix to the British Empire (Haupt and Krashinsky Robertson 2019).

In the next section, we discuss issues specific to critical media industry studies, asking how market smallness and peripherality play out on the mezzo level of

industry analysis: the level of hands-on agents, their everyday practices, self-conceptions and contentious power relations (Havens, Lotz and Tinic 2009). The section uses statements from Czech independent producers to illustrate how media practitioners reflect on their experiences of producing in a peripheral cultural environment, with limited resources and for very small audiences. This reflexivity might be termed 'small or peripheral market industry lore'.

TAKING RESEARCH OF SMALLNESS AND PERIPHERALITY TO THE MEZZO LEVEL: SMALL/PERIPHERAL-MARKET PRODUCERS

Most literature on small-scale markets and peripherality in the audiovisual field focuses either on the macrostructural characteristics of national markets and industries, or on individual auteurs and cultural representations. But to understand the changes currently afoot within the small national film industries of east-central Europe, it is important to consider not just the economic data, policy regulations and the films themselves, but also the production cultures at play: to closely observe the production community that gives these changes specific meanings. The explanatory power of critical media industry research lies in its ability to explain agency and power relationships within industry operations on the middle level of hands-on industry actors, their everyday practices and lived realities (Caldwell 2008; Havens, Lotz and Tinic 2009). If we want to approach smallness and peripherality from an industry studies perspective, the key question should be: how do media workers situated up and down the professional hierarchies make sense of the small-scale and peripheral position of their markets, and what are their strategies and tactics for dealing with smallness and peripherality? More specifically: how do their professional self-conceptions – understood as a part of a broader 'industrial reflexivity', which is defined by Caldwell (2008: 34) as both corporate macrostrategies establishing power and human microstrategies critically resisting top-down control and expressing locally lived realities – represent and act upon smallness and peripherality? How is smallness and peripherality put to work when producers assess potential market demand and rationalize their decisions about shaping, greenlighting or acquiring audiovisual content, namely how do smallness and peripherality feature in their 'industry lore' (Havens 2014)?

Little has been done in academic research to tackle these questions so far. Mette Hjort addressed them in her studies of 'creativity under constraints', mostly centring on Danish directors, whose experience may be illustrated with Thomas Vinterberg's telling words: 'The claustrophobic feeling that accompanies the thought of being financed by the state, of being guaranteed only a tiny audience, and of being part of a small industry is compensated for by the circus that those directors are able to generate' (cited in Hjort and Bondebjerg 2001: 271).

Ruth McElroy and Caitriona Noonan perhaps came closest to applying a critical media industry studies approach to a small-nation production culture facing digital disruption when they set the objective of studying

shared understandings of what it means to work within small nations where issues of power are lived and negotiated daily, where the scale, geographic location, and cultural characteristics of one's nation are factors that commonly need to be explained before one can speak to interlocutors from larger dominant global nations. This everyday reality – and the tacit grasp of power it entails – engenders a certain disposition to navigate translation across cultural, national, and linguistic borders. Indeed, this translational imperative may itself be a normative condition of small nationhood.

(McElroy and Noonan 2018: 174)

Hjort's 'creativity under constraints' and McElroy and Noonan's 'translational imperative' may serve as useful concepts for further comparative research in small-market production cultures, but they definitely don't apply to all small markets, or at least not to the same extent. As a way of proposing possible routes for further, more inclusive research along these lines, this section draws on a qualitative analysis of interviews with Czech producers, presented in full in Chapter 1, tracing whether and how their self-conceptions and 'industry lore' are embedded in the small scale and peripherality of the Czech audiovisual market.

The self-conceptions of Czech producers – conditioned by the lack of resources to develop a sustainable, market-oriented and internationally competitive business model, and by their deep dependence on public subsidies – show how humble, self-ironic, egalitarian, inward-looking, yet internally segregated their production culture is. This pragmatic production culture has internalized the smallness and peripherality of the local market to the point that the 'claustrophobia' described above by Thomas Vinterberg surfaces only in moments of crisis (such as the impacts of the post-2004 subsidy war with Hungary or the legal vacuum that almost prevented Czech public funding from functioning in 2012), or on occasions of confrontation with new trends at international festivals and markets. In most cases, however, the local production culture remains enclosed within the national boundaries, or even in the micro worlds of individual subfields. The perception that transnational SVODs can potentially change the situation is slowly growing though. HBO Europe is regarded as setting new production standards, especially in terms of well-financed and well-managed script development, and Netflix as an unpredictable but highly influential vehicle for unprecedented international exposure. In contrast, the more accessible

transactional video on demand (TVOD) services are not changing the rules of the small-market game at all despite the much wider presence of even mediocre Czech films across foreign catalogues (Szczepanik 2020).

There are at least five lessons that might be learned from the literature overview presented above and from the case studies in the following chapters that can serve as starting points for further comparative research into the smallness and peripherality of certain media markets in the digital era:

1. Small and/or peripheral media markets are social and cultural constructions, and they are always multiple in the sense that different markets correspond to different media products, services and business models. They need to be studied as internally diversified ensembles, with some parts strongly embedded in small nationhood (such as PSB production) and others more connected to the transnational flows of capital, labour and content (such as foreign production services).
2. Multiple product types, producer types and production cultures operate in juxtaposition, often as 'parallel industry' worlds. Mezzo-level critical media industry studies should pay attention to these distinctions, while comparative studies of small media markets should break the national-territorial 'container thinking' (Hepp and Couldry 2009: 33–4), adopting instead a cross-national perspective to compare elements of these individual types and production cultures across territorial contexts.
3. Different combinations of market size and positioning in centre/periphery hierarchies need to be distinguished and approached as dynamic: small peripheries, small semi-peripheries, small semi-centres, large peripheries, etc. From the outside, distinctions and groupings among small and peripheral markets are co-constructed by supranational regulators such as the European Commission, and continuously reconfigured by the ever-changing multinational corporations such as those in the FAANG group.
4. Small-nation 'claustrophobia', 'creativity under constraint' and the 'translational imperative' are significant features of more liberal, open and outward-looking production cultures. But there are also examples, especially among the Central and Eastern European countries, of centripetal (inward-looking) markets where smallness and peripherality are deeply internalized and – with more or less bitterness – pragmatically accepted by most local industry agents and policymakers, a situation which finds its expression in more opportunistic, risk-averse, inward-looking production cultures.
5. Small-market positioning in the global media system cannot be understood without studying the key intermediaries who act as gatekeepers to connect or

disconnect producers from the outside world, including sales agents, festival programmers and markets, international industry workshops, national film funds and agencies, and, increasingly, transnational VOD services.

As this book analyzes contemporary developments in the quickly changing media industries, some questions will inevitably remain unanswered or open. If it is indeed the case that the increasingly competitive transnational SVOD market is going to be changed by a 'trend towards volume' or 'anything goes', there might be much higher demand for cheaper local content around the world (Weiner 2019). How will small-market producers react? Will they become true partners sharing intellectual property (IP) and revenues, or merely production service providers for the SVODs? Will the SVODs facilitate the 'glocalization' strategies of global brands by producing localized versions of their branded product? Or, will they try 'delocalizing' their stories (Straubhaar 2007: 169–71), adapting them to the 'grammar of transnationalism' (Jenner 2018: 229)? Will they sell cheap Eastern European exoticism to specialized international circuits? Or, will they attempt to strategically use their distribution and marketing power for a wider circulation of local voices and stories? The growth of transnational VOD services certainly presents a threat to small-nation audiovisual production in terms of creative autonomy and authenticity, as well as copyright control, and might lead to decreasing media diversity in individual small markets. At the same time, the presence of the VOD majors may trigger regulatory initiatives aimed at encouraging the involvement of these global services in financing and circulating small-nation content. However, producing directly for global streamers is not the only way to overcome peripheral small market 'timid provincialism' (Iordanova 2007: 93). Current developments in European high-end TV drama production open opportunities for more equitable and sustainable co-production and joint venture arrangements, bringing together multiple public service media, independent production houses from smaller and larger countries, and regional as well as global streamers, the latter motivated by the 30 per cent quotas on European content introduced by the AVMSD. Due to the increasing importance of original local serial drama for global SVODs, these kinds of collaborations might create better chances for wider cross-border circulation than 'treaty' film co-productions, which so far have typically taken the form of arthouse films targeting festivals rather than the box office (Bondebjerg et al. 2017: 79–98; Dams 2020). Small media market researchers should be able to critically and comparatively study all these trends and industry modes: from successful examples of 'affinitive transnationalism' (Hjort 2010a: 49–51) to the stubborn provincialism and illiberalism of the more nationally-oriented media markets.

EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN MEDIA INDUSTRIES AND THE NEED FOR A NEW COMPARATIVE TYPOLOGY

Media systems typologies are well established and commonly employed for comparative research in communication studies, but only seldom used in the research of media industries. One reason for this is that, in their prevailing focus on the media-politics relationship, many scholars resort to a reductionist selection of extra-media factors, drawing on 'simplistic, teleological and ethnocentric understandings of social change' (Mihelj and Downey 2012: 1). Another reason, more important for this book, is a restrictive notion of the media that overlooks the economic, social and cultural factors conditioning media systems from within: as media institutions, industries, markets and hierarchical professional communities. Currently, the most widely used typology of European and North American media systems, proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), does not consider Central and Eastern Europe, which has been most often likened by other authors to Hallin-Mancini's Mediterranean 'polarized pluralist' type, which is characterized by late professionalization, high levels of state intervention in public service media, and high levels of media politicization. In their attempt to incorporate Central and Eastern Europe into the Hallin-Mancini model, Herrero et al. (2017) use as key explanatory variables each country's levels of political parallelism, public service broadcasting, press freedom and foreign ownership, and distinguish between three geographical groupings of systems: eastern (Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania), central (Croatia, Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia) and northern (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia). The central cluster cuts through the Visegrad group, placing Hungary in the more politicized eastern cluster and Slovakia in the more liberal north. The central cluster is characterized by a relatively high concentration of ownership with the lowest level of foreign share, the strongest PSBs (in terms of audience share), and a middle level of political parallelism and journalistic professionalism. Such a revision of the media systems model helps to highlight intra-regional political differences, but it does not compensate for the more crucial deficiency of the Hallin-Mancini model: its narrow conceptualization of media as political institutions largely determined by national politics and ownership structures. In other words, distinguishing degrees of political parallelism and foreign ownership does not help us understand how media industries actually operate, since industrial structures, practices and agents are not among the variables, and since art and entertainment content is excluded.

Closer to the aims of this book are accounts of production modes and systems in historical works on film industries, which – inspired by Karl Marx's concept of *Produktionsweise* – focus on homologies between economic structures, industrial organization and textual practices (Singer 2005). While this body of research lacks the systematic comparative ambition of the media systems literature, its

underlying presumption is the fundamental opposition between the Hollywood studios' mode of production on the one hand and the European arthouse or auteur cinema on the other: the first one is corporate, vertically and horizontally integrated, financialized, large-scale, producer-driven, and based on high levels of standardization and detailed division of labour, but – increasingly since the 1950s – also has flexible post-Fordist organizational structures, is off-shoring its business and has wide global circulation (Staiger 1985; Miller et al. 2005); the second one is small-scale, under-capitalized, characterized by low levels of division of labour, driven by the symbolic capital of directors' auteur names and festival awards, and limited to national or niche cross-border distribution channels (Bordwell 1979; Thompson 1993). In my earlier work, I described a third historical industry type: the state-socialist production mode that was dominant across the whole of Central and Eastern Europe until 1989, characterized by state ownership, bureaucratic top-down management and so-called production units taking the place of non-existent producers in the middle level of management (Szczepanik 2013c).

The post-socialist, east-central European film industries have been built on the ruins of the third type, under the influence of the first type (through US runaway production that has stimulated infrastructural development in the region since the mid-1990s) as well as the second type (via East-West co-productions and pan-European support programmes). But they have not (yet) accumulated enough symbolic capital for their films and high-end TV programmes to circulate well across borders, even if limited to festivals and niche distribution channels. While the larger Western European film industries are in fact hybrids of the first and the second types, since they include aspects of the integrated studio system (Meir 2019), the east-central European film production systems almost entirely lack integrated studios and consist of small or micro enterprises, even in the most commercial segments. Lacking a sufficient consumer base, strong industry players and internationally recognized brands, their film producers are vitally dependent on national public support systems in all their activities, starting with script development and ending with international festival exposure.

This introductory chapter does not aim to propose a new, fully fledged comparative framework for the study of media industries, or to revise the existing media systems typologies. Instead, it employs an industry studies perspective that is sensitive to the size of media markets, their embeddedness in the local cultural and political contexts, and their position in the transnational centre-periphery hierarchies, that considers not just political information but also entertainment content, and, most crucially, that primarily focuses on middle-level industry

agents and practices. The central unit of comparison is the agency of producers and other cultural intermediaries: their positions in organizational systems and production cultures, their strategic choices, day-to-day practices, professional habitus and circulation networks. The selected national media systems, approached as basic frameworks both enabling and circumscribing the producer agency, are not understood as self-enclosed entities, but as being continually transformed by three large-scale transnational forces: globalization, Europeanization and digitalization. These transnational forces, together with the peripheral position and/or small size of the respective media markets, form the basis for comparison.

As a way of laying down a basic comparative grid for further, more problem-oriented and qualitative discussions in the individual chapters of this book, Table 0.1 lists selected quantitative data for individual Visegrad media industries, comparing them with one example of a small non-peripheral market (Denmark) and one large central market (Germany).

Table 0.1 documents the quantitative features of national markets, and also shows the differences between the four Visegrad countries that will be referred to in the qualitative analyses in the following chapters of this book: the strength of Hungary as a provider of foreign production services and as a relatively efficient arthouse film exporter, but with weaknesses in terms of minority co-production and PSB market share; the strength of the Czech Republic in the total volume of both film and TV production (including international co-production) and the volume of online advertisement, but weakness in terms of average film budgets; the leadership of Poland in the share of national films in domestic cinema admissions, but weakness in terms of foreign production services. All the Visegrad countries lag far behind Denmark and Germany in terms of boasting big market players, digitalization (market penetration by Netflix), average production budgets, success rate in competition for European funding and, above all, export across all distribution channels. The last parameter, together with the number of local Netflix originals, defines their distinctively peripheral position in the network of transnational media flows. At the same time, the Visegrad countries show comparable results in the volume (and share, in Poland and the Czech Republic) of national TV and film production for their domestic markets.

THE SMALL/PERIPHERAL MARKET PRODUCER AS AN INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN COMMERCIAL AND PUBLIC INTERESTS

This book takes producers as its key focal point to describe agency in small and/or peripheral markets. In doing so, it differentiates between several aspects and

Table 0.1 Selected quantitative parameters for comparing small and/or peripheral screen industries in terms of globalization, Europeanization and digitalization¹

Parameter/Country	Poland (large peripheral)	Czech Republic (small peripheral)	Hungary (small peripheral)	Slovakia (small peripheral)	Denmark (small central)	Germany (large central)
Size of the market (population in millions of inhabitants)	38.4	10.7	9.8	5.5	5.8	83.2
Volume of film production (the number of theatrical feature films, fully national plus majority co-production, 2019)	79	70	17	24	41	237
Average feature film budget in millions of euros (2014–2018)	1.4	0.94	1.52	1.14	2.84	4.0
Number of TV fiction titles (2018) ²	57	30	17	19	17	273
Internet/TV advertising expenditure in millions of euros (2019)	1,136.9/1,037.8	913.5/584.1	303.2/241.7	176.8/805.4	1,116.8/275.2	9,427.7/4,840.1
Consumer revenues for on-demand audiovisual services in millions of euros (SVOD, EST, TVOD, 2019)	245.0	45.4	29.7	19.8	373.5	1,949.2

Estimated number of Netflix subscribers in thousands, and market penetration (December 2019)	1,328 (3.5%)	355 (3.3%)	264 (2.7%)	146 (2.7%)	769 (13.3%)	8,269 (9.9%)
Big players: number of private or public companies in the lists of the top 100 European television groups, top 40 production companies in Europe, and top 40 distributors in Europe (measured by consolidated operating revenues, 2019)	2-0-0	2-0-0	1-0-0	1-1-0	4-1-1	8-3-2
Share of national films in % (cinema admissions in the domestic market, 2019)	27.1	26.5	4.9	12.8	26.7	21.5
Share of US films in % (cinema admissions in the domestic market, 2019)	50.7	60.1	84.7	69.6	58.3	56.5
Share of PSB in % (daily audience market share of national public television, 2019)	28.3	30.1	10.8	13.9	76.4	47.3
Public funding of the public audiovisual sector in millions of euros (2019)	391.6	311.5	236.9	120.1	485.9	8,244.8

Parameter/Country	Poland (large peripheral)	Czech Republic (small peripheral)	Hungary (small peripheral)	Slovakia (small peripheral)	Denmark (small central)	Germany (large central)
Internationalization of production (number of feature film majority/minority co-productions, plus bracketed: ratio of co-production/fully national production, 2019)	20/14 (0.58)	25/18 (0.96)	5/3 (0.73)	10/20 (2.1)	58/28 (0.48)	16/15 (1.25)
Relative export strength ('export efficiency ratio' in theatrical/TV/online– TVOD, 2016)³	0.7/0.6/6.7	0.8/0.7/12.7	1.2/0.6/7.2	0.5/0.7/2.7	1.8/2.3/16.5	1.6/3.3/17.0
Foreign production services spend in millions of euros (the share thereof in the total volume of direct film production spend, 2019)⁴	low	328.3 (86%)	431 (94%)	0.65	n/a	n/a
Netflix 'originals' (December 2019)⁵	1	0	0	0	5	23
Titles in the US Netflix catalogue (August 2020)⁶	25	1	2	0	9	43
MEDIA support in millions of euros (2019)⁷	4.3	2.7	n/a	0.7	7.2	16.7

layers of the term ‘producer’. The narrowest definition coincides with the established concept of the European independent producer, sometimes called ‘creative’ to emphasize her or his involvement in initiating and co-ordinating projects as well as matching stories with talent and financial resources. The independent producer is also a cornerstone of European audiovisual policy, because most subsidy programmes and regulatory measures to promote European works are – following the 1989 ‘Television Without Frontiers’ and 2010/2018 Audiovisual Media Services Directives – aimed at producers, who are independent from TV networks and VOD services (in terms of ownership ties and turnover, due to contracts with a single broadcaster or VOD provider). Formal definitions of ‘independent producer’ are therefore included in audiovisual or broadcasting laws in most European countries, when they impose broadcasting and VOD quotas for European content or tie eligibility for public funding to specified legal or natural persons (Furnémont 2019: 47–51). However, the recent boom in SVOD original local production in Europe shows that these legal definitions – which seldom require independent producers to hold secondary rights to their productions – are not strong and uniform enough to prevent large transnational players from *de facto* reducing local independent producers to providers of production services by their unwillingness to share secondary rights ownership and revenues with them (Doyle 2016: 635–38; McElroy and Noonan 2019: 64). While policymakers in east-central Europe have yet to fully grasp the risks of this power asymmetry, it has already created conflicts in other countries where publicly subsidized works were fully bought out by Netflix or HBO, who acted as co-producers (Ekeberg and Helle 2019).

To understand the regional specificity of producer experiences, one needs to expand this narrow definition to include institutional producers too: not only production companies but also public broadcasters, film schools and the successors of state-run studios that still continue to operate (especially in Poland) while competing for the same public and private money as small independents. Considering the fact that in some of the east-central European countries (namely the Czech Republic and Hungary) production services form the bulk of the industry and employ most crew workers, service producers must also be included, even though they operate rather as line producers and production managers who obviously don’t control any secondary rights and don’t influence key creative or business decisions (despite being sometimes – for tax reasons – credited as ‘co-producers’).

A second, more general meaning of the term ‘producer’ comes into play when ‘production’ is understood as processes of ‘adding value’ (economic, symbolic, cultural) to the product, a concept increasingly important in the age of information overflow and uncertainty. The processes are spread throughout the product’s

value chain, which is – in the case of European independent production – characterized by dynamically changing relationships of power and authority among a high number of heterogeneous actors (Bloore 2009). From this broader perspective, producers in the above-described narrow sense belong to a larger category of ‘cultural intermediaries’. On the most general level, they have been traditionally described as ‘mediators between commerce and creativity’ (Spicer 2004: 34). In a more specific sense, they are, first of all, evaluating and filtering story ideas based on their professional expertise and personality; then, as soon as they make a project ‘their own’, they are mediating it throughout the different stages of development and production via their interactions with authors, creative teams and other agents of the value chain, such as co-producers, public funders, private investors, commercial buyers and, above all, audiences. In this process, ‘the crux of a producer’s activities resides in convincing and enlisting others: the producer progressively lines up various partners who will allow the project to become reality’ (Verdalle 2015: 192). In the era of transnational SVOD original production, the role of the independent producer also increasingly involves filtering, explaining and defending the voices of the distant, opaque commissioners such as Netflix (Barra 2021). To succeed in this fundamentally relational role, producers have to learn skills of applying for grants, pitching, explicating, pre-visualizing, planning and framing their projects in different ways to different industry players with the objective of creating trust in the project’s value and associating it with the right money, talent, symbolic capital, partners and markets. To authors and talent, they promise that their screen ideas will materialize and their careers will move on in the right direction; to sales agents, distributors and private financiers, they articulate the screen ideas in terms of selling points and target groups; to public funders and broadcasters, they must demonstrate the social relevance of the project, representation of national identity, festival ambition and employment of local talent and crews. While doing all this, their own industry personality becomes a device of intermediation: ‘their biographies, attitudes and embodied capital serve as occupational resources and guarantors of credibility’ (Maguire and Matthews 2010: 412). As a relatively new professional group that had to be reinstituted in the post-1989 east-central European screen industries and that is positioned both at the centre of project networks and at the interface with external forces, including international business dealing and policymaking, they have also acted as key agents of industrialization, standardization and Europeanization.

David Hesmondhalgh aptly remarks that literature on cultural intermediaries tends to misunderstand Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of distinction by including different kinds of production workers among intermediaries, while Bourdieu originally ascribed the role primarily to petite bourgeois *critics* (Hesmondhalgh

2006: 226). However, today's intermediaries operate in a different industry ecosystem than that of Bourdieu's 1960s France and their activities cannot be confined to a single professional role (Maguire 2014: 17). Recent changes in media industries' corporate structures and industry practices – complicating the audiovisual value chain and increasingly merging the role of producers with the roles of commissioning editors, sales agents, distributors and online curators, while marginalizing independent critics – make us rethink what cultural intermediation means. The point is not to claim that all agents in the value chain are producers and intermediaries at the same time, but to (1) highlight the productive contributions of all the agents involved in adding value to the products in the under-recognized small/peripheral media industries, and (2) foreground the specific position that producers (in the narrow sense) occupy in the 'high circumscription' model, where they have to continuously mediate between different public and private interests. The biggest east-central European producers, in the sense of physical production, are by far production service providers, followed by public service broadcasters, who act as (co-)producers or commissioners. Independent producers have a more fuzzy, unstable and precarious position in the system, having to mediate between and rely upon all the other agents in the local industry ecosystems.

With regard to international recognition of peripheral markets, sales agents, festival selectors and transnational cable and VOD operators play crucial roles in terms of adding value to the local product and increasing its potential for cross-border circulation and eventual success. Increasingly attached to projects from the stage of development, their activities are expanding from merely selecting, framing and marketing to actually co-producing. According to Marcin Adamczak, since the turn of the century international sales agents such as Wild Bunch, Match Factory, LevelK and MK2 have become crucial intermediaries filtering the overabundance of east-central European films and facilitating their cross-border festival and theatrical circulation (Adamczak 2015: 105–6). The oversupply combined with the notoriously low international recognition of east-central European films give sales agents and festival selectors a high degree of 'valuation power' (Bessy and Chauvin 2013) in the market. This has been acknowledged by producers themselves speculating on the potential interest of sales agents and A-list festival decision makers while promoting their projects to various co-production markets, training programmes or pitching forums, and designing their development strategies or grant applications.

Based on the two levels of 'production' sketched above, several typologies of producers might be constructed that reflect the conditions of small/peripheral markets. This book is loosely structured according to the value chain-based typology, focusing consecutively on producers in the narrow sense, on production

service providers, commissioning editors and AVOD executives. At the same time, in the next chapter, I will apply an original Bourdieusian typology of producers to map their positions in the field of production as defined by different levels of economic and cultural capital and reflected mainly in the practices of project development, the most volatile and strategically important stage of the value chain.

So what concept of producer can help us understand agency in small and/or peripheral markets? It is already clear that it should be neither a biographical person, nor an abstract legal or institutional entity. Media industries scholarship has repeatedly shown that social theories of 'structuration' (Giddens 1984) and 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1998) can be instrumental in studying individual agency as simultaneously social and industrial (see e.g. Havens 2014). From this perspective, individual agency and social structure are mutually constitutive, with an individual's dispositions or habitus emerging as sediments of structural positions occupied by the individual in a social field, while in turn reproducing and modifying the field through the individual's choices. Such an approach to individual agency doesn't deny the possibility of individual choice, expression or persona, but gives them a social or industrial logic: in this book, the industrial logic of small and/or peripheral markets. On the project level, small/peripheral-market producers are not autonomous captains but highly circumscribed facilitators of production processes, who have to compete for the same pool of public money and to share authority over the project with powerful directors, commissioners, distributors, international sales agents, festival selectors, etc.

In so doing, producers cultivate specific production cultures reflecting the 'high circumscription' of their agency. As producers make sense of the experience of producing for a small and peripheral market, they take into account the reality of being limited by the peripheral culture's specificity, chronically undercapitalized, under-staffed and heavily dependent on (and often suspicious of) public funders or broadcasters. The post-socialist context contributes to the flat hierarchies and egalitarianism of local work worlds whereby below-the-line workers tend to enjoy higher job security and remuneration than some above-the-line talent, especially screenwriters and sometimes even producers. Being a relatively 'new' profession, producers still cannot take their position in the work world for granted, their self-conceptions necessarily incorporating tropes of self-justification, self-doubt and a sense of existential vulnerability. Having no means for developing extensive marketing and export strategies, they do not have much trust in the free market and globalization, instead relying on highly intuitive and enclosed conceptions of national audiences and cultures. Their views of the European single market, support and training programmes are sharply divided along generational lines and differences in cultural capital. At the same time, their production culture centres

around a specific ‘industry lore’ informed not so much by lay theories of audience preferences and market trends, as is the case of their Western counterparts (Zafirau 2009; Havens 2014), but rather by speculation about what does and does not work with the committee-based decision-making of public funds, institutes, broadcasters and festivals. Rather than the self-mythologizing narratives identified by Caldwell in the industrial reflexivity of Hollywood producers, the cultural performances of east-central European producers involve narratives about the impossibility of overcoming the different kinds of financial, administrative and cultural barriers that prevent them from becoming ‘real entrepreneurs’ and from winning international recognition. Despite all the factors circumscribing their agency, however, they claim to follow their individual passions and tastes and express trust in small networks of close collaborators. And many of them have proved to be incredibly talented and creative innovators.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The design of the research behind this book involved a mix of qualitative methods, including in-depth interviewing, policy document analysis and participant observations, supplemented with quantitative data from various national and European sources and industry reports (mainly the European Audiovisual Observatory), as well as independent online analytics (such as uNoGs and Netmonitor). The empirical material used in this book comes mostly from interviewing Czech media industry professionals. Between 2008 and 2020, I conducted about one hundred interviews with Czech independent producers, production service providers, in-house producers at Czech public service television, commercial TV executives, film and TV directors, screenwriters, script editors, distributors, sales agents, VOD and web-TV executives, policymakers, and various crew members working on international productions in Prague. On a much smaller scale, I also interviewed foreign professionals: US producers, production managers and location scouts about their motivations for and experiences with shooting in Prague; Hungarian producers and production service providers about their experiences working on international projects in Budapest; Polish and Hungarian HBO executives about developing original local content for the transnational service; and finally, in the latest stage, representatives of the internationally most successful Polish production company, Opus Film; the Polish PSB Telewizja Polska; and the biggest sales agency in the region, New Europe Film Sales.

The core of the qualitative analysis was conducted in 2015, when, together with my colleagues Johana Kotišová, Jakub Macek, Jan Motal and Eva Pjajčíková, we systematically coded and recoded transcripts of sixty-four interviews with producers, directors, screenwriters and script editors for an industry report on film

development commissioned by the Czech Film Fund (Szczepanik et al. 2015). After the initial 'open coding', we identified a set of categories that corresponded to problems with development strategies and practices; in the following 'axial coding' stage, we determined twelve overarching problem categories (including, for example, 'initiation of the project and composition of the development team', 'definition of development' and 'international co-production'), identified connections within and between them, and, drawing on this analysis, developed a theoretical model of the production field based on four Bourdieusian types of producer practices (as noted in Chapter 1). The remaining interviews, observations and document analysis were then used to triangulate and supplement this key model, and to include other fields and agents of production, which are presented in subsequent book chapters. Most interviews employed the technique of 'elite interviewing', which is used in production studies to investigate high-level industry practitioners (see Bruun 2016).

An invaluable source of industry knowledge and data has been my experience of consulting, writing industry reports and reviewing grant applications for the Czech Film Fund (from 2013 onwards) and of reviewing scripts for the Czech PSB Česká televize (from 2015 onwards). In addition to screenplays, budgets, letters of intent, contracts and financing plans, a typical grant application file submitted to the Czech Film Fund consists of a producer strategy (including marketing) and 'explications' written by some or all of the following: the producer, the director and the script editor. Although these documents are obviously calculated to persuade the Fund committee about the project's value and don't necessarily reflect producers' true ambitions, having an opportunity to assess and compare about 150 application files over the years has given me a concrete sense of the discursive strategies employed in this key intermediary activity of small/peripheral-market producers. Drawing on John Caldwell's typology of socio-professional rituals and artefacts, these application files, together with hearings and consultations of public funds and public broadcasters, are approached as a key example of industrial symbolic communication and theorizing. Located in the contact zones between the industry and administrative practice, they represent borderline cases falling in-between what Caldwell called 'fully embedded' and 'semi-embedded deep texts' (Caldwell 2008: 346), while also exemplifying in a specific way what he elsewhere labelled 'emic interpretive frames', 'liminal rituals' and 'critical industrial geographies' (Caldwell 2006).⁸ In this way, my work for the Fund and the PSB allowed me to create a distance from my subjects, and provided me with a counter-perspective when studying producer agency, which was crucial for understanding the place of producers in the 'high circumscription' model sketched above.

Post-Socialist Producer: The Production Culture of a Small and Peripheral Media Industry

The lasting economic weaknesses of the [Czech] film industry have been only accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic. [...] we pretend to be able to generate profit and to be proper entrepreneurs with all that it involves, while in fact we are not, we are non-profit organizations disguised as entrepreneurs which results in many non-professionalisms.

—Jiří Konečný, Prague, 8 July 2020

Today's European screen media industries are often characterized by a relatively low level of integration and concentration (as compared, for example, to the US or China), with highly subsidized production a key structural component of the sector (see e.g. Jäckel 2003). Despite recent trends towards market concentration and vertical integration in large Western European countries, the rise of 'super-indies' and several pan-European groups (Meir 2018; Drake 2020), the bulk of feature film and a large part of high-end television production is still organized predominantly on a project-by-project basis by a vast number of mostly small, under-capitalized and short-lived independent companies without permanent ties to international distributors or television networks, forming a highly fragmented and volatile environment. Laure de Verdalle, who interviewed over sixty French producers, found that most are founders or co-founders of their own small companies, which tend to have few or no employees apart from the principal, operate with low overhead and some are even housed in the producer's place of residence. She observed that it was 'less common for a producer to join a company that already exists than to create his own. Producers are emotionally involved and typically their activities bear their own, very personal stamp' (Verdalle 2015: 194). This is even more true for post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, where the pre-1990 state-owned studios have – together with their parent organizations – been mostly closed down or turned into rental sound stages, rather than transformed into integrated studios of a new kind such as EuropaCorp, Bavaria Film, Gaumont and Pathé, or into subsidiaries of globalized conglomerates such as Sky Group, Vivendi, RTL Group, The Egmont Group or Nordic Entertainment Group.¹ Most projects are developed by individual

independent producers, who operate in a distinct industry environment from their Western European counterparts. Exceptions include public and private TV networks with in-house production, and one specific case of a horizontally and vertically integrated media corporation: the former Polish media and entertainment conglomerate ITI Group with activities in, amongst others, terrestrial and cable TV, film production, distribution and exhibition, and home video (Adamczak 2010: 348–53).

During the second half of the twentieth century, when all Central and Eastern European audiovisual industries were state-owned and centralized, some Western European producers developed industry personalities as internationally renowned moguls, such as Nat Cohen in the UK, Artur Brauner in Germany, Carlo Ponti and Dino De Laurentiis in Italy, and Pierre Braunberger and Daniel Toscan du Plantier in France. From the 1980s, producers in the five biggest Western European markets started responding to the increasing presence of Hollywood by innovatively designing transnational high-concept films of their own, trying to reach pan-European, US and possibly global audiences with titles such as *The Boat* (*Das Boot*, dir. Wolfgang Petersen, DE, 1981), *Chariots of Fire* (dir. Hugh Hudson, UK, 1981), *Gandhi* (dir. Richard Attenborough, UK/IN, 1982), *The NeverEnding Story* (*Die Unendliche Geschichte*, dir. Wolfgang Petersen, DE/USA, 1984), *The Name of the Rose* (*Der Name der Rose*, dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, IT/FR/DE, 1986), *The Last Emperor* (dir. Bernardo Bertolucci, UK/IT/FR, 1987), *The Bear* (*L'Ours*, dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, FR/USA, 1988), *The Big Blue* (*Le Grand Bleu*, dir. Luc Besson, FR/IT/USA, 1988), *Cinema Paradiso* (*Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*, dir. Giuseppe Tornatore, IT/FR, 1988), and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, dir. Pedro Almodóvar, ES, 1988) (Liebing 2012). This transnational tendency developed and further diversified in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, after the signing of the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production (1992) and the establishment of dedicated support programmes Eurimages (1989) and MEDIA (1991). Successful producers have been increasingly recognized as European rather than national business leaders, while at the same time adopting more modest industry personalities compared to their predecessors (e.g. David Puttnam, Jeremy Thomas, David Jonathan Heyman, Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner from the UK; Bernd Eichinger and Karl Baumgartner from Germany; Domenico Procacci and Nanni Moretti from Italy; Claude Berri, Luc Besson and Pascal Caucheteux from France; and Andrés Vicente Gómez from Spain). The boom in transnational European production has also allowed producers from small Western European countries to significantly expand the scale of their projects and develop international careers (e.g. Peter Aalbæk Jensen from Denmark; Veit Heiduschka from Austria; and Kees Kasander from the Netherlands).

Although their renown has circulated successfully across borders within transnational professional networks, contemporary Western European producers' industry personalities don't aspire to assume the 'larger than life', Hollywood-style character typical for the Italian 'tycoons' of the 1960s such as De Laurentiis (Codelli 2011), or Daniel Toscan du Plantier, the *directeur général* of Gaumont between 1975 and 1984, considered the most prominent French producer of the time, who appeared as 'a prototype of a jet setter': 'surrounded by stars and starlets, rubbing shoulders with the powerful, flaunting in the media, moving from festival to festival across the world' (Creton 2011: 339). The increasing dependence of contemporary Western European producers on protectionist EU regulation, public subsidies, film schools and international training programmes, official co-production treaties, arthouse distribution circuits and the symbolic capital generated at international festivals limits their entrepreneurial agency and shapes their self-conception. For example, the reliance on overheads and the producer's fee (parts of the production budget) rather than on selling a film, identified in this chapter as a key economic principle of the east-central European producer model, seems to be a widespread practice in French lower budget film production too, with producers rushing projects from development to production as quickly as possible (Verdalle 2013: 28, 30–1). Similarly, the financial and existential insecurity of independent producers' working lives has been described in studies of the UK film and TV industries (Lee 2008; Long and Spink 2014), as well as their structurally disempowered position, which leaves them at the mercy of commissioning editors and inhibits them in exploiting their intellectual property rights when working for big broadcasters or SVODs (McElroy and Noonan 2019: 54, 64–5). There is no space for detailed comparison in this book and no existing comparative research to rely on, but it is safe to say that, despite all the differences, there is a convergence between post-1989 Western European producers, on the one hand, and their Central and Eastern European counterparts, as discussed below, on the other. It is possible this convergence is being accelerated by the ever-stronger position of transnational VOD networks as distributors, commissioners and co-producers of European films and TV shows, as well as by the impacts of the post-Covid-19 economic crisis, which might further precarize both Western and Eastern European producers. Thus, the post-socialist, east-central European producers analyzed in the following parts of this chapter should not be perceived as fundamentally distinct from their Western European peers, their difference being rather a matter of degree.

In contrast to Western European producers, producers in post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe (outside the EU until 2004) started their careers under conditions characterized by a generational gap spanning half a century, a lack of industry standards, weak institutional support and uncertainty about their

professional identity. They have all remained unknown to the wider public outside their small professional environment, not to speak of international recognition, with their practices and professional biographies still waiting to be researched and fully understood. It seems that the only significant exception was the Hungarian-American producer Andrew G. Vajna (1944–2019), known for producing Hollywood blockbusters such as *Rambo: First Blood* (dir. Ted Kotcheff, USA, 1982) and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (dir. Jonathan Mostow, USA/DE/UK, 2003), apparently one of the only two producers tied to the region who made it into the ‘Variety500’ index of the most influential entertainment business leaders (the other is Ewa Puszczyńska, the producer of the Oscar-winning *Ida* [dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, PL/DK, 2013]; as noted in Chapter 2). After returning to Hungary, Vajna became the key industry figure behind the Hungarian boom in international production services since 2007, when he co-founded the now-famous Korda Studios, located near Budapest, which have hosted numerous Hollywood crews. A personal friend of Viktor Orbán, he was appointed the Government Commissioner for the Development of the Hungarian Film Industry in 2011 and conceived the Hungarian National Film Fund, which significantly increased public funding for national film production (Varga 2012: 29).² He is also seen as a key figure behind a scheme to build a new media empire linked to the Fidesz government in the early 2010s (Polyák 2015: 288).

There is very little media industry studies literature on European producers (as opposed to the much larger corpus of scholarly work on Hollywood studios, studio heads and American independents, which belong to a very different industrial environment). What are the specific features of European producers’ work, career, professional identity and talent? To what extent are European producers creative and strategic thinkers, hands-on managers, or business people? What is the structural position of European producers, and how are their strategies and practices enabled or limited by a national or regional market and their regulations, by technological innovations, industrial infrastructures and public support schemes? How does a European producer’s approach impact the cultural, artistic and commercial values of the final product, the career of a film-maker, or the ‘brand’ of an ‘auteur’? How do European producers contribute to prominent cultural trends such as the so-called new waves? These and other related questions have been asked only recently in a handful of pioneering academic works.

Alejandro Pardo reconstructed the historical genealogy of today’s ‘creative producer’ (Pardo 2010). Angus Finney, himself a former producer, published several handbooks on financing, co-production practices and other business aspects of European producers’ work (see e.g. Finney 2015). Peter Bloore proposed the first theoretical treatment of European producers’ management of creative work in the development stage of the production process (Bloore 2013). The French

school of film economics developed a methodology for the economic analysis of European audiovisual markets and the political regulations affecting them, while also looking at how they influence producers' strategies (see e.g. Creton 1997). Management studies literature proposed conceptual frameworks to study producers' strategic thinking and risk control (Rimscha 2010). Industry reports commissioned by institutions such as the European Audiovisual Observatory, the British Film Institute and the French Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée present mostly quantitative data about media production in individual countries. What is notably missing in the body of literature on European media industries is detailed, empirical work on specific national and regional producers' practices and identities.

Excluding textbooks, biographies, memoirs and interviews (see e.g. Adler 2004; Binh, Margolin and Sojcher 2010; Macnab and Swart 2012), the first examples of this kind of in-depth research emerged only very recently – scattered in articles and in several edited volumes, with two specifically focusing on the industrial role of European film producers: *Les Producteurs: Enjeux Créatifs, Enjeux Financiers* (Creton et al. 2011) and *Beyond the Bottom Line: The Role of the Film Producer* (Spicer, McKenna and Meir 2014b), and another on European 'production cultures' (Szczepanik and Vonderau 2013). Christopher Meir launched pioneering research on Studiocanal as an example of today's European conglomerates aspiring to global status (Meir 2016, 2019). There are also several unpublished PhD dissertations looking at the transnational endeavours of European producers from an American perspective (Liebing 2012; Harris 2020), and on the precarious work conditions of British independent producers (Lee 2008). In television studies, the most progressive approaches are found in sociologically- and ethnographically-based studies of television producers (both in-house and independent), commissioners, editors and so-called showrunners, especially in British public service television (see Born 2004; Bennett et al. 2012) and in Denmark (Novrup Redvall 2013), the two most globally successful centres of European high-end television production today. Based on a quantitative and qualitative sociological survey, Nicolas Brigaud-Robert's (2011) book on French television producers uncovers the genealogy, low recognition and the paradoxical internal logics of the profession, torn between the urge to develop innovative programmes, market imperatives and the conventional practices of broadcasting institutions. A new line of research is emerging in studies of pay-TV and SVOD original production in Europe (Barra and Scaglioni 2020).

Producers and the production practices of post-socialist screen media industries in Central and Eastern Europe have remained even farther on the periphery of current scholarship. The first studies of screen industries in the region started to appear only in the early 2010s in Poland, influenced by Anglo-American

political economy of media, production studies and cultural policy studies (see e.g. Adamczak 2010, 2014a; Varga 2012; Wróblewska 2014a; Szczepanik et al. 2015; Kozuchowski, Morozow and Sawka 2019; Majer, Orankiewicz and Wróblewska 2019; Majer and Szczepański 2019). Marcin Adamczak and Anna Wróblewska have focused specifically on the Polish production system, and proposed typologies of producer strategies and roles. In his pioneering book on the post-1989 Polish film industry in the context of Global Hollywood and European transnational arthouse cinema, Adamczak, employing Bourdieusian field theory, distinguishes between four ‘creative strategies’ linked to different subfields of local film production.

The first, the strategy of ‘Auteur’ (also termed the ‘Escape’ strategy), centres on the middle-generation directors born in the 1950s or later, and is characterized by the intentional ‘escape from the commercial demands of the film industry into the safe realm of “authorship”’ (Adamczak 2010: 250). This local version of European arthouse cinema initially tried to capitalize on the unprecedented international success of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s 1990s films and is exemplified by directors such as Jan Jakub Kolski, Wojciech Marczewski, Jerzy Stuhr, Lech Majewski and Wojciech Smarzowski. While Kieślowski’s *The Double Life of Veronique* (*La double vie de Véronique*, FR/PL/NO, 1991) and the *Three Colours* trilogy (*Trois couleurs*, FR/CH/PL, 1993–4) won numerous awards, Kieślowski’s successors did not match his international renown, until the recent successes of Paweł Pawlikowski’s *Ida* (2013) and *Cold War* (*Zimna wojna*, PL/FR/UK, 2018). In the first half of the 1990s, Adamczak claims, Kieślowski jumped on the bandwagon of festival-driven European cinema, shooting international co-productions supported by Eurimages and capitalizing on the boom of Western interest in the former Eastern bloc (similarly to Jan Svěrák in the Czech Republic and István Szabó in Hungary), which, however, quickly faded, pushing the region back into ‘invisibility’.

Adamczak’s second strategy is that of ‘Professionalism’ (or ‘Concession’), situated in the subfield opposite to the ‘Auteur’ strategy and centred around the middle and younger generations of directors pragmatically moving between commercials, TV and entertainment genre cinema aimed at purely commercial success in the national market. Directors such as Juliusz Machulski and Władysław Pasikowski expressed contempt for the European arthouse world, accepted the rules of the free market and looked to Hollywood for well-proven narrative patterns. They earned little field-specific symbolic capital in terms of critical reception and festival awards but were relatively successful at the box office with titles such as *Pigs* (*Psy*, dir. Władysław Pasikowski, PL, 1992), which gave birth to a peculiar cycle of gangster movies reflecting on the post-socialist economic transformation and the new fusion of politics with business and crime.

The third strategy of the 'Barons', the older generation of 'classic' directors well established in state-socialist cinema and enjoying high public regard after 1989, attempts to combine the first two approaches by moving auteur personalities towards the commercial subfield and aiming at attaining both high-art status and commercial success. The 'old masters' of Polish cinema, such as Andrzej Wajda, Jerzy Hoffman and Jerzy Kawalerowicz, accumulated unprecedented financial resources for a cycle of national super-productions adapting classic Polish literature in a safe, conservative manner, including *With Fire and Sword* (*Ogniem i mieczem*, dir. Jerzy Hoffman, PL, 1999), *Pan Tadeusz: The Last Foray in Lithuania* (*Pan Tadeusz*, dir. Andrzej Wajda, PL/FR, 1999) and *Quo Vadis* (dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz, PL/USA, 2001). Adamczak describes these historical spectacles as equivalents of the European 'quality' or 'heritage' films and a local response to Hollywood production values. Although they were the highest-grossing movies after 1989, they soon created a sense of repetition and from today's perspective the cycle seems to be confined to the pre-2005 era before the establishment of the Polish Film Institute.

The fourth strategy of the 'Partisan' refers to a heterogeneous subfield of marginal or 'guerrilla' practices of film-makers emerging in the late 1990s and early 2000s (who were born in the 1970s and later), working outside the mainstream semi-professionally and with tiny budgets, employing new digital technologies, often they are fresh film school graduates or aspiring amateurs. This 'humble' generation rarely offers original artistic alternatives and avoids inter-generational confrontations as well as (at least initially) radical political statements in favour of small-scale intimate stories. Some gradually launched successful careers as either arthouse (Małgorzata Szumowska, Jan Komasa and Anna Kazejak) or commercial directors (Patryk Vega).

Although Adamczak's director-centred typology is clearly limited by the historical context in which he formulated his perspective in the late 2000s, when the institutional transformations and production trends of the 1990s still prevailed as the key cognitive framework and when television and the internet seemed to be distant enough from film to regard the latter as a separate industry, his work remains inspiring as the first attempt at proposing a systematic model of the audiovisual field in Eastern and Central Europe. Ten years later, Adamczak's colleague Anna Wróblewska drew on his typology to propose her own, producer-centred model, based on a survey of seventy production companies operating in Poland between 2016 and 2018 (Majer, Orankiewicz and Wróblewska 2019: 186–98).

Wróblewska first stresses how the local context changed from that described by Adamczak in 2009: producers now have to compete for the same pool of public funding from the consolidated PISF and from regional funds regardless

of their renown, connections outside the field or previous commercial successes. They are also 'hostages' of the small, concentrated group of powerful distributors fighting for local content, which has recently enjoyed a steadily growing share of the national theatrical market: either producers agree to the conditions of the big distributors, or their reach is limited to a small (usually arthouse) niche. The field became more open to new entrants (see group four, below) and the entry barriers, hitherto defined by the exclusive access of well-connected producers to prominent talent and experienced crews, were lowered. The new generation of producers 'entirely changed' the local professional environment in the second half of the 2010s by carving out their own space, though without pushing away the older predecessors, which means that there is a high degree of heterogeneity among different producer types (Majer, Orankiewicz and Wróblewska 2019: 185). Wróblewska's criteria for defining producer types includes, among others, institutional and generational background, the portfolio of activities, the size of the company, the volume of productions, the business model employed, the institutional mission (if any), the typical product and the success rate in applying for public funding.

The first group, called producers with a 'Mission', is unique to the Polish post-socialist context, where private and state film producers now coexist. The group includes state-owned studios with the special legal status of 'cultural institutions', successors of the former state-socialist organizations following a predefined cultural agenda: the Documentary and Feature Film Studio (WFDiF), Studio Miniatur Filmowych and transformed 'film units' (Kadr Film Studio, Tor Film Studio and Zebra Film Studio, headed by renowned directors Filip Bajon, Krzysztof Zanussi and Juliusz Machulski, respectively). Control over substantial libraries of pre-1989 and more recent titles has given them a relative financial self-sufficiency and stability, without excluding them from competition for PISF funding or from commercial activities, and allowed them to invest in script development and to achieve a continuity of production. In October 2019, after Wróblewska published her chapter, all the above institutions were merged into one state-owned studio, called the Documentary and Feature Film Production Company – an ongoing transformation (as of November 2020) viewed by many in the field with suspicion and fear of job losses. A special case of the 'mission' producers is the public service television TVP (Telewizja Polska), which played a key role as co-financier and co-producer of feature films in the 1990s and early 2000s. It reduced its film production activity after the establishment of PISF in 2005, but still remains a significant film investor (obliged to invest 1.5 per cent of its annual licence fee revenues in film production).

The second, smaller group of 'Tycoons' consists of producers and owners equivalent to Adamczak's 'baron' directors, although without the latter's wide

public renown and heteronomous political support. These producers and owners of production companies are building on their contacts and experiences from the state-socialist studios and currently occupy the position of business leaders. They are often owners of production and post-production facilities, have a diverse portfolio of activities including commercials, TV series and entertainment programmes, cultivate informal pools of film and TV directors, and hold seats in professional associations and cultural institutions. The group includes larger independent production companies such as Opus Film (headed by Piotr Dzięcioł), known for international co-productions, and Akson Studio (Michał Kwieciński), specialized in TV series, as well as commercial networks producing films and TV series, namely TVN, Canal+ Polska and Polsat.

The third group, the 'Strong mainstream', is also small and composed of older producers who often started their careers as production managers in the state-socialist studios. They are building on their wide networks of long-term personal relationships in film, TV and related business sectors. By cultivating commercial genre traditions, they have created a sense of cultural continuity and stability in Polish cinema, increasingly moving from film into TV. Representatives of the group include Apple Film Production (Dariusz Jabłoński, Violetta Kamińska and Izabela Wójcik), Studio Filmowe Kalejdoskop (Zbigniew Domagalski, Janusz Skałkowski and Piotr Śliwiński) and Film It (Dariusz Pietrykowski and Andrzej Połec).

The fourth group, labelled 'Know-how', is the largest pool consisting of dozens of younger Europeanized producers proficient in applying for national as well as European public funding, skilled in composing European co-productions and specialized mostly in arthouse cinema. Their high cultural capital and soft skills compensate for their lack of financial resources and professional experience as they build a new kind of professional know-how by taking part in international co-production markets, pitching forums or training programmes. They are passionate and agile, quickly accumulate wide reservoirs of contacts and experiment with innovative approaches to financing or low-budget production. They make use of collaborative networks, lobbying, informal interest groups and professional solidarity as natural instruments for advancing their interests. Some of them are in the process of moving into either the 'tycoon' or the 'strong mainstream' categories. Examples include MD4/Mental Disorder 4 (Agnieszka Kurzydło), specializing in Polish-Czech(-Slovak) co-productions such as *The Red Spider* (*Czerwony pajak*, dir. Marcin Koszałka, PL/CZ/SK, 2015), *Fugue* (*Fuga*, dir. Agnieszka Smoczyńska, PL/CZ/SE, 2018) and the TV series *Rats* (*Zrądci*, dir. Viktor Tauš and Matěj Chlupáček, CZ/PL, 2020); Lava Films (Agnieszka Wasiak, Mariusz Włodarski) with ambitious arthouse co-productions such as *Sole* (dir. Carlo Sironi, 2019, IT/PL) and the Polish Oscar nominee *Never*

Gonna Snow Again (*Śniegu już nigdy nie będzie*, dir. Małgorzata Szumowska and Michał Englert, PL/DE, 2020); and Aurum Film (Leszek Bodzak, Aneta Hickinbotham), a producer of *The Last Family* (*Ostatnia rodzina*, dir. Jan P. Matuszyński, PL, 2016), which won the main Golden Lions award at the 41st Gdynia Film Festival. Wróblewska does not mention that a surprisingly high portion of the young producers, dubbed ‘children of PISF’ in the Polish trade press (i.e. those who began their careers after the establishment of PISF in 2005 and who heavily benefit from its support), are women (Romanowska 2015); the ‘Young Producers Section’ of the Polish Producers Alliance had eleven female and eight male members as of October 2020.

Wróblewska supplements the list with a fifth, ‘Supporting’, type that groups production facilities, post-production studios and distributors acting as financiers and co-producers by providing in-kind support or pre-buying distribution rights, and with additional subcategories including directors producing their own films (Joanna Kos-Krauze and Jerzy Skolimowski) and ‘out-of-system’ players not applying for PISF funding and specializing in specific purely commercial products such as romantic comedies and TV series (Tadeusz Lampka’s MTL Maxfilm and Patryk Vega’s Ent One and Vega Investments). Although Wróblewska’s typology is not transferable to other national contexts within east-central Europe, it is instrumental in distinguishing different business models and in explaining the roles of path dependencies, entry barriers and forces of innovation in producers’ work. Its drawback, however, is that it does not detail specific producer practices throughout the value chain, analysis that is necessary for understanding how producers add value to their projects and how they mediate it in their relationships with different collaborators and industry players.

The only extensive empirical in-depth analysis of the region’s producer practices to date is a book-length industry report I conducted together with a team of colleagues from Masaryk University in Brno, on a commission from the Czech Film Fund (Szczepanik et al. 2015). The study described current Czech producers’ practices during development: only in the process of developing screenplays, composing creative teams and financing, but not during the subsequent stages of the value chain.

The present chapter first summarizes the producer typology presented in our Czech Film Fund study and then uses its background material (mainly the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with producers, supplemented by new interviews) to propose a new and more specific reading that concentrates on post-socialist producers’ reflexivity and reveals how their professional identity is being constructed and how they are positioning themselves within the broader industrial system, professional community and media culture. This analysis is inspired by the Bourdieusian concept of the *habitus* in the sense of

the structuring of individual dispositions, understood as internalized positions an individual has occupied in a social space (Bourdieu 1996). I pay attention to the ‘economy of prestige’ (English 2005) that has been crucial for the post-socialist producer generation struggling to define their place in the professional community and to accumulate symbolic capital that would allow them to fulfil their role as business and creative leaders. I also draw on John Caldwell’s concept of ‘industrial identity theory’, referring to the cultural performances of industry insiders and acknowledging that the ‘media’s approach to corporate identity can be similarly contingent, slippery, volatile, changing, tactical, and theatricalized as the resistant human subject favoured in cultural studies’ (Caldwell 2008: 235). However, unlike Caldwell, this article does not treat producers’ cultural performances as fundamentally different from the reflexivity of ‘below-the-line’ workers. This conceptual shift responds to the differences in structural positions producers occupy in the US versus the east-central European screen industries as outlined above.

A TYPOLOGY OF PRODUCERS’ DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

Based on more than sixty in-depth interviews with Czech producers (24), screenwriters (12), directors (20) and other professionals,³ the aforementioned industry report for the Czech Film Fund on development practices presents a structural Bourdieusian model (Bourdieu 1996) of the audiovisual production field. It identifies four systemic types of development practices by producers, calling them Mainstream Arthouse (A1), Mainstream Commercial (C1), Marginal Arthouse (A2) and Marginal Commercial (C2). Because the analysis showed larger differences between the central and the marginal positions than between the arthouse and commercial cinema in general, the research team decided to visualize the field with the help of the ‘horse-shoe theory’ diagram (Faye 1996). Figure 1.1 shows that the central – as well as the opposing – poles of the spectrum closely resemble one another in terms of producer practices, despite their apparent differences in terms of the cultural values of the final products. The typology is not meant to fix individual producers and projects as separate types, but rather to distinguish between different modes of producer practice, with some producers repeatedly moving between them during their career and with some films located in the borderlands between categories.

In the *Mainstream Arthouse sector* (A1), which is the most prestigious product type (both in cultural and financial terms), producers balance the nurturing of ‘their’ auteurial directors-writers and their focus on socially relevant topics (typically revisionist stories about recent national history) with a strategic business approach: relatively high budgets (€1 million to €4 million) and production values, international co-productions combining different national and European

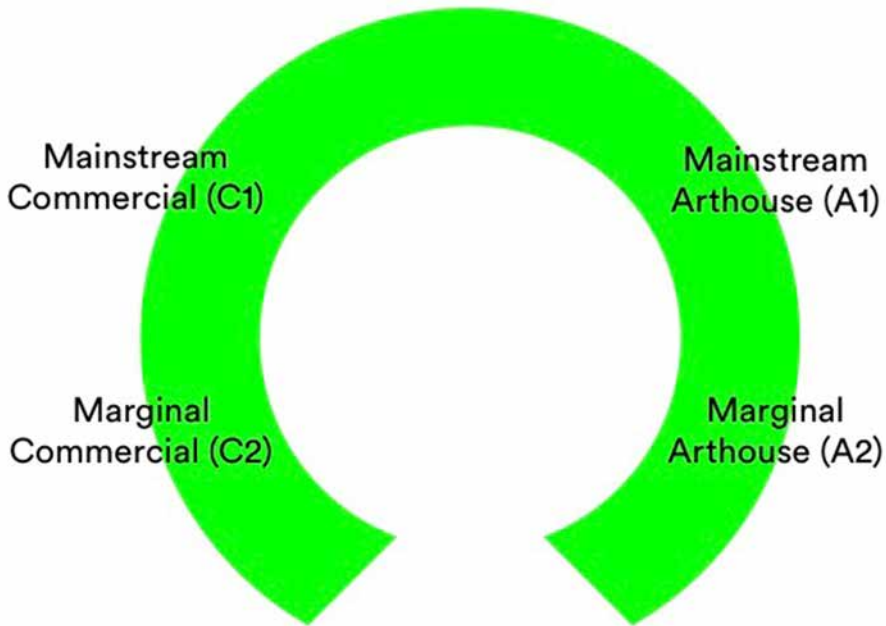


Figure 1.1 The spatial configuration of the development practices' typology inspired by Jean-Pierre Faye's 'horse-shoe theory' (Faye 1996).

public support schemes, pre-sales of rights to PSBs, mainstream distributors and sales agents, and a strong festival visibility. A1 producers are well-established professionals with their own style and a pool of authors; they have reputations as skilled grant applicants; and often combine fiction films with high-end TV series, animation and feature documentaries. They tend to actively co-initiate their projects (sometimes based on pre-existing literary material) both in business and creative terms, and remain highly invested throughout the entire development and production process, with the aim of finding a mainstream audience for their auteurs' visions. They cultivate reciprocal collaborative networks with foreign producers and often work with international sales agents. The A1 category is similar to Adamczak's 'Auteur' type and to Wróblewska's 'Know-how' type, with the most senior players (such as the well-established arthouse company Negativ) aspiring to become 'Tycoons'. Representatives include well-established companies such as Negativ Film (a group of accomplished middle-aged producers including Pavel Strnad, Petr Oukropec, Kateřina Černá and Milan Kuchynka) and Lucky Man Films (David Ondříček); the unique collaborative cluster of early- to mid-generation producers FilmKolektiv (Pavel Berčík, Ondřej Zima, Karla Stojáková and Jan Kallista), as well as several prominent director-producers

(Ondřej Trojan, Viktor Tauš, Petr Zelenka and Slávek Horák). Their films and TV series might be divided into two core subgroups: (1) the more prestigious core: higher-budget international co-productions with high production values, telling revisionist stories about the twentieth-century national history with the ambition of challenging established stereotypes and taboos such as *Identity Card* (*Občanský průkaz*, dir. Ondřej Trojan, CZ/SK, 2010), *Habermann's Mill* (*Habermannův mlýn*, dir. Juraj Herz, CZ/DE/AT, 2010), *Alois Nebel* (dir. Tomáš Luňák, CZ/DE, 2011), *In the Shadow* (*Ve stínu*, dir. David Ondříček, CZ/SK/PL, 2012), the HBO mini-series *Burning Bush* (*Hořící keř*, dir. Agnieszka Holland, CZ/PL, 2013) and *The Sleepers* (*Bez vědomí*, dir. Ivan Zachariáš, CZ, 2019), the Czech PSB mini-series *Czech Century* (*České století*, dir. Robert Sedláček, CZ, 2013), *Lost in Munich* (*Ztraceni v Mnichově*, dir. Petr Zelenka, CZ, 2015), the trilogy *Garden Store* (*Zahradnictví*, dir. Jan Hřebejk, CZ/SK/PL, 2017), *Toman* (dir. Ondřej Trojan, CZ/SK, 2018), *Charlatan* (*Šarlatán*, dir. Agnieszka Holland, CZ/IE/SK/PL, 2020) and *Shadow Country* (*Krajina ve stínu*, dir. Bohdan Sláma, CZ, 2020); and (2) more modestly budgeted, intimate stories set in the present with a message of morality, typically directed by Bohdan Sláma such as *Four Suns* (*Čtyři slunce*, dir. Bohdan Sláma, CZ, 2012) and *Ice Mother* (*Bába z ledu*, CZ, 2017), socially critical dramas or comedy TV series, typically directed by Jan Prušinovský, such as *The Snake Brothers* (*Kobry a užovky*, CZ, 2015) and the hugely popular PSB TV series *Most!* (CZ, 2019), and PSB crime series with messages of social criticism (the above-mentioned PSB TV series *Rats* [2020]).

Mainstream Commercial (C1) producers work with slightly lower budgets (€1 million to €2 million), pre-sell their projects to large national distributors and private TV networks, and use product placement. They seldom receive national or European grants or aim for international festival awards, and they limit their co-production deals to neighbouring Slovakia. The C1 producers are well-established professionals with reputations as skilled and tough business people; they cultivate a pool of proven commercial directors or writers, but tend to choose story ideas and strictly control the whole production process themselves. They are mostly limited to the domestic market and are critical of A1 and A2 producers for relying on public money (although they themselves often take advantage of the national 20 per cent rebate programme). C1 resembles what Adamczak calls 'Professional' and Wróblewska the 'Strong Mainstream', with some players aspiring to become 'Tycoons'. The category falls into three subgroups based often on adaptations of contemporary Czech bestsellers: (1) lifestyle comedies targeting middle-aged and older viewers set in contemporary urban locations, depicting the life of the middle and upper-middle class, centring on romantic relationships across marital bonds and generations such as *You Kiss Like God* (*Líbáš jako bůh*, dir. Marie Polednáková, CZ, 2009) and *You*

Kiss Like a Devil (*Líbáš jako ďábel*, dir. Marie Poledňáková, CZ, 2012), *Women in Temptation* (*Ženy v pokušení*, dir. Jiří Vejdělek, CZ, 2010), *Handyman* (*Hodinový manžel*, dir. Tomáš Svoboda, CZ, 2014) and *Women on the Run* (*Ženy v běhu*, dir. Martin Horský, CZ, 2019); (2) crime stories and thrillers with relatively high production values such as *The Godfather's Story* (*Příběh kmotra*, dir. Petr Nikolaev, CZ, 2013) and *Gangster Ka* (dir. Jan Pachel, CZ, 2015); (3) family and children's movies, including animation such as *Lucky Four Serving the King* (*Čtyřlístek ve službách krále*, dir. Michal Žabka, CZ, 2013) and *Angel of the Lord 2* (*Anděl Páně 2*, dir. Jiří Strach, CZ/SK, 2016). Typical representatives of this category are experienced producers such as Rudolf Biermann (In Film), Tomáš Hoffman (Infinity), Adam Dvořák (Movie), Miloslav Šmídmajer (Bio Illusion), and Svatka Peschková and Šárka Cimbalová (Marlene Film Production), who work with commercially successful directors such as Jiří Vejdělek, Jiří Strach, Alice Nellis, Marie Poledňáková, Jan Pachel and Jan Hřebejk.

The *Marginal Arthouse* (A2) producers are used to very low budgets (€150,000 to €1 million), funded exclusively from public sources (e.g. PSB, national Czech and Slovak grants, and rebates). A2 producers do not initiate their projects but instead provide the necessary financing and managerial services to their auteur directors-writers, who are often shooting their first films with low production values or focusing on marginalized social groups. They occupy this marginal position by choice, spurning free-market principles and being proud of their creative courage, sometimes resorting to semi-professional practices (for example, merging professional roles or making use of free labour). While more or less content with being limited to the national market and to very small arthouse audience groups, and while being strongly critical of their A1 and C1 competitors, some aspire to join the A1 type and aim at smaller international festivals. They usually combine fiction films with documentaries (both short and feature-length). The A2 category is equivalent to the anti-commercial side of Adamczak's 'Partisan' type and the more junior segment of Wróblewska's 'Know-how' type. This category is very heterogeneous and is characterized by low production values, real contemporary locations, no expectations of viewer success and often ideological opposition to mainstream cultural norms and value systems. Examples include the first movies made by FAMU (Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) graduates based on their personal lives, or socially critical fiction, activist (semi-)documentaries (often portrayals of the Roma people) and experimental films with high artistic ambitions but an extremely small, niche target audience. Typical representatives include both older-generation producers such as Viktor Schwarcz (Cineart TV Prague) and Čestmír Kopecký (První veřejnoprávní), and middle- and younger-generation Radim Procházka and Jan Macola (Mimesis Film), and films directed by David Jařab, Petr Marek, the early films of Robert

Sedláček, Mira Fornay and Tomasz Mielnik. Examples of their work include *The Greatest Czechs* (*Největší z Čechů*, dir. Robert Sedláček, CZ, 2010), *Nothing against Nothing* (*Nic proti ničemu*, dir. Petr Marek, CZ, 2011), *Places* (*Místa*, dir. Radim Špaček, CZ/SK, 2014) and *Journey to Rome* (*Cesta do Říma*, dir. Tomasz Mielnik, CZ/PL, 2015). Exceptional successes within this product type include the world-renowned surrealist animator Jan Švankmajer, whose films have been produced since the 1980s by Jaromír Kallista; Paris-based Petr Václav, who specializes in semi-documentary films with Roma non-actors and whose *The Way Out* (*Cesta ven*, CZ/FR, 2014) premiered in a non-competition section at Cannes and won multiple Czech Film Academy awards; and Karel Vachek, the enfant terrible of Czech documentary film-making, who has influenced several generations of Czech auteurist documentarists since the 1990s.

The *Marginal Commercial* (C2) producers are of necessity outsiders, working with low budgets similarly to A2, but funded almost purely from private sources, with the exception of automatic rebates (private TV networks, a lot of product placement and the producers' own money). C2 producers do not initiate their projects (which are typically crime thrillers with socially controversial themes or lowbrow comedies) but solely serve the director (by offering financing, managing and DIY marketing); sometimes they work on commissions from financiers outside the film industry. They have low professional reputations, lack the typical cultural capital of professional producers (FAMU school) and do not even try to enter the festival circuit in any of its segments. They sometimes resort to semi-professional practices; however, they aspire to C1 and combine fiction film making with non-film activities. C2 is comparable to the commercial subset of Adamczak's 'Partisan' type and the 'out-of-system' players identified by Wróblewska. Examples include companies such as Nogup, Pegasfilm, MagnusFilm and Jan Lengyel. Their production falls into two core subgroups: (1) middle-budget, lowbrow comedies that meet professional production standards (director Zdeněk Troška); (2) cheaper, semi-amateur movies with very low production values that hardly conceal their low-quality craftsmanship, but which push controversial social criticism bordering on exploitation (director-producer Tomáš Magnusek). Both subgroups show preference for current themes, real locations and original story materials. If a film becomes even a modest box office hit, they tend to serialize it until it burns out, as in the case of summer comedies such as *Bad Joke 1–5* (*Kameňák*, dir. Zdeněk Troška, Ján Novák, F. A. Brabec, CZ, 2004–15), which was followed by a TV series of the same name (2019); *Old Gossipton 1–3* (*Babovřesky*, dir. Zdeněk Troška, 2013–15); and a thriller trilogy about racial conflicts in Czech schools called *Bastards 1–3* (*Bastardi*, dir. Petr Šícha, Jan Lengyel and Tomáš Magnusek, CZ, 2010–12), again followed by a TV series of the same name (2014).

Table 1.1 Parameters defining the four types of Czech film production (adapted from Szczepanik et al. 2015)

Producer Practice	Mainstream Arthouse (A1)	Mainstream Commercial (C1)	Marginal Arthouse (A2)	Marginal Commercial (C2)
Financing sources	Czech PSB; CFF grants and incentives; MEDIA; a distributor; international co-production (and the related foreign public support sources); sponsors (e.g. the energy company Innogy)	Private television broadcasters (incl. Slovakian); Czech PSB to a minor extent; a distributor; private investors or sponsors (e.g. Innogy); product placement; CFF grants and incentives; MEDIA; rarely international co-production (and the related foreign public support sources)	Czech PSB; CFF grants; MEDIA as an exception (used by the Cineart production company)	Private television broadcasters; a distributor (only for proven C2 directors); private investors; product placement (up to 50% of budget); CFF incentives
Co-producers and partners	Czech PSB; distributors; foreign co-producers (Slovakia, Germany, Poland); foreign sales agents	Private television broadcasters and distributors in Czechia; private business partners	Czech PSB	Private business partners in Czechia; private television broadcasters
Budget	25 million–100 million CZK	25 million–55 million CZK	5 million–25 million CZK	4 million–10 million CZK for ‘outsider’ C2 creators; 20 million–30 million CZK for ‘proven’ C2 creators
Distribution channels (excluding DVD/Blu-ray and online sources) and festivals	Multiplexes; single-screen and art cinemas; domestic and foreign festivals; Czech PSB	Multiplexes and single-screen cinemas; private broadcasters	Limited distribution in art cinemas or no cinematic distribution at all; domestic festivals; Czech PSB; alternative distribution channels	Multiplexes and single-screen cinemas (in the case of subtype b, cinematic distribution might be limited or non-existent); private broadcasters

Target audience⁴	Mainstream audiences interested in quality; arthouse films of domestic provenance – these viewers do not shy away from difficult movies; art/festival viewers	Mainstream audiences enjoying domestic genre movies, including family and children's movies; more expensive projects try to attract occasional cinemagoers	Specialized and art/festival viewers	Tabloid readers and soap opera viewers; mainstream audiences interested in Czech genre movies
Ambitions for cultural prestige (film awards and festivals, international recognition: 0–3)	3	1–2	2–3	0
Creative team	Projects driven by a combination of a writer-director and a producer; the producer is a co-author of the project	Producer-driven projects; the producer is the initiator of the project, sometimes in cooperation with a long-time partner-director	Writer-director projects; the producer provides services to the author and her/his distinctive vision	Creator-driven projects, sometimes custom-made for a financier; producer's work is reduced to production management and marketing

Producer Practice	Mainstream Arthouse (A1)	Mainstream Commercial (C1)	Marginal Arthouse (A2)	Marginal Commercial (C2)
The producer's position in the production field and in the professional community	Recognized professionals with their own producer style and vision, with reputations as experienced applicants for public support; they combine fiction films and documentaries and TV series production; they balance their orientation towards auteur cinema with a knowledge of changing market demand; ambitions to get to foreign festivals and markets; critical of C1 and A2	Recognized professionals with reputations as competent and self-sufficient businessperson, in some cases with a distinctive producer style oriented toward the domestic market and aware of the trend of decreasing viewership; they don't have ambition to get to foreign festivals or markets – or they do have these ambitions, but to a limited degree and they manage to fulfil them only as an exception; critical of A1 and A2	Consciously on the margins of the field, in the opposition; they combine fiction films with documentaries; they work with extremely low budgets, sometimes even as semi-amateurs; completely dependent upon public support, they reject market criteria of success; they expect extremely low cinema attendance; they have ambitions to get to smaller and domestic festivals, but not to enter foreign markets; they are critical of A1, which they aspire to enter (to professionalize themselves), yet without losing their creative courage and distinction	Forced to remain on the margins of the field; outsiders by necessity; not quite recognized by leading authorities in the field (decision makers, good taste arbiters, etc.); they sometimes work as semi-amateurs; they want to enter C1

Note: CFF = Czech Film Fund; CZK = Czech koruna.

Table 1.1 provides an overview of the parameters that were used to define the four types or sectors of Czech film production.

In its conclusions, the Czech Film Fund (CFF) industry report demonstrated how the typical business models of Czech film producers (especially in the A2 and C2 sectors) limit the possibilities for more systematic screenplay development and for longer-term production strategies. Development is identified as a critical vulnerability of the Czech production system, responsible for the weak performance of Czech films at international festivals and in foreign markets. Screenplays are underfinanced and underdeveloped, and producers approach their projects one by one, without any strategic continuity. These producers cannot afford to maintain an in-house development executive to manage the company's pool of projects and talent, and they leave their screenwriters in precarious working conditions, with no guarantee of fair payment in the early stages of development. Apart from A1 (and some A2) producers, most are not used to focusing on foreign markets, attending international workshops or discussing their scripts with specialized script editors. They cannot afford to be selective enough to greenlight only the best projects for production (in contrast to the high selectivity typical of the UK and US screen industries): virtually all initiated projects are eventually rushed to production. The producers appreciate the role of the CFF in partially compensating for this deficiency, and they rely on the Czech PSB, Czech Television (Česká televize – ČT), to act as the main co-producer and commissioner. But they also criticize these two public institutions for their reliance on committee-based decision-making, as opposed to individual responsibility. Czech producers are also suspicious of collective action and negotiation, and they do not have detailed knowledge of the production field as a whole, apart from their closest collaborative networks.

The CFF report also emphasized that for policymakers, it is crucial to treat different producer types differently, because they work under different conditions and pursue distinct goals. For the A1 and C1 producers, development – even if they criticize its current institutionalized practices and public support – represents the core producer task and the defining element of the producer's professional identity, to such an extent that some are even prepared to delegate physical production to another production company, which then plays the role of a production service provider. The producers take pride in initiating their projects, composing the 'creative triangle', being involved in the entire creative process of rewriting and having their say in key decisions about the story structure, the characters and the genre characteristics. Although they don't initiate literally all the projects themselves, sometimes coming on board as late as the drafting of the first full version of a screenplay, they like to see their role as deeply creative, bordering on co-authorship. Their strategies and producer styles are articulated not only in their

selection of projects, but also in how they shape the projects, how they manage the creative team and, over a longer period of time, how they navigate the writer-director's career. While A1 producers emphasize collaboration and shared vision, the C1 producers make decisions in a more authoritative way. While the A1 producers acknowledge that international workshops, co-production negotiations, research and other soft preparations are important elements of development, their C1 counterparts focus on working on the screenplay and casting (composing a 'package') with the objective of persuading their business partners (distributors, broadcasters) to pre-buy a portion of the rights.

For the A2 and C2 producers, it is more typical to act as coordinators and production managers providing their services to the writer-director. They regard themselves as humble facilitators, focusing on financing and practical preparations for the shooting, without really getting involved in analyzing the screenplay and giving notes for other than economic reasons. Their aim is to secure financing and cut down all unnecessary costs if the financial resources prove to be scarcer than expected. They generally limit their requests for changes in scripts to practical cuts motivated by financial concerns, and help the writer/director move the script to production as quickly and smoothly as possible. Their strategic producer thinking is manifested in the choice of the project itself; more precisely, they would rather commit to a trusted writer/director than to a particular theme, story structure or style. But oftentimes they choose to work with first-time director-writers who are so eager to get their scripts produced that they are willing to waive their fees. Some of the A2 and C2 producers go as far as to claim that development – considered an administrative invention imported from the 'European producer system' rather than a natural stage of the production process – is just a necessary evil, and that producing is possible without development whatsoever. But most of them, especially in the A2 type, are conscious of the lack of professional standards in their development methods, and expect to be pressured to develop future projects more systematically in the near future.⁵

STUDYING PRODUCERS' INDUSTRIAL IDENTITIES

In what follows, I will shift from describing the business models and structural positions per se to an explanatory analysis focusing on how producers themselves understand their business models and positions: how they incorporate them into their professional identities, and how they understand the limits imposed on them by the small peripheral market in which they operate. However, I will occasionally digress from the identity exploration approach to explain specific principles of the business models – for example, production fees and selectivity of development – that producers consider crucial conditions defining their identity.

Unlike the practices of 'performing industrial identities' typical for Hollywood above-the-line talent and executives (see Caldwell 2008: 237), post-socialist producers tend not to employ their 'self-conceptions' as sophisticated branding and PR – to solidify personal brands or 'corporate personas', or to manage business uncertainties. What they have in common with the producers' self-portraits mapped by Caldwell are their claims to be able to intuitively understand audiences, to choose and lead a production team, and of personal creative agency: the producers want to be involved in shaping a film's vision from the very beginning; they use their personal taste and judgment to pick a story idea or greenlight a project; and their professional satisfaction supposedly draws from personal aesthetic enjoyment rather than financial profit. But, unlike Hollywood above-the-line industry 'players' or 'moguls', they do not use extravagant self-mythologizing (the trade narrative genre that Caldwell calls the 'genesis myth', and the industry authorship theory he refers to as 'aesthetic status metaphors') to support their glamorous social status, personal aura and professional leverage. On the contrary, they generally resort to unpretentious, humble or even self-ironic styles of self-presentation. Rather than talking of themselves in terms of 'lone-wolf artistry' or 'edgy bohemian' (Caldwell 2008: 202–3), they are ready to accept and adopt a much drier vocabulary of policy discourse and grant schemes. They do not present their cultural sensibility as the result of an elite education or cultural pedigree, because they do not come from privileged families (unlike many actors), and their career tracks tend to be pretty similar, since virtually all of them (apart from the A2 type) graduated from the same film school: FAMU's⁶ Producer Department. This sense of homogeneity and egalitarianism is also reflected in Czech film credits and awards: the producer categories are far less diversified, inflated and hierarchical than their US counterparts. The level of division of labour in the production department is quite low, and it is easy for an outsider to determine who the main producer is. Credits such as 'Associate Producer' or 'Executive Producer' are rare. What follows is a condensed overview of a series of seven tropes that emerged from the qualitative analysis as key indicators of who producers are in the current Czech production system.

1. A profession to be re-invented: Towards a 'European producer'

Until 1990 across the whole Eastern bloc, film projects were developed and the work on screenplays organized by so-called 'units' – semi-autonomous groups of production chiefs, script supervisors, production managers, directors and writers, all permanent employees of the state-owned studios. Producers, as a profession and by definition, could not exist in the state-run, propaganda-focused film industries. Since the only legal producer was the state (or its bureaucratic representatives within the studios' management structures), these units virtually

replaced hands-on creative producers in all the film industries of the region (see Adamczak, Marecki and Malatyński 2012; Ostrowska 2012; Szczepanik 2013c). After 1990, when the state-socialist command economies gradually transformed into free markets, nobody fit the Western European definition of producer. The first professional group to jump in to fill the niche of the private production business was, in the Czech case, the former production managers freshly fired from the privatized Barrandov Studios in Prague. They were accompanied by adventurous business people from outside the film industry, who, for a short period of time, thought there might be an opportunity to earn quick money making films.

It was only after the mid-1990s that a new generation of FAMU graduates from the reformed producer study programme adopted the standard European definition of the producer as a project's initiator and manager of the whole production process, both economically and creatively. But it took another twenty years before Czech producers (especially in the A1 sector) as a professional community started integrating into the European system of co-production, support schemes, festivals, workshops, pitching forums, training programmes and, above all, transnational professional networks. This process is still not over and remains contested.

There are several specific aspects of the producer's job which emerged in the interviews as indicators of what it means for the professional community to be a 'real', 'European' producer: the ability to follow one's own creative intuition and vision; to build a sustainable business model; to enter international co-productions and to distribute films across borders; to take advantage of national or European support schemes; and finally, to properly develop a project by investing enough financial and human resources into the pre-production stage.

Not all of these ideas of what it means to be a 'real', 'European' producer are met with unanimous agreement. While the younger generation, especially those of the A1 type, sees these ideas as goals and a modernization programme, more nationally-oriented producers of either the marginal arthouse or commercial types look at them with suspicion and anxiety. One disillusioned director-producer of the A2 type lamented:

Today's producers, the new generation, don't want big directors anymore, they need directors only as a marketing vehicle [...]. They want to hire the directors. This is a big change in producer thinking, among those in their 30s or 40s, who want to raise, to become European. They want a director to be their marketing puppet.

(A2 director-producer, 5 December 2014)

His words show that the 'Europeanization' of the local producer system can be seen as a clearly negative trend, one that endangers the very core values of the

national arthouse cinema. They demonstrate how deep are the internal divisions within the community along generational and sectoral lines, and that some producers still adhere to the idea of being little more than production managers.

2. No producer without development?

The discursive operation of identifying with the concept of development was repeatedly used by the interviewees to distance themselves from the heritage of the state-socialist production managers turned producers, who limited their job description to just financing and organizing a shoot. But the term ‘development’ was not commonly used among Czech professionals until the late 2000s. Due to the historically conditioned confusion of ‘producer’ and ‘production manager’ mentioned above, the pre-production stage was not necessarily thought of as a producer’s job. The traditional Czech term for development, used in the state-socialist studios, was ‘literary preparation’, and clearly indicated that developing screenplays is the job of writers and script supervisors (called ‘dramaturges’) rather than producers. However, when the Czech Film Fund introduced two specialized subsidy programmes to support ‘screenplay development’ and ‘complete development’ in 2013, ‘development’ was already a widely circulating buzzword, although this does not mean there was general agreement of what it meant. In the early 2010s, the neglect of the development stage was recognized as a critical deficiency by other national funds and institutes in east-central Europe too, most notably in Poland and especially in Hungary. The Hungarian National Film Fund (HNFF, established in 2011) implemented – under the influence of the government commissioner Andrew Vajna – a two-step development funding scheme (script development and project development), supplemented by a system of close oversight and mentoring by HNFF readers and a special development board that was supposed to comment on at least two script versions. Some producers regarded this as a partial return of the ‘state studio’ system (V. Petrányi, Q&A, the FIND Project field trip, Budapest, 28 March 2014); in 2020, the system was expanded to TV and VOD original productions by the HNFF successor, the National Film Institute (NFI 2020).

In the current Anglo-American industry discourse, ‘development’ refers to ‘the work that surrounds the initial concept or story idea, the acquisition of that idea, the screenwriting process, the raising of development finance and the initial stage of production planning’ (Finney 2015: 27). Development can also include ‘packaging a project (by attaching actors and other talent), and budgeting and researching the shoot’ (Bloore 2013: 35), but this latter definition already intersects with the next production stage, so-called ‘soft pre-production’, which includes recces, location scouting, more casting, etc. Development is thought to be a key stage for a producer to strategically plan and design the project. It is also

a risk investment, because there are no guarantees that a project will make it to the production and exhibition stage. It is very unpredictable and volatile due to the many potential differences among key players and obstacles that could slow down or entirely stop the process somewhere between generating the initial story idea, writing the final script and getting the 'green light' for shooting. Development has been repeatedly described as a key factor in a film's success and as a parameter differentiating various production systems: Hollywood studios supposedly invest 8–10 per cent of a film budget in development, and their average development–production ratio is estimated at about 1:20 (Finney 2015: 32), as opposed to 4 per cent of a film's budget and 16–20 per cent of projects actually produced in the UK and Europe (Bloore 2013: 22). Our interviews indicated that these figures are significantly lower in east-central Europe: the vast majority of initiated projects make it to shooting, while development investment comprises only about 1.5 per cent of the total budget. What does this say about the east-central European producer?

For A1 producers, systematic and well-financed development is the most crucial part of the job, an indicator that the producer is the true initiator of the screen idea, in control of the whole production process. It is also a key condition to foster the Czech film production system's professionalization, standardization and international competitiveness. An A1 producer in her mid-forties, specializing in relatively high-budget international co-productions, criticized current Czech film-making for poor development work and a low level of selectivity:

There is a pressure here on producers to shoot things. They can't develop six projects and choose just one in five years. They need to move to shooting despite people telling them the project is not finished yet.

(A1 producer, 29 October 2014)

On the other hand, A2 producers, who generally live on public funding alone, are very conscious that their development processes are too hasty, underfinanced and limited to accepting finished scripts, thus lowering the quality and international competitiveness of the final product. But they generally blame this on the lack of financial resources and the small national market. The veteran producers see development as a 'necessary evil' – which is a logical consequence of their mission to humbly 'serve the auteur' and move projects to the shooting stage as quickly as possible, with minimal interference in the auteur's unique vision. This seems to be changing for their younger peers: a relative A2 novice in his early thirties expressed ambition to become more professional and European by investing more time and money in development. He plans to combine the 'producer-driven project' approach – typical of the mainstream arthouse

producers – with the idiosyncratic, auteur-centred styles typical of the A2. C1 and C2 producers see development as a foreign, bureaucratic regulation, introduced artificially via grant schemes, and they oppose the pressure to change their ways of doing things. A veteran C1 producer-director with a long track record of widely successful titles, including one Oscar nomination, even rejected the whole concept of selectivity:

A producer who develops ten screenplays and selects just one for production is not a real producer. He can't read scripts, has no idea of what he is up to, just blindly testing what can work. This whole European system is a disaster and crazy in economic terms.

(C1 producer, 13 November 2014)

Development thus proves to be a deeply contested idea: for some it defines who a producer is or should be, for others it is a destructive bureaucratic requirement coming from Brussels.

3. The myth of the missing 'dramaturges'⁷

The third, and closely related, trope gives producers' reflexivity a specific post-socialist dimension: a paradoxical nostalgia for the institutional support, collaborative arrangements and stability provided by the state-socialist studios, mixed with a sense that it can never be restored in the market economy. Special attention needs to be devoted to script editors and consultants, commonly referred to as 'dramaturges' in the Czech screen industry terminology. Dramaturges are widely considered crucial, yet this is the most underfunded, neglected and precarized of all the professions involved in film development. The term 'film dramaturge' originated in the 1930s, when it was adapted from theatre and from the German film production system, where dramaturges were understood to be not just script editors, but also functionaries of Nazi cultural policy and pre-censors. The Czechoslovak state-socialist production system, especially in the late 1950s and 60s, cultivated a tradition of 'film dramaturgy' that balanced the bureaucratic, pre-censorship role with the more practical and creative tasks of detailed script editing (so-called page-by-page dramaturgy) and development management. Dramaturges operated in so-called dramaturgical or creative 'units' that were gradually established in all the state-socialist studios of Eastern Europe and which effectively functioned as studio producer units. Especially in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, dramaturges were the key personnel and heads of these units, responsible for scouting new talent, selecting story materials, pairing writers with directors, greenlighting or cancelling projects for production, and overseeing the whole production process. Their role was similar to

today's independent producers, although stripped of the usual financial and legal responsibilities (see Szczepanik 2013c). The dramaturges of the 1960s are seen as vital facilitators of the Czech New Wave; the older generation of screenwriters, directors and producers still refers to their legacy when calling for support, training and standardization of film dramaturgy today.

However, this tradition of film dramaturgy was closely related to and dependent on the state-socialist studio system; it appears impossible to restore and implement it in the current fragmented production system, in which production companies are so small and financially insecure that they cannot afford any permanent staff. (As indicated above, development is the stage of the film value chain which suffers most from the financial weakness of producers in a small market and their lack of longer-term strategy.) The historical concept of the film dramaturge is similar to that of today's creative producer and head of development, who typically works as an in-house employee, a producer's right-hand assistant in terms of managing a portfolio of projects in development. But almost no Czech producer has been able to maintain them long-term. The professional community and policymakers have long been looking for ways of compensating for this lack. The Czech Film Fund requires dramaturges to be hired and reasonably paid for every project it funds, and has even initiated a special training programme to nurture a new generation of dramaturges skilled in the Western methods of script advising, editing and doctoring.

However marginalized and criticized, 'film dramaturges' do exist in the local industry, and they are even occasionally credited in the opening titles. The most common type is a salaried employee of the Czech PSB assigned by management to feature film projects co-produced with an independent producer. They usually don't perform page-by-page dramaturgy but instead act as hands-off script advisors and assist the creative team in navigating the institutional demands of the PSB (as noted in Chapter 5). Sometimes freelancers are hired to conduct one-off script analysis, but this is often an opportunistic move to meet a funding scheme requirement or the national funding board's expectations. Unlike Western European or US script doctors, script editors or consultants (see Bloore 2013; Bordino 2017), Czech dramaturges interviewed for the CFF report expressed their expectation to be hired to give the writer continuous feedback throughout the entire development process – as opposed to producing a one-off analysis ('doctoring' a script). However, most interviewed producers were in fact not willing to give up a portion of their control or were not financially able to hire such personnel. The ideal type of dramaturge, creatively overseeing the whole creative and production process, ritually invoked by all the professional groups involved in development, thus remains absent from the current Czech production system, as this A1 producer acknowledged:

Everybody asks why there are no dramaturges in Czech cinema any more. For me, it is an irritating way of looking for excuses. The way we got used to perceive dramaturges here is entirely non-functional, false, nonsensical. The existing dramaturges are working in an impressionistic way, just saying things like 'This script doesn't work'. Contrary to this, [Western] script editors are people whose reading and analysis can actually inspire you. Certain people have to be part of the process from the beginning to the end. They have to watch the concept, whether it is a crime story or sci-fi, or a post-apocalyptic world, or even more detailed genre definition, they have to watch a director's concept, after choosing the director. What is important is that this is the producer's job, which includes dramaturgy in itself. I will not hire somebody [a dramaturge], who can't really be with the project from the beginning to the end. That's why this position of a person, who is somehow distant from the project and who just says something about the script from time to time, does not exist in more functional film industries, because it doesn't make any sense.

(A1 producer, 20 November 2014)

Only very seldom did respondents acknowledge consistent and close collaboration with a professional dramaturge. More often, they reflected on the deficiency of current Czech dramaturgy and how producers need to compensate for the lack of 'real' dramaturges by asking their crew members, fellow writers or even family members to provide feedback, or by performing 'dramaturgy' themselves (what they call 'producer dramaturgy'), which can be anything from giving general comments to page-by-page analysis:

So, it is us producers who are most often performing dramaturgy. We get angry and mad while doing that, we often have no clue what to do, but we try hard being dramaturges ourselves. Of course, we would appreciate a dramaturge, but what we actually get from Czech Television [the PSB] are dramaturges who write beautiful long contemplations, which are 90% useless, you don't understand what they tell you to do, because it is something between a critique and a review. [...] They don't include specific directions such as, change this character in this way, the other character in that way, and remove this whole part, because it is a dead end.

(C1 producer, 13 November 2014)

The narrative of the missing dramaturge is the most striking paradox of the current Czech development discourse: the ever-present call for dramaturges is confronted with the lack of a systemic place for them, financial resources to pay for their work, and professional respect to grant them the necessary authority and career motivation.

4. Not true entrepreneurs: The 'production fee business model'

The interviews showed that the business models of most local producers are based not on selling movies to the audience but on producing *per se*. Their most vital income is generated not from box office receipts or selling the film through other distribution channels, but comes from the so-called production fee (meant to cover the production company's overhead), supplemented by the producer's personal remuneration. Both fees are part of the production budget. The production fee is standardized, up to 7 per cent of the budget, which is covered mostly from public sources: the Czech Film Fund, the national PSB, foreign public funds and PSBs (in co-productions), and EU support programmes. Producers make their money before the film enters distribution, simply by pocketing the 7 per cent share of the total budget plus their personal fee, which of course incentivizes them to inflate the budget when applying for public funding, although producers sometimes defer their fee as a way of contributing to the budget. When considering the average Czech feature film budget of €940,000, the producer's share totals between €80,000 and €100,000: a €65,000 production fee plus the producer's fee of between €13,000 and €50,000, depending on the type of project, the number of producers and whether development is included. This system, most typical of (but not limited to) the arthouse sector (A1 and A2) of the industry, de-incentivizes producers from moving towards a business model that responds to market demand. The respondents were not proud of this, but they did not hide the fact; some even acknowledged it as a specific economic logic and key characteristic of their professional identity. Because many of them make a living from physical production and not from selling the product, they are not motivated to be as selective as their US or even UK counterparts by greenlighting only projects with the highest market potential while abandoning the rest. Instead, following the economic logic of the local conditions, they tend to rush all screenplays to the shooting stage as quickly as possible, while minimizing development costs and losses. Because there is no production fee in the development stage, they cannot afford to nurture a broad pool of projects-in-development and follow a longer-term producer strategy; they simply depend on collecting the next production fee.

A seasoned A1 producer acknowledged:

Producers generally can't build their business models on the very low opportunities for making profit from distributing their films on the small national market. That's why most production companies' business plans are based on producing. They develop and shoot films themselves, and they collect the production fee to pay their company's expenses, the salaries, and so on.

(A1 producer, 13 October 2014)

The 'production fee business model' is even more typical for the A2 sector, where audience numbers are commonly as low as several thousand per film, and where the box office makes no difference because it cannot cover even a modest marketing campaign, let alone production costs. A middle-aged director-producer with a reputation as an *enfant terrible* (who used to work with producers of the A2 type but recently moved to more mainstream TV work) pointed to a hidden aspect of the production fee-based practice:

These guys live from the production fee; not from box office revenues, like Hollywood producers do. It means they need to inflate budgets [...]. It's one big hypocrisy and there is no way out. They all inflate the budgets here, and everybody in the system somehow counts on it. The bigger the budget, the bigger fee they get. A vicious circle.
(A2 director-producer, 5 December 2014)

The farther away from the A2 sector one moves in the direction of commercial film-making, the more significant distribution rights and box office revenues are for producers' business models. However, the other extreme pole of the field, C2, features a private-business equivalent of the production fee model: projects co-financed by product placement. Product placement money can represent up to 50 per cent of the total budget. Reliance on it often means that development is extremely fast and limited to soft pre-production, because the final screenplay is needed to close the deal. Again, films are not sold to consumers, but rather to business partners.

Although the 'production fee business model' is tacitly accepted as a necessary consequence of the small-market economy and the state's cultural policy, it is often used to critically depict producers as 'not true entrepreneurs'. They do not bear the highest risks; they do not depend on the success of their products on the market; they are not pushed to innovate and expand by vigorous competition. Instead of studying their audiences' tastes, they spend their time writing grant applications and trying to figure out what grant committees or PSB executives expect from them. An internationally ambitious A1 producer remarked that

If you are able to produce a film just from the Czech PSB and the Fund money, maybe combining them with the equivalent Slovak public sources, you only need a director who is liked by the Fund, and you can make a living that way. Once in a while you may be lucky to produce a modest hit and earn some more money. But from my point-of-view, it is a dead end, it doesn't lead you to Europe. [...] And without confrontation with the outside world you don't have true ambition, and without the ambition you can't create anything noteworthy.

(A1 producer, 13 November 2014)

But the 'production fee model' is not entirely risk free. The interviews show that reliance on public money creates its own specific risks and competitive environment: the cash flow is unsteady, dependent on the deadlines and bureaucratic operations of the support programmes; grant committees have their own preferences, and it is allegedly easy to fall out of favour with them. Many arthouse producers diversify their business activities to compensate for the slow, unpredictable income from feature fiction films: commercials and foreign-production services are generally the most typical business activities to secure continuous cash flow; grant-supported documentaries can also be a quicker and easier way to earn some money; TV series deals with the PSB Česká televize or with a private network help to achieve the highly desired stability.⁸ The minority who focus solely on feature films tend to be the most vulnerable.

A related anti-businesslike characteristic of Czech producers, across all the sectors, is their reluctance (bordering on sheer rejection) to think in terms of marketing and audience research. Even the commercially-oriented producers do not talk of target groups, do not commission market research and do not invest in elaborate marketing campaigns. They claim that the producer's singular talent lies in intuitively understanding the needs of the author and the audience. Their 'industry lore' (Havens 2014) or 'industrial theorizing' (Caldwell 2008) about audiences is visceral and self-centred. An experienced C1 producer of several popular hits claimed:

The most important thing for me is that I like the film, I enjoy it myself, and that it is good. I don't do any target groups. It is more about luck [...] whether the film works and people come to watch it. [...] You can't calculate that, you simply must sense it. [...] To achieve a broad audience appeal, a social phenomenon, you need to click with the audiences, and that's not something you can calculate. It just must happen. And that's the talent: the talent of the director and the screenwriter and of myself as a producer to rightly mix and sustain and navigate the whole project.

(C1 producer, 5 November 2014)

Since the steady decline in movie theatre attendance for Czech films in the first half of the 2010s⁹, commonly attributed to the digitization of the domestic movie theatres, it has become more and more difficult for the mainstream commercial producers to achieve this kind of 'social phenomenon', and they were hit by the crisis harder than their arthouse counterparts. The interviews show signs of a change, making this kind of self-confident attitude increasingly rare: even the commercial producers are starting to apply for grants, seeking co-production deals and thinking of development more carefully.

5. Precarized producer and public service television as a 'black box'

The interviewees from other professional groups, namely screenwriters and script editors, often accused producers of exploiting and disempowering them. It is not just the issue of giving up rights and control over the work to the producer, and of generally low screenwriter fees (€8,000–€20,000, i.e. roughly 1 per cent of an average Czech film budget), but also of step deals, based on splitting the fee into gradual payments and deferring a part of them as long as possible, usually until the first or even last day of shooting or until the producer gets a grant.¹⁰ Writers are often not paid (and sometimes not even given a contract) upon commencement of their work; they must wait until completion of the first screenplay draft, which may not be accepted in the end, in which case they are not paid at all. They therefore struggle throughout the early development stages, and have to take other jobs at the same time. Especially A2 producers excuse this practice by referring to their 'shared passion' for film-making, and it is not surprising they like to work with first-time writers or directors, who more readily agree to work for free throughout the development stage just to get their film made. Screenwriters rightly see this practice as a way for producers to transfer the risk of development financing onto them. But although producers seem to be much more powerful compared to the isolated and underpaid writers, they reflexively make surprisingly similar references to precarization.

First, the producers see themselves as being exploited and disempowered by the national PSB, Česká televize. Traditionally the strongest co-producer of Czech films, producers partner with ČT out of necessity, and ČT is appreciated as a stable source of co-production financing and commission or acquisition deals (co-producing about thirty independent features per year),¹¹ and as an influential agent of standardization of production practices, including development. The production of television series for ČT can provide independent producers with a vital source of security and continuity that film-making cannot. But producers also criticize ČT for its monopolistic, centralizing and bureaucratic ways, and for denying them the symbolic capital earned in the film world. They are given supposedly unfair contracts which take advantage of the monopolistic position of ČT, pushing them to sell extremely long-lasting broadcasting rights for relatively low flat fees, and to accept disadvantageous in-kind co-production contributions instead of cash. Even more importantly, producers complain about the lack of individual 'producer responsibility' on the side of ČT, whereby co-productions with independent producers are negotiated, greenlit and managed not by individual commissioning editors, but by a two-level management: first, producers have to pitch their ideas to one of the 'creative producer units' or to the 'Film Centre' (a unit specialized in feature films), whose heads then need to get approval from the central 'Programme Board', which takes final decisions collectively

and is notorious for its unpredictability. If a project is eventually greenlit, the relatively weak unit heads only rarely provide – according to independent producers – sufficiently competent and authoritative guidance throughout the whole production process. The lack of strong and trusted production executives on the side of ČT leaves the independent producers facing a ‘black box’ of committee decision-making.

Another aspect of producers’ precarization results from the above-mentioned unpredictability of decisions by grant committees and grant-money cash flows. This is how an experienced and internationally ambitious A1 producer, focusing – unlike most Czech producers – solely on producing feature films, describes his uncertain situation:

When you make money solely from original feature film production, you simply must shoot a lot. I am really anxious about it right now. I can’t stop for a moment, otherwise I’ll not be able to pay my rent in two months, and I will be done. [...] It is extremely exhausting and that’s why development support is so important.

(A1 producer, 13 November 2014)

Producers live from production to production, from one production fee to the next, and the in-between periods for developing new projects need to be covered by side business or grants. The same producer adds that the combination of this kind of perilous balancing, the cash-flow delays and the need to combine different financial sources (each of which come with complicated and often conflicting requirements) sometimes pushes him to the limits of legality: he has to defer payments, transfer money between projects, drastically adapt budgets, etc. This may be nothing unusual for a UK or US producer, but what is specific here is the crucial role of public money in simultaneously reducing and increasing the uncertainty: ‘All kinds of public support come in complicated payments and often late. Very slow. This applies most specifically to the rebates,¹² which you get only after you cover all production costs and audit them’, adds the same producer.

6. Internationalize or perish

Another factor inciting a sense of precarization, and the most painful for the older generation and the two marginal sectors, is the trend of internationalization. Workshops and festival industry programmes have become increasingly important sites for networking, deal-making and trading of symbolic capital – and an increasingly important precondition to get public funding as well as international co-production and distribution deals. Within this industry which was traditionally tightly bound to the small national market, the booming co-productions seem to place new demands on producers’ competence, and even

engender a new producer mindset. The art of presenting projects at pitching and co-production panels is seen as a much-needed skill by the younger producers, but as a humiliating and discriminatory barrier by their older peers. The controversy became even more explicit when the Czech Film Fund introduced the criterion of attending workshops into its grant application forms.

Positions are divided again across sectors. International co-productions are seen by many of the younger generation, especially in the A1 sector, as the only way to face the threats of global competition as well as the problem of shrinking national audiences, and they tend to seek co-production partners starting in the early development stage. They build international networks of contacts and nurture long-term relationships with foreign partners who could help them tap into foreign support programmes and PSBs. As an experienced but still relatively young A1 producer told us:

International feedback and a search for ways to tell our Czech stories, whose proper cultural home is in the Czech Republic, in a way that people abroad can understand them, should be the basic part of any development. From my point of view, it is the only honest way to develop films today, a very essential part of development.

(A1 producer, 13 November 2014)

Like his generational peers, he has gradually moved to more ambitious minority co-productions as a way to work with higher budgets, with internationally renowned auteur names, and to get more chances at A-list festivals. Minority co-production became a new playground for producers seeking international prestige (as noted in Chapter 4).

On the other hand, the older generation, especially within the two marginal sectors, see international co-production – with the exception of Slovakia, the most frequent co-production partner and virtually a part of the same market – as a threat potentially compromising their projects:

I don't believe in it, because when you offer them [foreign producers] an arthouse film, they immediately start sending notes, and they ask for including their crews, their actors ... and that's how everything is disturbed, and made more expensive than they are willing to pay. We can do that with Slovaks, we understand each other, we have good relations, their actors are great. But making larger co-productions out of the arthouse projects ends up with Bohdan Sláma [a prominent arthouse director] shooting bullshit somewhere in Berlin. That's why I don't believe in that, in those EU funds, Eurimages, that push us to make co-productions it may be ok with a bigger film like Jan Svěrák's [an Oscar winner] but not with this kind of smaller arthouse.

(A2 producer, 1 October 2014)

Many in the commercial, and especially marginal commercial, sector feel excluded from this new globalizing world, which adds to their sense of being outsiders in their own production system, despite bringing more money into it than many of their arthouse counterparts. A C2 producer of crime thrillers in his mid-forties expresses his deep suspicion, citing wasteful, unethical practices:

Within co-production arrangements, a lot of money gets lost. I was preparing [a historical movie] with a Polish co-producer. He told me how much he will contribute, then his share shrank and shrank, and finally he said that all that money needs to be spent in Poland and that he will contract his people. That meant trying to please them and telling them: 'Here, I give you a super high fee, because you will pay me back next time'. In the end, what I am getting for two million CZK [Czech koruna] from them is what I can buy here for 600 thousand. [...] Then the producer cuts his fee and a lot of money is lost. [...] So, I decided to get rid of the Polish partner, because he brought in what he took away elsewhere, and because the whole arrangement doesn't make sense in the end. You just have more paperwork, more complications, more reporting.

(C2 producer, 7 November 2014)

The effects of the pressure to internationalize on producers' self-conceptions are yet to be fully seen. It is likely that with the European Commission gradually implementing its Digital Single Market strategy, and with the transnational streamers taking a more active role even in the small and peripheral markets of east-central Europe, the urge to develop projects accessible to international audiences will grow. It seems that in the heavily regulated and subsidized European audiovisual ecosystem, arthouse producers will have a better starting position to find a new survival strategy than their commercial counterparts, who are more dependent on actual sales in their small national markets.

7. Small/peripheral industry lore

As the above-described tropes illustrate, producers often reflect on the limitations imposed by small-market realities on the scale and scope of their business models and projects. While the number of films per capita is higher in small countries because of the relative intensity of public funding (Poort et al. 2019: 62–3), the diversity of content tends to be lower (in terms of budget categories, genres and production types). Factors contributing to the homogenization of audiovisual content include: the limited scope and scale of financing options, the tiny sizes of niche consumer groups in the population and the structural fragmentation of the production system, in contrast to the highly concentrated distribution and broadcasting sector. Consequently, certain production types (e.g. high-budget

spectacles), minority themes, genres and styles remain under-represented or entirely absent from the market, while production values are suppressed by the low average budget of just €1 million. Rather than measuring and analyzing audience preferences, producers focus on anticipating the expectations of the public and industry gatekeepers who decide on the funding and circulation of their projects. As mentioned earlier, independent producers often see the committee-based decision-making process of the public institutions (the boards of the CFF or the PSB) as impersonal, opaque and unpredictable, arbitrary and irresponsible. They construct different, often contradictory theories to rationalize what they perceive as an institutional black box limiting their opportunities:

The Fund supports many films just a little bit, so we end up with 40 supported films a year that do not have enough money and they all look like DIY. When you ask the 40 producers, they all tell you: 'We wanted to do it differently, but we did not have enough money, we didn't manage to put a sufficient budget together'. All the films are based on similar themes, because we can't do a historical spectacle, we can't do sci-fi or new kinds of films, because we don't have money, because everybody wants just 20 or 30 million CZK. And then all the films look dull.

(A1 producer, 10 November 2014)

While reflecting on the limits to their choices of subject matter on a more general level, producers also refer to their domestic culture's specificity: the supposed lack of internationally appealing themes and talent, as well as cultural barriers to transnational circulation:

It is the unattractive place we live in. Nothing is happening here apart from corruption. There are no big themes, we are atheists, we don't believe in the supernatural [...] Asians are much more interesting, something is changing, something is happening there. The South of Europe is much more interesting, too, people believe in God and are not afraid of tackling metaphysical dimensions. We are just earthbound mockers, to exaggerate a bit. There are simply no themes here.

(A1 producer, 1 October 2014)

As already mentioned, the small market size (a population of 10 million) is also seen as severely limiting producers' marketing options, preventing them from targeting specific groups, because anything but the whole national audience is too small for a serious marketing campaign:

There is no marketing approach that could help you achieve high attendance numbers across all the age groups and the whole social spectrum, and to get

near the goal of 500,000 [a benchmark for a national box office hit]. You could commission some marketing and define a target group, but this way you can make maximum 150,000 or 200,000. But an audience of a million or 800,000 is not a target group. It is such a wide spectrum that it intersects and goes across everything. So you need something more general than a target group definition. There are some common factors and elements, but they don't come out from a classic marketing analysis of a target group.

(A1 producer, 5 November 2014)

According to Czech commercial producers, it is impossible to concentrate on a particular target group in a country of 10 million. By local measures, a successful film needs to attract at least 200,000, and a true hit about 500,000 viewers. And that means addressing the widest possible audiences across all social groups: creating 'a phenomenon'.

Finally, market size affects producers' responses to digitalization and globalization. While in the national market, VOD smoothly integrated into the business models and practices of traditional distributors without disrupting them, producers have yet to find efficient ways and the right intermediaries to use online distribution to enhance their foreign sales. Scepticism about the potential of VOD to boost export performance prevails among arthouse and even more so among commercial Czech film and TV producers, who unanimously agree that foreign revenues from iTunes, Amazon and other transactional video on demand (TVOD) catalogues are much easier for them to get into than subscription video on demand (SVODs), where opportunities are close to zero. Currently, the only escape route from the digital periphery seems to be co-producing with HBO or Netflix, or finding an established international sales agent with business links to powerful foreign distributors and VODs. Recent HBO Europe originals such as *The Burning Bush*, *Shadows* and *Blinded by the Lights* – widely sold to international buyers and distributed via HBO's multiple territorial catalogues including the US – show that transnational SVODs have the potential to give locally produced content unprecedented exposure and marketing support. Facing these new challenges and opportunities, many producers defensively reassert their hyper-local orientation and ties with traditional buyers (distributors, broadcasters, sales agents), while others speculate about HBO and Netflix's criteria for co-producing or buying local content, and the possibilities for moving into higher-budget or niche genre production:

For me and my screenwriter, HBO Europe's approach to genre was the new experience, the real change. In a climax scene of our project, the main bad guy is shot from a distance [...] and his head explodes. We knew from the past that

everybody in the Czech PSB tends to reject or treat with a lot of suspicion genre elements like that, which however make our project what it is. [...] We didn't manage to persuade the responsible PSB executive to get involved, because he thought it is a B-movie ending. When we came to HBO and told them about the ending, that a guy's head explodes, they really liked it. Suddenly the perception of genre was entirely different. It was such a contrast, for the first time somebody told us we can shoot through a character's head.

(A1 TV and film producer, 7 February 2018)

Producers have internalized the small-market limitations, taking them for granted, and mostly articulate them only when complaining about their conditions compared with larger markets. In doing so, they tend to construct significantly different tropes from those foregrounded by Mette Hjort in her optimistic accounts of how small-nation constraints can be turned into opportunities through clever cultural policies, or solidarity and sharing among film-makers (Hjort and Petrie 2007). In the Czech market, the perceptions of provincialism, limited resources and disadvantageous conditions fail to inspire any shared discourse of emancipation, innovation and national branding. These sentiments also have not motivated coordinated efforts to break through into the international arthouse film or quality TV scenes of the kind witnessed in Denmark. Solidarity amongst Czech producers is not absent (see e.g. the producers' cluster FilmKolektiv), and the small-nation proximity of the production community, policymakers and the public indeed creates a sense of trust and sharing, but the prevailing producer mindset is based on a pragmatic and even opportunistic acceptance of small-market and small-culture limitations. Producers have adapted their business models to the few available resources and developed survival strategies based on careful risk reduction. By doing so, they have split into several producer types that are distinguished by the proportion of public and private funding they receive, their key partners (commercial broadcasters vs the PSB), and their degree of national or international orientation (in terms of international co-production, as exemplified in Table 1.1). Trapped within their type or subfield, producers build small but tight collaborative networks and accept the rather predictable rules of the game for financing projects. They have also learned to spread the risk of feature film-making with the help of safer business models for producing commercials and TV series, and of servicing foreign producers.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary Czech producers still have to deal with many consequences of their small national market and its state-socialist heritage. Their 'self-conceptions' reveal generational and sectoral divisions as well as deep anxieties about the

'European producer system' and the ongoing transformations of the global media markets. Unlike the industrial reflexivity typical of the Hollywood above-the-line talent or the executive ranks mapped by Caldwell (2008), Czech producers do not resort to self-mythologizing, branding narratives. Rather, they perform their volatile professional identities in terms of much-needed professionalization, standardization and internationalization amid fears of globalization, disempowerment vis-à-vis European cultural policy, and enforced delegation of decision-making power to film funds and PSBs.

Their work world is not a highly structured environment in terms of the distribution of economic and symbolic capital. It operates as a permeable, flat, loosely interconnected network with a number of informal knots based on recurring collaborative links and personal relations. Apart from the extreme poles of the two 'marginal' sectors (especially C2), anybody could potentially work with anybody else. The network is not clearly divided between tiers of 'winners' with high 'transaction rates' and 'nonwinners' waiting for work (Faulkner and Anderson 1987: 893): most work at a similar pace of a maximum of one or two projects per year, and budgets differ very little across the sectors. The network does not separate an 'elite inner core' with high degrees of interconnectedness from a large 'periphery' (see Jones 1996): membership in a vague 'core' is defined only by one's success rate in applying for public money and making deals with the PSB. The Czech producers' career patterns are fairly homogenous: most graduated from or even still study at the same film school, FAMU,¹³ while the oldest generation shares memories of starting their careers in the state-socialist studios. Their social lives are not organized by a strict hierarchy; their professional world is not a 'colony' concentrated around a rich and powerful 'elite', dictating the rules of business and social interaction (as in Hollywood, according to Rosten 1941). From a researcher's point of view, it is easy to talk to them: gaining access to Czech producers is far from being as difficult as it is for an ethnographer in Hollywood (Ortner 2013).

By identifying the seven tropes that re-emerged across most of the interviews – the production manager/producer dichotomy; development as defining a true producer; the narrative of the missing 'dramaturge' as an expression of nostalgic longing for the state-socialist production mode; the 'production fee business model' as a symptom of failing as a real producer; precarity vis-à-vis public institutions and EU cultural policy; the urge to internationalize, perceived as both modernizing and traumatizing; and the limitations of producing for small audiences and within a peripheral culture – I have presented the key features of producer reflexivity within this small, peripheral production culture. The unique characteristics of the Czech context were further foregrounded by comparing the findings with the existing literature on Anglo-American (and French, to a lesser

extent) production cultures. Czech producers view themselves quite differently from their Western European or US counterparts: as a largely disempowered, dependent, endangered species desperately looking for more stability, autonomy and recognition. They see themselves as being at the mercy of the state's cultural policymakers and the powerful public service broadcaster. The reasons for this were identified in three interconnected areas: the heritage of the state-socialist production system, the structure of the small-market economy, and the systemic reliance on public support. While this chapter showed how post-socialist producers make sense of the 'high-circumscription' system they work in, the next chapter presents a case study of a producer who managed to creatively capitalize on the resources the system offers, developed her own unique producer style and built a strong personal brand reaching far beyond the national borders.

2

Managing the 'Ida effect': An Arthouse Producer Breaking Out of the Periphery

The previous chapter described how the self-conceptions of small- and/or peripheral-market producers involve making sense of various institutional, economic and cultural factors circumscribing their agency. The tropes resulting from this production culture analysis blend together creating a portrait of humble, in some instances even precarized, cultural workers who have learned to accept and adapt to the limited resources of the small markets in which they work, the low international recognition of peripheral national production and the various institutionalized restrictions of their entrepreneurial autonomy on both the national and European levels. While such a picture answers to a 'zero degree' – a common form of producer practice that reflects the scale, the structure and the position of the peripheral market – it does not rule out significant exceptions with game-changing potential. Finding an example of a producer successfully breaking out of the confines of her peripheral home market was based on a simple criterion: from an international perspective, Opus Film's Ewa Puszczyńska is currently the most successful and most recognized producer from east-central Europe. While the success of Opus Film is certainly a unique case, and does not represent Polish arthouse production in general, it remains significant for understanding the sector's dynamics, both in terms of the firm's long evolution and deep embeddedness in the local audiovisual ecosystem, and the impact it has had on the younger producer generation.

This chapter thus shifts from a structural perspective to tracing an individual producer's career trajectory and style of work, to show how peripheral market limitations might be overcome by creatively employing the resources available for a transnational strategy within the 'high circumscription' system. This case study focuses on the Polish production company Opus Film, whose film *Ida* (dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, PL/DK, 2013) won the foreign-language film Oscar in 2015, a first in the entire history of Polish cinema, and whose *Cold War* (*Zimna wojna*, dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, PL/FR/UK, 2018) broke national records in foreign sales. After briefly describing Opus Film's thirty-year long evolution from a production service provider to an advertising producer and finally a leading mini-studio

specializing in international arthouse film co-productions and premium TV series, the chapter centres on the career and work style of *Ida's* and *Cold War's* producer Ewa Puszczynska. The analysis takes account of her 'self-conceptions', revolving around her improbable professional genesis and her empathetic relationships with auteur directors, against her strategy of gradually building a transnational network of contacts and renown that would eventually translate into access to a wider distribution, larger financial resources and further prestigious opportunities – all without permanently leaving the city of Łódź (an inner semi-periphery within a peripheral market). Puszczynska's fascinating confessions about her devotion to Paweł Pawlikowski's way of seeing the world, as well as about her willingness to violate industry conventions to protect his idiosyncratic directorial style, translate as a gesture of professional distinction performed by a 'creative producer' setting herself apart from the 'business producers'. But they also function as an elaborate promotional reflexivity aimed at decision makers and intermediaries in the transnational arthouse circuit, promoting films through the auteur myth and vice versa, while the producer comes to the fore as the key facilitator and a 'brand' in itself. In doing so, Puszczynska symbolically articulates a moment of strategic reconciliation between the 'producers' cinema' and the 'directors' cinema' that have been set against each other in the Polish industry discourse since the early 1990s.

Studying an individual producer's professional career, self-conception and work style poses different challenges than studying the work style of a director, because the work of a producer crosses the borderlines between artistic creation, management and business. Some producers focus more on financing, deal-making or marketing strategy, others on selecting story material, putting together a creative team or managing the production process; all of these activities might be creative and innovative in their own right, and individual producers tend to combine them in different proportions (Pardo 2010; Spicer, McKenna and Meir 2014b). In his provocatively titled study 'The Producer as Auteur', Matthew Bernstein (2008: 188) claims that rather than personal self-expression or visual sensibility, the question about a producer's creative contribution should centre on her or his unique way of 'facilitating' the auteur voices of others through the management of collaborative work, negotiation with business partners, and combining economic and creative resources. As noted in the previous chapter, producers are always positioned in-between, as a special kind of intermediary: mediating between different kinds of public and private interests, the creative team and the potential audiences, the project and its financiers, partners and buyers, and the local and the international markets. Rather than searching for a set of common textual traits across a portfolio of titles, an analysis of one producer's style should consider all these areas of producer work, including interactions with other industry agents, while foregrounding those aspects that are the main

domain of a given producer. Since Ewa Puszczynska is a hands-on manager and a 'creative' (rather than 'business administrator') producer type, deeply involved in all stages of the development and production processes, but also aware of the challenges of internationally marketing Polish arthouse films, the second half of this chapter focuses on her collaboration with directors and her understanding of today's European film market.

FROM ADVERTISING TO ARTHOUSE TO PREMIUM TV: THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF OPUS FILM

Opus Film was co-founded in 1991 by its current head, Piotr Dzięcioł (b.1950), a Łódź Film School graduate, who had worked as a production manager in the state-owned Feature Film Studio (WFF Łódź) since the late 1970s, and for a time worked in the US as a joiner towards the end of the 1980s, which gave him a precious opportunity to become fluent in English. Returning to Łódź and facing the dramatic decline of the local film production infrastructure after 1989, he used a serendipitous opportunity of servicing several small foreign film projects that had come to the city to cut costs, and started his own company for the purpose. Dzięcioł decided to stay on in the city of Łódź, the post-World War II centre of the Polish film industry, despite the fact that in the 1990s it was increasingly overshadowed by the capital Warsaw as the new hub of media production. That decision made him switch from film to TV advertising production, a market that was about to boom across east-central Europe and in which he had no strong local competition. Opus Film aggressively built ties with big international agencies (including multinational networks such as Saatchi & Saatchi and Leo Burnett Worldwide), and soon was churning out about seventy commercials a year, becoming one of the three national market leaders. It also provided precious jobs to experienced but underemployed Łódź crews trained in the state studios, thus accumulating human resources for further expansion. By 1999, Dzięcioł had already earned enough money to buy a large part of WFF's sound stages, which gave him a safe infrastructural basis to diversify his activities and to shoot more than one project at a time. He hired ambitious young film-makers to shoot adverts for him, one of whom, Piotr Trzaskalski, proposed his first feature project, a touching story about a large-hearted scrap picker, to Dzięcioł in 2000, pledging to work for free in the name of his whole creative team. With enough financial and human capital accumulated from his advertising business, Dzięcioł agreed to take the unprecedented risk and fully finance the film with his own money. *Edi* (2002), Opus Film's first feature, turned out to be a surprising box office success in the domestic market (budget 800,000 zloty, 424,000 viewers, revenues 5.6 million zloty) and was chosen as Poland's submission for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar (Pachnicka 2013: 248; Adamczak 2015).

After *Edi*, Opus Film reinvented and rebranded itself as a dedicated art film producer – without abandoning its advertising production and production services. Since then, Opus Film has been churning out about two features a year, often by first- or second-time directors, some of whom had previously shot commercials for Dzięcioł, such as Sławomir Fabicki's *Retrieval* (*Z odzysku*, PL, 2006). This film was screened in the Un Certain Regard section at the Cannes IFF, which was the first significant Polish presence at the festival since Kieślowski's *Three Colours: Red* (*Trois couleurs: Rouge*, FR/CH/PL, 1994), and boosted the firm's international orientation. This strategic shift coincided with the Polish state decisively reclaiming – after a decade of neglect – its role in funding national cinema in the mid-2000s. Opus Film started systematically relying on the newly established Polish Film Institute for public funding, and soon became one of PISF's main beneficiaries, preceded only by the successor of the state-owned Documentary and Feature Film Studio (WFDiF) (Adamczak 2014a: 84). Dzięcioł became a PISF board member, nominated by producers in 2008, and PISF backing (up to 50 per cent of a film's budget) crucially helped Opus Film in sustaining its risky orientation towards arthouse projects and debuts.

Experienced in dealing with Western advertising agencies and advertisers, Dzięcioł also quickly moved into international co-production, becoming one of the most prolific majority as well as minority co-producers in Poland and building a network of trusted partners in numerous Western European countries plus Israel. Opus Film's notable, mostly Eurimages-supported minority co-productions include the human-trafficking drama *Your Name Is Justine* (dir. Franco De Pena, LU/PL, 2005), which was submitted by Luxembourg (which contributed about 75 per cent of the budget) to the 79th Academy Awards, though it was disqualified by the Academy for insufficient creative contribution from the country (Goodfellow 2006); *King of Devils Island* (*Kongen av Bastøy*; dir. Marius Holst, NO/PL/SE/FR, 2010), a prison thriller starring Stellan Skarsgård; and Ari Folman's *The Congress* (IL/BE/DE/LU/FR/PL, 2013), Opus Film's entry into the tier of the most complex international co-productions (with a budget of €9.6 million), represented by the prominent sales agent Match Factory, which was opening the Cannes Film Festival 2013 Directors' Fortnight sidebar.

As noted above, Opus Film has from the time of its earliest features pursued foreign co-production partnerships, international festival exposure and, since the early 2010s, also has been dealing with influential sales agents such as Match Factory, MK2 and New Europe Film Sales. Dzięcioł considers this a logical consequence of focusing on arthouse films, for which financing cannot rely on the national market only. He acknowledged that this started shaping Opus Film's projects from the stage of development: 'As soon as we close a script and have a director attached, we start talking to sales agents, because good agents have an

enormous influence on festival selections.' But he also noted that international input and festival awards do not always translate into domestic box office, as illustrated by the commercial failure of *Retrieval* and some other co-productions in the national market. The case of *Ida*, which premiered poorly in Polish cinemas, showed that international renown needs to be systematically employed to feed back into higher domestic interest and box office: '*Ida* was winning a lot of festivals while still in Polish theatrical distribution, which boosted domestic attendance week-by-week. Arthouse audience in Poland has significantly grown recently, so artistic success abroad can impact on attendance in the home market' (P. Dzięcioł, personal interview, 7 September 2020).

Dzięcioł's seemingly outsider base in Łódź (supplemented by a Warsaw office) in fact gives him numerous competitive advantages: access to a large pool of well-trained but relatively cheap crews and students from the Film School, large sound stages and equipment left over from the state studios, which he gradually modernized, Camerimage (one of the largest festivals in the world devoted to the art of cinematography), the Łódź Film Commission, and diverse historical locations around the post-industrial city (Wesołowski 2017). Although the key turning points in the evolution of his firm were largely triggered by happy coincidences rather than a pre-planned strategy (such as meeting the right people at the right time), Dzięcioł has worked systematically to accumulate economic and social capital and soon developed a well-run system of financing, spreading risk and organizing work, and above all a network of trusted professionals that he is able to efficiently carry from one project to the next (Adamczak 2015: 48).

The financing of feature projects, made sustainable due to public funding, generally doesn't generate short-term profit (apart from a few exceptions such as *Edi*, *Ida* and *Cold War*), and thus the company continues to rely on the relatively safe and steady profits from advertising production. Advertising represented about two-thirds of Opus Film's turnover as of 2012 (Adamczak 2015: 51) and is still a substantial part of its business (its portfolio comprised over 1,500 commercials as of 2020), but recently was superseded by TV series production as the firm's main source of income (P. Dzięcioł, personal interview, 7 September 2020). On the one hand, the main benefit of the symbiosis between advertising and TV series and arthouse film projects has been secure cash flow, which is vital at the development stage and during periods between individual production grant instalments, especially for complex international co-productions, something smaller independent producers can only dream of (Pachnicka 2013: 261). With the ability to transfer money between Opus Film's advertising and the film arms, Dzięcioł claims to be able to start shooting at the time most convenient for the project and the team, without necessarily having the financing entirely closed, or without waiting for the first grant instalment to arrive (Adamczak 2015: 52–3).

‘Unlike other producers, I was lucky to have this goose that laid the golden eggs for me. When cash was missing in a film production, I simply moved money from one pile to the other. I have never had production problems resulting from the lack of cash’, Dzięcioł acknowledges. This reliable financial background also allows Dzięcioł to increase film budgets by deferring Opus Film’s guaranteed 7 per cent production fee (P. Dzięcioł, personal interview, 7 September 2020). On the other hand, the firm’s growing library of feature film titles can be expected to generate longer-term residual profit when sold as packages to TV networks and VOD services. The company’s main financial sources for feature film production remained relatively stable from the mid-2000s: the Polish public service broadcaster, which co-funded Opus Film’s early features, has since 2006 gradually been replaced by the Polish Film Institute, supplemented by support from the city of Łódź and other regional funds, foreign public funds, MEDIA and Eurimages, as well as distributors, foreign broadcasters and sales agents in the cases of international co-productions. Among private investors, (post-)production service providers and Canal+ Poland have been the most regular partners, a collaboration with the latter recently extending into repeated TV series commissions (Pachnicka 2013: 255–60).

Starting in 2012 the internal division of Opus Film’s operations further diversified to include – apart from advertising, feature film production and foreign production services – the fourth pillar of premium TV series production. This has proven to be the segment that is most profitable and dynamic, partly due to the cash rebate programme launched by PISF in 2019 (as of October 2020, Opus Film had six serial projects in development and four prepared for production in 2021). Dzięcioł created a new label, ‘Opus TV’, that has concentrated on co-developing and co-producing with pay-TV channels AXN/Sony (*The Crime* [Zbrodnia, 2014–15]; *Ultraviolet* [2017–19]), Canal+ (*Raven* [Kruk. Szepty słyhać po zmroku, 2018–21]; *Klangor* [2021]), Netflix (*The Liberator* [2020]), and potentially also HBO. As of October 2020, he planned to further separate the two divisions, leaving the management of the film and advertising arms to his son Łukasz, so that he – strongly believing in the future of premium TV series – could focus solely on the rapidly growing Opus TV, expecting the turnover to be approximately equal between the branches (P. Dzięcioł, personal interview, 7 September 2020).

It is not easy to compare Opus Film with other production companies in east-central Europe. Its feature film portfolio and producer methods clearly qualify it as a representative of the Mainstream Arthouse (A1) producer type as defined in the previous chapter. In this category, producers are deeply involved in all stages of production, including the relatively well-funded and elaborate development process. They have a decisive arthouse/festival orientation, but

are strategically moving towards mainstream. They are involved in relatively high-budget international co-productions and the long-term nurturing of auteur directors. Some of Opus Film's individual producers (namely Łukasz Dzięcioł and Ewa Puszczynska), as the next section will show, fall into Adamczak's 'Auteur' and Wróblewska's 'Know-how' category. However, the company's evolution and business model, and the scope and scale of its activities qualify it as a local 'Tycoon' or 'Baron' type according to Wróblewska's and Adamczak's typologies (as noted in Chapter 1). Other Polish mini-studios falling into these categories, such as Akson and MTL Maxfilm, have also pragmatically combined feature film production with straightforward commercial activities (advertising, TV series and entertainment formats), but – unlike Opus Film – extensively rely on popular genres or nationally well-established director names and TV celebrities (Majer, Orankiewicz and Wróblewska 2019: 192). Opus Film is distinct in its decisive arthouse and international profile – even if this applies only to its feature film division, while its commercials and TV series commissions generate the bulk of its revenues. It also differs in terms of strong personalities and working styles that were allowed to mature within the company, which has been perceived as a supportive space for inter-generational professional learning by the younger generation of directors and producers. This combination of financial, infrastructural and personal resources with an arthouse international outlook makes it quite unique even in comparison with other east-central European countries. There are several production companies strategically combining production services or commercials with internationally oriented arthouse production in Hungary (Pioneer Pictures) and the Czech Republic (Lucky Man Films), but none of them has such a long history, wide personal network and broad portfolio of successful titles.

A SAFE SPACE FOR INDIVIDUAL PRODUCER VOICES

When self-reflexively describing his producer approach, Dzięcioł vehemently differentiates himself from commercially oriented producers who tend to perceive directors as workers for hire, and emphasizes his deep belief in arthouse cinema and the strong role of the director, who remains the main star of the European festival circuit:

Ninety percent or more of my films are auteur cinema, where I don't want to take certain rights from the director, because I know it is his child and he had thought of the film for a long time and usually wrote the script. I am the type of producer, who gives a lot of freedom to the director. Of course, I discuss the script and casting, I am coming to the set, I discuss editing, but I always leave the last word to the director. [...] It is not that the director dictates conditions to me. I am trying

to understand him, when I have a different opinion, I try to persuade him, and we always find a common solution.

(P. Dzięcioł, personal interview, 7 September 2020)

Despite his long professional history as a state studio production manager and advertising producer, Piotr Dzięcioł, now considered a producer legend and role model for the younger generation, has come to epitomize a new kind of producer figure in terms of his industry reputation and public image, at least from the end of the 2000s. While praised for building a small but highly successful studio empire that revived Łódź's declining film infrastructure, he has been seen as a hard-working self-made man, accumulating capital and building his contacts beyond the confines of the peripheral national market. That puts him in stark contrast to the notorious Polish media businessmen of the previous era, some of whom capitalized on backstage political connections, such as Lew Rywin, arguably the most powerful Polish film and TV producer of the 1990s, who was sentenced to two years in prison for his role in a political corruption scandal dubbed 'Rywingate' in 2004 (Adamczak 2015: 50).

Opus Film's core work force consists of about twenty permanent employees, mostly production managers and line producers, some of whom started working with Dzięcioł in the state studios before 1989 and then moved on with him to advertising and independent film production, with a certain number of them still exclusively focusing on advertising (P. Dzięcioł, personal interview, 7 September 2020; Opus Film 2020). This core has been supplemented by about forty freelancers (crews, technical and other support personnel) hired for individual projects but in fact working more or less steadily for Opus Film (Adamczak 2015: 51). Crucially for this chapter's focus, the core team was supplemented by two strong producer personalities: first Ewa Puszczyńska (b.1957) and then Piotr Dzięcioł's son Łukasz (b.1976). Since the mid-2000s, each of them has gradually built a unique portfolio and an individual style of work. According to Puszczyńska, they were granted 'plenty of independence in the studio, everybody was taking care of her or his "own" film' (Godziński 2018). It seems that one of Piotr Dzięcioł's key achievements was selecting ambitious collaborators and encouraging them to grow professionally (including his initial investment in their trips to international markets, workshops and festivals) and to choose their projects, while himself focusing on the strategic business leadership of the company from its home base. This arrangement, as Puszczyńska notes, speaking of herself and Łukasz, 'gives us a sense of safety. [...] Each of us has had enough space for making individual decisions on our own, but we know that beyond that space, we should come to Piotr for approval or advice' (Michalska 2015: 8). While both operate as individual producers, Opus Film has always retained the

legal and financial responsibility, including the sales (E. Puszczynska, personal interview, 2 November 2020).

Łukasz Dziecioł is a typical representative of the younger 'Know-how' generation as defined by Anna Wróblewska (as noted in Chapter 1). He studied at the Los Angeles Film School and participated in numerous co-production markets, screenwriting labs and producer training programmes such as Producers on the Move, EAVE (European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs) and ACE (Ateliers du Cinéma Européen). By participating in such industry events and initiatives, he has adapted to the norms and values of the European industry culture, developed his reputation of a European producer, and built an extensive network of contacts with potential co-production partners and buyers that the whole company capitalizes on, as illustrated by this 2012 statement:

I was attending Berlin Co-Production Market with Anna Kazejak's new project [later produced as *The Word/Obietnica*, PL/DK, 2014], which attracted a lot of attention and many co-production proposals. However, my first phone calls were to the people, whom I have known for years, to a certain Danish producer and a certain German producer. I simply want to collaborate with the people, with whom I feel good and whom I trust. This is the real benefit of these visits [to festivals and industry programmes], they all lead to a situation that when you attend a festival, you know there is a broad group of people, whom you know personally and who will always come. We are a sort of a large film family. It is a bit of a closed club, but that's exactly why we [Polish producers] need to invest in attending these programmes, all these meetings, because otherwise, we never get in.

(quoted in Adamczak 2014a: 108)

The professional credo Łukasz Dziecioł repeats in interviews is that it is not worth making films only for the national market: 'My choices are subjective and are guided by my taste, but it is essential that the story is universal. Producing obscure films aimed only at Polish audiences makes no sense' (Hartwich 2011). Well aware of the rules of the current European film market, he emphasizes the roles of festivals and sales agents as gatekeepers to international circulation: 'One of the key promotional channels for such a cinema are international festivals. When we are not able to qualify for any of the big ones and find a sales agent – that's a bad sign. That's why we make more and more co-productions, even minority ones' (Różdżyńska 2011). At Opus Film, Łukasz Dziecioł specializes in collaborating with young directors and smaller co-productions (including Grzegorz Zgliński's *Courage [Wymyk]*, PL, 2011) and *Animals [Tiere]*, CH/AT/PL, 2017]), more recently adding premium TV series (*The Liberator* for Netflix

and *Raven* for Canal+), while leaving more established directors and larger international co-productions to Ewa Puszczyńska (before she left in 2018).

CRAFTING AND BUILDING ON *IDA*'S BREAKTHROUGH

Somewhat unexpectedly, it was neither Łukasz Dzięcioł's *Retrieval* nor Puszczyńska's *The Congress*, but rather her next feature *Ida*, a humble black-and-white project, difficult to finance and initially not performing very well in the national distribution, that finally earned Opus Film an elite European reputation. Puszczyńska has had a unique career not comparable to that of Łukasz Dzięcioł or the older generation of former state-studio production managers such as Piotr Dzięcioł. A graduate in English Literature from the University of Łódź, she had been working as a teacher and translator before joining Opus Film in 1995 by coincidence, as a total outsider and almost forty years old, without any film background or connections. After years of translating and assisting on advertising commissions, she advanced to managing the commercials production, before switching to, first, line producing and then producing feature films in the mid-2000s, starting with *Your Name Is Justine* (Lankosz 2015). Almost all her projects are international co-productions, and Puszczyńska has been a vocal proponent of trans-border collaboration as a way to increase production values and circulation of European films, and to improve mutual learning and cultural exchange between professional communities. Since leaving Opus Film in 2018, she has been producing under her independent label Extreme Emotions, which released, among others, Mariusz Wilczyński's autobiographical animation feature *Kill It and Leave This Town* (*Zabij to i wyjedź z tego miasta*, PL, 2020), which premiered in Berlin. As of 2020 she was co-producing Jonathan Glazer's Holocaust drama based on the Martin Amis novel *The Zone of Interest* (PL/UK/US). Puszczyńska had been highly regarded in the European industry circles before *Ida*, but it was *Ida* that catapulted her to the top tier of European producers in 2013. After that, she became the international face of not only the company, but of the whole Polish film industry, with her standing consecrated by membership in the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the European Film Academy's Board, and her listing in the 'Variety500' (2019 edition) index of entertainment business leaders.

Ida tells the story of an orphaned young woman named Anna, preparing herself for her public vows as a novice nun. After being unexpectedly introduced to her aunt, a former hard-line Stalinist prosecutor responsible for sentencing priests in political trials, she learns about her Jewish roots, her real name Ida and the tragic death of her family during World War II. Consequently, she has to make the difficult choice between her newly discovered identity and the religion that saved her life. Set in early 1960s Poland, with a Polish cast speaking Polish,

the film is shot in black and white and in the now uncommon, nearly square Academy format (4:3 or 1.33:1 aspect ratio, standardized by AMPAS in 1932), thus alluding to cinema history, including the 'Polish Film School' aesthetics. All these artistically motivated choices seemingly limited *Ida's* audience and prospects for international sales.

Indeed, the genesis of the project and the road to international success were far from straightforward, mediated by numerous accidental encounters and disrupted by numerous diversions. The project started in 2006 as a collaboration between Paweł Pawlikowski, then regarded as a British director due to his long-term work in the UK, mostly in English, and the South African-born, London-based producer Eric Abraham, best known for co-producing Jan Svěrák's Oscar-winning film *Kolya* (*Kolja*, CZ/UK/FR, 1996). Abraham financed the early development stage and secured the MEDIA European Talent Award for the best screenplay in 2010. Before they decided on Opus Film as the Polish co-producer (after talking to several other local companies), the screenplay, co-written by Pawlikowski and the Polish writer Cezary Harasimowicz, was conceived quite differently: as an English-language thriller, 'much bigger, very politically engaged, with strong references to the Catholic church', as summed up by Puszczynska, who claimed to guide Pawlikowski towards a 'deep personal story' (Mitrić 2018: 331). Pawlikowski then rewrote the script again, helped by the British screenwriter Rebecca Lenkiewicz, made it more 'calm and meditative, where you suggest more than show' (Lucca 2014), and Opus Film gradually became the main producer, because it was able to secure substantial public funding from PISF (€720,000, almost 50 per cent of the €1.48 million budget), supplemented by regional funding from the city of Łódź, and private investment by Canal+ Poland. According to Puszczynska, Abraham did not like the shift towards the black-and-white, intimate, arthouse aesthetics, and largely withdrew from further collaboration, and participated only through his previous development investment and occasional advice. Puszczynska wanted to apply for Eurimages co-production funding, but since the UK was not a member of the Fund, she asked Abraham to employ his Danish company Phoenix Film for the purpose. The Eurimages application was successful and the collaboration with Phoenix Film expanded through Sofie Wanting Hassing, who became the Associate Producer, and thus could apply for minority co-production support from the Danish Film Institute, which closed the budget. To get the DFI funding, Hassing had to find a way of creatively contributing to the story, which was firmly embedded in Polish culture, which she did via sound post-production and music (Mitrić 2018: 333).

The physical production in Poland was mainly the responsibility of Puszczynska, who pre-selected the entire crew for Pawlikowski and who, backed by

her boss Piotr Dzięcioł, had to find a way of managing Pawlikowski's peculiar, unpredictable style of directing, a mode of collaboration that will be discussed below. Because neither Opus Film nor Abraham originally perceived *Ida* as a likely breakthrough hit, they did not try hard to attach a strong sales agent early on. They also missed opportunities to submit for the most important European festivals at Berlin and Cannes, and were rejected in Venice. The first foreign sale offers came only after the film premiered at the Telluride Film Festival, and more followed after the successful industry screening (ending with a standing ovation) at the Toronto IFF, where *Ida* won the FIPRESCI Special Presentations award. The film's reputation grew rapidly with a string of other accolades throughout 2013 and 2014: the main award at the Gdynia Polish Film Festival and the main Polish Film Academy award; London (Grand Prix), EFA, LUX Prize, BAFTA (Best Foreign Language Film); several US festivals and awards (including the Independent Spirit Award, a Golden Globe nomination and the American Society of Cinematographers' Spotlight award); and finally, the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar 2015 nomination. PISF then awarded Opus Film with an additional €500,000 in support for the Oscar campaign and Puszczynska hired a publicist to manage it. *Ida*'s eventual success against the strong competition of Andrey Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (*Leviatan*, RU, 2014) was, according to Puszczynska, a result of its long festival journey: 'A year and a half of hard work, awards, interviews, press releases, fantastic reviews. If not for that, we wouldn't be here [at the Oscar ceremony]' (Wróblewski 2015).

Polish distribution by the company Soloplan started in October 2013, shortly after the Toronto IFF and almost a year before other countries. The cumulative effect of international acclaim climaxing with the historical achievement at the Oscars helped *Ida* to mitigate the negative domestic publicity driven by Polish nationalists (including a petition addressing PISF, signed by over 50,000 people) accusing Pawlikowski of supposed 'anti-Polish' tendencies due to *Ida*'s references to the persecution of Jews by Poles (Pietrasik 2015). The awards caused the initially low domestic admissions to more than double, growing from first-run admissions of 100,000 viewers to 243,000 as of November 2020 (EAO 2020b), which by far exceeded Puszczynska's original expectations of a maximum of 30,000. More importantly for Opus Film, *Ida* was sold to over fifty countries including China and South Korea and earned about €10 million as of 2015, which the Polish firm had to share with its Danish partner, but which still made it an unexpectedly profitable enterprise (Wróblewski 2015).

The high festival exposure and worldwide sales were triggered by the post-Toronto buzz, including praise from numerous world-famous film-makers and writers, but all did not progress smoothly. The problem was that Eric Abraham's company Fandango Portobello (a sales branch of Phoenix Film) initially expected to sell *Ida*, but did not negotiate distribution deals in the production or

post-production stages. According to Portobello's Managing Director Christian Husum, this was because the project did not need additional financing via pre-sales and because Pawlikowski's habit of changing scripts while directing made it difficult to sell before production ended (Smits 2019: 110). According to Hassing, in the end Portobello was not active in selling *Ida*; she negotiated with other sales agents, but didn't succeed, because it was too late and because the film was considered too niche. She was selling the film together with Husum, assisted by Abraham and also by the Danish Film Institute's festival department, which had acquired valuable know-how in tailoring festival strategies for individual films:

When we were selling the film to different territories, our strategy was not to decide on the basis of the biggest offered MG [minimum guarantee]. We asked for the release plan presentations that would contain information about the number of prints, P&A [Prints and Advertising] budget and local festival ideas.

(Mitric 2018: 337)

In his case study on selling *Ida*, Roderik Smits rephrased Husum's recollections about their timing and selectivity in making deals, prioritizing those who better fit the film's character over purely commercial criteria:

they prioritised deals with specific distributors in their networks, particularly those who had previously dealt with films directed by Pawlikowski, or engaged with other black-and-white non-English-language films, such as the critically acclaimed German-language film *The White Ribbon* [*Das weiße Band – Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*, dir. Michael Haneke, AT/DE/FR/IT, 2009]. Examples of such distributors included Cinéart in the Benelux countries, Memento in France, Caramel Films in Spain, Arsenal in Germany and Camera in Denmark. [...] they deliberately participated in the Hong Kong sales market in March 2014 to negotiate deals with distributors in Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, China and Taiwan. They prioritised this sales market over the sales markets in Los Angeles in November 2013 and Berlin in February 2014.

(Smits 2019: 111–12)

While *Ida*'s theatrical release in the US had to be delayed until 2014 to qualify for the 2015 Oscar, it was no longer in cinematic distribution when the Oscar ceremony created a new buzz, nevertheless boosting its sales in secondary markets: DVD/BR, TV and online. Overall, this atypical, semi-improvised but eventually successful release strategy shows how important festival exposure, carefully orchestrated across a period of time, is for titles from peripheral markets. It also reveals the crucial importance of the transnational collaborative network, the back-and-forth transfers of knowledge, money, power and trust that connect

all the partners, unevenly engaged in different stages of the production and circulation processes. Rather than simply crediting the seasoned UK-based producer for bringing the émigré Pawlikowski back to Poland, I want to emphasize the key transformative role Puszczynska's intuition and perseverance played in creatively redirecting the project. But this case study also points to the fact that without the crucial help of the Danish partners, it would have been difficult for her to coordinate *Ida*'s festival journey that – without the backing of a strong international sales agent – initially stumbled but eventually led to profitable worldwide sales and an Oscar.

The opportunity created by *Ida* was certainly capitalized on by Opus Film and Ewa Puszczynska, who soon started developing another project with Pawlikowski: *Cold War* (2018). According to Piotr Dzięcioł, the mid-2010s was a difficult time for financing arthouse projects, because PISF tended to avoid awarding the highest possible support of 50 per cent of the budget, and Polish TV networks, including Canal+ and TVP, became more hesitant to invest in niche projects. For Opus Film, this was only an additional reason to focus on minority and majority co-productions, nurturing auteurs with potential international appeal such as Pawlikowski, Urszula Antoniak (*Beyond Words* [NL/PL/FR, 2017]) and Paweł Borowski (*I Am Lying Now* [*Ja teraz kłamię*, PL/NL, 2019]), and regularly applying for Eurimages funding (Wróblewska 2016).

Cold War was in many respects a direct continuation of *Ida*, building on its success: also a very personal story for Pawlikowski, shot mostly in Poland and in Polish, in black and white, with largely the same crew (see Figure 2.1). But unlike *Ida*, *Cold War* was from the beginning developed as a creatively and financially complex, export-oriented international co-production, with much stronger international partners and a budget four times higher than that of *Ida*: €6 million. Puszczynska partnered with British producer and Pawlikowski's long-time friend Tanya Seghatchian (Apocalypso Pictures), who helped to put together the UK part of the financing and to bring in the French co-producer MK2 (known in Poland for their work with Kiesłowski). The Polish financing centred around the generous funding obtained from PISF, initially under the management of Magdalena Sroka: the maximum possible grant of 4 million zloty, plus an additional funding of 4 million zloty for directors with international awards, followed by another 1 million zloty awarded by the new PISF head Radosław Śmigulski when the budget ran out, plus further funding for the Cannes promotion (Felis 2018). Other Polish sources included four regional funds, Opus Film's own investment, Canal+ Poland and the distributor Kino Świat, investing both as co-producers and also pre-buying rights through MGs. The UK share consisted of BFI support, investment by Channel 4 (via Film4), an Indian boutique studio with a London branch called Cinestaan and the *Ida* distributor Curzon Artificial



Figure 2.1 The lead actors Joanna Kulig and Tomasz Kot in *Cold War* (*Zimna wojna*, dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, PL/FR/UK, 2018). (Credit: MK2 Productions/Apocalypse Pictures/Film4/Opus Film.)

Eye's MG. In France, the sales agent MK2 became a co-producer managing the five shooting days in Paris, won support from the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (via the Aide aux cinémas du monde co-production fund), got ARTE France involved and secured the French distributor Diaphana's MG. The French agency MK2 and the UK-based Protagonist Pictures have been selling the film worldwide, while Amazon pre-bought US theatrical and worldwide VOD rights (except for co-producers' territories) (Wiewiórski 2018). With the co-producers and national funds from the two largest European markets, distributor MGs, pre-sales of broadcasting and VOD rights, and the sales agents attached from the development stage, *Cold War* – unlike *Ida* – met the highest standards of ambitious Western European co-productions.

'WRITING WITH THE CAMERA': A GOLDEN MEAN FOR THE CONVENTION BREAKER

For Puszczynska, *Cold War's* development included not just reading different versions of Pawlikowski's screenplay and financing the film, but also casting, rehearsing with actors and building characters with them, pre-visualizing the

world of the story through mood boards, screen testing to examine the interplay of actors, make-up, costumes and fragments of sets, and location scouting across Europe: 'All this needs to click together, and only after all that, we can say that the development stage is over, that we know, or at least think to know, how the film will look like on the screen' (E. Puszczynska, personal interview, 2 November 2020). Despite being deeply involved from the early stages of the writing process and despite her own literary background (as a translator and English studies graduate), Puszczynska is not the type of producer who likes to talk about character arcs or turning points. She also does not look at scripts in terms of target groups:

We [with the director] never think whether the film will be for women 35 plus or so-called wide public. [...] The most important thing for us is to be honest with ourselves, to be truthful, so that what we write and show on the screen does not feel false. [...] If the film is truthful, it will find its audience.

(E. Puszczynska, personal interview, 2 November 2020)

Rather than structural or page-by-page or even marketing-informed analysis, she describes her approach to script development as based on a broad, intuitive grasp of the story world as a whole, and on the assessment of its consequences for the production process – without closing the door for changes on the set. In a development workshop with an Israeli first-time director, she humbly acknowledged:

I don't consider myself an expert in script doctoring. I understand scripts emotionally. I often have problems explaining what does and does not work for me. I feel that something works, and something doesn't work, but it is difficult for me to put it into words. So, I thought my task was to connect Jack [Faber] to the right people. [...] We practically never talked about the script in details ... not page by page. I made comments on people's comments. We are absolutely in agreement on the general idea, what we want to tell. It is a very close, homogeneous understanding of the story, of the script. I understand scripts with emotions, with intuition.

(Creative Europe 2016)

Although this (hitherto unmade) project was very different from the mature and complex *Cold War*, the quote is telling in how it characterizes not only Puszczynska's development method but also her general concept of film script. Her understanding cannot be more different from the 'iron scenario' of the state-socialist production mode (Szczepanik 2013c: 89). But it is equally

different from the Hollywood 'continuity script' as a blueprint for the shot-by-shot budgeting and planning, and from the strict separation of 'conception' from 'execution', which Janet Staiger identified as the core features of the classical Hollywood production mode (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985: 227). For Puszczynska (following the lead of Pawlikowski), there is no clear split between scriptwriting and directing, the writing continues throughout shooting, and the script is never an exact blueprint for the film:

You need to remember that script is not yet a film. Only when we find the right locations, cast, sets, colors, smells, structures, when we put this all together, we can see what is truthful and what is false. And the success of the film depends on whether the viewer enters the world created by us and whether the world will be truthful for him. That's why certain scenes look different or are created differently from what is written in the script.

(Wiewiórski 2018)

Puszczynska's intuitive, open and flexible approach to the script and her insistence on the truthfulness of the story-world might have been one of her key dispositions that made possible her successful collaboration with Pawlikowski (as well as something she learned from him on *Ida*), who has been known for drawing on his documentary background and often changing his scripts in pre-production and even during the shooting. At a remarkably candid press conference on *Cold War* at the Gdynia festival, Pawlikowski acknowledged that 'the script was changing all the time, I was rewriting it after every meeting with actors, after different conversations, rehearsals, screen tests' (FPFF Gdynia 2018). During the shooting, comprising fifty-nine shoot days (almost a double the average Polish shoot) over a period of eight months, Pawlikowski demanded a special timeline with Sundays reserved for editing, which occasionally resulted in changes in individual scenes or even the overall plot. In this work regime, development, production and post-production overlapped and partly merged into one long continuous process – very challenging for the producer to manage. Within the Polish film-making community, Pawlikowski became notorious and was even mocked for the high number of retakes he shot with each camera setup. Pawlikowski, working closely with his DOP Łukasz Żal (see Figure 2.2), explained this time-consuming, seemingly improvisational method as a way of looking for the decisive moment that is reflecting the 'truth' of each scene:

Through all the labour, the sculpting and the artificiality of the situation, where everything has to click together, we search for contingency, to create a sense that the scene is not created by a human, but by a higher power, which decided that, for



Figure 2.2 Paweł Pawlikowski with his cinematographer Łukasz Żal on the set of *Cold War* (*Zimna wojna*, dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, PL/FR/UK, 2018). (Credit: MK2 Productions/Apocalypse Pictures/Film4/Opus Film.)

example, this has to go on in the foreground, these characters are speaking here in the middle, and over there in the background something else is happening, or that the light is exactly like this. To achieve this sense of contingency, you need to make enormous effort.

(FPFF Gdynia 2018)

In numerous interviews, Puszczyńska defended Pawlikowski's method, empathetically explaining the creative objectives behind it, and stressing that her role was to create conditions for the director to work in his own way, even if it seemed strange to the financing partners and the crew:

People often say that Pawlikowski shoots many retakes. I even heard the number 60. But that's a legend, which has surrounded the film, the number is exaggerated. The average number of retakes is about 20 per scene, 6 per setup. Paweł is not demanding repetition from actors. After several 'do this', 'do that' directions, there often came 'do something'. And usually, with all the fatigue, and after re-thinking by the actors, the last retake stayed in the final cut. Because – as [the actor] Agata Kulesza says – in Paweł's films, you need to play through your presence. The reason we shoot so many retakes is to let all the elements in the scene act as they should, actors, extras, cars – all this, to create the right rhythm of the scene.

(Wiewiórski 2018)

Despite all her understanding and empathy, Puszczynska still had to mediate between Pawlikowski's approach to directing as 'writing the script with a camera' (Knap 2017) and the requirements of the co-producers and public funds. While managing *Cold War*, she could already build on the rich experience acquired on *Ida*:

In his style of directing, Paweł would prefer to work on the basis of just 20 pages of notes about the story. In the Polish system, this is impossible, because to get public funding, you need to have the script finished, then a budget based on the script, and the production schedule broken into shoot days. For *Ida*, I had to find a golden mean between the requirements of physical production and the director's work style. I immediately knew that the film will not be an easy task, but a process, in which I will have to be prepared for changes, for the script to evolve during the production.

(Lankosz 2015)

Her ability to accommodate Pawlikowski's demands was made possible in part due to Opus Film's financial back-up, which in the case of *Cold War* was supplemented by significant loans the firm took out in Poland and France (P. Dzięcioł, personal interview, 7 September 2020). For Puszczynska, this meant that she could afford the luxury of working with an 'open budget':

Many Polish producers can't comprehend that we were all the time [on *Cold War*] working with so-called open budget. Until the end, we didn't exactly know how much the film cost. A risky method, I don't recommend it to anybody. The responsibility for the project, for the money, is immense. But there are situations when I have to say, 'I close my eyes now, I will figure out something later'. I had to follow Paweł – and the film. Nobody says to the painter: 'There is too much blue colour here, use some green.'

(Felis 2018)

While Puszczynska evoked a sense of almost 'blindly' following the auteur's vision, her approach was far from uncontrolled. When working on the set, she had to broker between the director's semi-improvisational method – multiple retakes, concurrent editing – on the one hand, and the budget limits as well as work habits of the crews, on the other:

I love being on the set. I usually come for an hour or two in the morning, on my way to the office, then again during the day, and finally in the most crucial moment before the shoot ends. My experience taught me that this is the moment

I am most needed, because the set needs to be closed, but the director might have got stuck in a scene. It is a kind of bargaining: As a producer, I say: 'One or two more retakes and we are done'. And the director immediately starts negotiating and asking for more. In the beginning of a shoot, my everyday presence incredibly irritates the director, and he gets grumpy when I show up towards the end of the day. But gradually he gets used to it and starts calling me jokingly a 'speaking clock'. However, the producer is not supposed to guard, but instead to support the director, to solve his problems. [...] And you also need to remember that the film is not only a director, but also a large group of people, whose work on the set is not an artistic one, and their engagement is not so emotional as the director's. If the director works in a non-standard way, such as Paweł, the crew might start rebelling. [...] Sometimes they rebel when faced with a certain solution, because they have done a hundred films and have never heard of such an idea before, so what is the director making up here. Then the producer comes in and defends the director.

(Lankosz 2015)

The most striking examples of such 'non-standard ways', inspired by Pawlikowski's documentary background, were deviations from the conventional production temporality. When Pawlikowski demanded to shoot *Ida* chronologically, which goes directly against the economy of production planning, Puszczyńska didn't entirely reject the request, but rather negotiated a compromise that 'on each of the locations individually, there will be a chronological order of scenes', even if it required moving between individual parts of the location more frequently: 'Of course, the crew didn't like it in the beginning, because "you don't shoot films like this". So, I had to talk to them, explain, persuade them that there are certain rational assumptions behind it' (Michalska 2015: 10). Another example from *Ida* was Pawlikowski insisting on a break between shooting days, which gave him time to reconsider the whole narrative structure based on a rough cut of two-thirds of the film, and adding a couple more shoot days that allowed him to rework it: 'He has always done that. He had contractually guaranteed a break between a first and a second part of shooting. It is an editing break. The last couple of days are always reserved for the second part of shooting.' When he insisted on twelve additional shoot days instead of five that were planned, Puszczyńska gave him four instead, and demanded that he create a shooting board to precisely pre-visualize all the additional scenes (Michalska 2015: 10–11).

Puszczyńska's mediating work thus aimed at allowing, as much as possible, Pawlikowski's unconventional auteur practice, without alienating the crew and the financing partners. Pawlikowski's directing kept erasing borderlines between development, physical production and post-production, and thus complicated

not only financial and production planning, but also the system of cooperative links within the crew, whose conventional ways of doing things were challenged. In contemporary film production, the mutual understanding of and consensus about unwritten work conventions is crucial, because the filming requires extremely intense and flexible collaboration of a large group of highly specialized workers. Their organization is temporary or project-based, meaning that some of the crew members might never have worked together before, but they nevertheless need to immediately understand each other's roles (Bechky 2006). According to the sociologist of art Howard Becker, 'conventions' (covering conventional ways of solving all kinds of problems from the selection of material to the dramatic structure) are the key organizing principle of every 'art world': the shared knowledge of the conventions makes all sorts of practical tasks easier, speeds up decision-making processes, saves resources and allows for efficient cooperation. The breaking of conventions is an integral part of art history, because they pose a constraint to the artist, but conventions come as an integral system, and each individual violation creates practical difficulties, additional costs and requires changes in other customary activities, which in turn complicates the artist's collaboration with the support group (Becker 1982: 40–67). Puszczynska fulfilled the task of explaining the necessity of such violations to resistant crewmembers (whom she knew well because she pre-selected and hired them for Pawlikowski), while at the same time 'taming' the violations to a level that was acceptable in both organizational and financial terms.

SHARING A VISION: AN AUTEURIST PRODUCER WITH A SENSE OF STRATEGY AND BRANDING

Peter Bloore (2013), the author of a respected book on film development from an industry perspective, stresses that for the producer and the author, agreeing on a 'shared vision' of the film-in-the-making is the fundamental precondition for their successful collaboration. In her public statements, Puszczynska often takes this principle to the extremes. She repeatedly speaks of her personal fascination with Pawlikowski's creative thinking and of engaging in an intellectual dialogue with him: 'I always look for directors who will be my intellectual partners. [...] I admired [Pawlikowski's] erudition not only in the field of film, but also his knowledge of philosophy and literature [...] I wanted to work with somebody, from whom I can learn something as a human, not just a producer' (Lankosz 2015). This sense of close intellectual exchange or even identification can also be interpreted in a more practical sense: as a way of 'ensuring the match between the vision' of the writer-director and the producer, so that they are both 'trying to make the same type of film' (Bloore 2013: 78), and thus avoiding complications, frustrations and conflicts. Sharing the *same* vision was an especially challenging

task for Puszczyńska considering that the script kept fundamentally changing throughout the whole process, until the final edit.

The ability to closely follow the creative process in all its stages is the core element of her self-conception as a 'creative producer', the term Polish arthouse producers frequently employ to legitimize their position in the field of (publicly supported) film production by stressing their high level of engagement in the creative process and by differentiating themselves from the more business-oriented, commercial producers. Puszczyńska's self-conception is unusual, however, in her emphasis on the temporality of producer's work and the continuous transformation of the object produced. In her work with Pawlikowski, this has reached an extreme form of the uninterrupted process of 'deep development' (blending script development with production and post-production), whereby a film remains in the constant state of 'becoming', as she alternately calls it:

I am a creative producer, very closely collaborating with the director from the beginning to the end, throughout the whole process. Understanding producer's work as a process means that it is not enough to have a script development, or a budget closed, and then just do scene after scene. In arthouse films, which I am interested in, this is not possible. The process lasts all the time until the finished film is delivered. [...] In the last couple of years, the Polish film industry is moving from the directors' cinema to the producers' cinema. Today's producers sometimes think they need to be tough and powerful, insisting that everybody follows their decisions and that nothing changes, keeping the budget to the last zloty, because the producer rules. Yes, that's true for most cases. But when working with an outstanding author such as Pawlikowski or Tomasz Wasilewski [...] and when he demands a change in the stage of shooting, which is not just a caprice of an Oscar winner, but there is a deep thought behind it, which I understand can improve the result, then I say: 'although we don't have budget for that, it is still worth doing' [...] Sometimes it is the film itself, which leads us forward, when the author knows where his goal is, but has not yet found a perfect way to reach it, and the perfect way is not the shortest one. If the film itself suddenly starts guiding us during the process, telling us the way A is better than B, you should at least seriously consider it, or find very strong arguments for rejecting it [...]. This is the creative approach not just of the author, but also of the producer.

(E. Puszczyńska, personal interview, 2 November 2020)

Puszczyńska does not look down on commercial production (as proven by her involvement in several Opus Film's pay-TV series commissions), but she still takes a decisively auteurist stance. In her willingness to violate established conventions, her tendency to nurture and protect the author's unique vision

and practice at the cost of financial security, she draws on the long tradition of auteurist cinema, whereby the director is considered the sole author of the film. Her reflexions resemble the justifications of French Nouvelle vague producers for deviating from established production conventions (the importance of the script, limited location shooting, strict division of labour and codified crediting), to enable a new kind of artistically ambitious film-making and to protect the author's freedom of expression (Berthet 1998: 50).

Puszczyńska does not neglect the collaborative aspect of film production but sees a clear hierarchy in it, strictly distinguishing between the core creative team centred around the author and the producer on the one hand and the production crew on the other, with their different motivations and temporal regimes of work. She intentionally selects strong auteur director personalities to work with and attributes to them full authorship in the sense that they have responsibility over final decisions in all creative aspects of the film. In *Cold War*'s closing titles, this auteurist approach is manifested in Pawlikowski's controversial credit for 'Story, Direction, Image', which Puszczyńska did not initiate, but still defended, explaining that Pawlikowski was indeed the author of the film's final visual texture on the screen, which all the other collaborators just helped him with (E. Puszczyńska, personal interview, 2 November 2020).

This auteurist discourse obviously has strategic and (self-)promotional aspects to it. From a strategic perspective, the publicly declared readiness to violate conventions for the auteur's sake might be aimed at the auteur himself and his inner circle of advisors. As the French sociologist of work Laure de Verdalle noticed, independent producers nurturing and investing in an increasingly successful director always reach a point when they have to face the principal risk of the director switching to a more renowned producer, and they employ strategies of building a 'progressive loyalty' to ensure recurring collaboration and protect their 'investment' (Verdalle 2013: 32–3). By stressing her understanding of and passionate commitment to Pawlikowski's idiosyncratic directorial style, Puszczyńska brands herself as a 'directors' producer' ready to build her own stable of unique auteurs – a move especially important at the time she was leaving Opus Film for her own company.

In the east-central European context, the claims of an intimate producer-director symbiosis bear symbolic overtones, due to the decades-long controversy between proponents of the 'directors' cinema' and the 'producers' cinema'. In Poland, the polemics have been more pronounced than in the other countries of the region because the older director generation largely controlled institutions distributing public funding in the 1990s and 2000s, and because the state-owned 'units', led by prominent directors, were not dissolved after 1989. The directors became the focal point of resentments against the new market rules

and for nostalgia for the alleged communality of directors' cinema, but they also positioned the unit heads as direct competitors of the newly established private production companies (Gębicka 2006: 222–6). Otherwise, as noted by Adamczak (2014b), long-term producer-director cooperation had been rather rare in Poland up until the 2010s, as opposed to the Czech Republic (see duos such as Ondřej Trojan and Jan Hřebejk, Pavel Strnad and Bohdan Sláma, and Ondřej Zima and Jan Prušinovský).

A EUROPEAN PRODUCER: ARTHOUSE CINEMA'S INTERNATIONAL MARKET LOGICS

At the same time, Puszczyńska's passion for international co-production, identification with an imagined international community of film professionals and insistence on occupying a central role – side by side with the director-writer – in developing a project, clearly mark her as a 'European producer' as envisaged and constructed by EU support and training programmes, namely Eurimages, MEDIA and EAVE (Vinuela 2011). Despite her decisively auteurist moral stance, Puszczyńska has been well aware of the market logics of arthouse cinema, the marketing value of the auteur brand and the importance of market intermediaries such as festival selectors and sales agents for creating the value of Polish films in the global market.

The experience with the ad hoc sales strategy for *Ida* apparently taught her a lesson in how important sales agents are for both festival and cross-border commercial circulation. She understands the attachment of a sales agent as 'the first verification of international chances' for her films and likes to 'talk to them about a project early on, about the talent, the theme, give them the script to read, show them the rough cut'. She stressed that it is important to build a network of personal contacts with sales agents, to compare their libraries and previous successes, so that the right match for a given film can be made: 'You should not always look at the biggest ones, because even if they like your small film, they might not have time to properly take care of it. Sometimes it is better to pick a small boutique agent, who has only two or three films a year, and will really reach all the distributors and festivals' (E. Puszczyńska, personal interview, 2 November 2020). It is therefore telling to look closer at her most consistent, recent collaboration with a sales agent: the Warsaw-based New Europe Film Sales (NEFS) of Jan Naszewski.

NEFS is the only influential sales agent with an internationally recognized brand that emerged in the east-central European region in the 2010s. Although it started building its brand by selling short films, then Scandinavian and other Western European arthouse features, NEFS has been gradually building its reputation as a trusted selector of internationally appealing Polish films, with

the biggest successes including Jan Komasa's *Corpus Christi* (PL/FR, 2019), which premiered at Venice and was nominated for the 92nd Academy Awards, and *Sweat* (dir. Magnus von Horn, PL/SE, 2020), officially selected for Cannes. As Naszewski puts it: 'We are seen as guaranteeing a certain quality. There are about forty Polish films produced a year, and we take just one or two [...], those which in our view have the highest international potential, [...] quite often entering projects in the stage of development or editing' (J. Naszewski, personal interview, 23 November 2020). For Puszczyńska's production of Tomasz Wasilewski's upcoming film *Fools* (*Głupcy*, PL/RO, 2021), NEFS was attached from an early stage, reading different versions of the script, visiting the shoot and investing an MG (E. Puszczyńska, personal interview, 2 November 2020). In 2018, Puszczyńska and Naszewski teamed up with the producer Klaudia Śmieja (known for complex international co-productions including Claire Denis's *High Life* [DE/FR/UK/PL/US, 2018] and Agnieszka Holland's *Mr. Jones* [*Obywatel Jones*, PL/UK/UA, 2019]) and launched a joint label called NEM Corp. with the ambition of becoming 'a leading European production outlet and a go-to address for top international partners and local talents', taking advantage of PISF's new 30 per cent cash rebate programme (Barraclough 2018). Although the group has not yet released any titles (as of January 2021), it illustrates the trend of incorporating an international market perspective into the mode of operation of Polish arthouse producers.

Puszczyńska's career trajectory and self-conceptions illustrate how the Polish arthouse producer 'habitus' – a system of embodied dispositions ingrained through socialization that integrates past and present perceptions and actions, and thus 'generates' an individual's value judgments within a field (Bourdieu 1998: 8) – is increasingly formed by the tensions between the local cultural influences and market limits, on the one hand, and the European production culture the producer needs to acquire to successfully operate in the transnational arthouse field, on the other. The 'European producer' has to internalize the 'principles of the game' (Bourdieu 1996: 166–7) in the European arthouse field, structured by transnational market intermediaries such as sales agents, VOD services, festivals, co-production forums, industry training programmes and European support schemes. Puszczyńska has demonstrated her acknowledgement of the 'valuation power' (Bessy and Chauvin 2013) of these intermediaries, who coordinate the arthouse market and add a value to individual projects, by involving them in her films from the development stage, and even by forming a direct alliance with NEFS. At the same time, the European producer habitus – as the 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1998: 80) of the European arthouse community – also dictates a form of 'disinterested' behaviour that positions the producer as 'inspired discoverer', guided by her 'disinterestedness and irrational passion' (Bourdieu

1996: 168) for the auteur's vision, rather than as a businessperson merely selling it. There is a mutual dependency and structural homology between the image of the inspired and disinterested producer and that of the auteur: they produce each other in the 'cycle of consecration', by producing field-specific symbolic capital for each other. In this sense, Puszczynska's comments on Pawlikowski's idiosyncratic style and on their intimate collaboration are not something accidental in relation to the process of film production: they are an integral part of the producer's work of creating the value of the film, while at the same time creating the value of the director and eventually the producer herself.

THE 'IDA EFFECT' OR THE GOLDEN ERA OF POLISH FILM

Ida and *Cold War* were breakthroughs for the Polish film industry not just in terms of awards and critical acclaim, but also international sales. While *Ida* was sold ad hoc, *Cold War* had influential sales agents attached from the stage of development. The contract with Amazon gave the global platform not only US theatrical rights and worldwide VOD rights (except in the co-producers' territories, and Netflix Poland bought *Cold War* from Opus Film), but also the right to read the script and have a say in the poster design; the same applied to MK2 and Protagonist, who divided theatrical territories between themselves. Although none of them apparently influenced key creative decisions, according to Puszczynska, they had an immense impact on *Cold War's* global circulation, with Amazon investing heavily in its Oscar campaign. The power of the brand was revealed incidentally at Cannes, when the festival director Thierry Frémaux announced the list of nominated titles. Puszczynska recalled: 'I heard the sentence "*Cold War* produced by Amazon", and my heart stood still. [...] Frémaux did not mention Opus Film, MK2, Apocalypso or PISF. We still have to work hard to make the Polish presence in Cannes more visible' (Felis 2018).

In his study of the cross-border circulation of European films released in Europe between 2005 and 2015, Andrew Higson identifies *Ida* (non-national EU admissions 1.2 million) as one of only two successfully travelling *auteur* films not produced in any of the big five producing Western European countries (UK, DE, FR, IT, ES), the other being *4 Months, 3 Weeks & 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, dir. Cristian Mungiu, RO, 2007) (Higson 2018: 313). Had Higson included the year 2018 in his study, he would have needed to add another Polish title to his list of EU films that secured at least 1 million non-national European admissions: Pawlikowski's *Cold War* (EAO 2020b), sold to over seventy countries (as of June 2018) and earning over €8 million in foreign theatrical distribution within the EU (Felis 2018). If only admissions in the Europa Cinemas Network were to be considered, *Cold War* would rank as the European number one (EAO 2019a: 21).

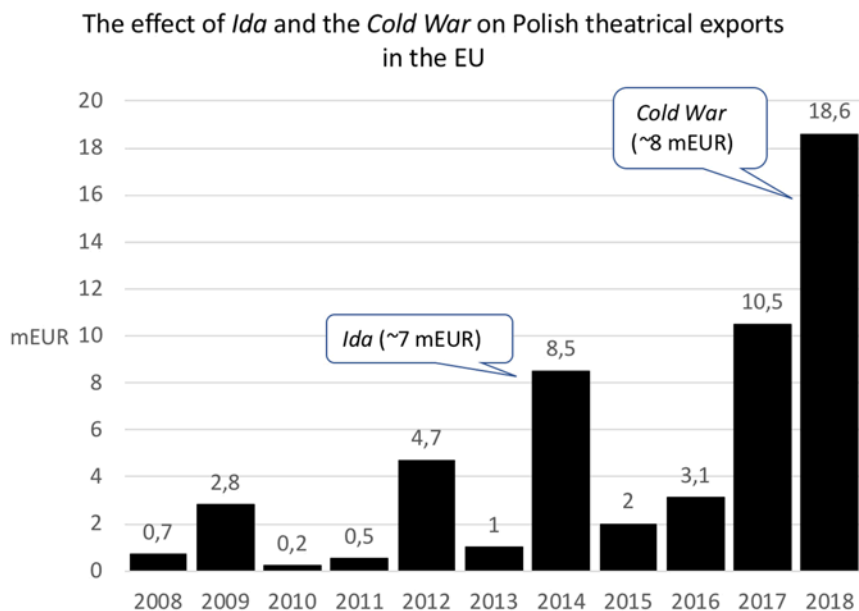


Figure 2.3 Estimated revenues of Polish films in foreign theatrical distribution within the EU. (Credit: Iniarski 2019: 15.)

Indeed, *Ida* put the whole of Polish cinema into the global spotlight, increasing the interest of potential buyers, festival selectors and co-producers, which helped Opus Film in producing and selling Pawlikowski's next film. For the Polish production community, it has – in Puszczńska's words – 'broken the stereotype that auteur, artistically demanding cinema has to be limited to a small niche' (Felis 2018). On the institutional level, it has opened a window of opportunity for the Polish Film Institute to draw on the symbolic capital accumulated by *Ida* and further expand its international strategy, including promotional support for films at festivals and in industry markets, and the introduction of the long-awaited production incentives, the delay of which was (until finally launching the 30 per cent cash rebate programme in 2019) considered a crucial competitive disadvantage by Polish producers.

As Agnieszka Odorowicz, the highly regarded first head of PISF (serving between 2005 and 2015), noted in an interview touching on the effect of *Ida* on the recognition of Polish cinema, 'international festival selectors will from now on think twice before rejecting any Polish film. And they will at least watch it, which had not always been the case until now' (Sendecka 2015). In the mid-2010s, PISF started heavily supporting global festival and awards campaigns for Polish films (Tizard 2015), and the late 2010s, described as the new golden

era of Polish cinema both in terms of domestic box office and exports, proved Odorowicz's predictions right, with the new generation of producers conquering international festivals.

To take just one example: Mariusz Włodarski (b.1980) of Łódź-based Lava Films, who started his career at Opus Film and claimed that 'my professional godmother is Ewa Puszczyńska and my godfather is Piotr Dzięcioł' (Romanowska 2015: 16), in 2020 alone had one film in the Cannes Official Selection (*Sweat* [2020]) and two in Venice (*Never Gonna Snow Again* [*Śniegu już nigdy nie będzie*, dir. Małgorzata Szumowska and Michał Englert, PL/DE, 2020]; *Apples* [*Miła*, dir. Christos Nikou, GR/PL, 2020]). Although Opus Film may no longer be the most active co-producer of international arthouse films in Poland (with its move towards premium TV series, as mentioned above), it has left a lasting impact on the Polish producer community, whose international recognition and symbolic capital currently surpasses that of its Czech, Slovak or even Hungarian counterparts. It would be difficult to find a production company and a producer with as high an international reputation in all of east-central Europe other as Opus Film and Ewa Puszczyńska. Puszczyńska's career might serve as an inspiration for younger generations of peripheral market producers aspiring to become recognized members of the European arthouse community. It remains to be seen whether they succeed and whether their shift towards the centre of cultural power will make them lose touch with the local field.

3

The Service Producer and the Globalization of Media Production

Political economists and network theorists offer different assessments of the global relations of motion picture production. While spatially extended webs of productive labour are central subjects of both approaches, neither explains specifically how these webs are constituted nor how they operate in peripheral production ecologies. What is more, they do not consider the implications of the knowledge transfers taking place and power hierarchies emerging from such transnational production contexts. By contrast, this chapter offers a concrete analysis of these issues in Prague's post-socialist film and television industries, comparing them to those of Budapest, and thus proposes a picture of media globalization from a peripheral perspective. After comparing key theoretical frameworks for the study of international service production, it provides a historical overview of Hollywood's presence in the two cities both before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain, uncovering recurring patterns of 'opportunistic' business collaboration (Hjort 2010b: 19–20), whose mutual benefits overshadowed conflicts and tensions on the level of everyday work lives. In the final analytical part, it focuses on the internal segregation of the Prague work world and on barriers inhibiting trans-sectoral knowledge transfers, which originate from a two-tier production system split between international and domestic production, and characterized by different business models, gatekeepers, career prospects, and precariousness.

The state-socialist past of the Czech Republic still affects its screen industries. In 1991, Prague's once-monopolistic Barrandov Studios laid off most of its 2,700 staff, including all creative personnel. This step helped transform the Czech capital into a regional hub of international media production, attracting Hollywood with the prospect of a large, skilled, non-union labour pool and, after 2010, a 20 per cent rebate programme. During the city's first peak year of 2003, international operations attracted €185 million in investment, roughly twenty times more than wholly indigenous productions that year. Another peak came after the Czech rebate scheme stabilized and just before the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020: in 2019, when the total foreign production spend in the country totalled €328.3

million (Czech Film Commission 2020a). There are three main gravity centres in this labour market: international productions, television broadcasting (with the public service broadcaster holding a privileged position) and wholly local productions. These represent three semi-permeable economies, work cultures and instances of globalization. Furthermore, each is characterized by its own distinctive structure and career patterns. Questions about their development in the future crystallize around the extent to which they can sustain themselves, collaborate, transfer knowledge, offset risk and increase their regional competitiveness.

This chapter concentrates on international productions, especially 'service production' in film and television. This is by far the strongest sector economically, yet the most vulnerable. It is also the sector about which scholars have said the least. This chapter considers how the globalization of media production might be understood from the perspectives of the local 'service producers' and transnational crews working on international productions. Despite being among the best-paid members of the labour market, Czech personnel are afforded less creative control, job security and professional upward mobility than their colleagues in other sectors. Interviews with prominent members of this production culture,¹ along with ethnographic data gathered by student interns,² suggest that inequality in working conditions has contributed to the dynamics of this professional community. This chapter therefore focuses on multidirectional local and translocal processes of mediation taking place within the global production networks connecting major east-central European cities to other parts of the world. In so doing, it reconsiders globalization in the sphere of film production in a manner that counters prevailing US-centric perspectives.

LOCALIZED LEARNING IN GLOBAL PRODUCTION NETWORKS

Recent academic discussion of international production is dominated by neo-Marxist criticism of the New International Division of Cultural Labour (NICL). This approach sees the globalization of film production as a means for Hollywood to strengthen its international hegemony. It is said that Hollywood achieved this powerful position in several ways, including sidestepping US labour unions, disempowering and deskilling the global workforce, and fostering levels of uncertainty that destabilize local producers. NICL, it is argued, transforms locations into industrial sites for service providers, making them prone to dependency, underdevelopment and disinvestment (Miller et al. 2005).

Although it has broadened our understanding of the global political economy of media, a neo-Marxist analysis of this kind can be criticized for its US-centrism. By largely echoing positions advanced by American screen unions, this approach arguably paints a somewhat unbalanced picture of power relations between US companies and their overseas suppliers. Such an approach could

also be accused, on the one hand, of focusing on the short-term project-based thinking of incoming producers, such as choosing between different levels of incentives, labour costs and production services offered in competing locations. On the other hand, it could also be accused of disregarding the long-term 'location interests' that have led local companies and policymakers to embrace international production, including development of studios and film services, branding and knowledge transfer (Goldsmith and O'Regan 2005). My interview subjects tended to demand a more measured perspective on the effects of international production on creative labour. They did not lament the exploitation spotlighted by neo-Marxists. Rather than denounce overseas producers when confronted with the precariousness of their working lives, these workers spotlighted difficulties caused by local policies, co-workers and intermediary service companies. They also compared their working lives to schooling, inasmuch as their work afforded opportunities to learn American-style practices without leaving their hometowns. They invoked a post-socialist imaginary derived from their mediated experiences of foreign production practices, restricted mobility and limited career prospects.

From the perspective of a regional post-socialist production centre, these location interests can be illuminated by the work of the Manchester School of Economic Geography.³ Its theory of global production networks (GPNs) considers how opportunities for knowledge diffusion are expanded by two parallel processes: the dispersion of the value chain across corporations and national boundaries, and integration across hierarchical layers of network participants. In contrast to neo-Marxism, this position considers local workers to be social actors rather than victims. It emphasizes the multi-actor and multi-scalar characteristics of transnational production, alongside societal and territorial embeddedness. Within GPNs, 'global network flagships' source specialized capabilities from outside the company itself; however, knowledge transfer does not guarantee effective knowledge diffusion (Ernst and Kim 2002). Rather, knowledge must be internalized and translated into capabilities, because local suppliers learn by converting explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge. The qualitative data garnered from my interviewees suggests that mutual learning, social networks and cultural mediators play key roles in the lives of Prague's film-makers.

In contrast to the permanent positions, standardized careers and formalized training procedures that were central to the pre-1991 Czech production field, today's inter-firm, 'boundaryless' careers demand that workers adapt swiftly to complex new tasks (Jones 1996) and a shared industrial culture, which helps them rapidly form new teams with strangers. Central to the formation of these informal, variable social networks are horizontal flows of information and tacit organizational knowledge. American and Western European heads of departments,

line producers and above-the-line talent work directly with local crews, integrating them into production teams and exposing them to tacit knowledge.

Processes of externalization and internalization are particularly intense when lengthy location shoots expose crews to foreign working practices. Economic geography has shown us that learning through offshoring depends on face-to-face contact between incoming and local actors. Malmberg and Maskell (2006) identify three dimensions of 'localized learning'. First, a 'vertical' dimension involves interaction between business partners, input/output relations and their distinct yet complementary activities. Second, the 'horizontal' dimension involves observation, benchmarking and imitating similar activities. A third, 'social' dimension involves everyday exposure to shared industry 'buzz' or interpretative schemes. The long-term success of these processes is dependent on additional factors, including the degree of trust or quality of network relations that exists among interacting sites and between the initial local knowledge base and its institutional setup (Malmberg and Maskell 2006).

Accordingly, I would like to propose three provisional hypotheses linking globalization of production with creative labour and localized learning in the post-socialist work world of Prague. First, the city's position in global production networks suggests a multidirectional version of globalization, wherein local agents actively react to global forces, and where 'location interests' and 'localized learning' are preconditioned by historical and environmental specificities. Intermediaries play a key role in translocal transactions – in Prague's case, usually production services companies and line producers. Second, the 'post-socialist precarity' of creative workers results more from an internal than international division of labour. Prague film labour is compartmentalized due to a fragmented production sector, a lack of strong workers' organizations and the selective involvement of the state. Politicians have contributed to separating the constituent sectors of the screen media industry into an indigenously produced 'national culture', which they feel needs state support, production services (perceived as a pure business) and the traditionally strong public service media that attracts most of their attention. Third, although it has improved the local infrastructure, the globalization of media production has failed to improve the quality of locally produced screen media due to barriers that continue to hamper transnational learning and career development. Innovative, internationally successful and critically applauded works are more likely to come either from smaller production companies deeply rooted in the local environment, which are occasionally able to combine original content with smaller-scale international services, or from transnational companies such as HBO, which nurture long-term relationships with local talent and understand the local market, rather than directly from workers and companies servicing Hollywood's big-budget runaway productions.

HOLLYWOOD MEETS STATE-SOCIALIST PRODUCTION CULTURES

The history of hosting foreign film producers in the Czech lands is older than the local cinema itself: the very first film shot in what would become Czechoslovakia was a big American production: *The Horitz Passion Play* (USA, 1897), headed by the Lumières' American representative, William W. Freeman, and depicting a famous village theatre performance in 65 tableaux (Štábla 1971). Although interwar Czech film production was national-market oriented, the local industry culture was influenced by the solid presence of foreign distributors. In the 1920s, almost all major Hollywood studios established offices in Prague and made it a regional hub of the international film trade. These local branches mutually coordinated their business strategies, regularly making use of business information from the US government, and were locally known for implementing American methods of management, accounting, market research, and advertisement, which eventually influenced their Czech counterparts. Several key figures of the post-World War II state-socialist film industry gained their first professional experiences in the offices of the majors, including 1950s Barrandov Studios head Bohumil Šmída (Paulová 2014).

Providing services to foreign companies is nothing new for Prague's Barrandov Studios either; in fact, it was built into the organization's DNA by its founder Miloš Havel, the uncle of the post-1989 Czech(oslovak) president. The studio first engaged in this practice shortly after its establishment in 1932 (servicing Julien Duvivier's *Le Golem* [FR/CZ] in 1935, for example), and continued to do so during the Nazi occupation of Czechia, when Barrandov gradually became the most important production facility of the German film industry, damaged by allied bombing. Germans expanded the studio, greatly modernized its equipment, including colour film technology, and shot about eighty feature films there (Dvořáková and Klimeš 2008). After the nationalization of the Czechoslovak film industry in 1945, a collection of seven Soviet films were shot in Barrandov Studios, some of them with the same German colour technology and the local personnel trained by the Germans, as a part of an unrealized Soviet strategy to build a transnational production network across Central and Eastern Europe. Since the Soviets also made use of their frozen funds in the Czechoslovak National Bank, derived from Soviet films' local box office, it is safe to say that this practice was comparable to US 'runaway production', which started to flow into Western Europe at more or less the same time after the war (Fomin 2005; Steinhart 2019).⁴

Tito's Yugoslavia, which broke from the Soviet bloc in 1948 and whose state-run economy incorporated market principles and worker self-management, warmly welcomed Western producers starting in the mid-1950s, taking advantage of its beautiful locations and warm climate, for which it was even called

the ‘California of Europe’ in the US trade press (Tusher 1967). Other studios in Central and Eastern Europe followed in a more careful manner, headed by Prague and Budapest, the production centres with the strongest tradition and continuity with the interwar period – as opposed to Poland, for example, whose Warsaw-based production facilities were destroyed, personnel were killed or dispersed during the war, and where a new infrastructure had to be built from scratch in the less-decimated city of Łódź (Zajiček 2009: 69). In the late 1950s, after the isolationist period of Stalinism ended, Barrandov started participating in myriad co-productions with, and provided production services to, partners from socialist and gradually also Western nations. Services to Western producers launched with animation work for US clients in 1959, shortly after the first US-USSR cultural exchange agreement from 1958 – with the most prestigious commission being MGM’s revived *Tom and Jerry* series between 1961 and 1962 (Dietch 2008) – and developed further with West German feature film and TV productions starting in 1963 and American feature commissions in the late 1960s (Szczepanik 2021a). Budapest followed suit almost simultaneously, after the Kádár regime started liberalizing the Hungarian economy and decentralized the local film industry. Mafilm (1962) and Barrandov (1963) established specialized foreign departments, responsible for international co-production and production services.⁵ Unlike co-productions approached from the perspective of cultural diplomacy, services to Western producers tended to be valued by both Prague and Budapest in economic, rather than ideological, terms, because they were lucrative ventures bringing much-needed hard currency into the country. By the mid-1960s, the American press widely reported a boom in East-West collaboration, while also rightly predicting the new international division of cultural labour, which would be strictly hierarchical and segregated:

Prague, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia are rife with rumor and promise of ambitious international co-productions. The Germans, French, Italians, Americans and British are coming. And they bring with them the rich potential of Above-the-Line, which means the story, the stars, the director and a modest retinue of technicians to join the Below-the-Line native offering of transportation, housing, studio facilities and personnel – and, of course, all the problems of making a movie – compounded by barriers of language, custom, production habits, and ‘soft’ currencies.

(Joseph 1966)

The year 1968 marked the first peak in American presence in east-central European studios. While MGM shot *The Fixer* (dir. John Frankenheimer, UK, 1968) in Hungary, United Artists backed the production of *The Bridge at Remagen* (dir. John Guillermin, USA, 1969), an independent war movie, whose shooting

around a bridge close to Prague involved historical US weaponry, which was, together with the foreign crew and cast, caught in the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968 (Szczepanik 2021a). In the existing literature on so-called runaway production, one of the key issues is the barriers and channels between diverse 'production cultures'.

As Daniel Steinhart pointed out, Hollywood studios had to build a network of trusted mediators across Europe to minimize risks connected to geographical distance and cultural differences. These mediators were usually production managers with strong ties to the region and good reputation with studio executives, such as Henry Henigson, a long-time collaborator of MGM in Italy (Steinhart 2019: 131–3). In Central and Eastern Europe, this was much more difficult: there were no trusted professionals with a dual background. The Americans resorted to a solution that continues to be used in the local runaway business today: they teamed up with Western Europeans, mainly British producers, line producers and department heads, who had at least some international experience, to help them deal with Eastern Europeans. A typical example was Stanley O'Toole, a Briton who worked as Head of Production for Paramount Pictures in Europe in the 1960s and an executive producer for Warner Bros. in the 1970s and 80s, when he also oversaw or produced US films shot in Czechoslovakia (*Operation: Daybreak* [dir. Lewis Gilbert, USA, 1975]; *Yentl* [dir. Barbra Streisand, UK/USA, 1983]) and Hungary (*Nijinsky* [dir. Herbert Ross, UK/USA, 1980]; *The Sphinx* [dir. Franklin J. Schaffner, USA 1981]; *Lionheart* [dir. Franklin J. Schaffner, USA, 1987]). Similarly, the production manager for *The Bridge at Remagen*, Milton Feldman, had been previously involved in a number of foreign location productions and location scouting in numerous Western European countries, but also in Egypt, Libya, Israel, Cuba and Japan. In an article about the making of *The Bridge at Remagen*, he expressed his professional mediator credo:

I was careful not [to] tell Czechs how to run their business. If there's one thing I've learned in my travels, it's this: you must not go into a foreign country and try to show them how to make pictures. They have their way of operating, we have ours. Strike a compromise in the two methods and you get the work done.

(Feldman 1966)

Despite all the barriers, any shooting necessarily creates opportunities for intense, long-term physical contact between individual crew members, resulting in mutual organizational and individual adaptation and learning, which can eventually translate into local capability building (Ernst and Kim 2002). Czechoslovak film-makers often testified that working on a Hollywood production was a career-changing experience for them, although sometimes painful in terms of

more complex and demanding work, different production practices, foreign languages and longer working hours.⁶ A group of proven production managers and crews gradually formed under the umbrella of Barrandov's foreign production services department that moved from one foreign commission to another. For example, AD Mirek Lux worked on almost all pre-1990 US-originated runaways and is still in the business today.

Due to the intense informal communication among American producers and crews who had shot or prepared to shoot in east-central Europe, a successful commission could quickly build the reputation of a foreign studio and sometimes even of individual film-makers behind the Iron Curtain. In rare cases, foreign producers demanded collaboration with individual Czech film-makers: *The Bridge at Remagen* producer David Wolper asked for three Czech crews to follow him to Germany and Italy to finish location shooting after the Warsaw Pact invasion (Duping 1968). Czech pyrotechnicians and stuntmen such as Jaroslav Tomsa made their name working on the film. They became highly valued by foreign producers, and some even claimed that *The Bridge at Remagen* experience actually laid the foundations of the Czech stunt craft, now world-renowned.⁷

According to Omar Sayfo, who conducted interviews with pre-1989 Mafilm employees, the Hungarian crews who worked on US productions formed a specific community of practice and

have shared a sense of belonging to an exclusive group, defined by working habits and organizational culture which differs from domestic productions. As they see it, they all share the self-discipline to work twelve to sixteen hours a day, often six days a week, cultural understanding, a set of practices compatible with Americans, and sociality.

(Sayfo 2020: 51)

Nevertheless, all these learning effects and gains in symbolic capital generated by Hollywood runaways were limited to production management and assistant roles in the lower levels of the professional hierarchy. For example, none of the Czech actors who played minor parts in *The Bridge at Remagen* would later achieve a significant international career.⁸ Although Czech personnel often represented a majority of the American-led crew, they were very seldom appointed as department heads, not to speak of above-the-line talent. This was – and still is today – partly different for production services for Western European, mainly West German, film and TV producers, where Czech department heads were more common from the early 1960s onwards.

How, on the other hand, did American producers and film-makers perceive their Czech counterparts, and what was their everyday experience of working

in Prague? The official discourse on co-production and runaway production, especially in the trade press, has been traditionally very diplomatic, hiding conflicts and disagreements and telling 'getting along well' stories to build a positive image of potential business partners. Indeed, most articles quoting American and British professionals praise Czech crews, and Wolper even claimed he would 'dedicate the picture to the Czech people' (Werba 1968). Nevertheless, when reading between the lines, recurrent tropes of differences and frictions between the production cultures can be identified that were characteristic of the local production service industry until at least the mid- to late 1990s. The first and most critical category of complaints relates to the financial risks of working in a foreign environment and with unpredictable partners – which is, however, not very different from the well-known cautionary stories of shooting in Western Europe, as well. Another group of critical remarks addressed differences in production practices and work ethics. As *Hollywood Reporter* put it in a rare example of listening to the below-the-line voices:

As if in chorus, the American actors and crewmen 'love the people', but to work with them is another matter. *The Bridge at Remagen*, in short, is not exactly a ballet in movement between the company's 200 Czechs and 50 Americans. As construction man [Hendrik] Wynands put it, 'not too many Czechs understand instantaneous movement. Everything is planned movement, a nail will be driven in the floor of the tower at 10 a.m. on Monday morning, that sort of thing. ... They were suspicious of us in the beginning, and there was a lot of friction but that slowly ebbed away. Now the Czechs are wonderful, but on the set they have the attitude that "this can't be done" or "that takes time". They also resent overtime, but that's understandable. Barrandov doesn't pay overtime like Hollywood and many of them have to get up at 5 a.m. to catch streetcars to the studio and then make the location. All are used to getting off at 2:30 p.m.'

(Loynd 1968; Loynd's ellipsis)

The property master Donald B. Nunley compared his experience with Czechs to other foreign environments: 'I've worked in Hong Kong, the Philippines and Spain and it's never been like this. [...] This is my fourth month here and I've learned you can't depend on "yes" and promises of "I will". When you want something, you have to get it yourself' (Byron 1968). The DOP Stanley Cortez, who couldn't bring in his US camera staff for economic reasons, complained about language difficulties and the Czech lighting equipment, but he also noted that a 'great many of their electricians are women', quickly adding: 'They were wonderful girls, however, and in many cases turned out to be far superior to the male electricians' (Lightman 1968). Similar stories of Czech substandard

equipment, film-makers being slow, inflexible, unreliable, looking for excuses rather than solutions, etc., balanced with praise of their professionalism and of beautiful locations, could be found in the 1990s trade press covering the boom in international production in Prague.

The third category of problems related to local cultural customs and everyday life infrastructure that made it more or less difficult for the cast and crews to perpetuate their life habits: slow and low-quality hotel services, unreliable water supply and telephone or cable connections, staff not speaking English, etc. Of course, American actors and film-makers voiced their admiration for the Prague Spring. When reading hundreds of trade press reports and publicity releases, or emotional passages in the memoirs of *The Bridge at Remagen* stars Robert Vaughn (2008) and Ben Gazzara (2004) (see Figure 3.1), and the producer David Wolper (2003), we can even get the impression that Hollywood had never before watched east-central Europe so closely as in the summer of 1968. But 1960s Prague was generally not perceived as a ‘fun’ city, with a Western-style nightlife unavailable: ‘Most of the younger American actors were bored, and



Figure 3.1 *The Bridge at Remagen* (dir. John Guillermin, USA, 1969). Shooting on a bridge in Davle, outside Prague, which was, according to Wolper, crucial to the realistic effect of the war movie. (Credit: United Artists Corporation.)

for children the situation was impossible.’ Some of the actors’ wives moved to Zurich or Paris, and Vaughn travelled to London. All the stars had to ‘endure three months of anonymity’, because no locals recognized them on the street (Byron 1968). The reason the trade press paid attention to Prague’s lack of appeal to American actors and crews probably was that it indeed could have made a difference. It is a well-known fact among industry insiders that off-screen tourist appeal plays a substantial role in the process of selecting a foreign destination for location shooting.⁹

Despite the post-1968 political freeze, both Barrandov and Mafilm opportunistically continued servicing American and Western European producers throughout the 1970s and 80s, each building up an infrastructure of international representatives, specialized departments and production managers, each capitalizing on the influx of hard currency and high-tech equipment (Sayfo 2020; Szczepanik 2021a). Cheap Barrandov Studios sets and crews, well-preserved historical locations and advantageous ‘package deals’ with the state-run film company attracted war movies such as Universal’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (dir. George Roy Hill, USA, 1972), Warner Bros.-backed *Operation: Daybreak* (1975), and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (dir. Delbert Mann, UK/USA, 1979), as well as historical costume spectacles such as United Artists’ *Yentl* (1983), and above all *Amadeus* (dir. Miloš Forman, USA, 1984), whose magnificent use of Prague architecture built long-lasting popularity among US producers, which survived well into the 1990s. Budapest drew level with Prague and gradually surpassed it by attracting the US-interest French-Italian-West German co-production *Bluebeard* (dir. Edward Dmytryk, FR/IT/DE, 1972), set in 1930s Austria and starring Richard Burton; Woody Allen’s war comedy set in nineteenth-century Russia, *Love and Death* (USA, 1974); a Paramount distributed biopic featuring a male homosexual relationship, *Nijinsky* (1980); the Warner Bros.-backed adventure *Sphinx* (1981), with scenes from an Egyptian tomb built at the Mafilm Studios; the sport/war movie *Victory* (dir. John Huston, USA, 1981), starring Sylvester Stallone, Michael Caine and Max von Sydow, where Budapest stood in for Nazi-occupied Paris; the medieval epic *Lionheart* (1987) with Gabriel Byrne and executive-produced by Francis Ford Coppola; several Jewish-themed wartime dramas (including *War and Love* [dir. Moshé Mizrahi, USA, 1985]; *Hanna’s War* [dir. Menachem Golan, USA, 1988]); and two versions of *The Phantom of the Opera* (dir. Robert Markowitz, USA, 1983; dir. Dwight H. Little, USA/UK, 1989). This string of US commissions crossing the Iron Curtain symbolically culminated with *Red Heat* (dir. Walter Hill, USA, 1988), an action buddy movie starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as a Moscow police captain, where Hungary substituted for the USSR, the first big project brought to Budapest by the Hungarian-US producer Andrew G. Vajna, who

was about to play a key role in the Hungarian film industry throughout the next thirty years.

In the late 1980s, Hungary was pulling ahead of Czechoslovakia not only in terms of attracting US productions, but also in terms of liberal economic reforms, including the deregulation of film studios, transforming Mafilm into a provider of studio services to both national and foreign producers. The Hungarian divorce of studio services from film production emulated the earlier disintegration of major studios in the US and Western Europe, and it also anticipated post-socialist transformations in other east-central European countries, including Barrandov, which followed the same route after its 1992 privatization. Despite all the political and economic changes, the practices, issues and tropes identified in the example of *The Bridge at Remagen* returned regularly over the decades, some of them up to today: the kinds of conflicts and the importance of middle-level mediators in overcoming them; the positive impacts on local infrastructure and below-the-line employment contrasted with negligible impacts on national production; and above all the key role of national governments in attracting foreign investment.

PRAGUE VERSUS BUDAPEST: THE COMPETITION TO BECOME HOLLYWOOD'S EAST EUROPEAN BACKLOT

The pre-1989 US runaway production in Czechoslovakia and Hungary prefigured the key structural limits that the local screen industries face today: internal segregation dividing the production community between a large group of small local producers and a small group of large production service companies that have little interest in national cinema. During the privatization of the state-run studios in the 1990s, a number of former Mafilm and Barrandov production managers used their contacts to establish their own companies, and thus contributed to the new international production boom. In the first half of the decade, the Hungarians were faster in mobilizing and expanding their existing contacts and resources and building new infrastructures. A group of powerful service companies quickly emerged, updated their skills (e.g. American-style location scouting and budgeting, plus management of proven local crews and paperwork) and specialized in specific foreign markets: the largest, Transatlantic Media Associates (TMA), accompanied by the smaller Magic Media, Novofilm and Eurofilm, focused on US productions; Andre Szocs Production accommodated French projects; Focus Film dealt mainly with Italians, etc. Several high-budget and/or prestigious productions followed, including David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly* (USA, 1993), where Budapest played Paris again; Alan Parker's *Evita* (USA, 1996), where the city doubled as Buenos Aires, the second big project brought to Budapest by Andrew Vajna; *Spy Game* (dir. Tony Scott, USA/DE/JP/

FR, 2001) with Robert Redford and Brad Pitt; and another Vajna project *I, Spy* (dir. Betty Thomas, USA, 2002) with Eddie Murphy, where Budapest played itself. Despite all the successes, Hungary has, especially since the late 1990s, been increasingly perceived as a destination for 'low-budget, B-category television movies' and for 'spillover from Prague'.¹⁰ Mafilm's transformation into a public limited company and the privatization plan didn't proceed successfully and the company went bankrupt, which was followed by the closure of TMA and other service providers in the early 2000s, when a sense of crisis permeated the production service sector in Budapest (Sayfo 2020: 49). One of the reasons for this was the head-to-head competition with the nearby Barrandov Studios and the emerging group of service producers based in Prague, who were able to offer comparable or higher quality locations, studios and crews, and cheaper labour (Nadler 1994).

The development of Prague's post-1989 production service sector started slower than Budapest's, with the former being frequented mostly by smaller European projects in the early 1990s. Modestly budgeted, but significant exceptions were Steven Soderbergh's *Kafka* (FR/USA, 1991), starring Jeremy Irons, and a part of the TV series *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* (ABC, 1992–3), supervised by the *Star Wars* producer Rick McCallum, who settled in Prague after retiring from Lucasfilm in 2012 and has been running his own service company Film United there. While the potentially break-through shooting of *Mission: Impossible* (dir. Brian De Palma, USA, 1996), where Prague spectacularly played itself, created rather negative publicity due to mismanagement by the Czech service provider and the sloppiness or even corruption of the municipal administration, it served as a wakeup call to the local professional community, which came to realize that historical locations and a rich filming tradition are not enough to sustain business. The Czech foreign services boom really took off in 1996–8, making Prague 'a virtual Hollywood backlot' (Whiteman and Nadler 2004: 19) for the next eight years.

In 1998, a Prague-based production service provider Stillking Films (see below) expanded into big-budget productions, acting as a regional mediator for Hollywood studios wanting to shoot in countries such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. In a marketing campaign dubbed 'Shoot Europe', Stillking invited foreign studios to 'show us the scripts, we'll budget them for you, find the right locations and crew – and if you work with us you'll save between 30% and 50% compared to equivalent costs in the US' (Rosenthal 1998: 1). By the late 1990s, Prague was earning a reputation for quality and not just inexpensive film production services. Bigger projects were drawn to the city by its experienced crews, Barrandov's fourteen soundstages, and locations that could stand in for any European city or historical period. Consequently, a disproportionately large film-making community of five thousand professionals developed (Olsberg SPI 2006).

The boom years brought in major studio-backed productions including *Les Misérables* (dir. Bille August, USA, 1998) starring Liam Neeson and Uma Thurman; *Hart's War* (dir. Gregory Hoblit, USA, 2002) with Bruce Willis; *The Bourne Identity* (dir. Doug Liman, USA/DE, 2002) with Matt Damon, where Prague substituted for Paris and Zürich; the dieselpunk superhero movie *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (dir. Stephen Norrington, USA/DE, 2003) with Sean Connery; the action horror *Van Helsing* (dir. Stephen Sommers, USA, 2004) with Hugh Jackman; another superhero film, *Hellboy* (dir. Guillermo del Toro, USA, 2004); and Terry Gilliam's adventure fantasy *The Brothers Grimm* (USA/UK, 2005). The peak culminated with the super-productions *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch & the Wardrobe* (dir. Andrew Adamson, UK/USA, 2005) and the twenty-first Bond series movie *Casino Royale* (dir. Martin Campbell, UK/USA, 2006).

However, the boom started to slow dramatically after 2004, when Hungary, almost simultaneously with its accession to the EU, implemented an aggressive 20 per cent tax rebate scheme (on all costs spent in Hungary) explicitly meant to lure overseas producers from Prague to Budapest (Kit 2004; Whiteman and Nadler 2004: 19; MTI 2006; Cunningham 2010). Supposedly on Andrew Vajna's recommendation, the tax refund was inspired by – and mostly surpassed – the existing incentives in traditional runaway destinations such as Ireland and especially Canada, the pioneer of production incentives and the major destination for outgoing US productions, which at that time offered a combination of labour-focused 16 per cent tax credits and a variety of provincial incentives (Center for Entertainment Industry Data and Research [CEIDR] 2006; Olsberg SPI 2006). Hailed as 'the most cinema-friendly incentive package in the world' (Nadler 2006: 34), the Hungarian scheme thus contributed to the upcoming 'subsidy race' that was about to engulf the whole of Europe. Poised to soar in Hungary, foreign film investment fell 70 per cent in Prague between 2004 and 2005. A second slump saw foreign spending drop another 66 per cent in 2008. For the first time since 1992, income from international productions was less than from domestic productions (Olsberg SPI 2006; MK ČR 2010b). In the city's post-boom years, production service professionals suggested that the domestic film industry could not survive in a small country like the Czech Republic without investment from overseas producers, and the experienced labour pool shrank with many freelance crews migrating to non-film jobs (Holdsworth 2007; personal interviews).

Czech film industry leaders started a lobbying campaign soon after the introduction of the Hungarian incentives (cf. Dočekal 2006), but the right-wing conservative government as well as President Václav Klaus were not favourable to implementing an incentive programme and of conceiving of film as a strategically important industry. In 2006, a prominent UK consultancy was commissioned

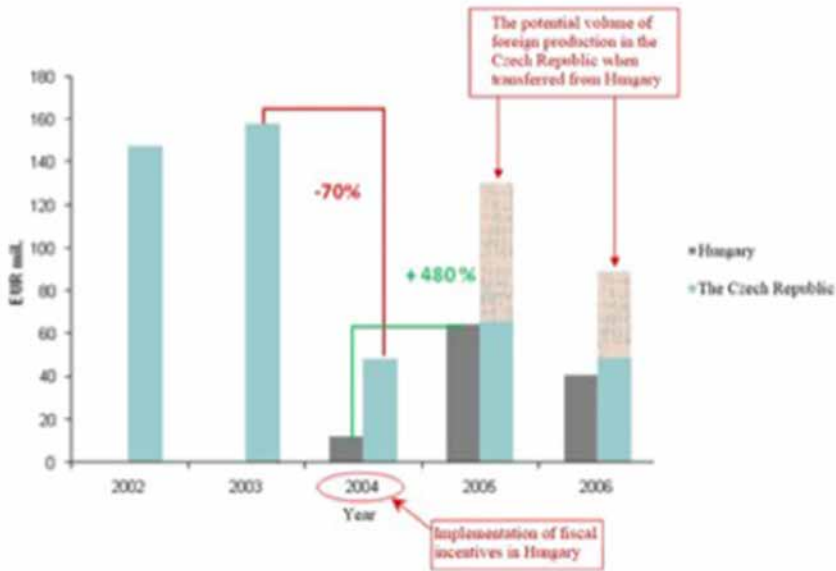


Figure 3.2 The drop in foreign production volume in the Czech Republic after the launch of the Hungarian tax rebate scheme in 2004. (Credit: MK ČR 2010b: 4.)

by the Czech Ministry of Culture to conduct an economic impact study of the Czech film industry to quantify the positive economic impacts of international film production and to lobby the national government to introduce a rebate programme (Olsberg SPI 2006). After prolonged and politically divided negotiations, the 20 per cent cost rebate scheme was finally approved by the successor caretaker government of Prime Minister Jan Fišer in October 2009 and took effect in June 2010 after approval by the European Commission. This made the Czech Republic a latecomer, joining the race at the time when seventeen EU member states had already implemented incentive schemes (and by 2018 all member states had such schemes in place). Although widely welcomed, the Czech policy was initially characterized by short-term thinking, with the total rebate budget negotiated year by year, and with a focus on attracting international projects individually, rather than on a long-term strategy designed to complement and develop local skills (Tizard 2014). In the first stage, the relatively low annual allocation of \$15 million–22 million in practice limited the number of projects eligible for rebates, again weakening Prague’s competitiveness and frustrating both Hollywood producers and local production service providers. After including the rebate programme in the new audiovisual act of 2012, the annual cap was finally raised in 2014 to \$35 million and in 2019 to \$56 million, though with no further guarantee of the allocation in future state budgets. The

Czech incentives gradually fuelled a new wave of international productions and had a positive impact on employment (Olsberg SPI 2014: 41). However, despite repeated negotiations with the local policymakers and politicians, Hollywood majors never came back to Prague, leaving the venue to US independents, TV networks and SVOD services, and European or even Asian producers. This has opened new opportunities for smaller production service companies specializing in individual countries or regions such as Scandinavia, while weakening the position of the Hollywood-oriented big players such as Stillking Films. While smaller European film and TV projects prevailed in numbers, the largest and most lucrative commissions have more recently been high-end TV and SVOD series,¹¹ both US and European (mainly British and German), mostly historical, fantasy and war dramas, including *The Musketeers* (BBC, 2014–16); the first season of *Genius* about the life of Albert Einstein (National Geographic Channel, 2017); historical fantasy *Britannia* (Amazon, 2018); *Das Boot* (Sky One, 2018–), a reboot of the famous 1981 film of the same name; the neo-noir fantasy *Carnival Row* (Amazon, 2019–) starring Orlando Bloom; and the adaptation of the famous bestselling fantasy literary series *The Wheel of Time* (Amazon, Sony, 2021–). Despite an interruption caused by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the two seasons of *Carnival Row*, serviced by Stillking Films, broke records with 230 Czech shooting days and local spending totalling \$133.8 million, which resulted in \$23 million in cash rebates (Czech Film Commission 2020b).

By contrast, Budapest has enjoyed considerable and relatively steady prosperity since introducing its (virtually cap-free) tax rebate programme (Barracrough 2013). It has responded to the Czech and other competitors, who have also been gradually increasing their incentives, by raising its tax rebate level from 20 to 25 per cent in 2014 and to 30 per cent in 2018, thus pushing competition to a new level (Zeevalkink 2014). The *Rambo* producer Andrew Vajna, who had been a key connection between Hollywood and Hungary, returned to Budapest and co-founded (along with the country's biggest developer and richest man, Sándor Demján) Korda Studios, one of Europe's biggest and most sophisticated production facilities, first announced in 2004 and opened in 2007 with six sound stages outside Budapest, with former Hungarian ambassador to the US András Simonyi as chairman. Other studios and high-tech post-production facilities soon followed, gradually turning Budapest into a major European destination for A-list Hollywood productions. New leaders have emerged in the local production services sector, namely Mid Atlantic Films, specializing in Hollywood blockbusters, and Pioneer Pictures, servicing UK and US TV shows, the latter also teaming up with the Prague leader Stillking to offer services together as 'Pioneer Stillking'. Mid Atlantic Films owner Adam Goodman likened the production service business to 'running a good restaurant':

The more people come here, the more buzz it generates, the more business we receive. We're now an established location. Since Hungary got its new tax rebate in 2004, which was instrumental in putting us on the production map, we've continued to draw business away from Prague.

(Curtin and Sanson 2017a: 159)

Indeed, high-profile commissions that earlier would have been filmed in Prague started flowing to Budapest soon after the introduction of rebates: Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (USA/CA, 2005); 20th Century Fox's fantasy *Eragon* (dir. Stefen Fangmeier, USA/UK, 2006); the sequel to *Hellboy*, which did not return to Prague (*Hellboy 2: The Golden Army* [dir. Guillermo del Toro, USA, 2008]); the apocalyptic action horror starring Brad Pitt, *World War Z* (dir. Marc Forster, USA, 2013); the 3D action adventure starring Dwayne Johnson, *Hercules* (dir. Brett Ratner, USA, 2014); *The Martian* (dir. Ridley Scott, UK/USA, 2015), whose interior sets were built in Korda Studios; *Blade Runner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, USA, 2018); and the special effects-heavy sci-fi *Terminator: Dark Fate* (dir. Tim Miller, USA, 2019). Budapest has also jumped on the high-budget TV series bandwagon, attracting shows such as *The Borgias* (Showtime, 2011–13) and *The Witcher* (Netflix, 2019).

After the introduction of the Czech rebate scheme, the volume of incoming production in Hungary did not stop growing; even in Prague's peak year of 2019, the international foreign production spend in Hungary was significantly higher (see Table 0.1, p. 34). According to Omar Sayfo, Budapest has solidified its position as the number one international production venue in the whole of Europe by treating the film industry as a 'national interest' and by concentrating immense power to influence political decision-making in the hands of a single person subordinated directly to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán: the late Andrew Vajna, who regarded increasing incentives and creating welcoming conditions for foreign investment as his key strategic goal (Sayfo 2020: 50). On a more practical level, Budapest's success has been attributed to the more flexible design of its tax shelter incentives. They allow for efficiently 'maximizing local spend' and also for adding foreign spend to the tax rebates (the cost of Hungarian labour when working outside of Hungary) as opposed to the cash rebates from Prague, where limited annual budgets and (at least initially) an unpredictable administrative mechanism deterred Hollywood majors (Curtin and Sanson 2017a, b). As of 2020, it seems that the financial stability and the administrative mechanism of the Czech policy have improved significantly and became more predictable, but – as the Czech Film Fund head Helena Fraňková admitted – the reputation of Budapest as a more Hollywood-friendly venue will probably persist without significant increases in both the percentage and the annual cap of the Czech

rebates (H. Fraňková, personal telephone interview, 30 September 2020). At the same time, the rivalry does not seem to be a zero-sum game; on the contrary, the Olsberg SPI assessment indicated that the introduction of the Czech rebate scheme in 2010 created a situation where both production centres have grown more or less concurrently, effecting in a 'quasi "single market" for inward investment productions', and in increasing worker mobility between the two countries (Olsberg SPI 2014: 40–1).

MEDIATORS BETWEEN WEST AND EAST

A typical Hollywood production coming to east-central Europe involves hundreds of crews shooting both at local studios and on location. Below-the-line personnel are mostly local, heads of departments are American or British, and above-the-line talent comes from the United States. For several months, talent and support personnel work for twelve hours or more per day, six days a week. Their face-to-face interaction can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts but permits them to observe each other, imitate their practices and learn by doing.

As studios and producers operate on an increasingly global scale, they must collaborate with personnel in a variety of locations, overcoming differences in language, culture and work habits. The key players in a Hollywood runaway production are typically the head of physical production (or vice president of production) at the studio, the producer, the line producer, the production designer, the location scout, the director, and the local service producer with her or his production managers. During shooting, the line producer is the studio's principal representative: s/he oversees the production on location. Line producers may hold little decision-making power, but American producers see them as experts on locations and local crews, whose opinions influence whether to shoot at a particular overseas site. Local production service companies and production managers are the main partners of incoming line producers. Together they form a cultural interface between Hollywood and local production centres, as they pursue maximum efficiency by engineering Hollywood-style working conditions.¹² Incoming line producers and local production managers are therefore key channels of knowledge transfer, enabling both parties to learn from each other. However, by achieving this mutually beneficial symbiosis and assigning other agents to distinct positions within the structure of the transnational team, they obstruct the access of local personnel to higher level positions.

After Barrandov Studios privatized, laid off most of its employees and started looking for foreign commissions in 1991, production services in Prague were still dominated by the former executives of Barrandov's communist-era Foreign Commissions Department. At this time, Prague was underdeveloped, with most overseas producers using their own crews and sending rushes to cities such as

London. Moreover, overseas producers required local intermediaries to help deal with local accounting and legal systems, as well as providing access to essential resources like labour, sets and locations. The state-socialist-era production managers who pursued these roles encountered significant difficulties in adapting to the new flexible regime. Many spoke little English, and their working habits and organizational culture were different from those of their new American partners. As former secret police agents, some struggled to come to terms with transparent negotiations and business practices.¹³

By the late 1990s, this older cohort who had focused on Western European productions was being replaced by younger players. Some of this new generation came from the US, the UK, France and Germany, with Briton Matthew Stillman's company Stillking the most successful of the new setups. The then thirty-year-old Californian David Minkowski came to Prague in 1995 to work on low-budget international productions. He teamed up with Stillman, marking the start of a twenty-year process that made him the most influential figure in the Czech production services industry. Minkowski's career advanced at a rate impossible to achieve in Los Angeles, a city in which, by his own admission, he would have been unable to secure high-ranking executive positions on prominent projects such as *Casino Royale* (2006) (Kandell 2007).

Foreign commissions required flexible, English-speaking workers. This development coincided with an estimated thirty thousand mostly young Americans relocating to Prague. Having formed social networks, some of these 'YAPS' – Young Americans in Prague – were hired by production service companies as managers to work alongside Czechs, most of whom had been employed by Barrandov during the communist period. The latter were reluctant to work the long hours common for Hollywood productions, however, so Minkowski sourced bright, eager youngsters working in the city's hotels and restaurants. According to one account, he would strike up conversations to test their English, and if they seemed smart enough to quickly learn a new, demanding job, he would ask if they wanted to work at Stillking. 'They always said, yes', recalls Minkowski. 'I mean who would choose to be a waiter or receptionist instead of doing movies?' Ten years later, most Stillking employees were under forty, and the Barrandov generation was largely gone (Kandell 2007).

My interviews suggest that overseas producers and Czech personnel mainly transferred organizational knowledge relating to the division of labour, pacing, problem-solving, work ethics and communication. Even below-the-line talent contended that they learned more managerial than technical skills. If technical knowledge was in fact mentioned, it did not concern film-making or technology but rather budgeting and accounting. This type of embedded organizational knowledge can be externalized during on-set interaction and internalized by

local suppliers through observation and imitation. Production managers serve as cultural mediators during this kind of transfer. Minkowski identified the need to train new production managers as the greatest challenge to the current system, estimating that financial and organizational services represent 80 per cent of Stillking's operations. Rather than re-educating veteran professionals, he picked young, English-speaking outsiders: 'In the areas of accounting, production management, coordination, assistant directors, [...] location management, you can train people who don't have any experience and you can put them in positions of authority, and if they are the right personality and have the right internal skills, they can learn it quickly' (D. Minkowski, personal interview, 19 May 2009). By the late 2000s, Czech production managers were self-sufficient, with Hollywood-style organizational skills firmly integrated into their daily routines.

Minkowski could not simply throw local young English speakers into skilled technical fields such as camera operation and lighting. Yet even in these areas, technical expertise was an important but inessential aspect of recruitment, as newcomers were assigned mentors from the older generation. He recalled the case of a gaffer who, although talented, 'drank a lot [and] didn't work more than twelve hours, even if he was getting paid overtime'. Although this gaffer's work ethic did not meet American standards, Minkowski felt apprentices might learn much from him: 'They didn't have his cultural history, so they weren't running into the same problems', he explained. Today, Minkowski added, these former apprentices are the top technicians in Prague (D. Minkowski, personal interview, 19 May 2009).

Rather than simply Czechs picking up Hollywood methods, these learning processes are bilateral. The importance of locational knowledge and mutual learning is spelled out by Tom Karnowski, a prominent line producer involved in international productions such as *Shanghai Knights* (dir. David Dobkin, USA, 2003) and *Everything Is Illuminated* (dir. Liev Schreiber, USA, 2005), shot in Prague, and *A Good Day to Die Hard* (dir. John Moore, USA, 2013), shot in Budapest. He explained that before deciding to travel to a foreign location, Los Angeles producers look at who has completed projects of similar size or type in the location in question. They also take local production practices into account. Karnowski recalled that while working on *Everything Is Illuminated* with an American director and cast, he became convinced that they should utilize the skills of as much local personnel as possible and 'make it like you would have a Czech film, [...] especially if we have a very low budget to work with' (T. Karnowski, personal interview, 4 December 2009). He therefore considered Czech production culture well suited to the improvisational techniques often used when shooting low-budget American films on location.

The necessity for any transnational production of brokering between different, often incompatible production cultures and work ethics was reported by Minkowski's counterpart and main Budapest-based competitor, Mid Atlantic Films co-owner and British expat Adam Goodman. Goodman has struggled to expand and rejuvenate the tight local labour pool, because some crews have built protective barriers around their inner circles: 'It's not arrogance or selfishness, but they worry about new blood. They worry about someone shining on set and then replacing them. It's a fundamental insecurity that the nature of this work breeds in the crew. You never want your current job to be your last' (Curtin and Sanson 2017a: 161). Both in Prague and Budapest, the massive influx of big foreign productions threatens to overwhelm the local crew base and creates a shortage of specific professions, for which – unlike in larger production centres in the US or UK – there is no straightforward solution in the way of formal schooling (many technical film crafts are not taught in vocational schools).¹⁴ The role of service producers is also to constantly search for the next generation of local crews and find ways to gradually move them into the inner circles.

As service production industries in both countries mature and internally diversify, it is becoming clear that US production requires a different approach to brokering than with Europeans, and that there are significant differences between production cultures among various European countries. Budapest's Proton Cinema, founded in 2003, has been working mostly with Scandinavians, but also Dutch, British and German producers. Proton's co-founder and producer Viktória Petrányi acknowledged that

There are huge cultural differences even among Scandinavian crews, [...] how a Danish crew is set up compared to a Norwegian crew, what is their connection to their salaries, to their working hours, what are their work morals. [...] There are differences in how they handle numbers, overbudget and savings. In some cultures, overbudget is a waste of money and a true sin which can never happen, in other cultures overbudget is [an] absolutely normal contingency issue. [...] Therefore, the cultural difference between Hungary and Scandinavia is even bigger. [...] You have to deal on [an] everyday basis with who is responsible for what. In Scandinavian crews, there are thirty to thirty-five people, in Hungarian [production service] crews fifty-five at least, and it's still not the US system, their crew is eighty at least, so it still isn't the Anglo-Saxon system. [...] In a Scandinavian crew, if you are responsible for something, you are really responsible, responsibility doesn't go out of your hands at all. In Hungary, it's very much hierarchy, which means that if there is someone in your department above you, you will always say: 'Let's ask the one above'. [...] That causes a lot of conflicts, who decides on what. They are always feeling that we are slowing decisions, we always have the feeling they have no idea

what they are doing, because every one of them makes a quick decision and acts on it, then many times it goes out of budget and out of control, so we think that this military structure we are used to is much more precise, which is true, but it's not that handy on the other hand.

(V. Petrányi, Q&A, the FIND Project field trip, Budapest, 28 March 2014)

Petrányi describes how her method of brokering between the incoming Scandinavian and the domestic Hungarian production cultures developed from a strict adjustment to a mixed, more balanced approach:

When we started, I thought we have to work it out, so that if a company comes with a project, you have to read their script and you have to adjust your entire cultural crew mindset to how they work, to say to your people 'we don't work our way now, this is a Danish crew and we have to fully understand their process and fully follow'. However, with the years working like that, I realized it is not entirely true. I still want to set up crews and entire process in a way that we think with them, but in many points, it doesn't really help to fix the Hungarian mindset, people feel that they are forced, they feel uncomfortable, because they are not used to that paced system. So, a good combination of the two is healthy, you have to create a fine balance. I am pushing my crew somewhere between the Hungarian system and the Scandinavian system: I downscale it, but I still keep it handy for the Hungarian mindset.

(V. Petrányi, Q&A, the FIND Project field trip, Budapest, 28 March 2014)

This comparison shows that service producers in Prague and Budapest are continuously looking for the right balance between adapting to foreign practices and preserving elements of the local ways. The largest Hollywood-oriented companies on both sides, Stillking in Prague and Mid Atlantic in Budapest, are more rigorous in adapting to the foreign models, while their smaller competitors, specializing in European productions seem to be more flexible, and thus also better prepared and more inclined to combine production services with international co-production and domestic production. That's why their potential for overcoming the internal segregation of the local work worlds seems higher.

A TWO-TIER, DEPARTMENTALIZED WORK WORLD

The global production networks theory mentioned above teaches us to avoid the pitfall of misrepresenting knowledge transfer and spillover effects enabled by spatial proximity, interaction and monitoring as an automatic, mechanistic and unidirectional process. Contrary to some journalistic accounts and government-commissioned reports, the neo-Marxist critique of the globalization of

cultural production claims that these effects are not mutually beneficial or innocent.¹⁵ Rather, it is important to recognize that effective knowledge absorption happens only when locals develop their own capabilities, and that learning is usually a reciprocal process, even though it may be perceived in negative terms due to the adverse effects it is seen to have on the local culture. We might also recognize that unlearning can be just as important as learning, especially in a post-socialist working environment. Nevertheless, most of my Czech interview subjects talked about learning as a positive career accelerator. Foreign line producers and department heads became conduits of tacit, embedded organizational knowledge, which local players attempted to internalize through direct observation and imitation.

Outside observers and policymakers concluded that knowledge transfer would lead foreign producers to gradually transform the practices and styles of the domestic industry. Such a change would come from sharing a labour pool and infrastructure, and from interaction, observation and imitation (EEIP 2009). That said, overseas producers appear to have little interest in reshaping local production – by, for example, hiring local above-the-line talent or hiring Czechs as department heads. In short, there is no clear evidence of any transformation resulting from the presence of foreigners in terms of local capabilities to develop higher-quality national film and TV content. Even the BBC – which practices runaway production via its international branches, BBC Worldwide and BBC America – has not promoted its public service ethics or aesthetics during production in Prague. As the experience of Czech crews working on *The Musketeers* (2014–) suggested, the presence of the BBC was felt in the division between British and Czech workers and its safety regulations. Czech support personnel did not even recognize the corporation as the producer of this series, noting no significant differences between working on a BBC venture or other Anglo-American projects.¹⁶

Second, it was anticipated that service providers would eventually diversify into producing Czech-language films. However, despite their occasional claims to the contrary, none of the Hollywood-centred production-service heavyweights – Stillking, Czech Anglo Productions, Milk & Honey Pictures, Film United and Etic Films – has branched out into original feature productions. Exceptions fall outside the core group focusing on Anglo-American commissions. They include companies servicing European film and TV productions, which, after the introduction of the special minority co-production support scheme by the Czech Film Fund in 2010, began acting as official co-producers applying for public funding. The most prominent representative of this group is Sirena Film, a company founded in 1994 by the late French producer-director Artemio Benki, specializing in servicing Scandinavian and French productions,

which also co-produced high-end costume dramas such as *A Royal Affair* (*En kongelig affære*, dir. Nikolaj Arcel, DK/SE/CZ, 2012), *Marguerite* (dir. Xavier Giannoli, FR/CZ/BE, 2015), *Personal Shopper* (dir. Olivier Assayas, FR/DE/CZ, 2016) and *The Dancer* (*La Danseuse*, dir. Stéphanie Di Giusto, FR/BE/CZ, 2016), and which in 2012 established a development division to start its own projects. However, Sirena's approach to minority co-production is not very different from their production services in the sense of having little to no influence in the development stage and limited participation of local workers in mid- or higher level, more creative positions (as noted in Chapter 4). Apart from production and location management, they usually contribute to make-up, costumes, sound recording and the art department, with the only significant department head having been the late production designer Martin Kurel, who won the French 'César' academy award for his work on *Marguerite*. Second, there are independent producers, whose main portfolio consists of Czech films, but who support their companies with a side business of servicing a specific type of foreign productions, such as Karla Stojáková's Axman Film, which works for South Korean producers, and Punk Film (Ondřej Beránek et al.), which services Indian productions. Irregular, mostly limited to practical services and dependent on narrow networks of contacts, such collaborations do not induce long-lasting knowledge transfers that would affect the quality of local products.¹⁷

Despite these exceptions, the dominant approach is that of Stillking, a company with solid knowledge of the Czech film-making community but evidently little interest in producing or co-producing Czech films. Minkowski, Stillking's production head, has met numerous Czech producers but never found a reason to work with them: 'We know them and they know us, [...] but we just didn't find something that makes sense. I don't think we are the first stop for them to come and produce Czech movies, because we are not really Czech producers.' He admits that the number of American films shot in Prague did not increase the importance of Czech films because 'there is no connection there' (D. Minkowski, personal interview, 19 May, 2009). On the other hand, Minkowski claims that Stillking trains local crews who can then improve the technical quality of the local product. However, this claim relates only to certain aspects of the production process – primarily art direction, special and visual effects, stunts and, to a lesser extent, makeup, costumes and camera operation. Stillking-affiliated production managers usually do not work on Czech productions, and Czech above-the-line talent and department heads do not work for Stillking.

The rate at which Czech personnel enjoy professional upward mobility within transnational crews differs from case to case, partially determined by the nationality, size and organizational structure of the co-producer. The smaller and more flexible the company and the specific production, the more Czechs hold positions

close to first-line decision makers, and vice versa. Specializing in bigger-budget projects, Stillking employs a large workforce but only a maximum of one Czech head of department, if any (in production design). In these large crews with their military-like organization, locals usually work under second-line decision makers while operating in a segregated labour sphere. They are largely unaware of the creative significance of their roles. According to Minkowski, this type of segregation was traditionally extreme in Barrandov's costume department, where a staff of mainly non-English-speaking women operated in a socially and spatially isolated workspace (Szczepanik 2013a).

Participation in international production has shaped the career trajectories of local film professionals in specific ways. Organizational concepts such as boundaryless careers (Jones 1996) and semi-permanent work groups (Blair 2001) go some way to explaining how this phenomenon has taken shape; however, these are limited as explanatory frameworks because they do not take into account the transnational processes that accelerate some workers' careers while restricting others to low-level positions, particularly those specializing in major Anglo-American productions. The latter find themselves in the paradoxical position of being well-paid mobile workers, thanks in part to a lack of union regulations, but with little chance of professional upward mobility. They remain trapped in a segregated work world, deprived of either the financial incentive to work on local productions or any realistic chance of the type of career development enjoyed by the foreigners travelling with international productions to Prague or Budapest.

American-born production managers are often fast-tracked. They typically skip arguably the two most challenging career steps: being given access to the industry and being socialized in aspects of it (Jones 1996). Instead, they acquire prized locational knowledge and develop marketable specializations at a rate impossible in Western media hubs such as London and Los Angeles. As Minkowski put it, 'I could have gone back to LA and become one of thousands fighting to work on films, or I could stay here and strike out on my own' (Minkowski quoted in Kandell 2007). By contrast, for local production management, the collapse of the old hierarchical state-owned studios brought uncertainty and unemployment in the early 1990s, but a rapid generational turnover granted some in their ranks swift access to the industry. The fortunate ones developed hybrid professional identities, claiming to 'work like Americans' without leaving their homeland.

To gain insight into the differences and mediating mechanisms that underpin communities of cultural workers, we can benefit from the self-reflexive comments of Czech personnel. Even those struggling to advance in the industry highlight their experiences of learning and self-fulfilment rather than any feelings

of exploitation. This sentiment is bound up with their construction of hybrid professional identities. Thus, the Czech soundman Petr Forejt described himself as becoming an American film-maker in Prague, distanced from the trivialities of a local industry in which wages and standards are low and improvisation and multi-tasking high (P. Forejt, personal interview, 17 June 2009). Similarly, Milan Chadima, a camera operator who has worked on such projects as *The Brothers Grimm* (2005), spoke of American producers helping him escape the frustrations of shooting low-budget Czech films and commercials (quoted in Baldýnský 2006). Coming closest to the privileged positions of the internationally renowned department heads were several Czech art directors, yet only one, Ondřej Nekvasil, has built what could reasonably be considered a career of international standing. Nekvasil switches between working on Czech arthouse fare, teaching production design and working as a production designer on mid-size foreign productions such as *The Illusionist* (dir. Neil Burger, USA, 2006), *Snowpiercer* (dir. Bong Joon-ho, KR, 2013) and *Underworld: Blood Wars* (dir. Anna Foerster, USA, 2016). Two factors underwrite Nekvasil's distinctive transnational career trajectory. A reputation-making Emmy for the two-part mini-series *Anne Frank: The Whole Story* (dir. Robert Dornhelm, UK/USA, 2001) brought him to the attention of American producers such as David R. Kappes, who hired him for the Sci-Fi Channel miniseries *Children of Dune* (dir. Greg Yaitanes, USA, 2003). He was also fortunate to specialize in the aspect of local production services most valued by American producers – set design and construction, which, in spite of high standards of craftsmanship, could be obtained up to 50 per cent cheaper in Prague compared to Los Angeles. I asked Nekvasil what he feels set him apart from those art directors who also work on medium- to big-budget productions but have failed to match his level of professional success. Nekvasil said nothing of differences in skill, but instead suggested that they may prefer the relative calm of the art department over the production designer's greater responsibility and face-to-face interaction with foreign producers (O. Nekvasil, personal interview, 11 June 2009). This example notwithstanding, it is clear that the careers of even the most successful Czech service production workers are characterized by striking limitations. Such individuals are not promoted to higher creative positions as department heads, especially on big-budget US productions. They work in other international media hubs – apart from Budapest – only when their employers move a project across borders, and rarely take part in prestigious domestic projects. With defunct or historically marginalized labour unions, they are unable to collectively negotiate better conditions, and thus remain locked in a segregated, dependent position in the professional hierarchy of the transnational production system.

In Hungary, the internal dynamics of transnational crews and below-the-line career patterns – similarly accelerated by the spatial concentration of high-end

productions but limited by the barriers between the locals and the incoming department heads – do not seem to be different at first sight. On the one hand, Adam Goodman remarks that the ‘opportunity to rub shoulders with the best of the best is unique to locations like Budapest. You won’t find the same opportunity in Los Angeles so early in your career’ (Curtin and Sanson 2017a: 161). On the other hand, he acknowledges the need to ‘always remind my local crew that they are not equal to their US or UK counterparts. The foreign department head is the boss. End of story. Deal with it. It’s never going to change. They have more responsibility and more authority’ (163). However, when looking inside the sector of European production services in Hungary, the local industry demonstrates a higher level of permeability and interaction between the domestic production and foreign service production, and also a higher degree of upward career mobility for local crew members than in the Czech Republic. This applies to Mid Atlantic’s competitor Pioneer Pictures, specializing in servicing British high-end productions, but occasionally producing minority co-productions (*Willow* [Vrba, dir. Milcho Manchevski, MK/HU/BE, 2019]) and Hungarian films, and even more so to Proton Cinema, which – apart from servicing Scandinavian productions – has been deeply invested in developing and producing A-list festival-oriented Hungarian arthouse films, mainly those directed by Proton’s co-founder Kornél Mundruczó, but also with first-time directors. In 2014 Viktória Petrányi reported that while Proton’s production department produces one feature as own content every two years plus two theatre shorts per year, their production service department manages three production services annually, which is more or less the same amount of time and work, because development and financing take more time than producing. According to Petrányi, international production services are having a long-term impact on Hungarian domestic production:

Both good and bad. We really learn a lot, and whatever we can, we are incorporating in our process, many good, flexible, handy things, but there is also backfire. People, who work a lot on Anglo-Saxon films, their responsibility steps are very divided, [...] and if you mix this American mindset with [a] European mindset, you have serious issues.

(V. Petrányi, Q&A, the FIND Project field trip, Budapest, 28 March 2014)

At the same time, Petrányi stresses the differences in the hierarchy and internal division of labour within transnational crews working on US and European productions:

We only do European projects. Our business idea was that we know how to do a low-budget handy content, which is what I incorporated in the service, not the

other way around. In the US hierarchy, there are plenty of Hungarian crews, but servicing the second line of decision makers, very far away from the first-line decision makers, which means they never really understand why they do what. In the European projects we are servicing, [...] I always try to put Hungarian creative crew members very high.

(V. Petrányi, Q&A, the FIND Project field trip, Budapest, 28 March 2014)

Although most of Proton's commissions are similar to those of Sirena and other European productions serviced in Prague, in terms of local workers' positions in the crew hierarchy, the difference is still visible, with examples of Hungarian cinematographers, costume designers, set designers, production designers and make-up artists occupying department head positions more frequently than in Prague. And vice versa: when examining recent films by the world-renowned and award-winning Hungarian directors Kornél Mundruczó (*Jupiter's Moon* [*Jupiter holdja*, HU, 2017]), László Némés (*Son of Saul* [*Saul fia*, HU, 2015]) and Ildikó Enyedi (*On Body and Soul* [*Testről és lélekről*, HU, 2017]), we can notice a significant presence of production service workers in the production, art, make-up, camera and special effects departments. This applies even more so to Pioneer's commercially successful original Hungarian production, *Budapest Noir* (dir. Éva Gárdos, HU, 2017), a mystery set in 1936. These instances of permeability and interaction are not representative for Hungarian cinema in general, but they illustrate that Hungary benefits from localized learning and knowledge transfers more extensively than the Czech Republic, thus confirming Omar Sayfo's claim that Budapest's domestic production and production service work worlds are more integrated than in Prague (Sayfo 2020: 54–5). According to a Pioneer executive, the incentive for production service companies to 'take more risk' and start developing their own domestic projects came largely from the post-2010, reformed direct public support system, which has been regarded as more flexible and transparent than the Czech policy (I. Takács, Q&A, the FIND Project field trip, Budapest, 28 March 2014).

CONCLUSION

To gain a better understanding of the contemporary production world of Prague (and Budapest), we need to take a more balanced approach than those focusing primarily on the supposed exploitation of the global labour force, as neo-Marxism does, or on city development strategies, as creative industries and cluster theories do. Cultural intermediaries, knowledge transfers and learning effects play major roles in a post-socialist, non-English-speaking country like the Czech Republic. As a result of historically specific realities – such as weak labour unions whose reputation among cultural workers still has not fully recovered

after being exploited by the pre-1989 communist regime, and the interventionist yet selective cultural politics of the state that has been slow to respond to industry needs – the experiences of local film workers tend to contradict the conclusions that might be suggested by theories of cultural imperialism or NICL. Instead, film workers criticize local policymakers and focus on learning and overcoming local mobility barriers rather than complaining of exploitative working conditions imposed by Hollywood producers. A new model of globalization is clearly needed if we are to gain deeper insight into the interplay between the global forces ‘from above’, such as GPN’s ‘flagships’, and those from below, such as local workers. As economic geography has shown, we also need to understand the relationships between local and translocal transactions (Malmberg and Maskell 2006), whose interaction allows for extra-local knowledge flows. In the case of the Prague screen industries, such an approach might involve examining mediating mechanisms and agencies such as the service production sector in terms of their interaction with local and international partners and competitors. The production culture in Prague is effectively a two-tier system split between production services and domestic productions, which are characterized by different salaries, career patterns and work practices. Recognizing it as such opens up new avenues of investigation. We might, for example, consider the extent to which multitrack globalization precipitates ‘departmentalized’ thinking, especially in service productions. We should also consider the implications of the ‘celluloid ceilings’ (Lauzen 2018) that have prevented many local workers from moving into local projects and securing higher level and more creative jobs.

Service production is a fully globalized and highly profitable industry sector, much larger than the national audiovisual production in countries such as Hungary and the Czech Republic, yet is mostly segregated from local production by different pay levels, budgets, production technologies and personal networks. Dina Iordanova coined the term ‘parallel industry’ to show that international production arriving to take advantage of cheaper labour and locations does not necessarily change the ‘timid provincialism’ of a small national cinema such as that of Bulgaria in the 2000s (Iordanova 2007). The same applies to Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, Riga and other Central and Eastern European production centres where rebate schemes have boosted incoming investment from the US and lately from Western Europe and even Asia, but where the domestic structure of production and national export potential have not changed much.

Kevin Sanson studied production services both in Prague and Budapest from an anthropological perspective. He concluded that service producers provide invisible logistical labour aimed at overcoming the immense obstacles and uncertainties of the global production system, ‘required to smooth over potential cracks and suture together what is an essentially fragile enterprise’ (Sanson 2018: 367).

The realities of production services thus provide a key to understanding the spatial dynamics of media globalization as an always ‘incomplete and tentative process’ (373). This chapter recasts this work of overcoming fundamental uncertainties and differences in the global production enterprise as another version of ‘highly circumscribed agency’. Stillking’s head of production, Minkowski, described his experience of ‘high circumscription’ (without using the term) in an interview he gave to Sanson in 2013, when he hyperbolically explained what he had to endure as an American producer in Prague to make the new Czech rebate system work for him:

I’ve become more of a lawyer and an accountant and a lobbyist. I spend so much time trying to understand how this whole process works from a legal perspective, from a financial perspective, from a policy perspective, and from a bureaucratic perspective. I spend time trying to figure out how to game it and goose it to secure work from foreign producers. I need to convince the government to support the film business. I need to figure out how to keep from losing business to other countries. All of this, instead of focusing on the production itself.

(Curtin and Sanson 2017b: 154)

This quote illustrates that the service producer’s agency is empowered and at the same time circumscribed by forces farther beyond her or his control than for independent producers, as described in the first chapter of this book: the unreliable political will to protect and support the local infrastructure and labour pool with ever-increasing incentives, the currency exchange rates, the next round of the international ‘subsidy race’ and all the unpredictable changes initiated in global media capitals that create new frictions in the distant peripheries. Unlike independent producers, however, the service producer also helps to reproduce the principles of circumscription downwards in the professional hierarchy, by guarding the ‘glass ceilings’ dividing the local and incoming crews.

Breaking Through the Eastern European Ceiling: Minority Co-Production and the New Symbolic Economy of Small-Market Cinemas

Most international film co-productions have ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ co-producers,¹ but until the 2000s, minority co-producers and minority co-productions tended to be marginalized or even discriminated against in terms of official recognition and public support, especially in smaller countries. Minority co-productions now seem to be gaining increasing attention from producers and policymakers throughout Europe, mainly in small national markets. Since around 2010, the situation has changed dramatically: there has been a clear trend towards launching special support schemes for minority co-productions.² This trend extends beyond the traditional centres of minority co-production such as those in Germany and France, which traditionally supported films being made in the less-developed cinema industries of small nations. Minority co-production programmes have been initiated in some smaller Western European countries, such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway. But they have also become popular among the post-socialist countries of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia and Albania, the only significant exception being Hungary.³ The publicity channels of national funds and institutes, and even of some critics, have started to identify with the successes of minority co-productions at international A-list festivals, treating them as if they were national films.

The Council of Europe made minority co-production easier with its 1992 Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production by lowering the threshold for the minimum contribution to 10 per cent (as opposed to the 20 or 30 per cent typical of most bilateral co-production treaties) and by introducing the concept of the ‘financial co-production’, which allows for a purely financial contribution by the minority co-producer.⁴ The ‘financial co-production’ model is based primarily on industry logic, or the real needs of independent producers, rather than on cultural diplomacy (as opposed to many bilateral co-production treaties), since it does not require the minority co-producer to demonstrate a creative

contribution on-screen, and thus avoids the trap of so-called 'Euro-pudding'. However, it still requires that the minority co-producer takes a share of the risk by contributing financially, gets a fair share of copyright and revenues, and meets the cultural criteria of the respective national selective support schemes. According to the co-production researcher Petar Mitrić, the Convention's 'European financial co-production' model encouraged smaller states to embrace a 'systematic policy of internationalization with the goal to train, strengthen and support national minority co-producers', and over time 'has significantly decreased the power asymmetry between the minority and majority co-producers in European co-productions and led to a more true collaboration between European producers' (Mitric 2020: 153, 155). The Eurimages cinema support fund, as a supranational financial instrument closely linked to the Convention, which is the legal basis for supporting co-production, rewards minority co-producing countries by paying back portions of their national public investment; this has been acknowledged by the Polish Film Institute as one of the motivations for participating in the scheme (Sikorska 2016). The trend has facilitated the emergence of production companies specializing in minority co-production and a new generation of 'transnational' producers for whom European financial co-productions are the main business model and who share the same liberal values, collaborative networks and practices of efficiently combining national and European subsidies (Mitric 2020: 159). However, the new arrangement has yet to be embraced by national audiences, as minority co-productions have thus far failed to establish a competitive advantage at the local box office.

There are two basic definitions of minority co-production: first, a financial definition that frames co-production from the perspective of the co-producer who provides less than the largest share of financing; second, a definition upheld by European as well as national regulators and funds, which sets out certain qualifying criteria for official co-production under the bilateral treaties and the Convention on Co-Production. The term 'minority co-production' is itself overdetermined by the nationalistic cultural policies embodied in the treaties as well as by the Convention itself. These policies calculate national economic and creative contributions in percentage shares. However, minority co-production is also recognized as a specific 'production technology' (Baltruschat 2010), a categorization recently adopted in the neoliberal discourse on the creative economy, and has grown into a burgeoning sector in which the concept of audiovisual production as a marker of national identity is now being redefined.

The reasons for the recent boom are complex, not least because its initiators include both independent producers and public institutions, and its implications have yet to be fully realized. Minority co-productions allow for higher budgets even in small market economies and enable financial risks to be distributed

among multiple partners and public institutions, thus affording the minority co-producer a 'risk-mitigated' or even a 'totally risk-free' position (Morawetz et al. 2007: 425). They herald opportunities for the unique transfer of knowledge, while allowing small national industries such as that of the Czech Republic to pool creative talent, foster more advanced production centres and work with world-renowned producers and directors.⁵ They potentially assign more creative responsibilities to the local talent base than foreign-service productions, which are also derogatorily known as 'runaways', to borrow a term from the vocabulary of the US labour unions (Miller et al. 2005). Crucially, they promise a break away from the prevailing conditions (or to use a gender studies term, the 'glass ceiling') that segregate local crews from high-level positions in the professional hierarchy, cut them out of the creative decision-making process and divest them of any say in the development stage.⁶ By involving well-positioned foreign partners, they facilitate cross-border distribution and marketing, multiply distribution channels, increase the visibility of films at prestigious festivals and ramp up the potential for accumulating higher symbolic capital.⁷ As Ann Jäckel contends: 'Without co-productions, many small countries would not have a film industry' (Jäckel 2003: 60).

But minority co-production also presents new challenges: the creative focus of a producer, and the sense of primary responsibility, can get lost if too many partners are involved, and precious public resources can be spent on pragmatic business ventures that may only have a tenuous link to the local culture, labour pool and audience. While often a very positive tool, the creation of transnational 'quid pro quo' networks of producers, PSBs and funds can also have a negative effect by forcing producers into honouring unwanted obligations. The onus of fulfilling the requirements of public funds can also lead to 'unnatural' co-productions, a version of the phenomenon known as 'Euro-pudding', that formulaic and bland mishmash of foreign storylines, characters, traditions, casts and locations. Interestingly, the cautionary critical discourse on the 'Euro-pudding' co-productions of the 1990s (Liz 2014) gave way to the notion of a 'good national film' (Halle 2008: 48–53), sometimes overshadowing the positive cultural impacts of cross-border collaboration and even framing co-production as a threat to national identity (see Bergfelder 2005: 323). The benefits and challenges of minority co-production apply to each of the four levels of 'cultural encounter' – production, institutional, content and audience – as distinguished in one discussion of television co-production collaboration (Bondebjerg et al. 2017: 80–1).

This chapter addresses questions about the structural position minority co-production occupies within the Czech screen industry ecology and shows how local independent producers are the key agents in cementing that position.

After providing a comparative overview of international co-production in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, and a basic structural analysis of the Czech co-production industry and policy practice, it moves to reconstructing the cautionary discourse of Czech producers on majority co-production. It thus switches to focus on the day-to-day collaborative processes being forged by local independent producers through an exploration of their strategic thinking and lived realities. As well as raising questions about the roles of knowledge transfer and symbolic capital accumulation, the chapter investigates the new power hierarchies and barriers that have begun to emerge from these transnational production practices. By reconstructing the role minority co-production plays in independent producers' business strategies and professional 'self-conceptions', it intends to balance the top-down structural perspective with a study of the 'industrial reflexivity' (Caldwell 2008) or 'industry lore' (Havens 2014) of the key co-production agents. As not all minority co-productions operate according to the same business model or the same pattern of production culture, the last section of the chapter distinguishes between three basic types of minority co-production based on an analysis of producers' strategic thinking: (1) the 'natural' type, (2) the quasi-foreign production services type, and (3) the long-term reciprocity type. I propose these as ideal types for facilitating the interpretation of the empirical data at my disposal. At the same time, they also bear features of the respondents' own conceptualizations and, as such, can be effectively combined in different ways to inform day-to-day producer practice. The research behind the chapter consists of qualitative analyses of semi-structured in-depth interviews with producers and directors, policy documents and several industry reports commissioned by the Czech Film Fund between 2006 and 2017 (Olsberg SPI 2006, 2019; Szczepanik et al. 2015; EEIP 2017).⁸

INTERNATIONAL CO-PRODUCTION IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

Individual countries in east-central Europe have taken significantly different approaches to international co-production since 1989. In Poland in the 1990s, European co-production had been long regarded with suspicion by national policymakers as deeply disadvantageous for national cultural and economic interests, which is why Poland ratified the 1992 European Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production only in 2002, later than Slovakia (1995), Hungary (1996) and the Czech Republic (1997). Polish producers treated minority co-productions (relatively frequent between 1993 and 1996) mostly as low-risk production services, 'aiming at quick earnings and avoiding difficulties related to the joint responsibility for the final film product, consciously resigning from distribution and prestige profits' (Gębicka 2006: 131). Until the early 2000s, the most active Polish company in the field of both majority and minority

co-production was Lew Rywin's Heritage Films (established in 1991), renowned as the production service provider for *Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1993), the minority co-producer of an adaptation of Tadeusz Konwicki's novel *The Little Apocalypse* (*La Petite Apocalypse*, dir. Costa-Gavras, FR/IT/PL/AT, 1993), Volker Schlöndorff's *The Ogre* (*Der Unhold*, DE/FR/UK/PL, 1996) starring John Malkovich, and Roman Polański's *The Pianist* (FR/UK/DE/PL, 2002), and the majority co-producer of high-prestige Polish projects such as *Europa, Europa* (dir. Agnieszka Holland, PL/FR/DE, 1990) and historical national spectacles such as *Pan Tadeusz: The Last Foray in Lithuania* (*Pan Tadeusz*, dir. Andrzej Wajda, PL/FR, 1999). Another strong minority co-producer at the time was the state-owned Tor Film Studio, known – aside from the films by its head Krzysztof Zanussi – for co-producing international films by Polish auteurs, including Krzysztof Kiesłowski's *The Double Life of Veronique* (*La double vie de Véronique*, FR/PL/NO, 1991) and the trilogy *Three Colours* (*Trois couleurs*, FR/CH/PL, 1993–4), Márta Mészáros's *The Seventh Chamber* (*La settima stanza*, IT/FR/PL/HU, 1995), and Agnieszka Holland's *Julie Walking Home* (DE/CA/PL/US, 2002) (Gębicka 2006: 132).

Since the establishment of the Polish Film Institute (PISF) in 2005, Poland has demonstrated the most consistent and strategic approach to minority co-production among the east-central European countries, supporting about seven foreign films a year from 2007 onwards (as opposed to three to five majority co-productions per year). PISF's first director Agnieszka Odorowicz declared the strategic goal of expanding international co-production at Berlinale 2006 (Wróblewska 2014a: 125–46). PISF has selectively invested in minority co-productions with a visible Polish creative contribution (most preferably the director), thematic element, original story material or prestigious projects with strong auteur name recognition. Polish minority co-productions of this period included Peter Greenaway's *Nightwatching* (UK/CA/PL/NL, 2007), Volker Schlöndorff's docudrama *Strike* (*Strajk – Die Heldin von Danzig*, DE/PL, 2006) about the formation of the Solidarity movement in Gdańsk shipyards, Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (DE/DK/FR/IT/PL/SE, 2009), Roman Polański's *Carnage* (FR/DE/PL/ES, 2011), and Ari Folman's *The Congress* (IL/BE/DE/LU/FR/PL, 2013), an adaptation of Stanisław Lem's story.

In 2016, PISF launched its widely promoted minority co-production scheme with a list of precise criteria and the decision-making power placed in the hands of a special selection committee, in its first term headed by the director Andrzej Jakimowski (known for *Tricks* [*Sztuczki*, PL, 2007] Poland's official submission to the Oscars). The new scheme's focus was supposed to be again on the Polish creative contribution, preferably the director (with special allocations for minority co-productions helmed by a Polish director),⁹ prestige auteur names, but also

on the potential for festival awards and on reciprocity with other public funds in the Central and Eastern European region and Germany (Sikorska 2016; Majer, Orankiewicz and Wróblewska 2019: 88–92; PISF 2020b).¹⁰ Poland's co-production activities boomed and diversified, and in the first half of the 2010s, Poland became the only Central and Eastern European country among the top-ten European minority co-producers (Talavera 2017: 31). Among well-established companies, Opus Film, known for *Ida* (dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, PL/DK, 2013) and *Cold War* (*Zimna wojna*, dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, PL/FR/UK, 2018), seems to be the minority co-production leader, recently involved in Fatih Akin's *The Cut* (DE/FR/PL/IT/RU/CN/TR, 2014), a Polish-set detective thriller *Dark Crimes* (dir. Alexandros Avranas, UK/PL/US, 2016) starring Jim Carrey and Charlotte Gainsbourg, which, however, received extremely unfavourable reviews, *Animals* (*Tiere*, dir. Greg Zglinski, CH/AT/PL, 2017) and *The Captain* (*Der Hauptmann*, dir. Robert Schwentke, DE/FR/PL/CN, 2017). Apple Film Production, another local 'tycoon', has since the 1990s specialized in film and TV co-productions with Central and Eastern European countries, including the latest Oleg Sentsov film *Numbers* (*Nomery*, UA/PL/CZ/FR, 2020). Within the large group of younger, Europeanized producers (as noted in Chapter 1), Lava Films has a strong track record of ambitious arthouse co-productions supported by Eurimages, including *Sole* (dir. Carlo Sironi, IT/PL, 2019) and *Wolf* (dir. Nathalie Biancheri, IT/PL, 2021). Most of these newer co-productions have enjoyed a wide presence at international festivals and resulted from long-term reciprocal relationships between producers, from their shared vision of the project's potential rather than from prioritizing Polish themes or catering to famous director names, as was the case in the 1990s and 2000s.

Hungary had the most extensive and diverse portfolio of minority co-productions among east-central European countries from the mid-1990s through the late 2000s, contributing to dozens of Turkish, French, Italian, Greek, German, Romanian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Slovak, Czech, Polish and British films. Although most of them are lesser known, the list of Eurimages-supported Hungarian co-productions includes Marco Ferreri's last movie *Nitrate Base* (*Nitrato d'argento*, IT/FR/HU, 1996), the animated movie *A Monkey's Tale* (*Le Château des singes*, dir. Jean-François Laguionie, FR/DE/UK/HU, 1999), *Gloomy Sunday* (*Ein Lied von Liebe und Tod*, dir. Rolf Schübel, DE/HU, 1999), Peter Greenaway's *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* (IT/ES/UK/NL/HU/LU, 2003–4), *The Trap* (*Klopka*, dir. Srđan Golubović, RS/DE/HU, 2007), and foreign films of Hungarian directors such as Márta Mészáros's *The Seventh Chamber* and Károly Makk's *The Gambler* (UK/NL/HU, 1997). The most active Hungarian companies involved in minority co-production included Focusfilm (participated in Italian, Greek and Turkish films), Tivoli-Filmprodukcio (Serbian and Slovak films), and

Objektív Filmstúdió, a successor of one of the 1980s Hungarian state-owned film units, called 'studios' (Varga 2012), that in the 1990s and early 2000s co-produced, among others, a group of Turkish films.¹¹

However, since the late 2000s and especially after the establishment of the Hungarian National Film Fund (HNFF) in 2011, Hungary has taken the opposite extreme position by almost ignoring the European-wide trend of supporting minority co-productions and won almost no Eurimages co-production grants in the late 2010s. More generally, Hungary has had one of the lowest shares, as well as one of the lowest absolute numbers, of both majority and minority co-productions in Central and Eastern Europe since the mid-2000s, falling behind even smaller countries such as Slovakia, Bulgaria, Croatia and Estonia (Talavera 2017: 26; see also Table 0.1, p. 34). Insiders explain this negative attitude to international collaboration in Viktor Orbán's Hungary by pointing to the tendency of the HNFF (as well as its successor since January 2020, the National Film Institute) to closely oversee supported projects in development and production (including the right to comment on two versions of the script and on the final cut), which would not be possible with a foreign producer in charge (V. Petrányi, Q&A, the FIND Project field trip, Budapest, 28 March 2014; I. Takács, Q&A, the FIND Project field trip, Budapest, 28 March 2014). The HNFF has recently supported about two minority co-productions per year, which had to compete under the same support scheme as national productions, including *6.9 on the Richter Scale* (*6.9 pe scara Richter*, dir. Nae Caranfil, RO/BG/HU, 2016), *That Trip We Took with Dad* (*Die Reise mit Vater*, dir. Anca Miruna Lazarescu, DE/SE/HU/RO, 2016), *Out* (dir. György Kristóf, SK/FR/HU/CZ/LV, 2017), *Ether* (*Eter*, dir. Krzysztof Zanussi, PL/UA/LT/HU/IT, 2018) and *Willow* (*Vrba*, dir. Milcho Manchevski, MK/HU/BE, 2019). Looking at these titles, it is difficult to identify a clear strategic pattern or key players among Hungarian producers focusing systematically on international co-production, with the exception of Proton Cinema, specializing in servicing and co-producing Scandinavian films including *The Last King* (*Birkebeinerne*, dir. Nils Gaup, 2016, NO/DK/SE/IE/HU), and Mirage Film Studio, whose features portfolio includes almost exclusively international co-productions (including *That Trip We Took with Dad*).

Until 2009, Czech cultural policy had a long-standing tendency of focusing solely on national films. During this era, the Czech Film Fund's board considered majority co-productions as simply national, thus marginalizing or entirely ignoring their foreign elements, while minority co-productions, by virtue of being perceived as 'foreign', were denied national support (MK ČR 2010a: 64). Foreign production services, on the other hand, were until 2009 viewed as an industry like any other, falling completely outside the official remit of film culture.¹²

As noted in Chapter 3, after Hungary introduced its incentive programme in 2004, at least 70 per cent of the annual volume of foreign production left Prague in the following year. Although it rose again significantly after the Czech Republic introduced its 20 per cent rebate programme in 2010, the major Hollywood studios never returned. Since 2010, dozens of British, French, German and Scandinavian projects have partially replaced American blockbusters, while US producers have kept coming with more moderate independent projects and high-end TV series. Yet, while foreign location/service production is still the strongest sector economically (EEIP 2017), it is also the most dependent on global trends, particularly with regard to changes in labour prices and competition between incentive programmes, termed ‘subsidy disease’ by some critics (Morawetz et al. 2007).

The newly developing subsector of minority co-production represents a hybrid between the foreign production services and majority co-productions traditionally considered national films. Since 1993, two to four Czech minority co-productions have been produced annually, with several winning Eurimages grants, but some being just production services with no significant share of copyright or creative contribution.¹³ The Czech Film Fund, however, did not begin supporting minority co-productions, apart from a few Slovak films, until 2009 (the Slovak film market held a special status due to the common history and close cultural ties between the two countries, and the Slovak Audiovisual Fund as well as the Slovak Culture Ministry supported numerous Czech films in exchange).¹⁴ Czech producers – unlike their Polish counterparts – did not strategically invest in well-known foreign auteurs for symbolic capital profit, with perhaps just two exceptions, Nikita Mikhalkov’s *The Barber of Siberia* (*Sibirskiy tsiryulnik*, RU/FR/IT/CZ, 1998) and *Paris 36* (*Faubourg 36*, dir. Christophe Barratier, FR/DE/CZ, 2008).¹⁵

In the 1990s and 2000s, Czech cinema was not perceived as a potential minority co-producer. However, Czech films were supported by minority co-production financing from France and Germany, countries which recognized that the local system of public subsidies was not fully developed. In the 1990s, the French Centre national de la cinématographie (CNC) supported movies such as *Razor Blades* (*Žiletky*, dir. Zdeněk Tyc, 1993, CZ/FR), Jan Švankmajer’s *Faust* (*Lekce Faust*, CZ/FR/UK/DE, 1994), Petr Václav’s debut *Marian* (CZ/FR, 1996) and Jiří Menzel’s *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* (*Život a neobyčejná dobrodružství vojáka Ivana Čonkina*, UK/FR/CZ/RU/IT, 1993). The latter was initiated by British producer Eric Abraham, who subsequently worked closely with Jan Svěrák on his six features, starting with the Oscar-winning *Kolya* (*Kolja*, CZ/UK/FR, 1996). In the 1990s, the German public service broadcaster ZDF co-financed several Czech films (including

The Return of the Idiot [*Návrat idiota*, dir. Saša Gedeon, CZ/DE, 1999]) and in the 2000s, the German Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung (MDM) fund supported Bohdan Sláma's films co-produced by Negativ, the most established Czech arthouse company, and the legendary German producer Karl Baumgartner (*Something Like Happiness* [*Štěstí*, CZ/DE, 2005] and *A Country Teacher* [*Venkovský učitel*, CZ/DE/FR, 2008]).

After around 2000, when the transformation of the national film industry might have been perceived from the outside as complete, France and Germany naturally started expecting reciprocal support from the Czech Film Fund; however, the favour was not returned until the early 2010s.¹⁶ Even the Polish Film Institute supported several Czech films in the late 2000s (e.g. *The Karamazovs* [*Karamazovi*, dir. Petr Zelenka, 2008, CZ/PL]), but after receiving no significant contribution from its counterpart, stopped doing so for a couple of years. According to the prolific minority co-producer Pavel Berčík, PISF's unofficial 'embargo' on Czech films was lifted only when solid reciprocal ties were established between Czech and Polish producers in the early 2010s (see Berčík 2012: 105). At the time of the introduction of PISF's special minority co-production scheme in 2016, Czech producers were again among priority partners (Sikorska 2016), with Polish support granted to Jan Hřebejk's trilogy *Garden Store* (*Zahradnictví*, CZ/SK/PL, 2017), produced by Viktor Tauš, and the successful arthouse title *Winter Flies* (*Všechno bude*, dir. Olmo Omerzu, CZ/SI/PL/SK, 2017).

By the end of the 2000s, a sense that the Czech production system desperately needed to expand beyond its provincial borders by building broader transnational collaborative networks, and an acknowledgement that a strategy of supporting minority co-production was the only way to achieve this, intensified among the younger generation of producers. In 2009, the ACE Producers network held a meeting in Prague during which the lack of a minority co-production support scheme was widely discussed.¹⁷ The first Czech minority co-production to receive public funding was a Polish film entitled *Yuma* (dir. Piotr Mularuk, PL/CZ) in 2009 (the film was actually only completed in 2012). In 2010, shortly before the Cannes IFF, the Czech Film Fund finally announced a new support scheme, allocating an annual budget of about €1 million to €2 million to minority co-productions, effectively lending support to roughly five to twenty projects per year. Two years later, the national PSB's newly established 'Film Centre' joined several minority co-production projects for the first time. Also in 2012, the first significant success at an A-list festival came when the Danish majority co-production *A Royal Affair* (*En kongelig affære*, dir. Nikolaj Arcel, DK/SE/CZ, 2012) – shot mostly at Czech locations and supported by a rebate programme and a minority co-production grant – received two Silver Bears (Best Script and Best Actor) at the Berlinale. The film's Czech co-producer was Sirena, an experienced foreign

production service provider which has since become the national leader in higher budget minority co-production. The success of the film changed the official perception of minority co-production and helped to further develop the special support scheme.¹⁸ In the late 2010s, the volume of minority co-productions increased and their geographical reach diversified, with new partnerships being established in Scandinavia and across Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, Romania, Slovenia, the Baltic states and Georgia, while the producer strategy became more focused on earning symbolic capital at festivals. A group of younger- to mid-generation producers quickly acquired minority co-production skills, contacts and reputations, including Jiří Konečný (Endorfilm), Pavel Berčík (Evolution Films), Viktor Tauš (Fog'n'Desire), Karla Stojáková (Axman Production) and Jan Macola (Mimesis Film). In addition, some older companies broadened their scope of activities to enter more minority co-productions, including Negativ and MAUR film (the latter specializing in animation).

MINORITY CO-PRODUCTION AS A SOURCE OF FIELD-SPECIFIC SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

After the national budget for film funding stabilized before almost doubling in 2016,¹⁹ the Czech Film Fund significantly increased its minority co-production support. It started by opening two calls instead of one from 2015, with the annual allocation growing from €100,000 (2013) through €1.1 million (2015) to almost €2 million (2016, 2017). Additionally, the number of supported minority projects rose from four (2013) to eighteen (2015), twenty-one (2016) and twenty-three (2017), including feature fiction, documentaries and animation films. At the same time, the Fund reconsidered its expectations and requirements, declaring majority and minority co-production to be its strategy for 'increased inter-connection of Czech cinema with international film production', and for 'gaining valuable creative and technological experience and attracting higher visibility for the Czech film industry in (not only) European markets' (SFKMG 2017). More specifically, it claimed that the support of minority co-production heightened the international competitiveness of Czech films by facilitating knowledge transfer and reciprocal ties with foreign funds, including the potential of winning more Eurimages grants. In its regular press releases explaining decisions in the minority co-production calls, the Fund has also referred to the increasing number of Czech creative contributions beyond the usual sound recording and sound or image post-production (e.g. actors, production designers, editors, composers), reciprocity between producers and the quality of the local distribution strategy that would make the titles more visible to Czech audiences.

The Fund's approach is relatively inclusive. It expects a significant creative contribution on the part of Czech minority co-producers, claiming to give

preference to 'authorial participation of Czech talent' over mere production services, and more weight to longer-term reciprocal collaboration between producers and funds. However, in line with the 'European financial co-production model', it does not require any on-screen representation of Czech language or themes. Unlike MDM and the Polish Film Institute, for example, the Czech Film Fund does not require the minority co-production grant (either in full or most of it) to be spent within the national territory or additional investment from other local sources to be raised (PISF 2020b). Such an approach thus welcomes both higher budget mainstream and lower budget arthouse projects, either from well-positioned Western European or under-capitalized Eastern European producers.²⁰ It also appeals to foreign projects that boast strong auteur names, festival ambitions, high production values and a commercial business plan (with or without specific Czech attributes). To that end, the Fund has expressed its strategic willingness to overcome the marginal position occupied by Czech cinema in Europe both in market and cultural terms. The latest step in co-production policymaking is a new arrangement between the Czech and Slovak Funds and the respective producers' associations on the so-called 'parity' of co-productions, within a fluctuation scale of 40 to 60 per cent. In this context, 'parity' means that both countries will accept their co-production shares – if they each exceed 40 per cent – as majority national projects that are eligible for respective national support, thus leaving more money for 'truly' minority projects (SFKMG 2019). The agreement reflects the long history of co-production with Slovakia and also the higher level of mutual creative collaboration, understanding and trust than with any other partners.

However, the fact that public funds have started recognizing and supporting minority co-productions does not mean that national audiences have done the same. Marketing minority co-productions in national markets seems to be quite difficult, largely because audiences do not recognize the minor presence of Czech actors and locations or the limited contribution of creative personnel as creating added value. Publicity referring to the festival successes of minority co-productions is directed instead at the international professional community and the politicians that approve the national support schemes used to fund them.²¹ To use Bourdieusian terminology (Bourdieu 1996), the symbolic capital gained by the presence of minority co-productions at international A-list festivals has managed to circulate within the field of cultural production, but has failed to extend to the wider public or translate into higher box office revenues.

Before moving to the main subject of minority co-production practices, the pre-existing discourse of producers on majority co-production needs to be reconstructed to position this new production technology within the context of both the broader industrial ecology and the local professional community.

CAUTIONARY TALES OF MAJORITY CO-PRODUCTION

Interviews with producers and directors suggest that majority co-production – a well-established practice that predates the 1990s – is perceived as a necessary but ambivalent practice. As the experienced producer of award-winning arthouse films Ondřej Zima suggests, a Czech film budget exceeding €1 million will require some kind of international co-production due to the small size and limited resources of the Czech market (O. Zima, personal interview, 7 December 2017). Other members of his generation of mainstream arthouse producers in their thirties and forties who target international festivals and markets acknowledge that the small size of the national market and the marginal position of Czech culture require them to develop projects for international audiences. They see the benefits of attending different kinds of international workshops, pitching forums and co-production markets, places where they receive constructive feedback from foreign script advisors and peers that helps to enhance their screenplays. Viktor Tauš, perhaps the most vocal representative of this approach, claims that systematic collaboration across national borders is essential for facilitating cross-border circulation and keeping European art cinema alive, and ‘the only honest way to develop film projects, especially those that are more artistically ambitious’ (Szczepanik 2016a: 132).

However, most Czech producers and film-makers, including those who have met with success and have international experience, tend to express scepticism, being of the view that majority co-production is a necessary evil. Just as they are eager to share colourful stories of failure or painful compromise, they are also critical of how co-production deals and foreign support schemes influence original creative visions by pushing producers to pragmatically spend shares of their budgets in foreign territories and incorporate foreign story elements, crew members, cast and locations. Co-production financing means that all production services are usually more expensive and that all processes take more time, starting with the development stage.

Several of the interviewed producers and directors recalled how their failure to get a Eurimages grant or to find a reliable foreign (usually Western European) co-producer actually helped their projects in terms of preserving producer autonomy and honouring the director’s creative vision. They expressed satisfaction in finding ways to avoid pragmatic adjustments, even if it meant drastically scaling down budgets. Examples include a critically acclaimed historical film *Protector* (*Protektor*, dir. Marek Najbrt, CZ, 2009) and Bohdan Sláma’s *Four Suns* (*Čtyři slunce*, CZ, 2012), both entirely national productions initially planned as Czech-German co-productions, *Lidice* (dir. Petr Nikolaev, CZ/SK, 2011), a collapsed co-production with a Polish partner, and *Lost in Munich* (*Ztraceni v Mnichově*, dir. Petr Zelenka, CZ, 2015), where an unsuccessful application for

a CNC grant and a failed negotiation with a French co-producer made it into the film's story as a parodic subplot. Others cited the advantages of availing of modest foreign public support, while cleverly resisting attempts to make adjustments detrimental to the original vision (e.g. the Czech-Polish co-production *The Karamazovs*, 2008).

The tales of failed co-productions are supported by the more general 'industry lore' of unbridgeable national differences (with potential co-producing countries such as Poland, Germany and Scandinavia), with the significant exception of Slovakia. An older-generation arthouse producer described the danger of compromising creative choices this way:

A consequence of accepting a co-producer's money is that he may get deciding influence and spoil the film, because you contractually give him the right to do that. [...] I can't imagine giving an experienced director a French female editor by force, just because of money – that's bullshit. That's the danger of co-productions. It is better not to have such a co-producer influencing your creative vision of the film. You need to eliminate his influence, and if it is not possible, then it is better to get rid of him. It's better to shoot a film for 20 million crowns instead of 30.

(A2 producer, 7 November 2014)

On the other hand, the same producers characterize the Czech Republic as insufficiently attractive for co-producing partners, either due to the lack of international appeal in terms of commercially successful directors and actors or the paucity of widely resonant cultural and political themes. Generally speaking, a deeply rooted sense of scepticism prevails, as especially borne out by ambitious projects with high production values that required financing beyond Czech and Slovak sources.

One of the most notorious cases of a troubled co-production is the Czech-Slovak-Polish-US-Israeli film *In the Shadow* (*Ve stínu*, dir. David Ondříček, CZ/SK/PL, 2012), a neo-noir-style crime thriller set in Prague during the late Stalinist period featuring the German actor Sebastian Koch (best known for his role in the 2007 Oscar-winning *The Lives of Others* [*Das Leben der Anderen*, dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, DE, 2006]) (Figure 4.1). Parts of the Prague settings had to be shot in Poland – to meet the Polish funds' requirements – and historically specific details of the story needed to be toned down to foreground a more general, 'good versus evil' story. Boasting relatively high production values (a budget three times higher than the local average), the film won eleven Czech Film Academy Awards and was praised by local critics for its elaborate visual style. However, it was a box office flop internationally, especially in neighbouring Poland, where expectations were high due to the traditionally positive reputation



Figure 4.1 Sebastian Koch as Major Zenke, a GDR detective and former Nazi in *In the Shadow* (*Ve stínu*, dir. David Ondříček, CZ/SK/PL, 2012). (Credit: Lucky Man Films.)

of Czech films among Polish film buffs. The Czech producer-director David Ondříček acknowledged a deep dissatisfaction with the co-production process, mainly with the Polish partners, a young production company that supposedly failed to meet administrative obligations tied with the Eurimages grant, and with the film's US co-producer and sales agent, which reneged on its commitment to provide the film with an adequate marketing campaign.²² The resulting cautionary tale that circulates in the Czech production community, then, is one of unpredictable dangers when working with unproven foreign partners and of painful compromises that negatively impact the original creative vision, particularly when too many stakeholders have their say.

The case illustrates how a lack of mutual understanding, trust and agreement on a shared vision among co-producing partners can threaten to destroy even projects that are extremely well prepared in terms of international financing and production logistics.²³ *In the Shadow* marks a turning point in the history of Czech co-production practice: a shift from the strategy of developing ambitious high-budget films towards more modest co-productions and, especially, minority co-productions. In 2012, the year of the film's premiere, this critical about-turn received a unique fictional treatment. *Negativ*, a Czech company that has the most extensive experience and credits in arthouse majority co-production in the local market, released a self-referential parody of European co-productions



Figure 4.2 Josef Polášek as himself, crossing the Czech-Polish border in the parody on international co-production, *Polish Film* (*Polski film*, dir. Marek Najbrt, CZ/PL, 2012). (Credit: Negativ Film Productions.)

jokingly entitled *Polish Film* (*Polski film*, dir. Marek Najbrt, CZ/PL, 2012). The film follows a group of actors from the Czech city of Brno that takes part in a fictitious Czech-Polish co-production of a film about their real selves. In an example of art imitating life, great fun is poked at the requirement for some of the film's Brno settings to be shot in Kraków locations just to meet Polish grant requirements (Figure 4.2).

PRODUCERS' STRATEGIC THINKING AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER: THREE TYPES OF MINORITY CO-PRODUCTION

In the same year of 2012, Czech producer Pavel Berčík from Evolution Films, a company specializing in minority co-production, wrote about the Czech practice of minority co-production as part of a commission from a research project investigating globalizing production cultures (Berčík 2012).²⁴ In an account of rare reflection, he distinguished several criteria of 'co-producibility' as a way of explaining why he and his colleagues chose to become minority co-producers. The first type of *natural* co-productions – characterized elsewhere as being based on 'true love' (Morawetz et al. 2007: 426) – arise from a cultural affinity between the minority co-producer and the director's style or the story material. This mutual relationship is rooted in providing opportunities for the minority co-producer's

creative input, which may (but does not have to) lead to the involvement of Czech characters, elements of the nation's history or its local settings.

The motivating factor for the 'true love' co-producers is the chance to become involved in the earlier stages of the production process, ideally from the script development phase. Berčík states that his main criteria for becoming a minority co-producer are: an attractive director with an interesting track record, a theme that can potentially appeal to all the co-producing countries and knowing that he will have a significant enough say to make a substantial contribution to the resulting quality of the film. He gives a concrete example by explaining why he joined *Yuma*, a story about the post-socialist economic transformation in the Polish-German borderland region. He recounts how he came to be involved in developing the screenplay:

I wanted to be a part of the film, which speaks about the wild 1990s in an entirely honest and open way, because there was no such film in the Czech Republic at the time. I also knew that the director Piotr Mularuk has a talent to make this story attractive for a wide public, which he did in the end.

(Berčík 2012: 105)

Berčík drew on Czech public support assisted by the in-kind contributions of two local post-production studios, while also employing Czech sound personnel and the renowned film-music composer Jan P. Muchow. Since then, sound recording and sound post-production have become the most typical creative contributions of Czech minority co-producers, capitalizing on the good international reputation and low prices of Czech sound designers and studios. When producers want to take advantage of the Czech rebate programme, they move some part of the studio or location shooting to the Czech Republic. In this case, a Czech production designer, art director or even a DOP may be assigned. Czech creative input may further extend to include image post-production, the musical score or cast members.

Interviews with producers suggest that this kind of smaller minority co-production is the product not only of a generational change in post-socialist Europe but also of the recent boom in international workshops and industry panels, such as EAVE, Producers on the Move, ACE and ScripTeast. Producers use festivals and workshops to build transnational networks of contacts that allow them to stay up-to-date and find projects that correspond to their aesthetic sensibilities and business strategies.

A second type of co-production is driven primarily not by a cultural affinity for themes or directorial talent, but rather by the decision of the majority co-producer to shoot in a certain country for financial or artistic reasons. This

quasi-foreign production services type of minority co-production potentially invites criticism from other industry sectors, not least because production-service companies tend to exploit the label of minority co-production in a very pragmatic way to access public grants. Typically, this kind of high-end projects, usually of French, British or Scandinavian origin, is attracted by the rich cultural heritage and high culture of Europe, but not so much the themes of everyday life on the Continent. Western European projects often travel to Eastern Europe to take advantage of historical locations, financial incentives and cheap labour ahead of seeking creative help. According to Petar Mitrić, who cites an observation made by the executive director of Eurimages Roberto Olla, there has been 'an increasing tendency of mostly French, but also some Scandinavian producers to reduce their minority co-producers to service providers and gap financiers whenever they can' (Mitric 2020: 163). In this arrangement, the Czech co-producer is basically employed as a line producer, with responsibilities restricted to physical production and location shoots that are more akin to standard production services – despite the official co-production certification being granted. Local creative labour rarely makes any significant impact, while the involvement of Czech producers in the process of development is either very limited or entirely absent.

Since the early 2010s, Prague-based Sirena has been a prominent example of a company pursuing such a strategy. After the Czech Film Fund launched its minority co-production scheme, this production-service provider (established in 1994 by Paris-born journalist-film-maker Artemio Benki) ventured into competition for the Fund's grants to co-finance relatively high-budget, high-prestige Western European projects. The more notable of these were French-Czech co-productions *Personal Shopper* (dir. Olivier Assayas, FR/DE/CZ, 2016) and *The Dancer* (*La Danseuse*, dir. Stéphanie Di Giusto, FR/BE/CZ, 2016), films that ended up receiving both rebates and grants from the Fund.²⁵ Since both films were screened in Cannes (*Personal Shopper* in the main competition, *The Dancer* in the 'Un certain regard' section), they attracted extremely positive publicity in the local trade press. Sirena was praised for focusing on artistically ambitious European projects and for facilitating the transfer of symbolic capital, unlike its Prague-based competitors among production service companies who pragmatically concentrate on more commercially-driven runaways.

However, pragmatic 'follow the money' collaboration is not limited to higher budget Western European films. Minority co-productions that originate in post-socialist countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Romania tend to have lower budgets, deal with the contemporary themes of everyday life and employ a minimalistic style. As such, co-production grants are more important for them than rebates. The Czech producers involved in this kind of minority co-production

tend to come from the domestic arthouse production sector rather than from the production services end. But the experience of assessing grant applications for the Czech Film Fund has shown that they often rely on the same level of minimal, well-proven services as the high-budget variant of the *quasi-foreign production services type*.

A third type of minority co-production is directly related to international collaboration based on *long-term reciprocity*. Mutual trust between producers from different countries is the main precondition and sometimes the main reason for entering into new co-production projects, sometimes referred to as 'reciprocal films'. Producer Viktor Tauš is proud of having reciprocal ties with his Polish partners:

When you need help from somebody, you have to be prepared to pay it back. That's how things work in any healthy relationship. The reciprocal projects ought to be supported by funds. The funds should ask producers to be selective in terms of carefully choosing with whom they are willing to collaborate and to cultivate the mutual relationship. I don't believe in one-off projects, I believe in joint growth. In the past, Czech producers often found partners in Poland, they got Polish Film Institute grants for their films, but they never [until recently] participated in the production of a Polish film in exchange.

(Szczepanik 2016a: 137)

Fog'n'Desire Films, Tauš's company with his Slovak partner Michal Kollár, was the majority co-producer of, among others, *The House* (*Dům*, dir. Zuzana Liová, SK/CZ, 2011), *Clownwise* (*Klauni*, dir. Viktor Tauš, CZ/LU/SK/FI, 2013) and *Red Captain* (*Rudý kapitán*, dir. Michal Kollár, CZ/SK/PL, 2016), as well as the minority co-producer of *The Red Spider* (*Czerwony paják*, dir. Marcin Koszałka, PL/CZ/SK, 2015). This track record is a result of Tauš's long-term reciprocal collaboration with Slovak and Polish producers (SokolKollar and Mental Disorder 4, respectively), which compensates for the lack of certainty and continuity characteristic of the fragmented, undercapitalized, small-market production system. It is also a way of cultivating a more continuous producer strategy, facilitating two-way knowledge transfer and pooling financial as well as creative resources with trusted partners. Tauš encourages his peers to do the same and lobbies the Czech Film Fund to introduce more systematic rewards for reciprocal projects.

However, there are also opponents of this reciprocal strategy. They consider reciprocity a dangerous practice, which can potentially channel public money into projects of doubtful quality with only superficial links to national culture and the film-making community. A producer of commercial films aimed exclusively at the national market, someone who is critical of the system of public support, expresses his frustration with reciprocity:

When you get into this structure of co-production financing, you realize that it's a big ... maybe not dirt, but something like that. [...] When you prepare a co-production, you separately meet perhaps three producers who tell you frankly: 'OK, so I will help you with this project, but you will have to help me with another one'. It means I will apply for a Czech grant, and if I get it, he will do the same. He must somehow like it, but it doesn't mean he'd say 'Wow, I will fight for your project until my last breath'. It is just a dirty business.

(anonymized C2 producer, 7 November 2014)

Although minority co-productions can be sorted into different types according to budgets, financial contributions, collaborative arrangements and motivations, most of the resulting projects are an ever-changing mix of these attributes. The same applies to minority co-producers, as embodied by successful arthouse producers like Zima and Berčík who easily combine all three types. It must be acknowledged, however, that although they occasionally switch to pure foreign production services, they emphasize the theme-/auteur-driven type above all.

Stories told by the interviewees often include almost-failed initiatives that were 'saved' by a minority co-producer, or sudden twists at different stages of the production process that led to unexpected opportunities for a significant creative contribution from the minority co-producer, a person originally expected to operate within the narrow confines of post-production services. Although these tales serve to claim credit for a (minority) producer, they also illustrate how messy and permeable these co-production typologies are.

Potentially, all three types of minority co-production create opportunities for knowledge transfer on, and across, all levels of the professional hierarchy. Jiří Konečný, perhaps the most active minority co-producer in the Czech arthouse sector, renowned for his contribution to Radu Jude's *Aferim!* (RO/BG/CZ, 2015), which won the Silver Bear for Best Director at the Berlinale, and *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (*Îmi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari*, RO/CZ/FR/BG/DE, 2018), the winner of the Crystal Globe for best feature film at the Karlovy Vary IFF, cites some of the benefits:

It happens that a director, who has done three films with the same DOP, suddenly has to collaborate with another cameraman from Poland or Denmark or Romania or with another editor. It will broaden his horizons and benefit the resulting film. Or it will not. Anyway, film-makers are potentially confronted with the very top competitors in their professional groups.

(J. Konečný, personal interview, 6 December 2017)

But the actual facilitation of knowledge transfer may also be limited by differences in work processes and habits or by the segregation of a mixed production

team. Berčík acknowledges that his attempt to learn from his Norwegian co-producers was difficult:

I was trying to adopt certain techniques from the Scandinavians, but it was extremely difficult. It is very rewarding for us to participate in their projects, but it is a long-term process, because I would have to hire a Norwegian screenwriter or a script editor, or both, to work on my Czech film, to really learn what they know. Or, I can slowly, through two or three films, accumulate experiences, watch the way they work, and try to implement it in my own projects, which I am actually doing. But it is a long-term process. It would be also interesting to have Czech screenwriters or script editors working directly on foreign projects [...] to let them learn by doing. When it is just me who is directly in touch with the foreign team, and who is then separately talking to Czech screenwriters and script editors, it is not very efficient.

(P. Berčík, personal interview, 30 October 2014)

Berčík's reflections show that the efficiency of knowledge transfer depends on the key creative team members being in direct, long-term contact with their foreign peers. On the other hand, when local producers are not involved in the creative decision-making process, a physical co-presence during shooting does not necessarily mean they will learn how to develop more original, internationally appealing projects.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A NEW SYMBOLIC ECONOMY OF SMALL-MARKET CINEMAS

With the recent introduction of minority co-production schemes, the restrictions on foreign projects eligible for national public funding have largely been removed. A neoliberal ideology of supporting incoming investment and its spillover effects, labour mobility, international competitiveness and knowledge transfer, and of de-provincializing the local film culture, is now being advanced to justify this flow of national public subsidies into foreign projects. At the same time, minority co-productions have become a pivotal element in a symbolic economy that revolves around securing festival awards, which are seen as concrete outcomes that can be used to politically justify the subsidy schemes that invest in the projects.

The new national support for and recognition of minority co-productions – at least by industry insiders – have helped national policymakers to frame co-productions as an integral part of national audiovisual cultures and industries. Minority co-production is being used for the purposes of national cinema branding largely through the promotion of festival successes, and has finally been accepted as an integral part of national cinema by professionals and policymakers (although not by general audiences). This is especially true in small EU markets

where international commercial or festival successes tend to be rare. Although most co-productions may be financially rather than creatively driven, this symbolic capital plays an equally important role in judging success. From the point of view of policymakers, the winning of awards at A-list international festivals is the key justification for initiating and sustaining specialized minority co-production schemes. At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis could reveal that minority co-production schemes remain more fragile and appear more expendable from a policy perspective than other forms of national public support.²⁶

For small-market producers, the recent boom in minority co-production marks a turning away from the strategy of increasing the production values of Western-assisted local blockbusters and from catering to star names. The new approach is more measured and pragmatic, prioritizing internationally appealing themes, styles and directors (perceived as up-and-coming rather than established stars), which ensures lucrative production service commissions and sustains reciprocity ties. It also helps producers from the peripheral markets of east-central Europe to build wider transnational networks and participate in industry events and training programmes. There are few signs of 'Euro-pudding' in the films mentioned in this chapter, while stereotypical foreign characters and transborder storylines are, thankfully, not as frequent as they once were. Rather, all parties understand that if festival awards and knowledge transfer are the key strategic goals, then the creative and cultural input of the minority partner should conform to the original authorial vision, even if the film remains mono-national in terms of its on-screen content. The new generation of producers specializing in minority co-production have learned to combine opportunistic business strategies derived from production services with an unwavering commitment to recruiting strong directorial voices, including relatively unknown, debut directors from Eastern Europe. In this sense, minority co-productions have upgraded the logic of production services (which suffer from a bad reputation in the eyes of many critics and policymakers) to the model of the arthouse film, while still making extensive use of public subsidies.

The same trend also illustrates in more detail one of the local production culture's tropes as noted in Chapter 1: how small/peripheral-market, post-socialist producers perform their professional identities vis-à-vis the pressure to internationalize. While some of the younger breed claim that co-production is a prerequisite for becoming a 'real', European producer, others, mostly their older colleagues, vigorously reject the pressure as artistically and economically compromising. As well as recognizing the significance of long-term collaborative networks that reach across national borders, the younger producers are skilled in pitching their visions in diverse institutional environments and keenly aware of the symbolic and financial economy of the festival circuit.

Public Service Television as a Producer

Co-authored with Eva Pjajčiková

While previous chapters discussed the circumscribed agency of different kinds of private producers, this one turns to the in-house ‘producers’ of public service television. Similar to the case of service producers, the question needs to be asked whether employees of public service media, who have no financial or legal control over the projects they produce, can be called producers at all. In line with the broader concept of ‘producer’ outlined in the Introduction, these television executives may indeed be called producers in the sense of adding value to projects by selecting, pre-approving and mediating them within their broadcasting organizations, and sometimes also co-initiating, coordinating and supervising all stages of production. They are not ‘producers’ in the legal sense, but they remain key figures for understanding the day-to-day production processes and production cultures of public service media.

It is safe to say that both in-house and independent TV producers in general tend to enjoy a lower level of financial and legal autonomy when compared to film producers (due to their dependency on networks for commissions and majority funding exchanged for rights), but they are often more creatively involved, which has been reflected in the increasingly common term ‘showrunner’. In their classic work on the 1970s American independent TV producers, Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley defined ‘self-conscious, creative producers’ as ‘voices of social commentary’, who ‘establish the creative vision of the projects they control’, while ‘involving themselves in the minute details of their productions’, but who also have to meet strict demands of the network programming departments and ‘internal censors’ (Newcomb and Alley 1983: xiii, 14). The recent ‘showrunner’ figure has become an equivalent of the ‘creative’ TV producer in the post-network era of high-concept, high-profile ‘TV blockbusters’. In the US context, these prominent writer-producers often expand their role to act as ‘brand managers’, launching and steering transmedia TV empires such as *Lost* (2004–10), while constantly negotiating their uncertain relationships with networks and relying on teams of executive producers and writers for day-to-day development and production (Mann 2009).

The later institutionalization and lower public recognition (compared to their US counterparts) of European independent TV producers is linked to the delayed advent of TV film and series production in the 1960s, and especially the liberalization of broadcasting followed by the boom in commercial networks in the 1980s and 90s. Caught between multiple competing and even contradictory interests, they have acted as intermediaries between innovative artistic ambitions, commercial market demand and the conventional rules of broadcasting institutions when negotiating the financial, legal and creative conditions for their projects, while also building their reputations with broadcasters in the increasingly competitive professional field (Brigaud-Robert 2011). In the current European media landscape – characterized by conglomeration, digitalization and globalization – TV producers operate in an even more complex arrangement including transnational TV networks and SVODs, distributors, multiplatform format producers, national public service broadcasters (PSBs) and public funds, having to invest more in coordinating across borders and building trust with various partners (Chalaby 2015; Bondebjerg et al. 2017: 99–128).

In the field of traditionally strong Western European PSBs, who since the 1980s have had to carefully balance in-house and independent production, independent producers have been overshadowed by powerful ‘channel controllers’ and ‘commissioning editors’, described in the existing literature as key gatekeepers guarding the values and setting the trends of television production in institutions such as ZDF, ITV and the BBC. The tense relationships between the commissioners and independent producers, as well as the competition between the internal and external programme supply, have created many controversies and since the 1980s coincided with big Western European PSBs increasingly adopting the culture of commercialism and entrepreneurialism (Tunstall 1993; Born 2004: 60; Zoellner 2009). The 1989 ‘Television Without Frontiers’ Directive (followed by the 2010 and the 2018 Audiovisual Media Services Directives), deregulating the European broadcasting market and introducing broadcasting quotas for independent producers, helped to spread these trends to smaller EU member states. Having been regularly accused of commercialism, conformism and clientelism, European commissioning editors’ self-perceptions nevertheless seem to be more creatively-oriented than market-driven. As shown in a recent study based on a sample of thirty commissioning editors from five European countries, PSB commissioning editors’ self-perceptions are similar to those of independent producers and demonstrate a higher share of ‘creative thinking’ and ‘common welfare orientation’, and a lower share of ‘market orientation’ when compared to their counterparts at commercial broadcasters or to programme buyers (Rimscha and Siegert 2011: 1021).

Public service broadcasters in east-central Europe have a different genealogy due to their pre-1989 history of functioning as state-controlled channels of soft propaganda, which used television entertainment as an instrument for the 'domestication of politics' (Bren 2010: 147). After transforming from state-run into public organizations in the 1990s, they gradually adopted European media regulation (including independent production quotas) and started competing with the newly established commercial channels. The level of their involvement in the production of feature films and high-end TV series significantly differs across individual east-central European countries, but they remain the largest local producers or commissioners of television content. This chapter asks the questions: Who is in charge of their in-house or commissioned programming? Who would qualify as the east-central European equivalent of 'commissioning editors' and 'showrunners'? How does their circumscribed agency play out in day-to-day processes of programme development and production?

The chapter starts with a comparison of two contrasting cases: the Polish PSB *Telewizja Polska* (TVP), which lacks a middle-level commissioning/producer figure and relies on top-down decision-making, and the Czech PSB *Česká televize* (ČT), which has recently reintroduced what it calls 'creative producers'. These are middle-level executives who have to gain approval from their top-management bosses for every project and whose involvement in the 'minute details' of creative decision-making varies greatly, depending on the producer personality and the project. The second section compares two 'creative producers' in terms of their working styles and self-conceptions, focusing on their methods of project development, their place in ČT's internal power hierarchy and their understandings of its public service mission. The remaining part of the chapter is an ethnographically informed case study of the production of a single TV series which centres on the tense relationships between the in-house 'creative producer', the partner independent producer and the writing team, and the ways their conflicting interests are mediated in the resulting programme. By exemplifying creative compromises resulting from the clash of differing expectations, authorial subjectivities and interests involved in the production, we gain critical counter-perspectives to the official descriptions of ČT's production system and the self-perceptions of 'creative producers'.

TELEWIZJA POLSKA: A TOP-DOWN PRODUCTION SYSTEM WITHOUT IN-HOUSE PRODUCERS

Poland and Hungary, unlike the Czech Republic, both have highly politicized public service media, whose current situation has been described by some commentators as 'media capture' or 'colonization' by the ruling political parties (Bajomi-Lázár 2015; Balčytienė 2016). TVP was the biggest co-producer of

Polish feature films in the national market from the mid-1990s until the early 2000s, when it closely collaborated with Lew Rywin, arguably the biggest private film producer in Poland, and his company Heritage Films. Rywin was a powerful industry leader bringing film and television together, while capitalizing on contacts he had accumulated during his tenure at TVP before 1991 (including head of TVP's production arm POLTEL in the mid-1980s); later on, he developed close ties and co-production activities with Canal+, where he served as a member of the Board of Directors in the late 1990s (Ostrowska and Radkiewicz 2007: 122–3). Unlike ČT, PTV's engagement in film production has been less stable, marked by periods of cutbacks after the establishment of the Polish Film Institute in 2005, and even a temporary total withdrawal (around 2010). In the mid to late 2010s, TVP co-produced on average eight feature fiction and fifteen documentary films per year with about 10 per cent of its total budget (Wróblewska 2014b; Filmpolski.pl 2020).

After the 2015 parliamentary and presidential elections, TVP became 'a core pillar of the Polish government's social engineering' (Polońska 2019: 227), with news and current affairs programmes becoming a propaganda tool for the Law and Justice party. At the same time, TVP stands out due to its relatively small volume of new original productions, with the highest share of repeat programming and the highest reliance on advertisement-based financing among European PSBs (Polońska 2019: 239). There are already indications that the ruling party's grasp will also affect TVP's choices of feature films and high-end TV series (co-) productions. TVP's Chairman Jacek Kurski (a former Law and Justice MP and MEP, and Jarosław Kaczyński's close ally) is known for strongly supporting the production of several politically charged TV series such as the patriotic historical soap *The Crown of the Kings* (*Korona królów*, 2018–) and a biographical series about the interwar authoritarian Chief of State, *Young Piłsudski* (*Młody Piłsudski*, 2018–20) (JK 2017). He also apparently tried to exploit TVP's feature film co-production *Solid Gold* (dir. Jacek Bromski, PL, 2019), whose plot resembles a real political scandal, to attack the opposition in the 2019 election campaign (Czuchnowski and Kublik 2019).

However, the Polish TV market has recently diversified to the point that TVP is just one of many possible commissioners and investors that an independent producer of high-end TV series and feature films can turn to. This has already resulted in examples of independent producers moving their projects from TVP to commercial competitors, who have so far been largely resistant – unlike most of their Hungarian counterparts – to direct pressure from the ruling party. The field now includes the commercial free-to-air networks TVN (a part of Discovery, Inc.) and Polsat (owned by Cyfrowy Polsat, the largest satellite platform in east-central Europe), local branches of transnational cable networks HBO and

Canal+, and VOD services such as Netflix and Showmax (a South Africa-based streamer that left Poland in 2019), each co-producing several premium TV series and feature films a year. The most frequent genres of film content chosen by the TV networks have been romantic and Christmas comedies, biopics (commercial FTA networks), crime (HBO, Netflix), arthouse titles (Canal+, TVP) and historical movies (TVP). The increasing production, co-production and acquisition of original Polish content has been driven by the recent rise in popularity of national production and the strengthening of competition in this market of 38 million inhabitants (Majer, Orankiewicz and Wróblewska 2019: 36–42).

In TVP's organizational structure, the (co-)production of feature films and fiction TV series has been delegated to a special division, currently called the TV Films & Series Creation Agency. The Agency scouts story ideas, receives and assesses proposals from independent producers, and responds to commissions from the programming department. With few exceptions, almost all its serial content is produced externally by commissioned independent producers, who contract talent and crews, but don't share any rights to the final product with TVP. Since 2020, the Agency has been headed by Marcin Skabara (formerly at HBO Poland and Sony Pictures Television Networks) and supervised by a right-wing journalist named Mateusz Matyszkowicz, one of the two members of TVP's top Management Board (the second member being the Chairman, Jacek Kurski); however, there are multiple inside and outside players influencing the final greenlighting decisions of the Chairman, including the programme heads of individual TVP channels, and, more recently (as of November 2020), the Programming Office (Majer 2016: 167–8; 2018b: 217).

The Agency itself is composed of two sections headed by two vice-directors: the first, 'creative' group (as of October 2020) employs seventeen script advisors, called 'redaktors' in Polish, usually working in pairs to develop individual projects and prepare them for approval by the programming department and other TVP divisions. They also supervise the production, a task generally limited to consulting on casting and accepting offline edits, and mediating between the external producers and TVP departments. The second, 'production' section consists of a dozen production managers responsible for managing financial and contractual preparations and TVP's in-kind contributions, running the production papers through TVP's internal administrative procedures. Artur Majer, one of the Agency's 'redaktors', who as of October 2020 was working on four serial projects and one feature film, and himself a production studies scholar, described the core development and approval process as follows:

The programming department sends the Agency a 'brief' generally defining the content required for a certain window, a family atmosphere or a historical drama,

and then we the 'redaktors' are searching for such a material. We can do an open call [...], or call our friends among independent producers directly. Then we can spend our development budget on preparing the required content, and after getting ready let's say some 13 episodes per 45 minutes, we present it to the programming department, and they decide, because that's them who pay and who have to officially commission the production and buy the rights. Then we ask the independent producer to propose a budget, which is then negotiated in different TVP's departments. After an agreement is signed, the pre-production preparation begins.

(A. Majer, personal interview, 21 October 2020)

Majer's reflection on his lived reality in the complicated organizational structure, composed of multiple departments processing and approving each project from various perspectives, foregrounds what he calls 'dispersed responsibility':

It makes it easy and comfortable for those responsible, because when the series proves to be a flop, you won't know who is to blame. [...] A dozen people may take part in the decision-making process relating a new project, it goes on and on and on, until the project is endangered, and finally somebody waves his hand and says, 'that's how it will be'. [...] There is no single person who takes on the responsibility. [...] If we use business management terminology, we can say that there is no 'process owner'. But when you ask who owns the finished project, there will be multiple people claiming the credit, who would say it was their decision. [...] But then the TVP's Chairman says, 'I am sorry, but that's me who approved it'. For us, this is rather frustrating, it creates a feeling like, 'let the top management decide, we just do our small job here, we just make sure the series is finished'.

(A. Majer, personal interview, 21 October 2020)

The system also leaves a space for politically charged commissions and interventions coming directly from the top management, such as the above-mentioned *The Crown of the Kings*. According to Majer, these cases are characterized by excessive and arbitrary interferences in various stages of the production process, frequent re-staffing and miscommunication, and finally dissatisfaction with the final product (A. Majer, personal interview, 21 October 2020).

Since 2008, TVP's film co-production has a dedicated budget corresponding roughly to a 1.5 per cent share of the annual licence fee revenues that the public network is obliged – based on the 2005 cinema act – to either invest in national film production or to transfer to the Polish Film Institute. Unlike ČT, TVP's film co-production deals have stipulated not just broadcasting rights, but also a share of theatrical revenues. But similar to the Czech PSB, TVP's co-productions have included all sorts of projects: arthouse and commercial, established and

first-time directors, big-budget historical spectacles such as the war spy thriller *The Messenger* (*Kurier*, dir. Władysław Pasikowski, PL, 2019) and minimalistic festival-oriented movies such as *United States of Love* (*Zjednoczone stany miłości*, dir. Tomasz Wasilewski, PL/SE, 2016). TVP has also entered independent projects in various stages of the production process, during the early development as well as just before completion.

Artur Majer's production studies analysis of *Artists* (*Artyści*, TVP, 2016) (Figure 5.1), one of the most aesthetically ambitious and politically challenging TVP series of the 2010s, suggests that the decision-making power over development and production processes is not clearly structured, is divided between inside and outside players, and that work processes are not very standardized in TVP (Majer 2018a). Jerzy Kapuściński, a former TVP channel head, personally initiated the *Artists* project and secured external funding and extensive creative autonomy for a team concentrated around an experimental theatre artist couple (writer Paweł Demirski and director Monika Strzępka) with no significant prior televisual experience. However, Kapuściński, the project's sponsor and de facto producer, quit his job during shooting after the Law and Justice party tightened its grip over TVP in early 2016, which created a decision-making power vacuum. The project went over budget and was swept into disarray in the post-production stage, pushing the director, Strzępka, to negotiate directly with the new TVP chairman Kurski about the programming slot (Majer 2018a: 160).



Figure 5.1 Marcin Czarnik as a theatre director in the lead role of *Artists* (*Artyści*, dir. Monika Strzępka, PL, 2016). (Credit: Telewizja Polska.)

Although the case of *Artists* is extreme in terms of creative and organizational conflicts, it still illustrates the key difference between TVP's and ČT's production systems: TVP is more directly influenced by political power on the selection and production processes, and by a centralized, top-down organizational model lacking a strong middle management layer. The post-2012 ČT production system has retained strong decision-making autonomy vis-à-vis the dominant political power, as well as a clear and relatively transparent division of responsibilities between different organizational divisions and layers, with a key role in the development process occupied by hands-on middle management, called 'creative producer units' that are headed by 'creative producers'.

ČESKÁ TELEVIZE: THE (RE-)EMERGENCE OF A PUBLIC SERVICE PRODUCER SYSTEM

The Czech Republic's national public service broadcaster ČT is the national as well as regional leader in terms of the scale and scope of original audiovisual production. Since the 1990s, it has been the most prolific co-producer of fiction and documentary feature films in the country as well as the strongest producer and commissioner of all sorts of serial content. After the establishment of the dedicated 'Film Centre' in 2012, responsible for co-producing and co-developing feature films, its track record includes on average the release of sixteen theatrical fiction films and fifteen theatrical documentary films annually (ČT 2020). In terms of serial content, ČT's annual production of eight titles (2–13 episode series) secured its number ten position in the list of top TV fiction producers in the EU as of 2018, ahead of any other Central and Eastern European commercial or public broadcaster (Fontaine 2020: 30). Although increasingly under pressure from the ruling political coalition centred around the prime minister and media oligarch Andrej Babiš, ČT has so far (as of October 2020) remained largely autonomous in its fiction production strategy. Within the 2012 reorganization, ČT introduced a new position for so-called 'creative producers', overseeing in-house production and acting as commissioners and partners with independent producers, although with a significantly restricted autonomy of decision-making. That sets the ČT production system apart from other regional PSBs.

The current ČT director general, Petr Dvořák, won an open competition for the office in September 2011 with a plan that promised to reduce the top management layer, to separate ČT's roles as a producer and a programmer (the latter to act as a client of the former), and to create a 'producer system'. He planned to base the producer system on a new middle management layer consisting of producer 'units' headed by 'strong personalities' expected to show 'individual creative responsibility' and 'directly collaborating with external producers' (Dvořák 2011: 20). Under the former organizational system (2002–11),

ČT's project development and approval process was centralized in five 'editorial offices', only one of them responsible for fiction (including TV series and feature film co-productions), headed by a 'chief dramaturge', who was repeatedly accused of pulling strings to get his own projects produced, which further contributed to the mounting criticism of ČT for its alleged clientelism, non-transparency, lack of responsibility and bureaucratic rigidity (Borovan 2006; Krumpár 2010). After entering office, in 2012 Dvořák indeed fundamentally decentralized the organization of development and pushed some of the decision-making power downwards by implementing a producer model based on approximately twenty 'creative producer units', responsible for developing all kinds of content excluding news and current affairs.

Each of the units is composed of a 'creative producer', a production manager (these two positions are sometimes merged), and two to five dramaturges (script advisors), who might be either permanent employees or external collaborators. The units are expected to broadly specialize in specific genres and formats, although without strict confines, and to compete with other units for project approval, production budgets and programming slots. Their main responsibilities lie in scouting for new stories and talent, pre-selecting and developing story ideas with outside authors and producers, and pitching those ideas to the Programme Board, which acts as ČT's central approval authority (greenlighting projects for the production of a non-broadcast pilot or a one-off programme, the first season, further seasons, significant changes during production, etc.). After approval, the creative producer is expected to 'couch' and oversee the whole production process and take part in promotional campaigns. Individual units are not permanent institutional bodies; instead, they are defined as 'project teams' with their heads appointed for a limited term and their lifespan depending on the number and success of approved projects. Apart from the units, a special division on the same organizational level called the 'Film Centre' was established in 2012 to select, co-produce or occasionally co-develop fiction and documentary feature films with independent producers. Compared to other units specializing in TV formats, the Film Centre has adopted a more hands-off approach, based on (largely non-binding) script notes and negotiating ČT's in-kind and financial contributions in exchange for broadcasting rights (ČT 2013a, b, 2018; Szczepanik et al. 2015: 181–210).

The new unit-structured system is seen to have provided an opportunity for the PSB to reinvent itself, by attracting new talent, diversifying output and appealing to younger audiences. ČT started to produce more feature films and TV series – especially crime dramas, sit-coms and historical family sagas – and experimenting with new hybrid formats crossing the border between reality and fiction. ČT's 2013 annual report claimed that original serial drama

is the 'display window' of its new programming strategy (ČT 2014c: 44), which was supported by ramping up ČT's yearly serial production budget by 36 per cent in 2013 (Borovan 2013). While in many respects ČT's new fiction programming remained conservative, catering to the tastes of its older target groups, it indeed achieved more favourable reviews for attempting to de-provincialize ČT's production by connecting with the transnational 'quality TV' trends. The new programming was screened more often at international festivals and sold in foreign markets, thus clearly distinguishing the new 'Dvořák era' from the previous period. Among the most innovative and successful post-2012 series are a sit-com mocking the Prague tourist industry, *The Fourth Star* (*Čtvrtá hvězda*, 2014), created by a prominent theatre ensemble; a sci-fi satire sit-com reflecting on Czech national stereotypes, *Kosmo* (2016); a dark political crime thriller set in 1992 Czechoslovakia, *Redl* (*Rédl*, 2018); a social satire exposing racist stereotypes, *MOST!* (2019); and a crime thriller about the local Vietnamese drug mafia, *Rats* (*Zrádci*, 2020).

Dvořák, the former head of the strongest Czech commercial TV network, Nova, brought with him to ČT several key former colleagues, including ČT's current head of development Jan Maxa and two 'creative producers'. Critics of Dvořák and Maxa argue that they also imported from Nova its commercial criteria and managerialism that are potentially in conflict with the public service remit, especially in the field of documentary film-making. Arguably, a great deal of the real greenlighting power remains in the hands of the top managers on the Programme Board (Dvořák, Maxa and the influential programme head Milan Fridrich), strictly constraining the authority of the 'creative producers' and effectively re-centralizing the final decision-making process. Board meetings, taking place approximately every week to achieve consensual final decisions on up to fifteen projects at a time, became ČT's key organizational ritual and a focus of expectations, anxieties and frustrations for both in-house and external producers, dramaturges as well as freelance authors who often speculate about the PSB's inherent power structure and decision-making criteria (Szczepanik et al. 2015: 181–210; Králová 2017: 107–40).

A 'NOSE' FOR A GOOD SCRIPT: THE WORKING STYLES AND SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF 'CREATIVE PRODUCERS'

The first generation of unit heads, so-called creative producers, was chosen in a series of open calls that resulted in the appointment of several influential and progressive figures with diverse backgrounds, both from inside and outside ČT. In the documentary and multi-genre area, they included Petr Kubica, the programme director of the Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival, and Kamila Zlatušková, who was then experimenting with hybrid genres such as

docu-soap or docu-reality before leaving ČT and founding the international TV series festival 'Serial Killer' in 2018. In fiction, the most respected and awarded producers are currently Kateřina Ondřejková, a veteran TV producer and former substitute national representative at Eurimages, and Michal Reitler, who followed Dvořák from Nova, where he worked as a producer of the then-pioneering and long-running daily soap *The Street* (2005–).

Reitler has produced critically praised and highly popular ČT series such as a police procedural based on true stories, *Cases of the 1st Department* (*Případy 1. oddělení*, 2014–16), a Czech remake of BBC's *Life on Mars* (*Svět pod hlavou*, 2017), a two-part historical TV movie about a mining disaster in 1960s Czechoslovakia, *Dukla 61* (2018), a subversive family comedy, *Gnome* (*Trpaslík*, 2017) and *MOST!* (2019). The last two titles cemented a collaborative network around Reitler, which includes the screenwriter Petr Kolečko and the director Jan Prušinovský, who is currently considered the strongest local film auteur in the field of social drama and comedy. *MOST!* became a nationwide phenomenon for its smart and contagiously entertaining ridicule of provincial racism and transphobia, whose individual episodes were watched by an average of 1.35 million viewers, supplemented by a further 700,000 catch-up views during the first week after the premiere, which made it the most successful series of ČT's 'Dvořák era' (ČT 2020: 117).

Reitler sees himself as a facilitator and a coach in the collaborative process, stepping in only when necessary: he creates the initial mix of people and ideas and mediates their inevitable conflicts, approves or steers the project at the main turning points, pitches it to the Programme Board, and commits to a specific programming slot and budget. He then helps solve bigger problems along the way, but he generally leaves the dramaturges to supervise or even co-write individual script versions. At the same time, he describes himself as an 'engaged', hands-on producer, who always wants to personally identify with the story idea and to add new value, namely to shape the project so that it serves ČT's specific audience needs. As such, he sets himself against the passive type of 'creative producer', which he jokingly calls a 'continuous flow water heater', a system that is used by independent producers who bring their projects to ČT just to get access to financing and programming slots.

Unlike some of his peers, Reitler doesn't feel constrained by the Programme Board in a negative sense of the word. As a former colleague of the director general Dvořák and the development head Maxa from the commercial Nova network, he is aware of being perceived by some independent producers as a privileged ČT executive and a safe bet: the one who is more easily given a green-light. He claims to understand the language and expectations of the key decision makers within the Programme Board: the programme head looking for safe

programme fillers, as well as the development head aiming at more ambitious content which can enhance ČT's reputation. After committing to a given format, budget, timeline and a programming slot, he strives to keep his promises, but he also makes sure to firmly demand adequate financing and production conditions that actually match the dimensions and ambitions of the project.

Reitler is an example of a highly methodical, structurally thinking, rational producer, who has systematically, from the beginning of his work in the position, through trial and error, built an inner circle of close in-house collaborators and an outer circle of loosely allied authors. The inner circle, consisting of about five dramaturges, bring in new story ideas or are assigned to projects according to their specific skills and tastes, which have emerged from previous collaborations:

I spent my first three years at ČT learning what I am good at, what I can be useful in, what types of authors I am compatible with and with whom I want to work on subsequent projects. [...] I now have a group of authors, whom I understand, I know what they want, and thus I can demand it from them. But sometimes they leave to work elsewhere, I have no exclusivity over them. [...] And then there are the in-house dramaturges, each of whom I chose for their unique perspective on the world. It took time. It is a group of six people, who don't agree with each other on almost anything when they meet in one office. We have different opinion streams in our unit, everybody defending her or his truth very firmly. As a producer, I don't have to take somebody's side, [...] I can watch a dramaturge helping Petr Kolečko write a comedy and keep my distance, helping them to understand each other, supporting one and then the other.

(M. Reitler, personal interview, 7 and 19 March 2018)

Reitler claims that he thus gradually cultivated a balanced portfolio of specialized skills, roughly covering the main genres and styles that correspond to specific programming windows and eventually the needs of audience groups as defined in the NeedScope model,¹ which he uses to distinguish between them. His core method, he explains, is based, first, on selecting a unique story idea that no other unit has, which is compatible with his own unit, and whose author deeply understands the material, and thus can achieve a level of truthfulness, and has the proper storytelling skills for the given genre; second, on coupling the author and the story material with the right dramaturge and director; and third, on supplementing the team with additional in-house dramaturge(s) in a later stage of a project development so that the combination compensates for any deficiencies or one-sidedness in terms of meeting audience needs, and thus expanding the programme's appeal:

Step by step in the process of development, I invite a couple of others from the inner group, who are on the opposite side of the NeedScope diagram. They get the script, which we designed in one part of NeedScope and sent it to them over there. They say: 'I didn't enjoy reading it'. And I ask: 'Why is that so?' And thus, we try to enrich the script, with the aim of engaging both hemispheres, to have a strong individualistic experience celebrating an individual human being who acts, which is the right side, and then the left side: a feeling of harmony, family entertainment defending traditional principles.

(M. Reitler, personal interview, 7 and 19 March 2018)

Reitler differentiates his approach as one of the more populist or 'commercial' among ČT's 'creative producers', always aiming at the highest possible ratings. More specifically, he is critical of the common collaboration between ČT and established independent producers and authors, whose film projects target narrow arthouse or festival audiences, the liberal urban elite, who are neither dependent on gaining wide appeal, nor interested in Reitler's input informed by the concepts of truthfulness, public service and audience needs:

We need to learn how to engage 'the others', not those who are already persuaded. [...] When we spend public money and want to be able to once defend the concept of the public service, we need people from the provincial rural areas to stand behind ČT, not just educated people from Prague and other big cities, who all have enough cultural resources at their disposal. [...] ČT needs to appeal to the 'other' part of the Czech society, the ones voting for the [populist] President Zeman. [...] But most authors, who know how to make stories for common people, are coming to me with their 'exceptional' projects. We need to find a feel-good material for Friday evening, but they don't want to do it. [...] And I know exactly what it should be like: three-generational, with the focus on thirty-five year olds, plus a connection to grandparents and grandchildren, who get along with each other better than with the parents, with the story set in an environment they really know and live in, such as schools. And the authors look down on it, saying that this is just a daily soap stuff for commercial networks.

(M. Reitler, personal interview, 7 and 19 March 2018)

Reitler acknowledges that his insights for understanding the needs of 'the other' audiences originate from his time at the Nova network when producing the daily soap *The Street*, and from regularly reading audience research reports. He emphasizes Friday evening because it has emerged as the most populist, 'family entertainment' programming window where the PSB competes with

commercial networks head-on, and thus negotiates its position in the national TV market.

Reitler's competitor and fellow 'creative producer' Jan Štern represents a different, hands-off approach, leaving more decision-making power in the hands of independent co-producers and directors. During his long career as a television producer and dramaturge, spanning twenty-five years between 1994 and 2018, he experienced three production systems at ČT: the first producer system (1992–2002) whereby producers had a higher financial autonomy and control over programming windows than under the current regime; the second, the 'central office' system (2002–11), under which he initiated two of the most successful of ČT's entertainment formats (the talk show *Všechňopárty*, 2005–; and the Czech adaptation of BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*, 2006–). The third, Dvořák's producer system (2012–), under which he produced some of the most critically acclaimed and popular ČT series such as the alternative sit-com *The Fourth Star* (2014); the family saga *The First Republic* (2014); a historical drama set in the Czech film-making community during the Nazi and the communist regimes, *Bohemia* (2017); and the thriller *Redl* (2018). Like Reitler, Štern doesn't directly criticize the Programme Board decision-making authority, instead he identifies with its key principles, and claims that the rules of the game are limiting but transparent and allow him enough freedom:

The system is based on the creative producers getting a general assignment from the Programme. The Programme tells you what it expects for a certain time slot, what format and for how much money. And you are proposing your projects, which have to fit the general definition of the assignment [...] and the top management's Programme Board then selects from the proposals. They are not ordering you what to do exactly, they just define the demand for certain types of content. [...] The producer can't go beyond the framework of the assignment, but nobody will force you to do a concrete title. [...] I am then competing with the other creative producers to get my projects approved at the expense of theirs, which is a normal competition, and I am happy when my project succeeds. [...] And the producer who can't meet the Programme's demand will eventually have to leave, because he will have no projects to work on, and many producers have already left ČT for that reason.

(J. Štern, personal interview, 8 March 2018)

At the same time, Štern acknowledged in 2018 that the selectiveness and competition have significantly tightened since the early years of the 'Dvořák era', when there used to be a shortage of original content and most projects pre-approved by the development head were eventually greenlit by the Programme Board.

He was also aware that creative producers' lack of control over an assigned programming window (unlike Western European commissioning editors) significantly restricts their autonomy of choice, and ultimately the diversity of ČT programming. According to Štern, the top management will never have enough courage to greenlight, for example, a subversive political satire that could possibly be produced by 'creative producers' in direct control of programming windows and budgets. Štern specifically mentions documentary films that suffer from the central approval system more than fiction, since they need to be more socially and politically controversial, which is in line with the critical views of the documentary film unit heads, dramaturges and authors, as documented by Lucie Králová (2017).

Štern sees his work method as supervising from a distance rather than directly intervening, editing and managing. He describes the production process as a sequence of different stages with a clear division of competences and authorities among key players, where he switches between looser and tighter control, without asserting his own perspective too much:

The development takes place between a screenwriter, a dramaturge or more dramaturges, and the creative producer. [...] I personally resist having a director involved in the script development. The director gets on board when the script is more or less finished [...] When you feel that the script is ready for the Programme Board, you also let the production manager calculate it, in my case she sometimes demands cuts and I have to adjust the script to ČT's financial reality. Then you offer the script to a director, who has to embrace it [...]. Before the Programme Board, ČT's director general has his representative read the script and give notes, which is good, because his perspective can help, sometimes the development head Maxa reads it, sometimes not [...] Programming department executives also send their notes [...] but you don't have to accept them. [...] Then, if you get the greenlight from the Programme Board, the real collaboration with the director starts, he can always change the script by projecting a new perspective upon it [...] Some of the directors will discuss the changes, some will do what they want on the set while shooting, and you will only learn afterwards, from the dailies, but that's their right, they are the directors, [...] and these are just minor changes anyway. I don't visit the set, [...] but I watch the dailies, and when something irritates me, a shallow visual style or something boring, I call the director, who usually tells me that I am an idiot. It is tricky to meddle in the shooting, but I did it a couple of times. [...] And then you go to the editing room with your dramaturge, and there is a discussion on how to edit it all together. The offline edit has to be approved by myself, the development head, and the Programme, which has quite a high authority. They usually don't send notes relating to the creative content, but they may complain about product

placement, violence, sex and other legal issues, and this may cause some struggles.

[...] And then, finally, the ratings come, and the real fuss begins.

(J. Štern, personal interview, 8 March 2018)

Unlike Reitler, Štern didn't create a permanent inner circle of dramaturges within his unit. He collaborated on most of his fiction projects with just one in-house employee: Petr Jarchovský, who is currently regarded as the most experienced screenwriter in Czech cinema, mainly due to his long-term collaboration with the director Jan Hřebejk. Apart from Jarchovský, Štern occasionally hired external dramaturges, mainly the highly regarded veteran of state-socialist film dramaturgy Helena Slavíková. Jarchovský and Slavíková set Štern apart from Reitler, who prefers working with less renowned or less veteran authors and dramaturges, whose talent and skills he can cultivate and combine. In contrast to Reitler, Štern's approach to development is more intuitive, based on recognizing strong story material. He does not believe in extensive rewriting and story editing: 'My fundamental experience is that when the screenplay is bad in the beginning, then you don't improve it by creating sixty versions, [...] and when the script is good, it should not be significantly rewritten, [...] because when you change one thing, the whole script starts falling apart.' Štern insists the key producer skill is a 'nose' for a good script, which can however fail, such as when he turned down the project of *Cases of the 1st Department* (2014–16), which was then fundamentally rewritten under Reitler's supervision and became a massive national hit. The only moment when Štern insists on intervening in the director's vision and firmly asserting the Programme's marketing interests is casting: 'We work with film directors, and they are used to having freedom to cast actors artistically, but that doesn't work in television, where you need the lead roles filled with famous actors, otherwise people won't watch it' (J. Štern, personal interview, 8 March 2018). In relation to casting, Štern reflects on the professional identity of 'creative producers', who differ from independent producers by having a reliable organizational and financial background, but who suffer from having a lower reputation and less respect within the film-making community:

ČT tends to interfere with the director's work more directly than in film. [...]

And the creative producer is tasked with performing this interference, with something that causes conflicts and creates disrespect. [...] Directors perceive us as TV officials, who are sitting in the office and getting a salary, as bureaucrats. Most directors tend to endure your interference, but some don't accept you as a partner and treat you as a pain in the ass. But you still hold the authority and the

responsibility. [...] It backfires when you accept a no-name actor based on the director's artistic reasons, and then you lose a third of the potential viewers [...] and that's 300[,000] or 400,000 people, who also pay licence fees. [...] We are getting audience reports and we know exactly who are ČT's audiences: people over fifty.

(J. Štern, personal interview, 8 March 2018)

But the main instruments for translating the top management's strategy into producer practice – which Štern acknowledges and identifies with when giving guidelines to his authors – are ČT's three programming windows reserved for serial drama:

Monday evening is a crime story, [...] but crime with something additional, a second thematic layer apart from the basic plot. [...] It is also comedies, which can be a bit eccentric. [...] Sunday is the best window, mini-series, events, most appealing for the 'creative producers', because it can be filled with 'quality'. The quality is restricted in crime series, but Sunday evening can be relationship drama, a historical mini-series, you have a vast scope of opportunities and freedom. Friday is the worst, family content that children can watch with their parents. I accept it, but producers generally don't rush to fill this window, they are not thrilled, nobody has fun doing that.

(J. Štern, personal interview, 8 March 2018)

While Reitler's and Štern's self-conceptions as creative producers reveal significant individual differences in creative and management involvement and development methods, they converge in the way they accept the constraints imposed on their producer agency by ČT's re-centralizing power hierarchy and the standardized programming windows. They also agree on a practical interpretation of ČT's public service mission by claiming to seek an elaborate balance between their competitive creative ambition and a consciously populist objective of addressing the widest possible audiences.

The sections below shift our attention to the role of 'creative producers' in day-to-day development and production processes. We do so by reconstructing the production history of the most successful Friday evening programme of the 'Dvořák era' and Štern's most watched (although not his favourite) project: the first season of *The First Republic* (*První republika*, 2014), a melodramatic family saga with a crime subplot capturing the atmosphere of Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1931.² This case study illustrates the insecure position of the 'creative producer' in the nexus of interests, values and power, embodied by the ČT top management (the Programme Board), an independent producer and the creative team.

A PUBLIC SERVICE SOAP MEDIATING ČT'S ORGANIZATIONAL AND STRATEGIC SHIFT³

In 2012 and 2013, Štern's creative producer unit, 'the unit for series and cyclical dramas', supervised the development and production of the first season of *The First Republic* that eventually became the top-rated Friday primetime programme in the local TV market between January and June in 2014. *The First Republic* exemplifies ČT's recent tendency to co-produce programmes with independent partners, thus potentially blurring the distinction between private and public interests. It also illustrates the emergence of family entertainment programming as a key slot used by ČT to compete with commercial channels for the primetime audience, as well as the greater effort being made to follow trends in American and European 'quality' television.⁴

Although it retains a high level of cultural cache and recently achieved the highest market share – capturing about 30 per cent of adults – ČT lags behind private networks in the main primetime (7.00–11.00 pm) slot and struggles to compete with their popular soaps. It has responded to this situation by introducing recurring series, including several public service versions of primetime soaps. Before the new director general Dvořák took office, ČT's most popular series was *Wonderful Times* (*Vyprávěj*, 2009–13), a nostalgic family saga set against the Czech(oslovak) political history of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, produced on commission by the independent company Dramedy Productions and fully financed by ČT.⁵ The commercial success of this series prompted Dramedy to propose a co-production with ČT, in which they would become minority co-financiers in exchange for international rights; another period family saga, albeit one with loftier cultural ambitions and higher production values. The resultant series, *The First Republic*, boasted a mixture of melodrama, crime and the supernatural, with a story starting after World War I, when Czechoslovakia was established as an independent country (Figure 5.2). It had a special position in ČT's new production strategy: the series was supposed to be an example of ČT's open collaboration with external partners, in Dvořák's words, 'the first really big co-production where an independent producer and ČT act as equal partners' (Aust 2013). *The First Republic* was also an integral part of Dvořák's new programming strategy aimed at redefining ČT's main first channel as 'a family channel with a strong share of original Czech serial drama, entertainment and attractive current affairs content' (ČT 2014c: 10).

The initial conception of the series posited a complex, gritty historical drama, but this gradually gave way to what many critics saw as a high-end soap. Shifts in power between ČT, its independent production partners and the head writer were symptoms of the changing position of public service television in the Czech market and ČT's relationships with private producers. The expectations



Figure 5.2 The head writer Gardner strongly disagreed with the casting of the handsome Slovakian actor Ján Koleník; he felt Koleník was incapable of playing a war-weary, psychologically ambiguous character. A still from *The First Republic* (*První republika*, dir. Biser A. Arichtev, Johanna Steiger Antošová, 2014). (Credit: Česká televize.)

and subjectivities of these parties fell into three categories: the ČT producer's aim of filling the Friday evening programming window, while combining light entertainment with public service values; the series' writers' idealization of Anglo-American 'quality television'; and the private producer's commercial objectives and vision of a public service primetime soap. The influence of these overlapping positions varied across the many stages of the process, fundamentally transforming the 'screen idea' (Macdonald 2013) of the series along the way.

Initially, Drameď's CEO and series producer Filip Bobišski hired the unknown screenwriter Jan Gardner, who had worked on the third season of *Wonderful Times*. Gardner was a supporter of complex narration and HBO-style 'quality' television, having spent ten years in low-level creative jobs in the United States. Gardner and Bobišski developed the initial concept that was approved by ČT's Programme Board, and assembled a writing team for the series' first season. Before their scripts were complete, casting and shooting began under the supervision of *Wonderful Times* director Biser Arichtev. Over time, though, Gardner, as the head writer, was stripped of creative control. At this point, Gardner, who

continued to work on the first season, felt that the original story idea had been compromised, as a different product to the one he had envisaged took shape.

This case study sheds light on the social logic that drove this collaborative effort. It focuses on two-way 'mediation' at different stages and sites of the production process; on the institutional frameworks, social relations and aesthetic conditions that mediated the text during its development; and, to a lesser extent, how the text mediated social relations between those involved in its production.⁶ There follows a description of the three main groups of agents that asserted their interests and values against each other, starting with ČT's 'creative producer'.

THE PUBLIC SERVICE PRODUCER STRATEGY: BALANCING THE SOAP WITH THE 'QUALITY' DRAMA

Having outsourced production, ČT did not control *The First Republic* through direct creative decision-making during shooting, but via supervision and approval procedures during development and pre-production (especially casting). Before its approval, ČT's Programme Board called for the series' budget to be cut and its production schedule tightened. As for creative influence at that time, ČT's head of development and the unit head met repeatedly with Dramedy producers to express their concerns about *The First Republic's* complex narrative structure and dark look, and asked for its supernatural underpinnings to be reduced. Head writer Gardner later encapsulated this sentiment by irreverently inverting HBO's promotional tag line: 'We are not HBO, we are television' (E. Pjajčiková, field diary, 2013). After the series was greenlighted by the Programme Board for further development and production, and in the absence of an established procedure to systematically oversee independent producers, creative producer Jan Štern was placed in charge of guarding ČT's producer interests as well as policing its public service merit and 'aesthetic boundaries' (Born 2010).

Štern said he was drawn to Gardner's script by its combination of family-oriented primetime soap and rich drama; this was exactly what he wanted for the Friday evening timeslot:

On Friday evenings from 8.00 pm, *Wonderful Times* played for four or five years, and it created a sort of programming window, which people got used to, which fit well their habit of wanting to relax rather than suffer, of spending their time with something that is dramatic, but gently dramatic, nothing drastic. Now they don't expect *True Detective*, but something like *Wonderful Times*.

(J. Štern, personal interview, 20 March 2014)

Štern supported Dramedy producing the series not only because its previous *Wonderful Times* had enjoyed a five-year-run in the Friday evening slot *The First*

Republic was scheduled to fill, but also because he recognized that ČT, overburdened with its ambition to ramp up original serial production, would have struggled to produce this series in-house and with the same budget.

Štern acknowledged that the interventions of the Dramedy producer and director lightened Gardner's vision, especially in terms of characterization. He defended these changes, suggesting it gave the series an attractive look. 'It's the kind of fast shooting where there is no time to work on individual scenes. You have to have a director that shoots fast without thinking too much about it', he explained: 'If you had a director aiming for high quality, he would have done only half of it' (J. Štern, personal interview, 20 March 2014). Claiming he had no direct influence on the production process after casting, Štern suggested the producer and director had taken charge, and that making changes to content after test screenings would have been prohibitively expensive. Štern's supervision after the start of the shooting therefore amounted to providing notes about upcoming episodes rather than calling for reshoots.

Štern expected *The First Republic* to deliver not only more complex narration and higher production values than *Wonderful Times*, but also stronger public service values – the latter by weaving national history into its narrative structure and characters' motivations. At the same time, he fully accepted the top management's competitive strategy of using the show to lure primetime soap audiences from commercial channels. He acknowledged how difficult he found it to balance these two ambitions:

You are moving between let's say an almost telenovela and a real serious drama. The serious drama couldn't play on Friday evening, people wouldn't take it, and telenovelas or this kind of light genres can't be produced by public service television. Therefore, we are from the start trying to steer *The First Republic* in a way that it's simultaneously attractive, public service and quality.

(J. Štern, personal interview, 20 March 2014)

Štern thus saw his main task as striking a balance between soap and drama, citing *The First Republic's* viewing figures as evidence that he did not need to intervene any more than he already had. He passed day-to-day supervision of ongoing script development to his closest external collaborator, the freelancing retiree Helena Slavíková, who had worked as a 'dramaturge' in Czech serial screenwriting since the mid-1960s, and who regarded her involvement in *The First Republic* as an entirely new experience.

What changed for her on *The First Republic* was not her working methods but the conditions under which she worked. Instead of editing a single-authored script for an entire season as of a piece, she was supposed to work with a changing

group of writers and with draft outlines that would be drastically revised at a later date, while shooting was already ongoing. Since *The First Republic* consisted of several complicated storylines, it was difficult to keep track of the dramatic arc, narrative logic and character psychology. Slavíková worked on five episodes before she felt she had adapted to this approach, and stopped demanding the definitive outlines she was used to receiving. 'I realized it is better not to know what will come next in the story [...] and let myself be taken by surprise', she explained (H. Slavíková, personal interview, 7 February 2014).

The value system that ČT applied to *The First Republic* was not promulgated administratively or enforced through the direct supervision of the 'creative producer'. Rather, it was Slavíková's 'situated ethics' and 'aesthetics',⁷ solidified during her long-term work in the state-run and public service television, that were seen to provide a reliable litmus test. Slavíková acknowledged that working on *The First Republic* was an atypical experience, but one that largely met her standards. The series' public service remit – 'to let people remember what they forgot', as she put it – was fulfilled by its historical content (H. Slavíková, personal interview, 7 February 2014). Similarly, the series fulfilled its duty to entertain thanks to its crime, investigative and supernatural elements. Her major concerns and most frequent calls for revisions centred on its romantic storyline, which she felt included love scenes so protracted and implausible as to render them kitsch. Slavíková mostly interacted with head writer Jan Gardner. She admired his resourceful and imaginative approach to storytelling, and his ability to rapidly devise narrative solutions to various problems. In one sense, she considered his approach somewhat foreign: American in its 'discrepancy with the tradition' and lacking the kind of practical literary erudition, creative intuition, taste and naturalized ability to make prompt judgments about narrative logic and realistic detail that she herself had acquired during a fifty-year career. She explained that:

A certain level of taste is required [...] I can feel it in my guts when things cross the line, when they are too much and don't fit [...] you can't make everything up so easily. And when I complain, he says: 'It is like *Dexter*' [Showtime, 2006–21]. But I don't care if it's like *Dexter*; I need it to be *The First Republic*. [...] Anything is possible, but it needs to follow a certain logic and order.

(H. Slavíková, personal interview, 7 February 2014)

Thus, ČT's aesthetic boundaries in script development were policed by Slavíková's localized judgments rather than by Štern's producer supervision. These were based on a genre-specific aesthetic horizon naturalized while working in the state-socialist production system. They were pushed to their limits as she

adapted to professional life in an outsourced, group-based, time-pressured, open-ended, non-linear system of writing. She was often forced to make compromises. In this way, her 'situated ethics' ('to let people remember', 'to give them something to think about') and 'situated aesthetics' (protracted love scenes are 'kitschy', a Dexter-like character is far-fetched) functioned – together with Štern's understanding of the Friday programming slot – as mediation channels through which the transforming nature of the public service network – its internal dynamics and contradictions, cultural history meeting the new, market-driven developments – coalesced in the version of *The First Republic's* first season that reached the screen.

WRITERS DREAM OF LOCAL 'QUALITY TELEVISION'

The professional background of the head writer of *The First Republic*, Jan Gardner, distinguishes him from others working in Czech TV series writing. Gardner moved to the United States in 1993 to learn screenwriting at UCLA. He worked stateside for a decade, as a script reader and production assistant to Roger Corman's head of development, where he became familiar with the dynamics of genre film production. Upon returning to Prague in 2002, Gardner grew frustrated with local production practices that differed from those he had encountered in the US and in American screenwriting manuals. '[In the Czech Republic] people are used to writing *petit* characters and conflicts, kind of everyday anecdotes', he bemoaned; 'I tended to write big stories, arc-plots, while people here write those mini-plots' (J. Gardner, personal interview, 13 December 2013).

In contrast to the highly pragmatic business models behind Spanish melodramas, which the Spanish-educated Bobiński brought to the process, and in contrast to the public service family entertainment supported by Štern, Gardner imagined that *The First Republic* would be heavily indebted to recent British and American quality dramas such as *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010–15) and *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010–14). Comparisons to these series were made repeatedly by members of the core writing team, and were foregrounded in publicity as a means of establishing an aesthetic basis for the series and of positioning it culturally. Gardner's dialogist, Pavel Gotthard, then a screenwriting PhD student, described his original vision of *The First Republic* as even grittier than that of Gardner:

A dark crime story with ghost motives: Gloomy Prague, diseases, [...] poverty. Laundrywomen coughing out their lungs onto clothes in the big dye works, children playing in dirty gutters, and so on. We wanted to show *The First Republic* as it really was, with all the misery and hypocrisy – rich against poor, and just a bit of romance. But then, this screenwriting vision met with that of the producer.

(P. Gotthard, personal interview, 9 March 2014)

Following a period in which the series writers were effectively left to their own devices, institutional frameworks and ideologies came back into play during casting and shooting. Dramedy exerted its authority on the production process, lightening the tone of the series so it might fit neatly into the Friday evening programming slot and mainstreaming it to facilitate pan-European sales. The competing visions of the writers and producers were spotlighted in notes Bobiński wrote about episode one (while writers were already working on episode sixteen), after the series had been cast. He called for darker material and dense drama to be diluted by the addition of family-oriented, visually attractive flourishes, many featuring children and their parents.

At a time when the remaining episodes were still being written, rifts opened between head writer Gardner and the main producer Bobiński with the start of production, revealing the true balance of power between the two. The writers were confronted with their contractually determined subordinate position when they started to notice significant disparities between their visions for this series and those of the producers. Gardner remembered that ‘[a]t a certain moment, I realized we [Gardner and Bobiński] were doing a “different series”, so I found myself struggling to adapt to the producer’s vision’ (J. Gardner, personal interview, 6 February 2014).

The transformation of the writers’ ideas into a ‘very different’ product started with casting: a crucial point at which all the agents involved could air their concerns. Inspired by American quality drama, Gardner backed the casting of highly skilled, ordinary-looking actors – ‘like [Steve] Buscemi in *Boardwalk Empire*’ – rather than glamorous celebrities (J. Gardner, personal interview, 6 February 2014). By contrast, the producers Bobiński and Štern, as well as the director Biser Arichtev, felt that the main characters needed to be played by conventionally attractive television stars (Figure 5.2).

INDEPENDENT PRODUCER STRATEGY: COST-EFFECTIVE ‘EUROPEAN MAINSTREAM’

Although it is a small company, Dramedy has become the leading supplier of fiction programming to the Czech public service sector since the success of *Wonderful Times*. Its corporate strategy is based on a long-term partnership with ČT, and a gradual shift from low-budget fare to medium- and big-budget output (by ČT’s standards) boasting higher production values and a greater cultural cache. *Wonderful Times* helped cement Dramedy’s reputation as a reliable producer of inexpensive public service family-friendly television capable of competing with the private networks’ primetime soaps.

Dramedy’s marketing materials differentiated *The First Republic* from *Wonderful Times* by emphasizing the new series’ heightened sense of drama and

superior production values. Producer Filip Bobiński maintained that *The First Republic* was not merely another period piece about everyday family life, but an ‘internationally financed’ ‘modern drama’; one that was ‘emotional, suspenseful, dynamic’, and ‘visually attractive’, and featured ‘expensive costumes’ (Bobiński 2014). Promotional rhetoric of this sort notwithstanding, these two projects by Dramedy were similar in terms of their production, not least because they shared key crew members. Bobiński explains that *The First Republic* represented a natural progression for Dramedy inasmuch as it enabled the company to upgrade its product, offering relatively high production values at a lower price than in-house productions (F. Bobiński, personal interview, 7 February 2014). He realized that meeting this objective involved using shorter shooting schedules, cheaper and more versatile sets, and minimal location shooting as well as adopting a more flexible development process that permitted the screenplay to be significantly redrafted during production. This model ultimately allowed Dramedy to move towards greater autonomy during development, to craft more complex narratives, to increase production values and to pursue international sales, all without losing its competitive edge.

Bobiński’s strategy was bound up with the dynamics of the Czech market. In this sense, it enabled Dramedy to differentiate its output from the basic narratives and low production values of the private networks’ primetime soaps, and from the public service broadcaster’s old fashioned, niche interest culture programmes. He calls this approach ‘European mainstream’, because – in his view – it patterns its combination of commercial genres, higher production values and cultural cache after Spanish family melodramas such as *Gran Hotel* (Antena 3, 2011–13).

During development, Bobiński worked to ensure that *First Republic* featured a viable narrative and a combination of genres, before making sure its high production values were secured through casting, sets, costumes and other visual elements such as the opening credits. The screenwriting process was largely overseen by the head writer. Bobiński maintained that

I don’t really care what individual episodes scripts are about because I know the overall style, how we want to narrate, how fast or slow it should be. So, in the end, it is not important whether this or that happens: I leave it to the writers to decide. What I really care about is, first, the concept we create in the beginning; the feeling of what viewers are to expect. And that’s a mix of all those things: the image of the programme, rhythm, period, characters – all what is created in the first stage. And, second, during the physical production, I need to make sure it really looks this way, so again a lot of producers’ work comes in.

(F. Bobiński, personal interview, 7 February 2014)

Bobiński's closest collaborator tasked with giving the series the desired look was the director Biser Arichtev. His preferences for a glossy look and romance, which were encouraged by the producer, influenced shot composition, choices of locations, costumes and props, and the simplification of character psychology, which was provoking a series of disagreements between the producer and the head writer. Gardner noted facetiously that the guiding principle of the series was now, under Arichtev, 'to show beautiful people in beautiful places with a beautiful atmosphere'. He suggested that Arichtev's background in light entertainment left him ill equipped to shoot a complex drama (J. Gardner, personal interview, 6 February 2014).

As a director, Arichtev sees himself as an efficient and flexible craftsman who delivers the best possible product under trying circumstances and considerable time pressure. While he did not influence the construction of *The First Republic's* storyline directly, his long-time collaboration with Dramedy afforded him a significant advantage over Gardner in their power struggle, because the producers trusted him and he shared their vision of the series. For Arichtev, the dramatic tenor of the original script was too 'heavy', and the dialogue and character actions too histrionic. He felt compelled to make the story 'lighter' and the aesthetics 'cleaner', by dressing attractive actors in lavish costumes, deleting tragic dialogue and eschewing 'dirty, social, heavy, overfull' sets. Arichtev also claimed that he wanted to appeal to younger viewers, by 'refreshing' the historical subject matter and fashioning a 'modern' visual style that updated the milieu and the language (B. Arichtev, personal interview, 9 April 2014).

The growing mistrust between Gardner and Arichtev led Gardner to avoid the set and eschew face-to-face discussions about shooting. According to Gardner's co-writer Gotthard, it was a 'real duel, on multiple levels, beginning with casting [...]. There were two sides of a barricade, writers on one, the director and producers on the other' (P. Gotthard, personal interview, 9 March 2014). The writers of *The First Republic* soon came to accept their subordinate position in the production process. Feedback from the set, editing room and test screenings alerted them to the fact that during production many of their psychological nuances and subtexts had been lost, and many of their tougher realistic details softened. Gardner realized there was little point in negotiating, explaining or defending his concept to the producers. 'They don't understand it and think we are just spoiling their beautiful images with our script', he lamented. The only solution to his conflict with the production team seemed to be to 'write it in a way they will understand how to shoot it' (E. Pjajčiková, Field diary, 5 November 2013). By the end of season one, it was clear that the writers' grand experiment with quality television was over. Instead of evoking *Boardwalk Empire*, as they initially wished for, *The First Republic* had effectively become a combination of a

European heritage series and local primetime soap opera. They were yet to learn that – for reasons beyond the scope of this chapter – a new writing team would be found for the second and third seasons.

As this case study shows, the hands-off position of ČT's 'creative producer' in the day-to-day development and production processes did not meet the standards of Newcomb and Alley's (1983) 'self-conscious, creative producers' or von Rimscha and Siegert's (2011) commissioning editors who prioritize creativity and 'common welfare' over 'market orientation'. Rather than co-initiating or identifying with the initial creative vision or defending the writing team's innovative ambitions, Štern stepped back and sided with the independent producer to navigate the series from being a gritty crime-ghost drama to a glossy soap. Rather than aesthetic innovation and excellence, his main concern centred on filling the Friday programming slot with a proper mix of light family entertainment and public value.

CONCLUSION

In the version of *The First Republic's* first season that aired in 2014, the struggles described above revealed themselves as discrepancies in an otherwise coherent audiovisual package: inconsistent casting, sudden shifts in characterization, unexpectedly rough dialogue, incongruous glimpses of realistic violence or poverty, and a complex crime storyline at times overwhelmed by light melodrama. However, what at first glance might appear to be little more than sloppy craftsmanship is in fact evidence of a struggle between producers and writers coming to terms with a production culture in transition. Through an ethnographic study of day-to-day production processes, the significance of the apparent textual discrepancies in the first season of *The First Republic* becomes clearer. This ethnographic approach reveals an equally compelling behind-the-scenes drama. It casts a light on how compromises in the final product mediate social relations between key worker groups – groups characterized by different levels of decision-making power, and by competing situated aesthetics and ethics. It is only through ethnography that we can illuminate the writers' unrealized vision: a vision of Czech 'quality' television that became a victim of the pragmatism of the independent producer as well as the apparent inaction of the public service producer, concerned with protecting the Friday evening slot. And yet, this series fared remarkably well in the ratings, suggesting that Czech audiences cared little about the impact of the drama unfolding behind the scenes. They instead responded positively to an attractive cast and the combination of romance and suspense.

This ethnographic observation of the tensions, negotiations and compromises between different voices involved in the production process reveals what Georgina

Born called the ‘condensing complexity’ of cultural institutions. According to this view, ethnography shows such institutions encompass ‘a population that is constituted not only by the mundane uniformities of professional and corporate identification, but by differences – of status and authority, power and resources, of worldview, culture and aesthetic orientation’ (Born 2010: 190). When described from the perspectives of all the key agents, the competing interests that marred the production process and which surface in the final product highlight the transformative conditions of Czech public service television and its place in the broadcast market. This post-socialist institution was at that time struggling to retain its market share by producing formulaic primetime soaps differing little from the more popular and less costly fare produced by private networks. At the same time, public service television was becoming increasingly conscious of the need to match the standards of imported high-end series, represented in the Czech market mainly by HBO (which at that time started producing its original local drama series), and of the demands of its media-savvy younger viewers.

Some at ČT hoped that the future creative success of their institution would hinge on the specialization and internal competition of its producer units and on granting its independent production partners greater autonomy. Yet, with no truly transparent policy of dealing with private producers, Dramedy, the trusted supplier of light entertainment, has become a market leader. As the dominant player in this emerging sector, Dramedy has sought to protect its own interests rather than those of the PSB – consolidating its national status and penetrating the European television market.

Since the launch of Dvořák’s ‘producer system’, ‘creative producers’ gradually became publicly known and respected figures representing ČT at festivals and award ceremonies, thus increasing their symbolic capital in the wider industry community. At the same time, their reputation is still not comparable with the successful independent producers. They are regarded by some independent producers, dramaturges and authors who point to their lack of creative and financial autonomy as ‘not real’ producers or even as ‘mere postmen’ facilitating communication between the project team and the Programme Board (Szczepanik et al. 2015: 181–210; Králová 2017: 123). When compared to the system of ‘commissioning editors’ – common since the 1980s in different variations among Western European PSBs (e.g. the BBC, Channel 4, ARTE, ZDF, DR, STV, etc.) who have employed the ‘publisher model’ that separates producer-buyers (commissioning editors) from producer-sellers (independent producers) – it seems that the decision-making power of ČT’s ‘creative producers’ is indeed lower (Zoellner 2009: 513–14). The greenlighting of their projects for production as well as the allocation of programming slots is always dependent on the approval of the Programme Board. ČT’s programming division is demanding or even commis-

sioning specific types of content for specific slots from the development division, where the ‘creative producers’ are housed. Unlike commissioning editors, they are not responsible for specific programming windows, do not control pre-set production budgets, do not manage acquisitions and do not negotiate international co-productions (Králová 2017: 210).

Although Dvořák referred to the BBC when he introduced his ‘producer system’, it is more directly inspired by the domestic traditions of collaborative development: ČT’s own older producer unit system (in place between 1992 and 2002, giving the unit heads arguably more freedom in terms of financing and control over assigned programming windows compared to Dvořák’s units), which was in turn modelled on the ‘dramaturgical units’ of the state-socialist studios (Krumpár 2010: 39; Szczepanik 2013c). What all these producer unit systems have in common is the peculiar fusion of creative (script and talent development) and organizational responsibilities on the one hand, and a highly constrained decision-making autonomy on the other. Although less autonomous than their Western European counterparts, Czech ‘creative producers’ still stand out in the context of east-central European PSBs, and it might be argued that they are one of the key drivers of the recent renaissance in local PSB original production. This difference was demonstrated in the above comparison with the Polish PSB production system, where the lack of a middle-level producer figure and the reliance on top-down decision-making opened a space for heteronomous political power to influence the selection of projects, while limiting the innovative potential of public service series production.

Eva Pjajčíková is a script editor and development executive currently employed at Česká televize. At the time of writing the first version of this chapter, she was an MA student of film at Masaryk University, Brno. In 2013, she conducted a nine-month internship on *The First Republic* television series, where she worked as an assistant to the screenwriting team. Later, she worked as a co-writer on the second season of the show.

HBO Europe's Original Programming in the Era of Streaming Wars

A recent *New York Times Magazine* feature about 'streaming wars' pointed to the 'trend toward volume' in the production of subscription video on demand (SVOD) original content. The article speculates that the age of 'prestige TV' will be replaced by the age of 'anything goes', where even premium services such as HBO will be 'pressured by corporate bosses to crank out more shows in order to better compete with smartphones'. If generating more and more diversified original content is indeed the near future of the VOD industry, and if in this 'ongoing scramble for hours, international shows have emerged as another significant frontier' (Weiner 2019), how will this trend impact small Central and Eastern European (CEE) markets, where the production of SVOD original content is still relatively limited? Of all the transnational players, HBO Europe is the only exception, systematically churning out productions across the CEE region over the last decade. This chapter asks how HBO Europe's original production executives are reacting to the challenges of the global 'streaming war' and how the changing corporate strategies are reflected in the original content being produced in the region. The first part of this chapter examines HBO Europe's evolving business strategy and the manner in which this strategy manifests in the service's original programming, using the Czech Republic as a prime example.¹ The second part of the chapter investigates whether HBO Europe's recent corporate decisions can be understood as a strategic response to the threatening innovations of competitors such as Netflix, Amazon and other over-the-top (OTT) players, who have been building a strong presence across Western Europe and are also expected to make production investments in CEE markets, namely Poland, to be followed by the Czech Republic and Hungary.² Finally, the chapter proposes an explanation for HBO Europe's competitive strategy vis-à-vis Netflix, based on the ongoing scholarly debates about the globalization of media production.

The relevance of these issues for the general topic of this book is twofold. First, HBO Europe is in itself a strong regional producer bringing production standards and strategic goals to the peripheral markets of east-central Europe derived from its transnational business model, and thus changing the local production

practices and culture from the inside. Second, HBO systematically collaborates with local independent producers, offering them comfortable and stimulating working conditions, safe and relatively high production budgets, attractive fixed fees, the prestige of its brand, as well as access to its transnational distribution platform, but it also limits their creative decision-making (however subtly) and is frequently unwilling to share rights to ownership and revenues. While this chapter focuses on the first aspect – the role of HBO Europe as a regional producer – the latter aspect deserves critical analysis too. It is becoming even more relevant in light of recent policy discussions about the disempowerment of independent producers working for big SVOD players (Ekeberg and Helle 2019; McElroy and Noonan 2019: 64).³

HBO has been establishing its overseas pay cable services since the early 1990s. Surprisingly, the first region on the agenda was post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, namely the ‘Visegrad’ countries – arriving in September 1991 in Hungary, 1994 in Czech Republic, 1996 in Poland, and 1997 in Slovakia, followed by other CEE countries – which led to the creation of ‘HBO Central Europe’. Two other noteworthy foreign offices opened in the same time frame: HBO Latin America in October 1991 and HBO Asia (Singapore) in 1994. In other markets, HBO programming (mostly US-origin) has been made available via third parties under the label ‘Home of the HBO’ (e.g. Sky in the UK, Ireland, Germany, Austria and Italy; OCS in France; and Amedia in Russia), or via a branded SVOD service (Ding Ji Ju Chang in China). HBO Europe is the most internationally diversified of the foreign platforms, producing the largest quantity of original local content and promising further growth. Although the company’s future remains uncertain following the AT&T takeover of what is now called WarnerMedia, HBO’s new corporate parent since 2018, there have not yet been many changes that would give credence to the rumours of big corporate shifts such as the unconfirmed story about AT&T’s purported plan to sell HBO Europe to Sky (Nicolau and Fontanella-Khan 2019). WarnerMedia recently made a change in the top executive position, replacing HBO Europe CEO Hervé Payan with Christina Sulebakk in July 2020, but the move does not seem to mirror the widely publicized departure of HBO’s long-standing CEO Richard Plepler, because Sulebakk was Payan’s direct subordinate at HBO Europe, responsible for distribution. In December 2020, WarnerMedia finally unveiled a plan for the European launch of its new streaming service HBO Max, aiming to bring together content from its various properties (HBO, Warner Bros. and TNT) in late 2021. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to assess the possible impacts of this move on HBO Europe’s original content production, but it seems that HBO Max will be aggressively expanding its geographic territory and will help integrate the production strategies of its US and overseas corporate arms more tightly (Middleton and Easton 2020).

After 2012, HBO Europe's business strategy took a drastic turn, reacting to increasing competition from transnational and global pay cable networks and streamers, primarily Netflix, but also Amazon, Sky, and Canal+, and later Apple and Disney. HBO Europe has been combating Netflix's accelerating expansion by expanding on its own, although in the opposite geographic direction: after operating in the CEE region for twenty years, HBO Europe was quick to open a number of new offices across Western Europe. Netflix's expansion into Western Europe started in 2012, which HBO Central Europe countered in the same year by rebranding itself as 'HBO Europe', accompanied by the launch of HBO Netherlands and HBO Nordic in Scandinavia, the latter of which became HBO's first OTT service (preceding the 2015 launch of HBO NOW in the US). Soon after Netflix's sudden move to the CEE territories in January 2016 (as a part of its 'global switch on'), HBO Europe announced its original production plans for Scandinavia (HBO Nordic) and the Balkans (HBO Adria). It also opened a new office in Spain under the name HBO España in 2016,⁴ followed by Portugal (2019), thus reaching a total of twenty-one European territories.⁵

However, HBO's responses to the rapid global growth and disruptive innovations of Netflix and to changing consumer behaviour came with a significant delay. The first, preliminary step was taken in 2010 when HBO Europe introduced HBO On Demand, a service operating via set-top boxes and limited to subscribers of selected cable operators. Similarly to other pay-cable players such as Sky and Canal+, HBO started adjusting its core business model⁶ in the following years by launching online video on demand, followed by branded OTT services and multi-device access – though all of these changes came a little too late. While HBO Europe has been experimenting with its stand-alone OTT service HBO Nordic since 2012, its online VOD service in CEE called HBO GO (launched in 2011) was originally tied to cable subscriptions⁷ and did not become a fully stand-alone service until 2017–18 (two to three years after HBO Latin America). Although the scope of its localized content was much larger than that of Netflix (at least until 2019, when Netflix launched an aggressive localization campaign in the Czech Republic and Poland), HBO GO was often criticized for its clumsy user interface, lack of download functionality (until 2019), personalization, multiple profiles, etc. After launching HBO GO, HBO Europe grew fast: it more than doubled its revenues between 2013 and 2019 from €207 million to €539 million. But Netflix's European revenues (currently the fourth highest among the leading European television and radio groups) in the same time frame went from €0 to €5.8 billion, more than 10 times higher than HBO by 2019 (European Audiovisual Observatory [EAO] 2019b, 2020c). The notion that HBO missed the bus for the direct-to-consumer marketplace, allegedly due to the company's business ties with its long-standing cable and satellite partners,

soon spread among the professional and broader public. Despite purportedly lagging behind Netflix in terms of OTT, HBO Europe still holds its ground as the leading premium cable and high-quality original local content producer in the entire CEE region. One of the key reasons behind the provider's steadfast position is HBO's established presence in the region and its embeddedness in local industry ecosystems.

THE EVOLUTION OF HBO EUROPE'S PRODUCTION SYSTEM

Statistics show that original TV series (as opposed to theatrical films and live broadcasts) have driven the global growth of OTT business, including HBO's online services.⁸ Exclusive premium series appear to be the most attractive content for the near future, with greater financial viability than feature films in terms of programming time, thus allowing for more efficient marketing campaigns and subscriber loyalty. Available industry data indicate that European territories exhibit an increasing preference for localized services and tailored content. What is more, the EU's revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive, to be implemented by member states by 2021, has introduced a 30 per cent quota for European content in VOD catalogues.⁹ It is not surprising then that in 2014, HBO CEO Richard Plepler proclaimed original programming to be the 'backbone' of HBO's international strategy (Plepler 2014: 41), and that HBO has been upgrading its local serial drama production ever since. Throughout HBO's history in the US, original content has proved to be the most efficient strategy for differentiating the service from standard free-to-air (FTA) television and from competitors in the premium cable market (Santo 2008). In the 2010s, local original content (mainly serial dramas) helped HBO to differentiate itself from stand-alone OTT services around the world – especially in regions where local content is highly valued (Scandinavia, CEE). The current head of HBO Europe's original programming, Antony Root, summarized his objectives thusly: 'Tell stories no one else is telling [locally] in ways no one else can tell them. Because everything we do has to be about differentiation' (Berlinale Talents 2015). Coupled with the company's long-standing relationships with local industry communities and the broad payable user base, original local content for non-Western and non-English speaking territories is HBO Europe's main asset vis-à-vis Netflix.

In 2004, after a period of hesitantly testing the viability of local production with relatively cheap stand-up comedy specials and documentaries, HBO's largest foreign division, HBO Latin America, produced its first original TV series – an Argentina-made serial killer drama titled *Epitafios* (2004–9). As of 2019, HBO Latin America had released approximately twenty original drama series (in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Chile), many of them successful and critically acclaimed. Since 2013, HBO Asia has also been producing original series, starting with

Serangoon Road (2013), a multicultural detective series set in Singapore in the mid-1960s. However, the most prolific production hub among HBO's international arms is HBO Europe. It started in 2004 with stand-up comedy specials, followed by documentaries and the co-financing of independent feature films by pre-buying pay-TV rights (from 2009 in the Czech Republic). After 2010, four of HBO Europe's national divisions – Budapest, Prague, Warsaw and Bucharest – opened original programming departments, which have been responsible for supplying local content to HBO cable and on-demand services, emulating the tried-and-tested US practice. Since 2016, HBO Europe has been systematically expanding its drama series production for various European markets, totalling twenty-one series as of 2019 (a number of them renewed for their second or third season), with many more productions on the agenda, primarily in Spain and Scandinavia. In each of the four CEE capital cities, HBO has been producing approximately one drama series per year since 2010. These series are either adaptations of foreign formats or original stories, made either in-house or with independent producers (where all rights are bought out in the latter case), shot exclusively in the local language and – with one exception thus far – without international co-production deals.

This systematic production initiative started in 2009, primarily with the intention of promoting HBO Central Europe's five movie channels (HBO, HBO2, HBO3 – formerly HBO Comedy – Cinemax and Cinemax2). The HBO executive credited for orchestrating the launch of original production was the then-VP of Programming, Ondřej Zach, formerly the head of programme acquisition at the biggest Czech commercial broadcaster, Nova.¹⁰ As an experienced programming executive, Zach noticed the dwindling importance of exclusive licences for Hollywood films in the era of online piracy¹¹ as well as the narrowing of distribution windows, and realized that only original content could differentiate the HBO brand from local FTA broadcasters. Starting in the late 1990s (when still working for Nova), Zach observed an increase in production values of European acquisitions, coupled with the potential to compete with US imports, citing the German crime series *Alarm for Cobra 11 – The Highway Police* (*Alarm für Cobra 11 – Die Autobahnpolizei*, 1996–, broadcasted by Nova since 1998) as an example. Unlike commercial FTA broadcasters, who invest in original programming to supplement the increasingly expensive (and temporally strictly limited) licences for foreign programmes and to fill vast programming schedules, pay-cable networks produce content for marketing and promotional reasons. Under Zach's management, HBO Europe stopped emphasizing Hollywood movies and instead shifted the focus of its marketing campaigns and public relations towards original productions, despite the fact that acquisitions still made up the vast majority of its content, thereby mimicking the strategy employed by HBO US in the early 2000s.¹² Zach fully credits this strategic change – the

brand being redefined as a fully fledged local service rather than a mere outlet for Hollywood products – for opening the door to local media that would be otherwise uninterested in writing about HBO. Unlike FTA channels, which are motivated to produce original content to save money on licencing, HBO Europe didn't respond to the increasing prices of acquisitions: with guaranteed exclusive rights to HBO US programming, it never needed large quantities of original content. The network could instead narrow its focus on a handful of original programmes per year which were carefully selected, meticulously developed and well financed. Soon after taking the position of country manager in 2006, Zach began to include Czech independent films in the cable programming. This added a new local layer to the stand-up originals that were launched in CEE territories around 2004 under the first HBO Central Europe CEO Phil Roter.¹³ The next step was to introduce documentaries which offered a similarly advantageous price-performance ratio. While such productions did give HBO programming some local flair, it was not quite enough to 'make it Czech' using Czech themes, faces and voices. Zach acknowledged that it was not until the first drama series *In Treatment* premiered in 2010–12 in four localized national versions across the region that local audiences and media really started to take notice (O. Zach, personal interview, 18 December 2017) (Figure 6.1).



Figure 6.1 Tereza Polachová, Ondřej Zach and Antony Root at a *Burning Bush* (*Hořící keř*, dir. Agnieszka Holland, CZ/PL, 2013) press conference in January 2013. (Courtesy of HBO Czech Republic.)

The final decision to ramp up original production and to develop the first drama series¹⁴ was made by the then-HBO Central Europe CEO Linda Jensen,¹⁵ who in 2009 hired Marc Lorber, formerly a London-based executive, to be HBO Central Europe's first senior VP of original programming and production. It was a special time for the European arm: at the start of 2010, HBO US bought out Disney and Sony Pictures Entertainment to transform HBO Central Europe from a joint venture into a consolidated, wholly-owned subsidiary of Time Warner. HBO Central Europe thus acquired exclusivity on all HBO US content, which also meant that going forward, European channels had to schedule all HBO original series, not only the biggest international hits, but also more niche titles that had no obvious appeal in CEE markets. The brand's distinctive aesthetics put more pressure on HBO Europe's original programming to be on par with HBO US content (Stewart 2013). Nevertheless, significant differences between European and US programming have persisted – for example, HBO Europe has not featured any sports and cultural events (typical for HBO US) and has focused instead on films and TV series. Furthermore, HBO channels and OTT services have had to comply with quotas for European content (based on the EU's Audiovisual Media Services Directive), though the cable licences granted under the Czech Republic's Broadcasting Act lowered the quotas for HBO channels to 10–12 per cent (as opposed to 50 per cent for FTA broadcasters), reflecting HBO's specialization in US films and series.¹⁶

The first stage of the upgrade involved increasing the annual slate of new documentaries from approximately eight to twenty (four to six for each key country), with the best introduced into international markets and presented at festivals. Jensen claimed that documentaries 'were a good way to tap into local stories and there was good marketing, PR and viewer value in making docs for a certain amount, rather than bringing out ads for the channels' (Stewart 2013). Indeed, a Romanian documentary about a homeless artist titled *The World According to Ion B.* (*Lumea văzută de Ion B.*, dir. Alexander Nanau, 2009) won the International Emmy Award for Best Arts Programming in 2010, putting HBO Europe on the documentary film-making map.¹⁷ After testing production opportunities with ambitious but relatively cheap and niche documentaries, the next step for Lorber – who formerly worked as an international format consultant, for instance on Russian and Czech adaptations of *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (RCN Televisión, 1999–2001) – was to test local markets with new versions of well-proven fiction formats. The Israeli drama *Be'Tipul* (HOT3, 2005–8), structured as weekly sessions of patients with a psychotherapist, seemed to be a perfect fit, having already proven itself as HBO's US version *In Treatment* (2008–10, with Gabriel Byrne in the lead role). Furthermore, the show's minimal set and repetitive story structure translated into relatively modest budgets and made it

‘a containable show in terms of production’, as observed by Lorber (Benzine 2010). The series, produced in Czech, Polish, Romanian and Hungarian versions, featured prominent local actors and became quite successful, attracting wide media attention and purportedly clicking well with HBO’s urban middle-class target audiences (for whom psychotherapy is regarded as an aspirational status symbol). It was even renewed for second and third seasons in every country but Romania (A. Majer, personal interview, 21 October 2020). After Lorber’s departure, HBO employed the same strategy once again, with three national versions of another Israeli format, a dramedy entitled *When Shall We Kiss* (*Matay Nitnashek*, Channel 10, 2007). This was then followed by adaptations with steadily increasing production values and original creative input from the local talent – of the Finnish gangster family drama *Easy Living* (the Hungarian adaptation *Aranyélet*, 2015–2018), the Norwegian political/crime thriller *Mammon* (Czech and Polish versions in 2015), a crime thriller combined with coming-of-age gay relationship drama *Eyewitness* (the Romanian version was called *The Silent Valley* [*Valea Mută*, 2016]) and the Australian gangster family drama *Small Time Gangster* (the Romanian version was called *Shadows* [*Umbre*, 2014–19]). HBO Europe became highly adept at picking up cheap and internationally obscure foreign formats, recruiting prominent local talent, and turning the formats into high-end, edgy productions, including substantial portions of newly authored story material, such as the highly acclaimed Romanian social/gangster series *Shadows*, directed by the award-winning auteur Bogdan Mirica.

HBO Europe’s regional production infrastructure and strategy took on its current form after Antony Root replaced Lorber as the senior VP of original programming and production in 2011. The organization gradually transformed from a loosely connected set of national divisions into an integrated pan-European network with thin but tight central management answering directly to the New York headquarters: a strategic manager (EVP original programming and production) supervising a group of hands-on tactical managers, and executive producers or commissioning editors responsible for the whole annual output in individual territories. Their main task is to select and co-develop new projects with local independent producers and authors, recommend them for approval by Antony Root, and finally to supervise physical production, conducted by a commissioned third party (in the Czech Republic, this means a company with long-term experience in servicing Prague-bound ‘runaway’ productions). The middle level, between the EVP (Root) and the executive producers in individual countries, is occupied by Root’s two closest assistants: a central executive producer (Jonathan Young) and a development executive (Steve Matthews). Under this system (Figure 6.2), serial drama production throughout Europe is effectively overseen by two London-based Britons: Antony Root, a Cambridge

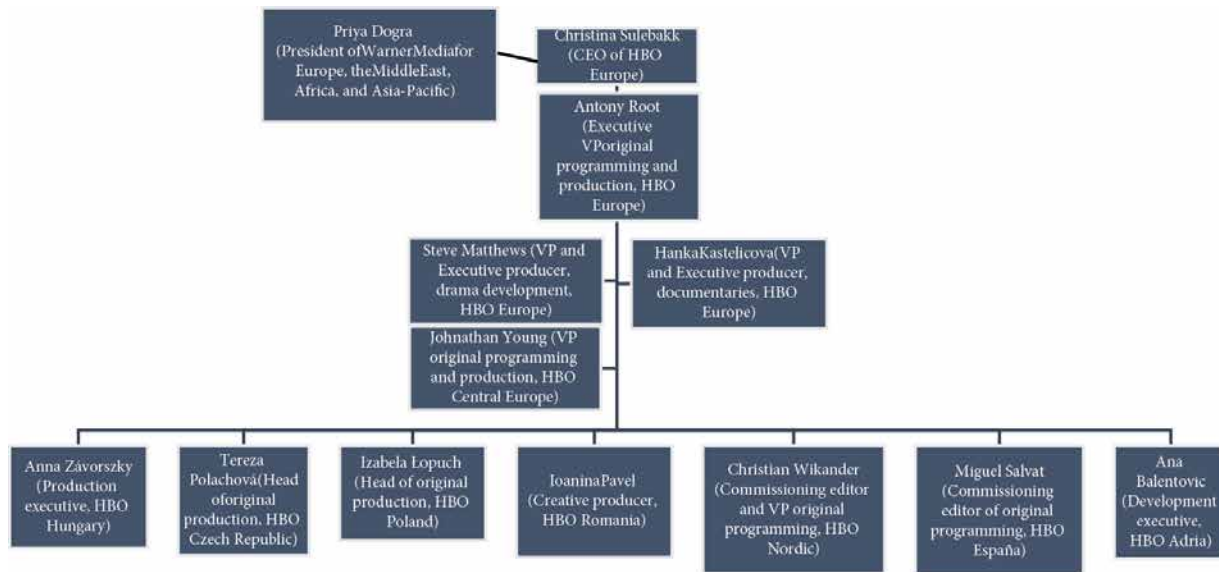


Figure 6.2 HBO Europe's production system as of January 2021.

philosophy and literature graduate with extensive executive experience in British and American television (working, for example, as the SVP for European Production for Sony Pictures Television before HBO) and his right-hand man, the central development executive Steve Matthews (hired in 2014), who previously worked on Showtime's *The Borgias* (2011–13) and spent several years in Budapest. Under Root and Matthews, HBO Europe's drama output has stabilized and expanded into a total of four regions: CEE, Scandinavia, Spain and the Balkans. So far, HBO Europe has produced local original content in nine out of the twenty-one national territories, with recent series premiering day-and-date across all European regions. Matthews and Young have been focusing primarily on CEE territories, while Root seems to have taken a recent interest in Scandinavia and Spain, where original production is most important for local audiences. In terms of Spanish-language content, such productions have been regarded as more easily exportable to the US than other foreign-language productions.

The first project completed under Root (although started under Lorber) adopted the localization method of multiple versions of the same format – the above-mentioned Israeli romantic dramedy *When Shall We Kiss* (Hungarian, Romanian and Czech versions, 2011–). As Root explained in a discussion with regional film-makers at the Sarajevo Film Festival in 2015, the adaptations were meant to make each of the three capital cities intimately recognizable, featuring popular cafés and other locations, and to supplement the high-brow *In Treatment* with a more popular, soap opera-like format to broaden the promotional impact of the original production (Sarajevo Film Festival 2015).

However, the most critical success came rather unexpectedly with the company's next strategic move, when HBO Europe decided to make its first 'event miniseries'. *Burning Bush* (*Hořící keř*, dir. Agnieszka Holland, CZ/PL, 2013) is a three-part drama about Czech national hero Jan Palach, who immolated himself to protest the 1968 Soviet invasion of his country and the subsequent moral capitulation of society. The project, co-produced by young independent production house Nutprodukce, cleverly combined daring plot material from first-time screenwriter Štěpán Hulík with the mature film-making style of renowned Polish director Agnieszka Holland, who had previously worked with HBO US and was a student at the FAMU film school in Prague during the invasion. The project, initiated in 2010, was developed in large part before Antony Root joined HBO. Upon its release in 2013,¹⁸ the series proved to be an immense national hit (a record winner at the Czech Academy Awards) as well as an international success, being sold to dozens of foreign markets, including the US. What is more, its global reach made people outside the CEE region recognize the existence of HBO Europe for the first time. If *In Treatment* placed HBO Europe on the map of regional television culture, *Burning Bush* did the same on the global TV

series scene: playing at international festivals, being represented by the renowned German sales agency Beta Film, and finally making its way into the HBO US catalogue. Jensen explained that this financially and creatively risky endeavour was directly linked to HBO GO: 'We need to build a library of local product because that has meaningful added value on HBO GO. Strategically we want to build a library to sit alongside the US HBO content' (Stewart 2013). It seems that the change in corporate ownership coupled with the full exclusivity of HBO US content and the launch of HBO GO were key drivers behind the decisions to dramatically upgrade production plans, increase production values and combine uniquely local stories with more universal themes, all while avoiding co-production deals and retaining full exclusivity rights. This created a shift in the company's production strategy, whereby original content transitioned from serving merely as a public relations instrument aimed at a local user base, to valuable exclusive content, designed to be released in other HBO territories and possibly sold beyond them. Inspired by the international buzz surrounding *Burning Bush* (Figure 6.3), the company's production planning now exhibited a sharpened focus on higher production values and original material rather than format adaptations. More high-budget event mini-series, reflecting controversial national themes, quickly followed.



Figure 6.3 Táňa Pauhofová as a lawyer of the Palach family and Jan Budař as her husband in *Burning Bush* (*Hořící keř*, dir. Agnieszka Holland, CZ/PL, 2013). (Credit: Home Box Office [HBO].)

The strategic goal of building an exclusive VOD library was further supported by the new situation that arose when HBO Europe launched its Scandinavian OTT service in 2012. Ondřej Zach noted that the Scandinavian on-demand market was already far more mature and saturated than CEE in terms of competition for premium film licences. Furthermore, the VOD consumer base was younger, less stable and more dependent on new attractive serial content than the relatively conservative and loyal pay-cable customers. ‘The demographic structure of the on-demand services leads to a higher consumption of serial content. The VOD consumers are technologically more advanced, have access to more content sources, including online pirating, [...] and tend to form clans and fan communities which then practice [...] binge watching’ (O. Zach, personal interview, 18 December 2017). This led the Scandinavian office to make an energetic push for expanding and upgrading serial content production. The division’s progressive role within HBO Europe was later acknowledged when Hervé Payan, CEO of HBO Nordic, became the pan-European CEO in January 2016; in 2020, Payan was succeeded by another long-time HBO Europe executive, Christina Sulebakk, who was involved in starting HBO España.

The Czech division stopped looking for foreign formats after releasing *Mammon* in 2015, and instead geared its focus towards original local projects, typically six- or eight-part miniseries (although it did continue producing new seasons of the format adaptations *When Shall We Kiss* and *In Treatment*). By 2016, nine projects were in development, with the expectation of greenlighting an average of one in three (Polachová 2016). The Czech production department virtually became a commissioning and development unit, working meticulously for several years on developing each of the stories with a small group. This team typically consisted of one to two writers and an independent producer who would later be joined by a leading director, with HBO Europe’s head of development, Steve Matthews, acting as a hands-on script advisor.

A new three-tiered production typology emerged after HBO Europe recruited Root, and can be summarized using Root’s own terminology as follows:

1. Multiple format adaptations with modest production values that are purely local and risk-averse tests of national markets: *In Treatment* and *When Shall We Kiss*.
2. High-end series, some of them ‘returnable’, either adaptations or original stories, mostly gangster dramas and/or thrillers about political corruption, ruthless competition for resources, and dysfunctional or abusive father figures, allegorizing the neoliberal transformation of post-socialist societies (*Easy Living*, *Shadows*, *Mammon*, *Wataha* [PL, 2014–19], *Eyewitness* and *Tuff Money* [Bani negri, RO, 2020]); or, more recently, sophisticated, ironic

- experiments with genre formulas in Spain (horror/action *30 Coins* [*30 monedas*, ES, 2020–1] and gastronomic love story *Foodie Love* [ES, 2019]) and Scandinavia (crime/sci-fi *Beforeigners* [*Fremvandrerne*, NO, 2019–21], hipster dramedy *Gösta* [SE, 2019] and quirky comedy drama *Welcome to Utmark* [*Utmark*, NO, 2021]).
3. Limited series and 'event miniseries', often commenting on major events in the nation's history, or crime stories with socially realistic depictions of specific troubled environments, with recent Nordic projects moving towards youth-centred social dramas: *Burning Bush*, *Wasteland* (*Pustina*, CZ, 2016), *The Sleepers* (*Bez vědomí*, CZ, 2019), *Blinded by the Lights* (*Ślepnąc od światła*, PL, 2018), *Patria* (ES, 2020), *Beartown* (*Björnstad*, SE, 2020) and *Kamikaze* (DK, 2021).

In addition to consolidating HBO's pan-European production system and diversifying its production portfolio, Root has recently introduced several strategic changes in response to global OTT competition, namely Netflix's dynamic production campaign. It appears that the Central and Eastern European region serves as a testing ground for HBO's expansion into more competitive Western European markets and for tailoring specific production strategies to the newly entered territories (HBO Nordic and Spain, which were approached primarily via the OTT service). HBO Europe is also signalling that international sales beyond HBO Europe territories have finally become one of the company's strategic objectives. While most previous series under Zach and Lorber targeted national markets exclusively, the more recent projects supervised by Root have been developed with international sales in mind as well, some even with the intention of being acquired by HBO US. *Patria* and *30 Coins* are the first collaborations between two HBO foreign divisions (HBO España and HBO Latin America, 2020), while *Burning Bush* and *Hackerville* (RO/DE, with UFA Fiction, 2018) stand as HBO Europe's first international co-productions. HBO Europe has thus been following the lead of HBO US' recent collaborations with foreign partners on high-profile projects such as *The Young Pope* (IT/FR/ES/UK/USA, with Sky/Canal Plus/RAI, 2016), *Chernobyl* (US/UK, with Sky UK, 2019) and *My Brilliant Friend* (IT/USA, with RAI, 2018–).

This historical overview has summarized the changing significance of HBO Europe's original production as transitioning between three main stages. In the first period, original production was a strictly local means of communication with the public and the local media while differentiating the brand from local FTA broadcasters (up until the success of *Burning Bush* in 2013). In the second stage, HBO Europe was building an exclusive library for HBO channels and HBO GO catalogues across the region in an era when online piracy and narrowing distribution windows had devalued the exclusivity of acquired Hollywood content.

The third, current stage is marked by a pan-European (and global) strategy of competing with Netflix and other global OTT players by producing premium content that is at once highly local and highly exportable across and beyond HBO Europe territories.

Each of these strategies implies different production practices (budgets, production values, selection of genres, themes and talent) as well as criteria for success. The early format adaptations were aimed exclusively at local audiences and media, though they could not be measured by the standard people-meter based ratings used by national FTA broadcasters. The reason behind this, as stressed by Zach, was that the total number of subscribers was too low in the small CEE markets to produce representative results – with the exception of Poland, which is not only the largest, but also the most developed and competitive pay-cable and VOD market in CEE.¹⁹ In addition, the fluctuation of subscriptions – a crucial parameter for any premium cable service – could only be tracked on a monthly, not daily basis. Instead of using fast ratings results, HBO Europe tracks the impact of individual series based on month-to-month subscriptions²⁰ as well as the number of media hits to measure their marketing effectiveness. With the advent of online VOD, it has become possible to accurately measure the streaming of individual titles. HBO Europe makes use of this by occasionally publishing data attesting to the high popularity of its original content vis-à-vis HBO US productions.²¹ Following the release of *Burning Bush*, original series are now also being evaluated by the publicity they generate at international festivals and award shows, as well as in terms of foreign sales outside of HBO Europe territories. For instance, Tereza Polachová, HBO Czech executive producer, praised *Burning Bush* for being sold to over forty territories and for having been seen in seventy countries (Polachová 2017). In addition, Antony Root confirmed that making it into HBO US catalogues has become one of the company's key strategic goals (Tizard 2018), following an announcement made by HBO CEO Richard Plepler at MIPCOM 2017 that HBO US will start introducing original foreign series to its US subscribers. This coincided with a repeated claim that HBO Europe will no longer produce format adaptations (apart from new seasons of adapted shows, based on original stories), reflecting the fact that adaptations are difficult or impossible to sell in foreign territories (Roxborough 2017).

The local drama series production initiative started long before Netflix announced its European expansion and even a year before HBO Europe launched HBO GO. This initiative was originally meant to distinguish the HBO brand from local commercial as well as public service broadcasters rather than from global players. Nevertheless, after the launch of HBO Nordic in 2012 and even more so after 2016, when HBO Nordic's CEO Hervé Payan replaced Linda

Jensen as HBO Europe's CEO,²² some of the division's key decisions can be read as specific pre-emptive or defensive strategies to counteract Netflix: attempts at gaining a 'first-mover' advantage or to retain valuable customers that could be lured away by the competition. An example of this is when HBO Europe originally rejected claims that it was preparing for Netflix by buying out packages of OTT licences to build a large portfolio of CEE content (Krasko 2014), though it eventually did just that,²³ as did Netflix in 2019.²⁴ Another illustrative example is HBO Europe's decision to expand into strategically important territories outside CEE: Scandinavia and Spain/Portugal. The company's OTT-only entry into the Scandinavian market foregrounded HBO's perception of the behavioural differences between online and TV consumers as well as between Western Europe and CEE. While the HBO brand has remained synonymous with conservative, family-based TV viewership in the less competitive and developed CEE markets, HBO Nordic and HBO España have played the risky digital game from the very start, lacking a stable consumer base as a result.

'NOT IN THE INTERNATIONAL MARKETPLACE?': NETFLIX, POST-GLOBALIZATION AND HBO EUROPE'S EXPANSION FROM THE EAST TO THE WEST

HBO is a dynamically expanding and increasingly diversifying multinational corporation, integrated in multiple local media ecologies and building new collaborative ties with local partners, talent and even public institutions. At the same time, its European office has consistently insisted on being an 'entirely stand-alone' corporate entity, adamant on going forward with original production without direct orders from the LA headquarters (although Zach acknowledged it was first inspired by HBO Latin America's original production that had started six years earlier). HBO came to CEE in the early 1990s when there was no noteworthy foreign competition, and its executives had long referred to it as a region of 'bad TV' – an underdeveloped market lacking experience in producing quality dramas, thus bearing the implicit presumption that there was no 'quality TV' before HBO. The company's executives have presented themselves as mediators of the HBO US aesthetic and production values, with a pedagogic mission of cultivating the local production environment, training local writers and directors, and helping them realize their true authorial visions (G. Krigler, personal interview, 28 March 2014). To appeal to local professional communities, HBO Europe's executives developed an elaborate production ideology of creative freedom, consisting of concepts such as 'authenticity', 'authorial voice' and 'a strong point of view' that Antony Root persuasively adapted from traditional HBO US production rhetoric to fit the regional conditions.²⁵ As HBO Europe's Head of Development Steve Matthews put it, they have aimed at creating

‘US-style muscular storytelling in television form married with auteur cinema, young married with old’ (Sarajevo Film Festival 2015). This ideology needs to be read critically against the core business model and production strategy described above, though that is not the aim of this chapter. Instead, the remaining section will foreground the evolving strategic position that CEE original content production holds in terms of HBO Europe’s competition with transnational OTT services across Europe.

At first sight, HBO Europe seems to reject – unlike Netflix and Amazon – the key principles of the globalization of media production, primarily those of international co-production, runaway production and the related international division of cultural labour (Miller et al. 2005). Root insists that all original productions have been entirely conducted in the commissioning countries: ‘We need to be part and parcel of the ecology of the country we are in, so I would not be in favour of taking advantage of a tax break in the UK [for example,] to shoot a Romanian-language series’ (TBI Reporter 2014). Similarly, he and his colleagues have repeatedly rejected ideas for creating international co-productions, especially for financial reasons, or shooting local stories in English: ‘we’re not in the so-called “international” marketplace, making internationally destined products right from the start from our local market, like the English-language *Medici* (IT/UK, 2016–19), produced in Italy. We’re not in that game’ (Pham 2016).

Through its long-standing presence, strong relationships with local production communities, and its involvement with local stories and languages, HBO has been redefining the globalization of media production. Nevertheless, after Netflix’s ‘global switch on’ and its rapid increase in local production across Europe, it was no longer enough to communicate with local audiences. HBO Europe needed stories that could better transcend borders, stories that were ‘at once acutely local and affectingly universal’ (Whittingham 2018), words used by Root to describe HBO España’s first drama project *Patria* (2020). The first Scandinavian original *Gösta* was hailed by its creative team as a self-ironic image of ‘what it is to be Sweden’ (Roxborough 2019), clearly aimed in equal part at the local market and export. According to HBO Europe’s executives, the saturated and highly competitive markets of Scandinavia and Spain offer more incentive and better opportunities for employing this new strategy, while also allowing for a more hands-off approach. Antony Root recalled that together with the local executive producers in the four CEE capital cities, he had to convince the local professional communities about the ‘spirit’ of HBO, to do the ‘very hard work of re-aligning the expectations of the local producing community to what our needs are, that they are not just free TV needs or another opportunity to make a quick buck’ (Berlinale Talents 2015). Steve Matthews similarly pointed out that unlike the CEE markets, where development needs to be watched closely, and

where most projects are generated in-house, HBO Europe's new territories are 'different in that they have highly mature markets of independent production companies with huge experience in development' that can be trusted to do the actual development work on their own (Molhov 2018). Consequently, HBO Nordic's shows boast better sales potential than their CEE counterparts, as acknowledged by Root: 'If you say, "We have this great new Romanian show", well, I'm not saying their [MIPCOM buyers'] eyes glaze over, but you have to get them used to the idea that there might be a great show coming out of Romania' (Roxborough 2017).

If the recent developments in Scandinavia and Spain are heralding a new original production and distribution strategy for HBO Europe, we have to consider conceptualizing it differently from original production in CEE. The initial idea of marrying HBO production and aesthetic values with local stories, languages and talent to produce shows that 'speak with a loud voice to local audiences' (Picard 2012) and still 'sit well' alongside US premium content in HBO GO catalogues can be described as a high-end form of 'glocalization' (Robertson 1995). Glocalization, a term referring to the customization of global services and content for local markets and the fetishization of local cultures for branding purposes, serves as a common strategy of global media corporations (seen, for instance, in the foreign production facilities of Hollywood majors or subsidiaries of US TV networks offering localized channels and content – Fontaine 2019). The key difference in HBO Europe's original programming, however, lies in its established physical presence, a personality-driven organization system, high levels of investment and quality control in the small, peripheral media markets and, above all, the brand's embeddedness in local cultures, which has exceeded the framework of 'localized Americana'. On the other hand, HBO Europe's recent move towards developing more exportable, albeit still strongly local, content goes beyond the traditional glocalization strategy. Instead, the company operates by absorbing the westernized content emanating from European 'digital peripheries' first into transnational (regional) flows followed by global 'dominant' flows (Thussu 2007). Unlike the notorious examples of 'counter-flows' originating from second-tier 'media capitals' – such as Bollywood movies or Mexican telenovelas exported to or adapted in the US – HBO Europe is exporting from small European markets that have no prior history as transnational creative hubs and whose national production remains notoriously unexportable (Grece 2017a). In terms of power relations, cross-border circulation remains closely tied to the interests and territories of the corporate mothership, no matter how much HBO Europe executives try to conceal this with their claims of regional autonomy; this will probably be even more evident after the European launch of HBO Max in late 2021.

HBO Europe's recent original programming balances national specificity with what Mareike Jenner calls the 'grammar of transnationalism' differently than HBO US or Netflix US original programming, whose *primary* aims are transnational distribution. In HBO Europe's original programming, local appeal still comes first, while transnational appeal plays second fiddle. Although the common denominator remains the same – the concept of 'quality' – the difference is that HBO Europe's original content does not 'eschew more problematic aspects of each country's history' to increase its accessibility across foreign territories (Jenner 2018: 229). On the contrary, 'problematic' aspects of national history, politics and culture – be it the moral anxieties of everyday life under the communist regime, contemporary political corruption in post-socialist societies or Catalan separatism – are mined to create nationally specific spectacles. In her analysis of HBO Europe's original production, Aniko Imre adopts the concept of 'commercial nationalism' (coined by Volcic and Andrejevic 2016) to explain how HBO Europe opportunistically uses national stereotypes as brands that can – in the era of populist nationalism – travel surprisingly well across borders, if married with the right blend of HBO 'quality'. According to Imre, HBO Europe's original programming has shown that 'the branded politics of national and European belonging connects, rather than divides, East and West, "völkish" and cosmopolitan affiliations' (Imre 2018: 63). While she focuses on the former Eastern bloc countries of Central and Eastern Europe, HBO Europe's strategic shifts in its new territories imply that 'commercial nationalism' is becoming even more prevalent. According to Terry Flew, today's media industries have entered the era of 'post-globalization', characterized by resurgent populist nationalisms and the renewed power of nation states (Flew 2018). HBO Europe appears to be an example of a post-global corporation that has been able to cleverly tap into these tendencies.

The question that remains is will HBO Europe's highly selective and locally-oriented approach prove viable in competition with Netflix's long-distance, but more aggressive and high-quantity strategy once it finally introduces more systematic production in the CEE region?²⁶ While HBO US announced a 50 per cent increase in programming hours for the 2019 autumn slate, in an alleged bid to satisfy AT&T's 'more is more' mandate (McNamara 2019), the European arm has grown slower and has refrained – unlike Netflix – from locally producing cheap content such as 'made-for-streaming movies' (FilmTake 2019). Nevertheless, it seems that imports from overseas subsidiaries will play an increasing role in HBO's business strategy, as in 2018, the company announced that it would make its entire foreign content catalogue (currently including approximately fifty series) available in the US (Schomer 2018). This move seems to be in line with the more general, long-term trend in the international drama market, which started

with the European 'buying boom' triggered by Nordic noir, and which has more recently shifted towards original non-English content travelling increasingly well across the territorial catalogues of transnational streamers. For HBO, which is considered a pioneer in developing high-end foreign series, the 'game-changer' came with *My Brilliant Friend*, a hugely successful co-production with the Italian public service broadcaster RAI; for Netflix, the German-language series *Dark*, for which 90 per cent of the viewership allegedly came from outside the country of origin, confirmed the cross-border potential of original local programming (Clarke 2018). If HBO's strategic shifts in Scandinavia and Spain are indeed translated back into CEE, it might further influence how original local content is commissioned by shifting the balance between locally specific issues and the 'grammar of transnationalism', as well as between expensive event mini-series and other types of content. In 2020, as a direct sign of that mutual influence, HBO Europe responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and the culturally universal experience of life under lock down by commissioning an anthology series of short movies *At Home* (2020), produced first in Spain and then in Poland with local film directors. It remains to be seen whether and how the upcoming launch of HBO Max across Europe will contribute to this east-west convergence and whether it will further contribute to overcoming the limitations of the peripheral markets in east-central Europe.

Digital Producers: Short-Form Web Television Positions Itself between Clickbait and Public Service

Co-authored with Dorota Vašíčková

The ins and outs of Czech politics orchestrated from one shady office. Pulling the strings is Tonda Blaník, an unscrupulous, abusive, hard-drinking, chain-smoking and yet, somehow, adorable lobbyist. Aided by two submissive assistants and sporting an always-new pair of extravagant shoes, Blaník is the man to call if you need help influencing an election campaign, appointing or firing a minister, resolving a political crisis or approving a new law. This conspiracy narrative is the premise of the most successful political satire in the Czech Republic's recent history: a five-season short-form web series entitled *The Blaník Bureau* (*Kancelář Blaník*, 2014–18).¹ A surprising co-production between leading local web-TV service Stream.cz (fully owned by the Czech Republic's biggest search engine company, Seznam.cz) and Negativ (the leading arthouse production company in the Czech Republic), the weekly series attracted a huge following and made headlines for its merciless lampooning of the ongoing scandals enveloping the country's prominent politicians. Commentators praised the series for reviving the genre of daring political satire and for presenting an unexpected challenge to the dilution of satirical content on Czech public service broadcaster (PSB) ČT (Česká televize), a state of affairs attributed² to its alleged fear of sanctions by the broadcaster's supervisory board, whose political liabilities had quelled the liberal spirit of the 1990s.³ The widespread public attention that Stream's *The Blaník Bureau* attracted in 2014 did much to herald Stream.cz as if it was a new phenomenon, although in fact it had been operating for seven years. In the years following 2014, Stream launched over a dozen other, mostly satirical and parodic fiction series, whereas its emerging competitors developed their own shows. Today, these services contribute to a lively national scene of short-form web television, whose prestige within the public sphere has been compared to public service broadcasting.

The aim of this chapter is to use the case of Stream and its web series production to reveal the small local market conditions that have facilitated the boom

in advertisement-supported, short-form web television and to examine how Stream's hybrid production culture has mediated a quasi-public service mission. After a short overview of the online video markets in east-central Europe and reviewing the existing literature on short-form web television, the chapter reconstructs the corporate history of Stream.cz, its evolving business models, the ambivalent position it occupies between broadcasting and the internet, and finally, its production ideology. The conclusion provides a broader overview of emerging trends in the rapidly changing web-TV market. The key research question of this critical production analysis is whether and how does Stream's business model, production ideology and practical aesthetics mediate public service values (even if only for several years, until its management and strategy abruptly changed in early 2018)? The analysis is inspired by the emerging scholarly literature on internet TV and web series, theoretically drawing on Timothy Havens's concept of 'industry lore' to explore Stream producers' understandings of the market (Havens 2014). Based on a qualitative analysis of interviews with key participants in the local internet television industry,⁴ the chapter also offers a contextualized answer to the question of what role original short-form web-TV production might play in a small audiovisual market dominated on the one hand by strong, albeit increasingly insecure public service media (PSM), and on the other by global platforms increasingly embedded in the local audiovisual ecosystem.

ONLINE VIDEO MARKETS IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

East-central Europe is not home to strong local production of premium pay-TV and subscription video on demand (SVOD) original content; however, it has been a key growth market in online video advertising. It also has multiple advertisement-supported video on demand (AVOD) or web-TV services with free-to-view web-only content. The AVOD ecosystem is different from SVOD in terms of its extreme heterogeneity, flexibility, cross-platform spreadability and local embeddedness. AVOD's dynamic growth has been driven by the recent global boom in online video viewing and online video advertisement spend. The EU total online advertising expenditure (comprising all kinds of online advertising: paid-for-search, classifieds and directories, and display – the last including video) took the lead over TV advertisement spending in 2015, and over all other media in 2019 (Grece 2016b: 18; IAB 2020: 8). The Czech Republic's online advertising spend surpassed that of TV in 2015 and Hungary's in 2016, with Poland following in 2019 (EAO 2020a). Within the 'display' segment of online advertising, driven mostly by mobile, online video remains the main growth driver with an average 30 per cent year-over-year growth (IAB 2020: 25; Grece 2017b: 11, 25–6).

Web-TV production vitally depends on the willingness of advertisers, traditionally used to buying TV adverts, to transfer their investment to online video, and especially so-called 'in-stream' video adverts, typically consisting of pre-roll, mid-roll or post-roll advert placements within video content (in-stream represented a 49 per cent share of video advertisement spend in Europe as of 2019) (IAB 2020: 27). Although linear TV continues to attract more advertisement money than online video in east-central Europe, online video advertisement spending is growing significantly faster than that for TV commercials, especially in Poland (32 per cent year-over-year growth for online video versus 2 per cent for TV commercials as of 2017) and the Czech Republic (32 versus 11). Total viewing numbers still favoured television, but younger demographics (age sixteen to thirty-four) spent more time watching online video content than television across the region as of 2017. While Google and Facebook attract about 50–60 per cent of digital advertisement spending in the region, with video playing an increasingly important role in social media, there are also strong advertisement-supported local platforms that draw a significant share (weCAN 2018).

In Poland, the biggest online services featuring original short-form video content include web portals, media houses and news sites such as Wirtualna Polska (WP), Onet, Gazeta.pl (Gazeta.tv) and Interia (Interia.tv). They mostly focus on light news, lifestyle and entertainment shows, with few examples of fiction web series. Player.pl and CDA.pl (the latter being a former pirate platform which managed to legalize its business) are local AVOD/SVOD services with limited original content portfolios (Adamczak 2020:151–2; Erling 2020). In the Czech Republic, the main online services publishing short-form original video content include large media houses such as Mall.TV (currently integrated in the media house CNC), DVTV (linked to the Aktuálně news site, which is owned by the media house Economia) and the video portals of iDNES (iDNES KINO and iDNES TV – parts of the biggest Czech media house, MAFRA). But the number one local leader has been the search engine and web portal Seznam with its video services TelevizeSeznam.cz, Stream and SeznamZprávy.

While Poland is the largest and currently most dynamic online video market in the region, the strongest east-central European web portal producing original video content is Seznam.cz. Heralded as 'the only company in Europe that is beating Google' (Waldo 2014), Seznam is the biggest local search engine and online platform in the Czech Republic. Although Google surpassed it in 2011 with regard to full-text search, Seznam remains Google's most successful European competitor on a national scale, retaining an approximate 25 per cent share in the Czech search market as of 2019. But it is much more than a search engine. Seznam's thirty-plus online services include a homepage, browser, e-mail, news and lifestyle webpages, a map app, e-commerce and three interconnected

web-TV services: TelevizeSeznam.cz, Stream.cz and SeznamZprávy. Seznam's revenues are mostly generated by its own search advertising system 'Sklik', display advertising (including videos) and the web feed on its homepage. Launched a year before Google, Seznam grew popular for its user-friendly e-mail service, which many middle-aged people still use. It also started producing content very early on – including one of the most popular news websites in the Czech Republic and a successful map application. The usual explanation for Seznam's long-term success is its cultivation of a close relationship with older and more conservative local users. With roughly 90 per cent of Czechs using its services at least once a month and a half of the population having Seznam.cz installed as their main home page, it had a 60 per cent share of all Czech pageviews in 2015.⁵ Although it has been gradually losing ground, it still had about 50 per cent daily reach with its homepage (with key related services) as of 2020, almost the same as Google's (Median 2020: 41). Outside the Czech Republic, Google has dominated all EU search markets since at least 2008, currently exceeding a 90 per cent share in most of them.⁶

Most short form, web-only video content is available via YouTube, Facebook and other social media. While user-generated content and promotional paratexts derived from long core texts dominate in social media, original branded shows could grow in the near future (Ting 2019). All countries in the region have lively professional and semi-professional YouTuber and influencer scenes as well as local multichannel networks (MCNs), which mediate between creators, brands and online platforms. Poland's Video Brothers (300-plus YT channels, 28 million subscriptions), Czech Tubrr (170-plus creators, 14.2 million subscriptions) and Hungarian Star Network (100-plus creators, 9.2 million subscriptions) are examples of dynamic regional MCNs, looking for ways to expand their businesses and pools of talent with cross-platform appeal.⁷

In each national market, especially in Poland, there have been examples of successful independent web series published on YouTube, such as *Piątek: The Original Series* (2011–) by Grzegorz Barański, which was bought by CDA Premium SVOD service; *The Chairman's Ear* (2017–19), bought first by Showmax, then WP and finally by Comedy Central (see below); and Robert Górski's *Państwo z kartonu* (2020) about family life in isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic, shot entirely on mobile phones and published simultaneously on WP and YouTube. However, a significant difference between Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary lies elsewhere: in the field of specialized short-form web-TV services. This subsegment of the AVOD market, dedicated to professional and original web-only content, is most relevant to the topic of this book, because – unlike the YouTuber and influencer scene and social media more generally – it remains closely interconnected with legacy media industries, including film and linear TV.

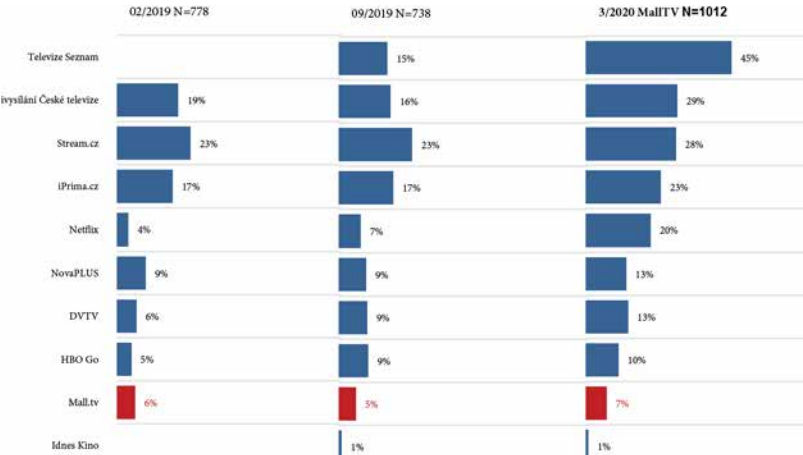


Figure 7.1 Ratios of active users before and during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020: internet TV and VOD services in the Czech Republic used last month. (Source: Mall.TV’s internal research [an online survey; respondents were members of the Perfect Crowd panel of 30,000 registered users].)

The high growth rates in online video advertising and Seznam’s strong position vis-à-vis global platforms are the key economic reasons that the Czech Republic has been the regional leader in professional web series production since the mid-2010s.

Although virtually unknown outside of their national borders (except in neighbouring Slovakia), the local reach of Czech web-TV services is significantly higher than that of transnational SVODs such as Netflix and HBO GO. Their strong position became even more visible after measurements of media consumption during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic were published. While the weekly reach of HBO GO grew from 1.5 to 2.2 per cent between early March (pre-Covid) and mid-April, the reach of the interview web-TV service DVTV grew from 2.4 to 5.8 and the combined reach of TelevizeSeznam.cz and Stream from 14 to 17.3 per cent (Median 2020: 43). Figure 7.1 illustrates how one of the strongest Czech web-TV portals, Mall.TV, demarcates and monitors its competition, placing long-form SVOD next to public service TV and short-form online video services. The services of Seznam (TelevizeSeznam and Stream – positions 1 and 3) are leading the chart, followed by the local PSB’s catch-up service (position 2).

Despite its strong position not just in the Czech Republic but also in the European market, short-form online video is almost untouched by critical media industry studies literature. This deficiency is even more striking when compared to the fast-growing literature on SVODs.

THEORIZING SHORT-FORM WEB TELEVISION

There is a growing volume of both business-oriented and scholarly work on non-linear, internet-distributed television and online video, the vast majority of which focuses either on VOD ‘portals’ such as Netflix (whose predominantly long-form, industrially produced content is comparable to linear TV programming) (Lotz 2017) or on social media platforms such as YouTube (Burgess and Green 2018). Catherine Johnson’s definition of ‘internet TV’ as services that ‘provide access to editorially selected audiovisual content through internet-connected devices, and privilege viewing over other forms of activity’ (Johnson 2018: 33) does not mention short-form web TV explicitly but is potentially inclusive of it. It is instrumental here to distinguish online television from other online services and apps featuring video, such as social media and news websites, where video is not necessarily the primary content, actively acquired or produced, whose interfaces are not closed and editorially managed, and where frictionless watching might be just one of many activities. Johnson acknowledges the existence of multiple combinations of closed and open services, but her definition still downplays the increasing permeability of the boundaries between internet television and open platforms or news websites, which is crucial to understand short form web-TV ecosystems. As she notes, Facebook Watch and YouTube Premium are primary examples of social media platforms incorporating features of internet TV services, including actively acquired and editorially managed original content (Johnson 2018: 43–4), but there are also examples of web-TV services expanding to social media. German public service Funk.net’s web series are watched predominantly on dedicated YouTube channels, but Funk still employs a separate, closed and editorially managed interface. A web-TV service might be also permeable with a corporate portfolio of other websites it is part of, which together form its extended, dispersed interface (see the case of Mall.TV described below).

For the sake of terminological clarity, this chapter uses ‘internet television’ when referring to industrial formations, infrastructures and audience practices and ‘web television’ when writing about web-native short-form content and services. Aymar Jean Christian understands ‘web TV’ as ‘television programming served exclusively via Internet protocols’ (Christian 2015) and ‘short form’ as its relative measure; for while the webisode is generally shorter than the standard TV episode (usually less than twenty minutes long), the crucial difference lies in web TV’s adaptability and flexibility. Freed from standardized programming slots, not only can ‘short-form’ content be as long or as short as the ever-shifting needs of production and narration dictate, it can easily adapt to changing consumer behaviour and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Because web series have lower budgets, smaller crews and shorter production schedules, it makes them more ‘open’ to various experiments in new

technologies, digital narrative techniques, marginalized topics and minority talent (Christian 2018). The shorter video length also has formal consequences and – as already indicated above – corresponds to specific consumer habits. It favours ‘personality over production values’ (Lotz 2016) and comedies over drama. Sketch comedies, which represent the bulk of the most popular web-TV content, are tailor-made for ‘bite-sized consumption’ (Edgerton 2013: 48).

One line of theorizing stresses the close relationships between short-form web television and social media. In her recent book on ‘internet-distributed television’, Amanda Lotz notes that this ‘parallel’, ‘emergent’ television industry is distinguished by its close ties with user-generated content (UGC), a reliance on social media dynamics, the support of advertisers and the ‘integration of viewing into daily life’ (Lotz 2017). Stuart Cunningham’s recent research focuses on the competition between and hybridization of Hollywood (‘legacy media’) and IT business models (Cunningham, Craig and Silver 2016). His description, with David Craig, of the emerging ‘proto-industry’ of ‘social media entertainment’ (SME), epitomized by the increasingly professionalized and commercialized uses of YouTube, points to the ways short-form video programming combines communicative formats with entertainment, or appeals to informal cultural innovation, authenticity and participation with commercialization and corporate capital (Cunningham and Craig 2016). In their most recent book, Cunningham and Craig show the abundance of SME around the world, including Chinese and Indian online video (Cunningham and Craig 2019).

Short-form online video also works differently in our daily lives: it fits mobile viewing and ‘workplace media’ habits such as ‘media snacking’ better than traditional long forms. Media conglomerates are desperately looking for ways to monetize short in-between moments in consumers’ daily routines (commutes, lunch breaks, waiting times, etc.) by developing new mobile content types and contextually specific distribution techniques that Ethan Tussey labels the ‘procrastination economy’ (Tussey 2018: 65). Corporations design strategies to preserve traditional business models in the new mobile era by producing promotional online videos aimed at attracting consumers back to the primary long content (Grainge and Johnson 2015), but short-form videos might be also used to generate profit on their own, either as vehicles for advertisements or even as paid content, although the latter option has not proven viable so far (as the failure of Quibi illustrated most spectacularly in 2020).⁸

In the most specialized scholarly work on professional short-form web TV written thus far, Aymar Jean Christian provides the first complex reconstruction of the US web series’ twenty-year long history, offering a typology of web-series producers and development practices while drawing distinctions between various levels of corporate control and ‘independence’ (Christian 2012, 2014). While

online video has been massively capitalized on by big commercial players, it is also a low-barrier entry point for semi-amateurs, early-career and niche artists, or a new opportunity for established film-makers who just want to experiment with a faster, cheaper, more immediate means of communication (Christian 2018). In Christian's typology, Stream.cz falls into the category of 'corporate, ad-supported web TV networks', although some of its content also bears features of his 'indie web series' category (Christian 2012, 2018). Focusing on the United States, Katherine Edgerton claims that most web series are aspirational, relying on free labour and writing 'on spec'. If they are created by established professionals, it is because they hope to 'jumpstart or diversify their careers in traditional media' and to enjoy the creative freedom of the web (Edgerton 2013: 108). However, this is hardly the case with Stream and its local competitors. For although Stream's creative talent is paid less than their colleagues in television or film, the fees are accepted by the professional community as relatively reasonable, and there have been even examples of creators who have made a living by producing several parallel programmes for Stream. Stream's combination of well-established arthouse film-makers brought in by prominent independent producers, UGC-inspired aesthetics, a mainstream target audience, and a strong corporate home alert us that it is fundamentally different to US commercial online video on the one hand, and indie web series such as *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011–13) and *High Maintenance* (2012–) on the other.

Very little has been published on European web series to date – exceptions include studies on German web series, the BBC and Scandinavian public service broadcasters' web-only content.⁹ In the nationally defined screen industry ecosystems of Europe, short-form web television necessarily has to negotiate its place in the context of small media markets, language barriers, fragmented production systems, strong PSBs and protectionist cultural policies. No surprise then that the most researched issue relating to European short-form web television is the transformation of PSBs into PSM – more specifically, how they adopt multiplatform or online-only production and social media strategies.¹⁰ 'Spreadable' (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013) content informed by 'social media logic' (van Dijck and Poell 2013) helps PSBs adapt to the media habits of young audiences, thus trying to secure the next generation of licence payers and, ultimately, relegitimize their status in the new screen ecology. Instead of simply supplying their publicly funded broadcasting content to corporate platforms, such as Facebook or YouTube, or imitating the increasingly commercial functions of social media, PSBs experiment with 'hybrid' forms and arrangements, combining television with the internet, the 'public' with the 'social'. Their key goal, according to van Dijck and Poell (2015), is or should be to do so without compromising the core values of their public service remit through the promotion

of universality (reconnecting with teenage and young adult audiences that most PSBs would otherwise continue to lose), diversity (representing marginalized topics and identities, providing opportunities for new talent) and innovation (experimenting with new technologies, cultural forms and innovative techniques of digital storytelling). Most public service web series aim at mixing popular content types with enlightening material to deliver different versions of ‘double storytelling’ (Novrup Redvall 2013: 55–80). They also address more narrowly defined target groups, as illustrated by the Norwegian hit teen drama *Skam* (NRK, 2015–17), a series that speaks to the specific needs of sixteen-year-old Norwegian girls (Sundet 2019).

Unlike Western European PSBs, many of which have launched dedicated services for online-only content in the past eight years (e.g. France Télévisions’s *Nouvelles écritures* in 2012, BBC’s *iPlayer Exclusives* in 2014, RTBF’s *Webcréation* in 2014, and ARD’s and ZDF’s *funk.net* in 2016), east-central European PSBs have yet to introduce special production programmes or portals of a similar kind, limiting their online strategies to catch-up services thus far.¹¹ As a result, they face competition from private enterprises, some of which have been able to develop a quasi-public service mission independently of PSB institutions, such as Stream in the Czech Republic and Showmax in Poland (until 2019). Van Dijck and Poell claim that in the multiplatform ecosystem, clear-cut divisions between public and corporate media are no longer possible. Their recommendation is to ‘strip down the institutional concept of public broadcasting to its core “naked” public value’ and to ask ‘How can public value be produced outside a designated PSB space?’ (van Dijck and Poell 2015: 159). Taking this initiative as a cue, in this chapter we inquire how and why the private portal Stream.cz has complemented the local linear PSB Česká televize in fulfilling its specific public service mission: not by producing teen series with ‘double storytelling’ like *Skam* but by addressing more mature audiences and cultivating a daring satirical discourse otherwise absent from the Czech PSB. It would be naive to claim that private online services can replace PSBs in the long run simply because corporate commercial interests would eventually prevail, with no control mechanism in place to prevent such a diversion. However, similar ‘islands’ of public service value can potentially provoke PSBs to be more innovative, to move beyond their ‘designated space’ by experimenting with social media logic and spreadable content on their own terms.

SITUATING STREAM.CZ IN THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL TELEVISION/INTERNET ECOSYSTEM

Although the first web series was created in the United States in the mid-1990s, only recently have we been able to observe signs of a global boom in web TV.

For example, web series have become a major mainstream trend in South Korea, collectively attracting tens of millions of views (Lee 2017). There, the local market for 'web dramas' flourished after the leading Korean search engine Naver launched the AVOD portal TV Cast, intended – unlike Stream – primarily for mobile audiences (Kang 2017). Western European web-series production has been growing since the early 2010s, after the first German portal devoted to web series was launched in 2009¹² and after NRK, the BBC, France Télévisions, RTBF and ARTE launched web-series production initiatives that were followed by public broadcasters in other countries (e.g. ARD and ZDF in Germany). At the same time, independent European web series have mushroomed on YouTube and Dailymotion, with some eventually moving to linear television. Public funds and broadcasters around the world have opened calls for web-series projects, whereas original web content creators now have their own festivals and awards (such as the Marseille Web Festival and the Streamy Awards, which honour the best online videos) and their own trade group, the International Academy of Web Television. Web TV has clearly been assimilated as part of the legitimate media industries, as illustrated by the introduction of special categories for web series at traditional TV festivals and awards (such as Emmy awards for short-form series since 2016) and the recognition of online production by professional guilds.

With the exception of the Czech Republic, the boom has yet to reach the post-socialist countries of east central Europe. Nevertheless, a hugely successful web series that bears striking textual similarities to the Czech *The Blaník Bureau* has broken through in Poland. *The Chairman's Ear* (*Ucho prezesa*, 2017–19, four seasons) was a political satire about an authoritarian leader – based on Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the governing party in Poland, the Law and Justice party (PiS) – who runs the affairs of an entire nation from a small secluded office which he (almost) never leaves. Made by the well-established comedy troupe Cabaret of Moral Anxiety, it proved extremely successful, attracting up to 10 million views per episode and outperforming the most popular shows on Polish linear networks. However, *The Chairman's Ear* differed from *The Blaník Bureau* if we consider its business model and corporate home. Shortly after its pilot launch on YouTube, the first season was backed and distributed by SVOD platform Showmax,¹³ with individual episodes opening on YouTube with a four-day delay. After the second season, the series was bought by the media house WP for its TV channel; as of 2020, all four seasons were broadcasted by Comedy Central Poland. But although Showmax Poland has since produced other original programmes and there are further examples of Polish web series, no strong web-TV service devoted primarily to web series has emerged in Poland with a volume and diversity of short-form programming comparable to Stream.

What, then, is so exceptional about Stream and how did it succeed? The service gained wide national popularity around 2014, but it was founded in late 2006, the year Google bought YouTube and opened its Prague office. Stream's founder Miloš Petana, ex-CEO of the second largest private TV network in the country, envisioned Stream as a local equivalent to YouTube or Metacafe, but one that would offer Czech internet users an 'alternative to television broadcasting' (M. Petana, personal interview, 28 April 2017).

Stream's first fiction web series, ironically titled *Gynecology 2* (*Gynekologie 2*, 2007; there was no 'Gynecology 1'), was released as a promotional tool to coincide with the launch of the platform. Although the series – a parody of a notorious Czech soap opera – used a formula of aesthetics, humour and creative talent similar to that employed by *The Blaník Bureau* and post-*Blaník* comedy series, it failed to generate sufficient revenue to cover the production costs. What this 'false start' illustrates is that while the technology and aesthetic foundations may have been in place, the advertising market (allowing for a viable business model based on advertiser support), 'industrial formation' (backing of a strong parent company) and 'practice of looking' (Spigel 2004: 2) specific to web television were not. To survive, Stream had to wait and repeatedly renegotiate its relationships with consumers and clients, experimenting with a number of alternative business models in the following years.

If Stream started as an internet alternative to traditional broadcasting, it soon mutated into a hybrid of original programming and UGC. Between 2007 and 2013, Stream operated primarily as a local answer to YouTube, nurturing and cultivating a reservoir of YouTubers and potential professional creators. Thus, from the very beginning, it combined elements of an interactive, Web 2.0 social media platform and a professional, curated AVOD portal. At the same time, Stream acted as an 'online archive' for several television broadcasters (before they launched their own online portals), a music video catalogue and even a streaming resource for feature films – before gradually eliminating all of these forms in 2013 to fully concentrate on original professional programming. Stream then took steps to combine nonlinear AVOD with linear broadcasting via the launch of its own smart TV app in 2014 and, at the end of 2017, via the incorporation of its original content into the linear television programming of 'Seznam.cz TV' (the linear TV channel of its mother company).

The groundwork for the post-2013 original content strategy was laid with a major change in 2011, when Seznam, which had bought a 50 per cent share in Stream in 2007, finally decided to acquire the entire company after it became profitable for the first time. Seznam's backing and its decision to invest in original internet programming were crucial. Under Seznam, Stream developed

into a fully fledged internet television studio. In 2013, it stopped supporting user videos and shifted to creating purely professional content, characterized by higher production values and elements of public service mission (investigative journalism, current affairs programmes, science, history, etc.). In 2016, Seznam increased its investment in original content production by 50 per cent. The strong position of Stream in the local market became unprecedented across the region, with perhaps only the above-mentioned Korean portal, TV Cast, which is owned by the search engine Naver, its closest counterpart globally.

FROM AN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN 'ANSWER TO YOUTUBE' TO AN INTEGRATED INTERNET TV STUDIO: STREAM'S EVOLVING BUSINESS AND ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

As an AVOD, Stream first and foremost must produce content that is marketable to its clients, whether they be advertisers, sponsors or advertising agencies. As such, all of its programming must function as a carrier of commercial messages or brand images. Stream's business model, its technological and financial constraints, and the habits of online audiences define its standard product: free, short (approximately five to fifteen minutes per episode), relatively low-cost video. As original videos are more expensive than other forms of web content, it is imperative for platforms like Stream to compete with linear broadcasters, which traditionally attract higher investment than print or internet media, for lucrative clients. However, Stream cannot compete with television networks in terms of production budgets, perceived value or infrastructure. Instead, it must try to achieve a television 'look' within an internet production system, a contradiction that has shaped and limited Stream's business model from the very beginning. Founder Miloš Petana's initial goal was to create 'an alternative to television broadcasting':

We come from a different world. Initially, our natural business partners, clients, agencies and other media couldn't categorize us properly, so our vision was based on creating TV 'sui generis'. [...] Because I come from the television and film industry, I know that content is king, and that's why my interest was in creating an alternative to television from the very beginning. In those days (which is no longer entirely the case today), advertising agencies had audiovisual divisions and separate digital divisions. So, when my colleagues and I would come to negotiate with them about a new campaign, they'd send us to the digital division people. I used to tell them: 'I don't want to be with you'. And they'd say: 'But you're internet'. And I'd say: 'Yeah, but we create content that's basically identical to television programming'.

(M. Petana, personal interview, 28 April 2017)

Petana explains how, in the early years of Stream, he felt compelled to respond to the established rules of a system based on the rigid categorization of media types. Faced with resistance from advertising agencies to redefine these categories, he had to fight for Stream to be accepted as a necessary component in the lucrative audiovisual sector.

Although Stream suffered from competing with traditional broadcasters in its early years, the Czech online advertisement market continued to flourish. While Stream lagged far behind YouTube in terms of views,¹⁴ the success of its original series, with top episodes reaching over half a million views, made it a serious competitor to both private and PSB networks. After years of losses, Stream finally started making a profit in 2010. Following the launch of Stream's fiction series production, its revenues more than doubled (between 2013 and 2017). Also, advertising agencies gradually overcame their reluctance to embrace online video, finally realizing that online viewers were not overlapping with linear television audiences. To that end, they started offering their clients solutions for reaching online audience groups via Stream and other platforms, persuading them to spend additional money on online video. After Stream redesigned its website and reduced banner adverts in 2013, video commercials and product placement became the key instruments for monetizing its original content. Standard video commercials – typically restricted to one pre-roll and one mid-roll, which is less than what competing sites offered – as of 2017 generated some 85 per cent of Stream's revenues, with the remainder coming from content marketing (product placement and sponsored programmes) (D. Gajdošík, personal interview, 14 December 2017).

Stream's post-2013 growth was inseparable from Seznam's corporate strategy, especially in terms of consumer traffic and sales. Eighty per cent of Stream's traffic came through Seznam's homepage (the rest comprised 15 per cent of traffic from direct access and 5 per cent from social networks), where several windows linked to carefully selected examples of Stream programming (Záhoř 2017b). Stream also took advantage of Seznam's in-house sales department, although it sometimes dealt directly with clients and collaborated with external media agencies.

According to content marketing executive Dušan Gajdošík, Seznam's grounds for getting rid of all of Stream's UGC and shifting to purely professional short-form programming after its definitive buyout by Seznam were twofold: first, to avoid competing with YouTube and its unrivalled technological solutions and, second, to strengthen control over content with a view to reassuring clients over brand safety concerns (D. Gajdošík, personal interview, 14 December 2017). After Stream eliminated UGC, it changed track to create dozens of original web-TV programmes, combining the roles of main financier, producer, distribu-

tor and exclusive copyright holder all in one. At the end of 2017, it produced about forty ongoing programmes, 40 per cent of which were in-house, with the rest comprising commissions (fixed-price contracts with external producers) or, more rarely, co-productions with independent producers. Programming was divided into three basic content categories: infotainment (cooking shows, lifestyle, science, history and culture, reality shows, investigative journalism, vlogs, how-to guides, driving accident compilations, etc.), original fiction series (political and social satire, sitcoms, parodies, thrillers) and children's programmes (mostly animation). Apart from this third category, Stream's content consisted almost entirely of short-form original production until 2018, when it changed again under new management that restarted more massive acquisitions.

Stream's business model was not based on the profitability of individual programmes per se, but, similar to linear channels and film studios, on the total profitability of a diversified 'portfolio' of titles, featuring different generic features, styles and production budgets. The fundamental idea behind the portfolio was 'symbiosis': a group of cheaper programmes could financially compensate for a fiction webisode, whereas fiction series such as *The Blaník Bureau* functioned as branding 'flagships' to produce higher symbolic capital and reach new target groups (D. Gajdošík, personal interview, 14 December 2017).

In terms of an organizational model, Stream effectively evolved into an integrated 'internet TV studio' and accordingly sought to standardize its content portfolio, production processes and divisions of labour. Stream gradually assembled a small team of about ten in-house management, production and editorial personnel; a panel of fifty regularly contracted external producers and creative talent; and a larger pool of occasional collaborators. In 2017, Stream's management was organized into a simple hierarchy: under Seznam's Content CEO, Stream's Chief Producer Lukáš Záhoř oversaw the production of all original content and was responsible for coordinating with Seznam's central management, including its sales division. Chief Commissioning Editor Martin Krušina supervised the Infotainment section and a team of editors. Based on the creative team involved in *The Blaník Bureau*, Stream also standardized its internal collaborative practices such as talent scouting, screenplay development and greenlighting. The independent production company Negativ, co-producer of *The Blaník Bureau*, cultivated a long-term relationship with Stream, and Negativ's in-house producer Milan Kuchynka served as the external chief editor of Stream's Fiction Series section, forming a group of commissioning and screenplay editors around himself. Each of its five members, including Záhoř (Figure 7.2), collaborated with a small concentric network of further external collaborators to systematize scouting and development processes. They held weekly meetings to push forward individual projects, and while most of these were commissioned from external



Figure 7.2 Lukáš Záhoř with Stream stars in 2017. (Credit: Seznam.cz.)

authors, some were written by members of the fiction editorial unit themselves. After they approved a screenplay, Kuchynka assigned one of the editors to closely oversee the rest of the development and production process (L. Záhoř, personal interview, 23 March 2017; M. Kuchynka, personal interview 4 May 2017). But, ultimately, he and his editorial unit held the reins:

First, we decide whether we like the story and ask the authors to develop characters and to write synopses of individual episodes and one final script. If it works, we greenlight the project, sign a contract, and the second stage involves all of the scripts for each episode. If they're approved, we start shooting. So, basically, a normal production process.

(M. Kuchynka, personal interview 4 May 2017)

But Stream's organizational and business model is already history. As of 2020, the company remained stuck in a state of 'prolonged transition' (Jenkins 2005: 24) or 'permanent beta' (Cunningham, Craig and Silver 2016: 4), open to the possibilities of radical transformation and hybridization, while also dependent on developments in technology, advertisement markets and consumer behaviour. And given this context, it is not outlandish to predict that Stream's expansion into linear broadcasting might even feed back into a redefinition of its standard

online product and the reintroduction of longer original formats to adapt to existing television advertising regulations.¹⁵

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN CLICKBAIT AND PUBLIC SERVICE: STREAM'S PRODUCTION IDEOLOGY

Negotiating between traditional broadcasting, online advertising and social media, short-form web television remains in flux, internally insecure and open to unpredictable external influences. To critically address the possibilities of fulfilling a public service mission beyond the traditional space designated to it, the following sections explore how Stream's production ideology reflects significant inner contradictions between its creative ambitions and the more pragmatic business logic of day-to-day decision-making in the context of the highly commercialized online video market. In what follows, we reconstruct selected principles of Stream's 'production culture' and categories of its 'industry lore'. While the first concept refers to the more general cultural characteristics of the professional community and accounts for the lived realities of moving between the internet and television, the latter consists of the micro-level strategic thinking of Stream's key insiders: the conceptions of audience behaviour, tastes and current market trends used to rationalize their decisions and promote the core values of their output.

'Opening people's eyes': The place for public service value in the AVOD business model

To understand why public service values have emerged in Stream's programming, we need to look at Stream's position within the complex portfolio of Seznam's content types, which include video news, a popular news website and lifestyle magazines. According to the marketing executive Dušan Gajdošík, Stream played a special role within Seznam's portfolio in the late 2010s and was considered an 'island of positive deviation' for its ability to produce higher quality content (D. Gajdošík, personal interview, 14 December 2017). This enabled Stream to collaborate with clients in different ways. Seznam's sales executives coordinated with agencies, producers and authors, who together strove to integrate commercial messages into the programming in a 'sensitive' way so as not to disturb tone and narrative flow and to preserve the creative autonomy of the content creators.¹⁶ This protective approach to quality content enabled a public value-focused production culture to gradually take shape. However, this had not been always the case.

Stream had to cultivate a relationship with its viewers by offering them enough content to ensure the audience returned on a daily basis. It produced dozens of original programmes every week, which needed to be diversified

into different genres, styles and modes of address to attract different target groups. In the early years, Stream lacked the financial resources for quality content production and had to combine original programmes with both UGC and acquisitions from traditional TV networks. At that time, Stream's original content was often labelled 'tabloid' and there was a consensus among commentators that it targeted relatively young audiences compared with linear broadcasters (see e.g. Ambrož 2007). At the time of its launch, Petana openly endorsed the 'tabloid for young adults' label, proudly claiming that Stream was the first to bring 'tabloid online video' to Czech audiences. Indeed, a number of Stream's older programmes from the period 2007–10, including UGC, easily ticked the tabloid box: from its first fiction series *Gynecology 2*, taking ironic advantage of its thematic overlaps with pornography (its 'Pussy' episode attracted disproportionately more views, exposing the search habits of Czech internet users), to celebrity gossip videos. Indeed, tabloid themes have not entirely disappeared from Stream's output, as it continues to produce programmes dedicated to wild driving accidents, bizarre bodies, pranks, records of all kinds and 'Guess What' pictures.

However, Petana's younger successors, responsible for restructuring content production under Seznam in 2012–13, chose to distance themselves from openly tabloid videos by identifying with values typically associated with public service programming. Chief Editor of Infotainment Martin Krušina cited his and his colleagues' personal tastes as the key criteria for selecting and greenlighting new projects and hiring new creators:

The only boundary the production team agreed to observe from the beginning was that we didn't want to produce a tabloid magazine dealing with celebrity gossip. We knew it would function best of all, but we didn't want it because (a) we don't like it and (b) we wouldn't be happy doing it.

(M. Krušina, personal interview, 23 March 2017)

In explaining their key decision-making criteria and shared values, Krušina and Záhoř in fact employed a lot of quasi-PSB buzzwords: 'clever', 'informative', 'eye-opening', 'topical', 'socially relevant', 'socially responsible' and 'authentic'. Upon closer inspection, however, the similarity with traditional PSB is not as straightforward as it may seem. When asked whether Stream had a mission of generating public discussion, both Krušina and Záhoř energetically agreed, but explained that the main strategy focused on 'raising issues and proposing solutions' (L. Záhoř, personal interview, 23 March 2017). To illustrate the claim, they referred to infotainment programmes about everyday problems such as municipal political affairs, low-quality products, fraudulent business practices,

widespread misconceptions of historical events or bad architecture, and town planning policies.

When asked by the host of an internet magazine for young entrepreneurs what his quality criteria were, Záhorský explained that he looks, both in fiction and in infotainment, to combine entertainment with an 'eye-opening', activating effect:

We want to be a free medium in terms of having courage to provide space for various strong, sometimes even radical opinions that nevertheless make sense to us. We want to open people's eyes, to show them how things really are. [...] It's not about controversy for its own sake, but about giving people information in an accessible way, and to change the world around us.

(L. Záhorský, personal interview, 11 May 2017)

He also defined his criteria for a successful show across all genres and content types:

A programme is a hit when it's not only watched by a lot of people but the right kind of people, when it creates a certain type of feedback and action. [...] The worst case is when we get an average number of views, zero feedback and no action. Those kinds of programmes don't 'turn wheels': they don't generate profit or have any effect on the world.

(L. Záhorský, personal interview, 11 May 2017)

Záhorský implied that the difference from traditional PSB programming was that while television networks focused on high politics, Stream sidestepped standard daily news coverage in favour of everyday issues. Whereas TV networks hired professional anchors, Stream preferred to use nonprofessional presenters who were specialists in their respective areas: 'Our presenters are strong personalities [...] who are well renowned in their fields, which means they have the authority to criticize, and it's this aspect that's the most interesting for us' (L. Záhorský, personal interview, 23 March 2017). Krušina elaborated on the same issue, explaining what Stream understood by 'authenticity':

We don't like presenters in the sense of them being television anchors, who are just as capable of presenting a programme about horses as they are about architecture or cooking. With a few exceptions, you don't see that kind of universal presenter in our programming. We strive to pick attractive fields that will interest a lot of people and the widest possible target group, to find an expert professional in that field who is deeply interested in the topic, even though they might not have the perfect diction or media training of a professional anchor. We seek out strong personalities

in specific fields, because they're more believable and, I think, more attractive for our viewers.

(M. Krušina, personal interview, 23 March 2017)

The idea of social relevance and topicality is perhaps best illustrated by the satirical humour of *The Blaník Bureau*. Stream's weekly web series poked fun at the latest affairs and scandals to hit Czech political life, revealing ironic conspiracy 'disclosures' through the backstage deals and machinations of the titular lobbyist. Its visual style resembles rough amateur camerawork, replete with quick pans and jump cuts. And unlike more mainstream PSB satires, it does not shy away from radical black humour, obscene dialogue, drug use, or using the real names and faces of the country's leading political figures. More importantly, it differs from linear fiction programming in that it, almost in real time, holds a mirror up to public life, turning political scandals into satirical fiction on a weekly basis – a format that would be impossible under the rigid system of PSB approval mechanisms. As Záhoř explained, the approach was borrowed from Stream's infotainment working methods:

In the framework of fiction programming, *The Blaník Bureau* is most similar to the ways we do infotainment: on a weekly basis, with no approvals of screenplays. It's very specific and totally free. We discuss topics in a general way, but the episodes are made so quickly that there's no time for approval procedures. A new episode simply goes into production and is released right away.

(L. Záhoř, personal interview, 23 March 2017)

As a result, Stream's production ideology combined elements of internet-specific infotainment, tabloid and user content with concepts more typical of public service broadcasting while reworking both into a new hybrid. While reflecting on some of the same political and social topics and events as PSB and adopting the core values of public interest, Stream did not imitate traditional PSB genres. Instead of straightforwardly pursuing professional standards of public service reporting such as objectivity and impartiality, Stream adopted a more practical, everyday-life, informal perspective and operated with modes of address derived from YouTuber culture.

Extracting public value from the UGC legacy

Chief producer Lukáš Záhoř explained that abandoning UGC in favour of fully professional original content – together with launching fiction series production, standardizing the weekly schedule and shifting to a new corporate structure – was part of Stream's complex transformation into a new kind of internet television

studio. However, for Záhorský, the heritage of UGC was still felt in Stream's professional creative pool, content themes, audiovisual form and mode of address, as they continued to churn out 'vlogs', 'life hacks', commentary-based accident compilations and 'pranks' (YouTube-style practical jokes that have endured as a key element in a number of Stream's professional programmes).

In addition, a significant part of Stream's in-house talent consisted of former amateurs, including the reality show presenter Kazma (see more below) and the reporter Janek Rubeš. The latter started his creative career at Stream as a local pioneer of viral videos (as a member of the 'Noisebrothers' duo, 2007–10). In the post-2013 era, he used his quasi-YouTuber skills to develop a unique, personal style of investigative journalism. For his award-winning web series *Prague vs. Money*, he worked undercover to document the fraudulent practices of Prague taxi drivers and exchange offices (notorious problems long neglected by politicians), often finding himself at the centre of heated exchanges with his 'interviewees' and even the subject of threats.

The dialectical relationships between UGC and professional production, or social media and television, formed Stream's DNA and remained deeply rooted in its user interface and programming. The latter tendency was epitomized in *Semestr* (*Semestr*, 2016), a series about a millennial couple communicating exclusively via social media in a setting reduced to two desktops and overlapping windows. With *Semestr*, Stream moved in the direction of NRK's *Skam* for the first time. Aiming at young adult, social media-savvy audiences, it managed to combine an entertaining romantic storyline, deep knowledge of the target group's lifestyles and needs, an innovative technique of digital storytelling, and an enlightening message about coping with loneliness and serious disease. At the same time, it provided a breakthrough opportunity for an unproven filmmaker with a strong, independent authorial vision, Adam Sedlák. However, the 28-year-old director found the collaboration far from smooth. Stream's producers were concerned with the effect the disorienting spatial effects of the multifocal two-dimensional narrative would have on its older audiences and made him simplify the visual style in post-production. He also criticized Stream's marketing, which supposedly missed the chance to communicate with pop culture-savvy millennials, and instead fell back on its standard marketing channels and methods (A. Sedlák, personal interview, 24 March 2017). The disagreement points to the fact that Stream, after fifteen years on the market, faced the same problem of ageing audiences that local TV networks had been struggling with since the 2000s. It seems that this productive tension between social media logic, on the one hand, and the TV portal model, on the other, will continue to inform web-TV programming and communication strategies in the near future.

Although Stream's primary target audience expanded from the original teenage YouTube generation to overlap with more mature mainstream audiences and Seznam platform users, according to Gajdošík, its audience was still not broad enough to replace traditional broadcasting (D. Gajdošík, personal interview, 14 December 2017). As linear television remained more popular, especially with older audiences, Stream functioned as a complement to it rather than a replacement, making use of the cross-media marketing trend. And because broadcasting surpasses web TV in terms of viewing time and YouTube is overwhelmingly more successful in terms of views, Stream was left to try to cement a position between broadcasting and social media. The solution seemed to lie in staking out a middle ground between broadcast television and YouTube by offering lower production costs than broadcasters and more professional local content than YouTube.

A home for independent voices: Translating between internet and film/TV production cultures

From its early years, Stream introduced itself to creators as a home for independent, alternative voices neglected by traditional mainstream media. Stream's founder Miloš Petana went as far as to claim that Stream was based on 'weirdness, standing out from the mainstream, on the edge of socially acceptable' (M. Petana, personal interview, 28 April 2017). This might sound slightly paradoxical, considering that Stream's most famous series were written and directed by well-established creators of arthouse films and co-produced by the Czech Republic's most successful arthouse company. Indeed, there is much more 'weirdness' to be seen on YouTube and other social media, just as there is a lot more 'alternative' material on conspiracy websites. But although Stream clearly changed its position in the field of cultural production, moving towards mainstream and traditional forms of content and towards older audience groups, there were still differences and barriers that demarcated the boundary between it and the traditional film and television production cultures.

The key person tasked with overcoming these barriers was arthouse film producer Milan Kuchynka. As soon as he found a common ground with Záhoř, Kuchynka started operating as a 'conduit' between Stream and other film-makers (including the award-winning writer-directors Marek Najbrt and Jan Prušinovský), many of whom he knew from mutual collaborations on feature film projects (L. Záhoř, personal interview, 24 January 2018). As chief editor of fiction, Kuchynka understood his mission, amongst other things, as making sure new projects fitted Stream's portfolio and target groups. He briefed film-makers on the specifics of developing a web series, telling a story in short form and

releasing it online for online audiences (M. Kuchynka, personal interview, 4 May 2017). Together with Záhorský and his editors, they read unsolicited screenplays, watched pilots and listened to a large number of pitches on a weekly basis. Adding to the workload, the vast majority of these were unsuitable for Stream, so new authors and subjects had to be constantly sought out.

Kuchynka and Záhorský stressed that they picked and greenlit each project according to their personal tastes ('doing what we personally like') with the intention of giving authors creative freedom. However, they also acknowledged that they set fixed budgets and fees, performed continuous hands-on supervision, especially in the development and post-production stages, retained total control over the final cut and acquired all copyrights. To attract new creators, Záhorský and his colleagues developed and spread a promotional discourse of creative freedom, autonomy and nurturing original talents, not very different from HBO-style industrial reflexivity. But Stream headhunted for amateurs too. According to Záhorský, YouTubers were attracted to Stream's vision of more professional, sophisticated work, as exemplified by Stream stars such as the entertainer Káza (L. Záhorský, personal interview, 11 May 2017). Kuchynka and Záhorský effectively acted as mediators between two distinct production cultures: traditional film/television and online video. The discourse served to prepare film-makers for the faster production and shorter forms of the internet, and YouTubers for more professional and elaborate work with the Stream team.

Created by a well-established film-making team, who in turn had attracted further film-makers to work for Stream, *The Blaník Bureau* played a crucial role in overcoming the barriers between film, TV and internet cultures. In 2016, *The Blaník Bureau* won a 'Czech Lion' (a Czech Oscar) award and multiplied its already high symbolic capital within the film-making community. And on 1 February 2018, amid high expectations, Negativ's feature film *President Blaník* (dir. Marek Najbrt, CZ, 2018), made by the same team and co-produced by Stream, premiered in Czech cinemas; its mixed reception demonstrated that the successful short-form online aesthetic does not easily translate to the feature film format (Figure 7.3).

Critical meta-television: Stream's self-referential aesthetics

One of the key lessons to be learned from Caldwell's 'production culture' theory is the deep suspicion with which he approaches any public self-representation of an industry, especially in the form of 'on-screen reflexivity' (Caldwell 2008: 309). While keeping in mind that Stream's on-screen self-referencing primarily serves publicity and marketing functions, the aim of this section is to highlight how it manifests criticism of traditional broadcasting and its own sense of distinction. One of Stream's first videos, dated 21 December 2006, shows its founder



Figure 7.3 Marek Daniel as Tonda Blaník in *President Blaník* (dir. Marek Najbrt, CZ, 2018). Photograph by Marek Novotný. (Credit: Negativ Film Productions.)

Miloš Petana smashing a traditional TV screen with a hammer before leaving his colleagues to deliver the final blows to the analogue beast. This ‘first’ video also featured the first Stream logo: a pirate-style skull (Stream 2006). Stream’s anti-TV gesture of ‘alternative television’ was present in its programming and off-screen corporate reflexivity until the departure of Lukáš Záhoř’s team. For example, a talk-show programme by Stream’s comedy star Luděk Staněk (who later followed Záhoř to Mall.TV in 2018) was devoted to identifying and mocking clichés found in traditional television programmes such as soap operas, talk shows and TV news.

The post-2013 Stream developed another kind of reflexivity that referred to its own heritage. Apart from various humorous self-promotional or backstage videos, Stream often used transpositions of their stars or even fictitious characters between programmes (as guests, experts and interviewees) or morphed the aesthetic features of well-established programmes into new formats. The most striking example of this strategy is a trio of playful cooking show parodies: the first, featuring a conceited chef preparing awfully expensive recipes and intentionally throwing away half of the quality ingredients, sends up snobbish cooking shows; the second, featuring a Joe Soap cooking from low-cost pantry staples, makes fun of the budget cooking trend; the third, a fiction series called *Gluttons* (2016), is a satirical comedy/horror involving the two chefs as unforgiv-

ing opponents battling it out not just for their reputations but for their lives. Záhorský explained this self-referential strategy as ‘building sympathy’ based on the ability to ‘make fun of yourself’. He attributed it to the internal evolution of Stream, a self-awareness all the more keenly felt given Stream’s tenth anniversary at the time. However, he also acknowledged the potential pitfalls, particularly that audiences might not be sufficiently acquainted with the prototypes being parodied:

It’s probably connected with our acquired self-confidence, which we lacked in the beginning. To be able to consciously parody yourself, I think you have to reach a moment when people know who you are. Making fun of ourselves while assuming it may be of interest to somebody else implies that we believe this ‘somebody’ knows what we’re actually doing. Because otherwise he or she won’t get it. I’m afraid a lot of the things we’ve done in this way haven’t been understood by people, because [...] we’ve gone too far, as with the *Gluttons*.

(L. Záhorský, personal interview 24 January 2018)

A third self-reflexive strategy involves the playful crossing of the boundaries between fiction and reality. The most striking example is *One Man Show* (2008–), the brainchild of entertainer Kazma, who specializes in staging complicated interventions in real-life situations to mystify the participants and expose their reactions. In the most notorious episode (which had more than 4.8 million views as of October 2020), he hires a young actor to pose as a participant in a private TV network’s reality/cooking show called *The Table Is Set* (*Prostřeno!*, TV Prima, 2010–), in which people taste and criticize each other’s meals. Pretending to be the sufferer of an unfortunate condition involving priapism and Tourette syndrome, the fake participant inevitably becomes the subject of much bullying and the butt of a number of highly inappropriate jokes. Kazma’s crew secretly films the real TV crew from a hidden room adjoining the set to expose how their manipulative behaviour induces conflicts among the contestants. The episode was praised for raising awareness of Tourette syndrome and for revealing the unethical practices of commercial reality shows. Another example is *The Blaník Bureau*, whose lead character, played by the renowned theatre and film actor Marek Daniel, ‘interacts’ with real politicians, drawing them into fictitious micro-narratives. The protagonist is repeatedly placed in real-life situations: from ‘organizing’ a demonstration to addressing a pre-election meeting of presidential candidates (as played out in the feature film *President Blaník*). Having seeped into the consciousness of Czech public life, Blaník (who even has his own Twitter account) has become something of a phenomenon, a living meme now synonymous with widespread political corruption.

Although there are significant differences between these meta-discursive, self-referential and self-reflexive textual practices, what Stream communicated through all of them was a certain sense of distinction – different from traditional media, closer to real-life problems, more truthful, more daring. In this way, it manifested its willingness to fulfil a public mission of its own kind.

STAY LOCAL! STREAM'S COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN THE SMALL PERIPHERAL MARKET

When talking to executives from Stream and Seznam, as well as to their associate creators, it was surprising how little they followed foreign models. Although the former Infotainment Chief Editor Martin Krušina mentioned BuzzFeed's YouTube channel as his model, and Lukáš Záhoř speculated about the possibilities of producing English-language versions of selected programmes and expanding to social media platforms, their strategic thinking and value horizons remained generally very local.¹⁷ The fact is that both Seznam and Stream considered their long-term ties with the local market their main competitive advantage. As Stream's founder Petana acknowledged,

Seeing global platforms develop, I came to the realization that the only added value we could offer our potential users was the Czech language and Czech cultural context. That's why our ambition was never to reach an international audience.

(M. Petana, personal interview, 28 April 2017)

It seems that 'stay local!' was, and will be, the main imperative of Seznam and Stream strategists for the foreseeable future. Indeed, it is a strategy followed by most of their local competitors among other VOD services too (Szczepanik 2017). Unlike long-form content distributed via Netflix or HBO GO, short-form web programming seems to build on deep local knowledge of target audiences' tastes and needs – and is one of the key reasons web TV occasionally inclines to public service values.

The case of Stream is clearly symptomatic of the small media market's structural and cultural limits. The company understood as far back as the early 2010s that it stood no chance of competing with Google's YouTube and the aggressive commercialization of its gigantic UGC assets. And after local broadcasters began to launch their own catch-up portals, Stream's online services fell out of demand. When the Czech internet giant Seznam bought the remaining share in Stream, it developed it into a vertically integrated internet TV studio, incorporating it into its corporate structure and content portfolio. Despite this, Stream remains in a state of 'permanent beta', which seems to be a characteristic feature of the whole web-TV industry.

PERMANENT BETA: THE STRUCTURAL VOLATILITY OF THE ONLINE VIDEO INDUSTRY

After we finished writing the first version of this chapter in early 2018, another radical transformation – so characteristic of Stream's historic development – took place. All of the key figures interviewed and quoted in this chapter left Seznam at that time, accompanied by some of Stream's associate creative talent. Seznam almost completely replaced Stream's executive ranks, shifted the portal's content strategy towards cheaper productions and eventually downgraded its brand as a division of the new label 'TelevizeSeznam.cz'. Stream's quasi-public service mission gave way to a more straightforwardly commercial content strategy based on cheap acquisitions, compilations and a clickbait-oriented portfolio. Symptomatically, *The Blaník Bureau's* spin-off series called *The Blaník Republic* (2020) launched on YouTube, and Stream published just one fiction web series in 2019 (apparently its last, at least for the time being). The new strategy did not work, and Stream's viewership dropped from almost 30 million views in November 2017 to 15 million in April 2018. In March 2020, Seznam laid off Záhoř's successor in the position of head producer without a replacement; other key members of Stream's post-2018 management were soon let go, and Seznam eventually announced the termination of its original fiction content production in 2020. Although online video viewing remained on the rise as of mid-2020, it seems that the Covid-19 pandemic and cuts in online advertisement spending intensified a general sense of crisis among online video publishers. The perception that investment in high-end short-form content does not pay off even in the long run made Czech web-TV executives, one by one, either stop or reduce fiction web-series production. Although video is more and more common across all kinds of online services, the boom in ambitious original web-TV content appears to be over in the country, at least for some time (Jetmar 2020).

Stream's pre-2018 legacy and formative example are not completely lost, though. Its core executive and creative team centred around Lukáš Záhoř (including Krušina, Kuchynka and Gajdošík) moved in 2018 to a new project: Mall.TV, owned by the e-commerce retailer Mall Group. Although originally limited by an instrumental business model (channelling viewers to the Mall e-shops and building customer loyalty around the brand), Mall.TV has managed to publish an ambitious portfolio of fiction and infotainment short-form titles. Some of them convey pronounced public values, such as the International Emmy-awarded web series *#martyisdead* (2019), a thriller about cyberbullying co-produced by independent production house Bionaut (a spin-off web series, *#annaismissing*, is already in production and scheduled for

a Spring 2021 release). At the time of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, Mall.TV assisted theatre companies and other artist groups in developing innovative methods of streaming live performances. In spring 2020, Mall.TV substantially expanded its business model. It started a process of 'integration' with one of the largest local media houses, Czech News Center (CNC), owned by billionaire Daniel Křetínský, also the owner of Mall Group. Mall.TV complemented CNC's cross-media offering for advertisers and began providing video content and online data analytics to CNC's diverse portfolio of dozens of media titles, concentrated around seven news rooms, all of which worked with online video (tabloid daily press, sports, women's, children's, motoring and other print magazines, plus about forty websites). The first web-TV series resulting from this strategic synergy was *Therapy by Sharing* (2020), a winner in the web-series category of the Serial Killer – International Festival of TV and Web Series (Brno, September 2020). The eight-episode web series, based on a popular Instagram profile that publishes real-life 'breakup messages', was promoted and integrated across a selection of women-oriented CNC titles (Aust 2020). This latest transformation of Mall.TV's business model and content strategy illustrates the above-mentioned permeability between closed services and other forms of online video that renders problematic Johnson's otherwise extremely useful definition of 'online TV' (Johnson 2018: 34). Although it is too early to assess its business success, it already seems that such a cross-media synergy might be a viable survival strategy not only for Mall.TV, but also for the local fiction web series as a format.

Even more importantly, the example of the unparalleled pre-2018 success of Stream and *The Blaník Bureau* also helped provoke the PSB Česká televize (ČT) to finally launch its own original web-TV production. In 2017, ČT's director general Petr Dvořák foregrounded the 'development of new online formats that would respond to the expectations of young users of non-linear streaming' as one of the priorities of his second term in office (Dvořák 2017: 17). In 2018, ČT hired Lukáš Záhoř – preceding his Mall.TV assignment – to design a content strategy and organizational model for its new online portal. Although Záhoř's ambitious project was not approved, ČT went on with the plan and built its own video portal team. In 2020, Dvořák officially announced the launch of ČT's new VOD portal, scheduled for 2021 (meant to replace the current catch-up service iVysílání and accompanied by an original web-only production initiative) that will be, in his words, 'as user-friendly as big platforms such as Netflix and HBO' (Čázenský 2020). Even before this announcement, ČT published its first call for web-series proposals in autumn 2019. A subsequent pitching forum revealed a surprisingly high level of interest and creativity among both ČT's in-house

personnel and independent producers, some of whom previously worked for Stream and Mall.TV, and the first slate of public service web-series projects got development funding and were in the pre-production stage as of January 2021.¹⁸ Although this is apparently the first initiative of its kind in the region, the current developments in PSB web-only content production in other parts of Europe, such as Scandinavia, Germany and Belgium, amongst others, promise that it will not be the last.

Dorota Vašíčková is a graduate student of Film Studies at Charles University, Prague. She is the author of a thesis on Stream.cz, for which she conducted a set of detailed interviews with the portal's executives and associated film-makers. She is currently working with ČT's video portal team as a web-only content commissioning editor.

Conclusion: 'High circumscription' in the Era of Global Streamers, and More Questions to Be Asked

This book provides a broad but incomplete picture of screen media industries in the east-central European region. Instead of a top-down economic or political overview, it dives into the everyday realities of producers working in different fields of media production, ranging from independent arthouse film to short-form web series. Individual chapters offer different articulations of what I call the 'high circumscription' system, whereby producers' agency is circumscribed and acts upon by the small size and peripherality of the local industries and markets. Such a picture, based on empirical case studies, can only provide a fleeting glance at particular industry settings at a particular time. All of these producer practices will continue to be transformed by industry and cultural-political developments that cross both national and regional borders, including the post-Covid-19 economic crisis, European media regulation, and the growing influence of transnational video on demand (VOD) services and platforms. It seems that producers will remain key figures – though not the only and not the most visible figures – in all of these transformations, but their agency might become even further constrained.

The European system of public funding as well as the regulation of broadcasting and VOD services rely on independent producers to initiate new projects, innovate audiovisual storytelling, and thus maintain the competitiveness and cultural diversity of European screen media. While audiovisual production has been supported by subsidy schemes such as MEDIA and Eurimages and protected by quotas and financial obligations imposed on Netflix and other transnational corporations by the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), independent producers are facing an increasing risk of losing autonomy and control over their audiovisual work. Already constrained by the 'high circumscription' system described in previous chapters, their agency will likely be further curbed by the growing financial and cultural power of VOD services and platforms.

When producing content for large subscription video on demand (SVOD) players, independent producers usually operate under the so-called cost-plus system, whereby the independent producer receives a flat fee, while the SVOD

covers all or most of the production costs and retains the majority or all of the primary, secondary and other ancillary rights. Unlike official co-productions, where secondary rights are shared proportionately to the financial and creative investment of each party, this model prevents the independent producer from secondary rights exploitation, and effectively turns her or him into a mere production service provider. National broadcasters have traditionally employed the 'cost-plus' system in some countries (including the Czech Republic and Poland) and have been prevented by regulators from doing so in others, to protect independent producers' commercial interests (as in the UK). But the practice is becoming more problematic as transnational SVOD services aggressively enter national ecosystems, willing to invest significantly higher sums in upfront fees in exchange for exclusively retaining all global rights for extensive periods of time, thus preventing producers from distributing their programmes in other windows, including theatrical distribution and sometimes even festivals (Doyle 2016: 635–8). Moreover, when a supposedly independent European audiovisual work gets public funding in the development stage, prior to being commissioned by an SVOD as an 'original', the situation poses a challenge to the public funds, which are legally obliged to support national independent producers, but eventually end up co-financing the commercial corporate production of transnational conglomerates.

One of the most heated controversies of this kind concerned HBO Europe's recent series *Beforeigners* (*Fremvandrerne*, NO, 2019) with an estimated budget of 77 million Norwegian krone, which was initiated by the Norwegian independent producer Rubicon TV. Rubicon received support from the Norwegian Film Institute (NFI) (9.5 million Norwegian krone), but then transferred all rights to HBO in exchange for almost fully financing the series. After learning about the contractual arrangement, the NFI refused to pay the grant because it no longer considered the project an independent production. But Rubicon brought the case to the Norwegian Media Appeals Board (*Medieklagenemnda*), where the NFI lost and had to pay the grant (Ekeberg and Helle 2019). This prompted the NFI to reconsider its practice of supporting and even legally defining independent producers (Løge 2020). The implementation of the AVMSD thus offers an opportunity for national regulators to adjust their legal definitions of the 'independent producer' as well as their public support rules so that secondary rights to publicly funded works are shared fairly with independent producers. It seems that the position of independent producers vis-à-vis global conglomerates will remain a crucial issue in the globalizing and digitalizing media ecosystem of the whole continent; nevertheless, east-central European producers will certainly be disadvantaged by their lower bargaining power when negotiating their share in secondary rights and revenues. That is why the role of public funds and

regulators in supporting, protecting and educating producers (who might be tempted to give up all rights in exchange for a guaranteed high fee) will be even more vital in the region.

There are a number of related media industry issues which remained beyond the scope of this book. The 'high circumscription' model obviously impacts audiovisual texts, their cultural meaning and aesthetic form. Georgina Born's call for connecting the ethnography of production with an analysis of aesthetic form-in-the-making might be instrumental for overcoming the traditional disciplinary barriers between studies of media systems or industry practices and close readings of cultural texts or audiovisual works of art. Her anthropology of cultural institutions and concepts of 'mediation' of creative practice and genre-specific 'situated' ethics and aesthetics help us understand how aesthetic features of cultural objects condense or 'mediate' the positioning of the producer in the field, the social relations and material conditions of their collective production (Born 2002, 2005, 2010; Szczepanik 2013b: 111). What would an industry-informed cultural analysis or aesthetics of peripheral audiovisual production look like, and what could it tell us about east-central European film and television? Some of the existing literature might provide us with significant hints: Mette Hjort's (2010b, 2015) typology of transnationalisms and the concept of 'creativity under constraints' in small-nation cinemas; the work of Dina Iordanova (2010) on global circulation of 'peripheral cinemas'; and Aniko Imre's (2018) studies of 'commercial nationalism' in post-socialist TV production. But none of it is really engaged in modelling a region-specific mode of production, and tracing systemic links between a peripheral industry ecosystem, industry agency and aesthetic form. Such an initiative might as well come from outside the field of media industry studies, perhaps from researchers empirically studying national film styles, if they eventually venture into more contextual and comparative work by linking systems of aesthetic norms to material conditions of production, such as in my Czech colleague Radomír D. Kokeš's (2020) long-term project on Czech cinema poetics.

Another issue that might influence the professional identity of European producers, their working styles and standing in the regional market in the near future, is gender (in)equality. While the majority of east-central European producers are still white men, some of the key public institutions have been run by highly respected women (e.g. the Czech Film Fund's current head Helena Fraňková and the Polish Film Institute's former long-time head Agnieszka Odorowicz), and there are some progressive tendencies worth mentioning, at least in terms of industrial discourse. In Poland, prominent professionals have repeatedly expressed a sense that women play an increasingly important role in the industry, pointing among others to the strong position of outward-looking

female producers such as Klaudia Śmieja, Aneta Hickinbotham, Anna Wydra, Agnieszka Kurzydło and Ewa Puszczyńska. Women are supposedly seen winning public funding for their projects more often than before and more actively building collaborative networks based on sharing and solidarity (Hollender 2020). Some of the most important Hungarian production companies have been run by women too – such as the co-founder of Proton Cinema, Viktória Petrányi, the managing director of Pioneer Pictures, Ildikó Kemény, and Partnersfilm's producer Ági Pataki. The Czech Audiovisual Producers' Association decided in January 2021 to fund an independent study on gender in the Czech film and TV industry. The recent discussion about 'women ruling Polish cinema' (Hollender 2020), however, should not obscure the persisting gender inequalities, the stereotypical representations of women and systemic 'glass ceilings' in industries across the region that result from the 'paternalist structures on which the liberalization and commercialization of Central and Eastern European media systems are based' (Pajnik 2012: 111), and which, in some professional groups, are even more pronounced today when compared to the pre-1989 state-socialist production systems (Hock 2010). The persisting inequalities are especially striking when considering public service media, which seem to lag far behind the objectives set by European media policies, guided since the mid-1990s by the approach of 'gender mainstreaming'. For example, the Czech public service broadcaster ČT's top management was almost fully male as of early 2021, while among ČT's twenty 'creative producers', men tended to run the more prestigious fiction units, leaving documentary and current affairs to their female peers.

This book's implicit goal is to help facilitate a dialogue between scholarly work on screen media originating in east-central Europe, and media industry studies that remain dominated by Western-centric perspectives and which prefer East Asia or Latin America when looking beyond the Anglo-American world. Until recently, east-central European media were seldom studied as globalizing industries or entertainment, thus replicating the Cold War cognitive schemes (see the Introduction). To disrupt this stereotype, this book has attempted to point to issues that make east-central European media a battlefield and an active player in the processes of digitalization, globalization and Europeanization, while highlighting some of the innovative research that has emerged in the region since the mid-2010s. By doing so, I did not wish to sound judgmental: nationally-oriented producers are in no way inferior to their outward-looking, export-oriented peers; moreover, they might be acting within the globalizing and digitalizing contexts in more innovative ways. Some of the aesthetically and culturally most progressive work, as the chapters on public service television and online video tried to show, is occurring in subfields that address primarily or exclusively local audiences. To sum up, I hope that my book will inspire more comparative work on

the various issues of small and peripheral media industries that I could not cover here, whether it be the mutual conditioning of industrial and aesthetic trends; perceptions of gender inequality in post-socialist work worlds; post-globalization tendencies in media policy; the political colonization and oligarchization of entertainment (and not just news) media; the roles of festivals, sales agents and distributors as cultural intermediaries generating value in the international markets; or barriers to cross-border online circulation that bring peripherality back into the digital world.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Unless indicated otherwise, all the data in Table 0.1 were compiled from the European Audiovisual Observatory's 'Yearbook Online Service' (EAO 2020c).
- 2 'Fiction' means original scripted fiction produced for TV or for SVOD; a 'title' corresponds to a TV season. For an overview of TV fiction titles paired with the total number of episodes released in each of the countries in 2017, see Fontaine and Pumares (2019: 19).
- 3 The 'export efficiency ratio' (EER) is the total number of European non-national film exports from a given country divided by its average national film production (Grece 2017a: 91–8).
- 4 *Source:* Czech Film Commission (2020a); National Film Institute (2019).
- 5 *Source:* Ampere Analysis (2019).
- 6 *Source:* the uNoGs database.
- 7 *Sources:* Creative Europe DE (2020), EACEA (2020), Media Desk CZ (2020) and Ulman (2020).
- 8 For reasons of confidentiality, the application files cannot be directly quoted, but they form a supporting qualitative data sample in Chapters 1 and 4.

CHAPTER I

- 1 There was not a single east-central European firm among the top forty leading production companies in Europe as of 2019, but there are over two thousand film and television enterprises in the Czech Republic alone (De Vinck and Lindmark 2012: 32, 53; European Audiovisual Observatory 2020c).
- 2 After Vajna's death in 2019, Csaba Káel was named his successor.
- 3 The ethnographically informed methodology employed the technique of 'elite interviewing' or 'studying up', used in production studies for interviewing influential industry 'players' (see Mayer 2008; Bruun 2016). The interviews were divided into ten groups defined by professions and product types, and coded according to twelve analytical categories such as 'initiation of the project and composition of the development team', 'development's definition', 'development's individual steps, strategies and financing', etc. (The first group of categories was derived from a testing set of five interviews and, later in the process of coding, supplemented by a second group that emerged from the remaining interviews.)
- 4 This draft classification of audiences does not stem from qualitative data on the consumer behaviour of actual viewers (there is no such data available), but from an abstraction of the producers' perspectives based on interviews and from the study of the films themselves.
- 5 The preceding three paragraphs summarizing the report's outcomes are adopted from Szczepanik (2021b).

- 6 FAMU is short for the Filmová a televizní fakulta Akademie múzických umění v Praze, also known as the Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.
- 7 This section is adopted from Szczepanik (2021b).
- 8 Some of the most successful Czech television series of the last five years were co-developed and co-produced with independent producers, for example, *The First Republic* (*První republika*, dir. Biser A. Arichtev and Johanna Steiger Antošová, CZ, 2014–18); as noted in Chapter 5.
- 9 This trend changed in 2016 with an increase in the share of Czech films on the market from 18 to 30 per cent, including several huge domestic hits, mainly *Angel of the Lord 2*.
- 10 The level of screenwriter precarization differs across the region: in Poland, the producer must own 100 per cent of script rights before applying for PISF funding, and the screenwriter's fee should be fully paid at that point (P. Dziecioł, personal interview, 7 September 2020).
- 11 For a year-by-year overview of Czech feature films co-produced by ČT, see České televize (2020).
- 12 For a description of the Czech Film Fund's incentive scheme, see Czech Film Commission (n.d.).
- 13 Several of the interviewees started their production companies and became established producers while still studying at the FAMU film school.

CHAPTER 3

- 1 The interviews were conducted in three phases: in 2009 and 2010 in Prague and Los Angeles; in 2013 and 2014 in Brno, Prague, and Budapest; in 2016 and 2020 in Prague. The questions solicited responses about the involvement of specific personnel in international productions, and how working on these projects affects career trajectories. The interview subjects were: Ludmila Claussová (film commissioner, Prague); Radomír Dočekal (Barrandov Studio's former president, Prague); Petr Forejt (sound recordist, Prague); Daniel Frisch (production manager and head of a production-service firm, Prague/LA); Thomas Hammel (producer and executive producer, LA); Michael Hausman (executive producer and first assistant director, New York); Tom Karnowski (production manager and producer, LA); Aleš Komárek (production manager and head of a production-service firm, Prague); Tomáš Krejčí (head of a production-service firm, Prague/LA); Cathy Meils (a former *Variety* correspondent in Prague); David Minkowski (production manager and head of production, Stillking Films, Prague/LA); Ondřej Nekvasil (production designer and art director, Prague); Steven North (producer and executive producer, LA); Rusty Lemorande (producer, LA); Cathy Schulman (producer, LA); Steven Lane (producer, LA); William Stuart (Barrandov Studios' representative in LA); Jaromír Švarc (art director, Prague); Michelle Weller (former production manager in Prague, currently out of the film business in Texas); Viktória Petrányi (producer and head of a production-service firm, Budapest); Pavel Strnad (independent producer, Prague); Petr Bílek (head of a production-service firm, Prague); Viktor Tauš (a director, Prague); and Helena Fraňková (the head of the Czech Film Fund).
- 2 From mid-2012 to mid-2014, the EU-funded Film Industry Internship Project (FIND 2012–14) organized over one hundred student internships. While working as assistants for international film and television productions, the interns conducted participant observations and kept field diaries (Szczepanik 2013a).

- 3 See e.g. Coe, Dicken and Hess (2008). For examples of applying GPN theory to global media industries, see Coe and Johns (2004), Flew (2007), Yoon and Malecki (2010).
- 4 The Soviet 'runaways' included: *The Stone Flower* (*Kamennyy tsvetok*; dir. Aleksandr Ptushko, USSR, 1946), *The Old Vaudeville* (*Starinnyy vodevil*, dir. Igor Savchenko, USSR, 1946), *Oath* (*Klyatva*, dir. Michail Čiaureli, USSR, 1946), *Spring* (*Vesna*, dir. Grigorij Alexandrov, USSR, 1947), *Tales of the Siberian Land* (*Skazaniye o zemlje sibirskoj*, dir. Ivan Pyrjev, USSR, 1947), *Three Meetings* (*Tri vstrechi*, dir. Sergei Yutkevich, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Aleksandr Ptushko, USSR, 1948), and *The Fall of Berlin* (*Padeniye Berlina*, dir. Mikhail Chiaureli, USSR, 1949).
- 5 Interestingly, the USSR made contacts with the West possible, but lagged behind Hungary and Czechoslovakia in taking practical steps itself, including establishing a special unit to manage co-productions and production services: the All-Union Corporation of Joint Productions and Production Services for Foreign Film Organizations (Sovinfilm) was created under Goskino in late 1968 (Siefert 2012: 86). Sovinfilm's head, Otar V. Teneyshvili, claimed in an interview for *Variety*: 'We are ready to do a co-production with the US, with any partner, who has something humanly and economically valid to propose. We, on the other hand, have much to offer: splendid locations, modern techniques, talented pros and boundless cooperation' (Pozner 1970). Although the promises of US-USSR co-production didn't materialize at the time, the rhetoric was reminiscent of the production services promotional discourse as we know it today – rather than the 'cultural diplomacy' typical of Cold War co-production.
- 6 See interviews with the Czech production manager and crew members working on *Amadeus*, as quoted in Mandová (2012).
- 7 See an oral history featuring the memories of Jaroslav Tomsa (Krátká 2017).
- 8 Czech actors in minor roles included Vít Olmer, Jan Schánílec, Rudolf Kalina and Rudolf Jelinek.
- 9 Here, I rely on my interviews with American producers and with local production service providers.
- 10 According to Eurofilm Studio producer Peter Miskolczi and Stern production executive Amy Szabados, quoted in Holdsworth (2005).
- 11 In 2018, serial productions represented 65 per cent of the foreign spend in the Czech Republic, which rose to 80 per cent in 2019 (Czech Film Commission 2020a).
- 12 Based on interviews with Cathy Schulman (personal interview, 23 October 2009), Tom Karnowski (personal interview, 4 December 2009) and Radomír Dočkal (personal interview, 5 June 2009).
- 13 This claim is based on information gleaned from files at the Barrandov Studios archive, the National Film Archive in Prague, a register of secret police agents and interviews with current production managers.
- 14 However, there have been attempts to introduce trainee programmes: in the Czech Republic, the EU-funded FIND project (2012–14) sent about two hundred student interns to work in assistant jobs; in Hungary, a training programme was introduced in 2016 that requires every production (with a budget over 10 million Hungarian forint) to hire trainees (Sayfo 2020: 46).
- 15 Positive spillover and local multiplier effects have been regularly highlighted by reports on the potential effects of national incentive programmes on the local economies (see e.g. EEIP 2009; MK ČR 2010b).
- 16 According to Project FIND student intern field diaries.

- 17 Based on Q&As with producers Karla Stojáková (Axman), Ondřej Beránek (Punk film) and Pavel Berčík (Evolution), 2012 and 2013, Masaryk University, Brno.

CHAPTER 4

- 1 Except for so-called parity co-productions, where each co-producer is supposed to have an equal financial share.
- 2 According to Petar Mitrić, there were thirty-two national minority co-production schemes in Europe as of 2020, but only two before 2008: in France and Germany (Mitric 2020: 156).
- 3 The Hungarian National Film Fund (since 2010) and its successor the National Film Institute (established in January 2020) have eschewed implementing a minority production scheme.
- 4 The minority contribution threshold was further lowered to 5 per cent in the Convention's revised version in 2017.
- 5 For a useful theory of knowledge transfer channels and barriers within 'global production networks', see Ernst and Kim (2002).
- 6 For the use of the 'glass ceiling' metaphor in studying gender inequalities in the film industry, see e.g. Jones and Pringle (2015), or Martha M. Lauzen's annual 'Celluloid Ceiling' reports on the behind-the-scenes employment of women (Lauzen 2018).
- 7 The improved cross-border circulation and box office performance of EU co-productions (as opposed to entirely national EU films) has been documented in several industry reports (Kanzler 2008; Grece 2016a: 16; Talavera 2017: 48).
- 8 The first set of interviews, comprising twenty-four semi-structured interviews with Czech producers and twenty interviews with directors, was conducted for an industry report on film development practices by Petr Szczepanik, Johana Kotišová and Eva Pjajčiková in 2014 and 2015 (Szczepanik et al. 2015). International co-production represented one of twelve coding categories. The respondents were chosen based on a representative sample of fifty Czech fiction feature films produced between 2009 and 2013. To fill in the gaps and update the former sample a set of follow-up interviews with five producers known for their extensive co-production experience was carried out between 2016 and 2018 by Petr Szczepanik, specifically for the present study. All of the interviews focused on producer practices, professional identities and strategic thinking.
- 9 There were two calls in 2020, with feature fiction minority co-productions required to include at least one Polish citizen in the positions of either the director, screenwriter, cinematographer, production designer (art director), editor or leading actor/actress; or, alternatively, at least three Poles in the positions of VFX supervisor, composer, sound designer, make-up artist, costume designer or actor/actress in the supporting role. At least 80 per cent of the support must be spent in Poland (PISF 2020a). PISF even commissioned an animated short film to promote the minority scheme (PISF 2016).
- 10 When the Polish Culture Minister for the liberal Civic Platform party responded to a criticism of the Polish financing of minority co-productions by two conservative Law and Justice party MPs, he stressed the positive balance of international co-production (foreign contributions to Polish films exceeding Polish contributions to foreign films by ten times), the reciprocity with foreign public funds, and festival awards as key rationales (Zdrojewski 2014).
- 11 A Turkish producer with extensive experience in international co-production (who did not wish to be named) explained that the surprisingly high number of

- Eurimages-supported Turkish-Hungarian co-productions in the 1990s and early 2000s (almost twenty in all) was not the result of any kind of official policy on either side. Instead, producers saw Eurimages as a good way to obtain funding, and most of these co-productions were purely financially oriented. As various control mechanisms were introduced to Eurimages, this became a less viable option.
- 12 In the Czech Ministry of Culture's 'Strategy of Film Support and Development for 2011–2016' (MK ČR 2010b), the first of its kind, this division was referred to as a harmful stereotype that needed to be overcome to increase the international competitiveness of Czech films.
 - 13 These titles appear in the European Audiovisual Observatory's Lumière Database as Czech co-productions (e.g. *The Bourne Identity* [dir. Doug Liman, US/DE/CZ, 2002] or *Casino Royale* [dir. Martin Campbell, UK/US/DE/CZ, 2006]), which only accentuates the lack of clear standards in defining co-producing countries.
 - 14 Slovak films supported by the Czech Film Fund before 2009 included *Escape to Buda* (*Útěk do Budína*, dir. Miloslav Luther, SK/CZ/HU, 2002), *Cruel Joys* (*Kruté radosti*, dir. Juraj Nvota, SK/CZ, 2002) and *Bathory* (dir. Juraj Jakubisko, CZ/SK/UK/HU, 2008).
 - 15 Unlike Poland, Czech minority co-productions supported by Eurimages in the 1990s and 2000s lacked any clear strategic framework or industry leaders. They included a predictable group of Slovak and Polish films such as *Provocateur* (*Provokator*, dir. Krzysztof Lang, PL/UK/CZ, 1995), *Thomas the Falconer* (*Král sokolí*, dir. Václav Vorlíček, SK/FR/PL/HU, 2000) and the regional superproduction *Bathory*, a few lesser known Western European productions such as *The Zookeeper* (dir. Ralph Ziman, DK/UK/CZ/NL, 2001) and *Fair Play* (dir. Lionel Bailliu, FR/BE/CZ, 2006), but also – surprisingly – several Turkish titles with a Hungarian minority share (*Clock Tower* [*Akrebini yolculugu*, dir. Ömer Kavur, TR/HU/CZ, 1997] and *Balalayka* [dir. Ali Özgentürk, TR/CZ/HU, 2000]).
 - 16 The first German film supported by the Czech Film Fund and MDM was *Sputnik* (dir. Markus Dietrich, DE/BE/CZ, 2013); the first Czech contribution to a CNC-supported feature fiction film was *Corn Island* (*Simindis kundzuli*, dir. George Ovashvili, GE/DE/FR/CZ/KZ, 2014).
 - 17 See the Czech Film Chamber's annual reports from 2008–11.
 - 18 The governmental Czech Tourism agency, tasked with promoting the Czech Republic as an attractive tourist destination abroad, even used it for its marketing campaign in the autumn of 2012.
 - 19 See the 2015 amendment to the Czech audiovisual act.
 - 20 See the Fund's aforementioned strategy (SFKMG 2017) and calls (SFKMG n.d.).
 - 21 See the Czech Film Fund's annual reports and increasingly frequent press releases and articles in the trade press that foreground the successes of minority co-productions, such as 'The First Exceptional Participation in Years for Czech Films at the Cannes Film Festival' (Štrbová 2016).
 - 22 I am here drawing on my interview with the film's Czech producer (October 2014), as well as on interviews conducted by my former student, Eva Burgertová (2016), with several producers and other personnel involved in the project.
 - 23 The fundamental importance of trust as a means of initiating and successfully completing a co-production, one rooted in previous collaboration with foreign partners or based on proven track records, is highlighted in Bondebjerg et al. (2017: 99–128).
 - 24 The EU-funded Film Industry Internship Project (FIND 2012–14), helmed by Petr Szczepanik and Petr Bilík, used student interns to conduct a collective

ethnography of production cultures, while also facilitating a platform for dialogue between local media professionals and academia via conferences, blogs, essays, discussions and excursions.

- 25 To cite concrete numbers, *Personal Shopper* received a minority co-production grant of €43,000, rebates of €260,000 and a €4,000 support payment for attending the Cannes Film Festival. See the Czech Film Fund's annual reports (SFKMG 2013–18).
- 26 When in late 2020 representatives of the Czech Film Fund decided about the transfer of funds between specific schemes and calls for 2021, one of the upcoming minority calls was the first candidate for cancellation (based on my own experience when working for the Fund as an external advisor).

CHAPTER 5

- 1 NeedScope™ is an analytical framework based on Jungian psychology used in marketing research and brand positioning that distinguishes the emotive drivers or archetypes behind consumer behaviour such as extroverted/introverted, individualistic/affiliative.
- 2 *The First Republic* was watched by an average of 1.3 million viewers per episode, 70 per cent of whom were women, mostly 45-plus years old (ČT 2014b). Two further seasons of *The First Republic* were produced in 2017 and 2018, but the development and production supervision on behalf of ČT was taken over by Štern's superior, the head of development Jan Maxa; only the first season is the subject of this chapter.
- 3 Research for the following case study is based on the experience of co-author Eva Pjajčíková as a writer intern on *The First Republic*, her nine-month participant observation of the writing team and interviews we both conducted with participants in the series.
- 4 This chapter uses the term 'quality' in line with the Anglo-American critical discussion that started in the 1990s with Robert J. Thompson's concept of the 'second golden age' of American television. However, it also acknowledges that there are different traditions of quality television (even if they are not labelled as such) in individual non-American markets, which both compete with and imitate the US precedent (Buonanno 2013).
- 5 For an analysis of how the series stimulated post-socialist collective memory, see Reifová, Gillárová and Hladík (2013).
- 6 For the concept of mediation as applied here, see Georgina Born's 'sociological hermeneutics' of art and media, drawing on Alfred Gell's anthropology of visual art and stressing the role of institutions and genres in cultural production (Born 2010).
- 7 The concepts of situated aesthetics and ethics – rooted in historical discourses of specific genres – are adopted from Georgina Born (2002).

CHAPTER 6

- 1 Since the 1990s, The Czech Republic has attracted the highest share of US TV inward investment in CEE, primarily on behalf of Central European Media Enterprises (CME), the owner of the largest Czech commercial broadcaster, Nova, and other channels across the region; since 2009 CME has been under the same ownership as HBO: Time Warner (WarnerMedia since 2018). The Prague-based HBO subsidiary also holds licences for HBO pay cable services targeting other CEE countries (Fontaine and Kevin 2016: 50).

- 2 Digital TV Research forecasted that Netflix's 2018 subscription base will double in Eastern Europe (including Russia) by 2024, reaching 8 million subscribers (2 million in Poland alone), and that Netflix will control a 30 per cent share of the regional market (Thomson 2019). A recent Ampere Analysis report predicted that Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Russian-speaking territories are among Netflix's next targets in terms of production investment (Editor 2019). These dynamic growth forecasts were further supported by reports that the Covid-19 pandemic boosted the global use of streaming services (PMR 2020).
- 3 The issue of the approach of SVODs to sharing IP ownership with independent producers (some of whom might be receiving public funding for their co-production projects) is not discussed in detail in this chapter, but I do return to it in the Conclusion.
- 4 Netflix emulated this move by announcing a multimillion dollar investment into Spanish production and its Madrid production hub in 2018, and is also opening national offices across Western Europe, followed by its first CEE office in Warsaw (Dziadul 2019).
- 5 As of 2019, HBO Europe's twenty-one territories were divided among five regionally defined services: Central Europe (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina), Nordic (Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark), España (Spain), the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Portugal.
- 6 HBO was originally a content provider in the sense of delivering content to its cable or satellite partners, not to the end users. Cable providers have been selling HBO as a package with other channels, which has had the advantage of building up a stable infrastructure and consumer base. However, HBO has had to give up approximately 50 per cent of its subscription revenues to its partners, a significant disadvantage when compared to OTTs such as Netflix. Launching the stand-alone services HBO Now, HBO GO and HBO Nordic allowed HBO to eliminate these expenses, at least partially, though it has compromised the safety of the company's position as a result.
- 7 The first CEE territory to launch HBO GO was Poland in December 2010, followed by the Czech Republic and others in 2011 (Dziadul 2010).
- 8 In his presentation on HBO's international growth in 2014, Richard Plepler included a graph (based on internal HBO data) showing that original series occupied approximately 70 per cent of the total viewing time on HBO GO as opposed to HBO's linear channels, where theatrical titles dominated (Plepler 2014).
- 9 For an overview of trends in SVOD content production in Europe, see Fontaine (2019).
- 10 Zach joined HBO in 2006 as HBO Czech Republic's country manager and was promoted to the VP of programming in 2012 and SVP of programming, acquisitions and affiliate sales at HBO Europe in 2015. He left HBO Europe in 2017 from the position of COO Central Europe and EVP of affiliate sales, HBO Europe.
- 11 A study of viewing habits commissioned by the Czech Producer's Association in 2014 showed that the majority of online viewing in the Czech Republic was from illegal sources (Milward Brown 2014: 71).
- 12 In this context, it was logical that HBO Europe's early original content (i.e. before *In Treatment*) was financed from the marketing budget.

- 13 In the Czech Republic, the biggest stand-up comedy programme, called *Na stojáka*, launched in 2004 and essentially introduced the previously unknown format to the local culture. It started with renowned actors but later cultivated a new generation of comedians, becoming immensely popular throughout its seven year run at HBO (before it was taken over by the Czech PSB in 2012).
- 14 Technically speaking, HBO Europe's first original serial production was the satirical short-form anthology series *Born Loser* (*Született lúzer*, 2007–8). Quite different in terms of tone and format from the later HBO Europe production, it disappeared from HBO's catalogue and was considered a dead end, 'just astonishing unprofessionalism on all levels' even by one of its scriptwriters Gábor Krigler, who later (2011–18) worked as HBO Hungary's development executive (G. Krigler, Q&A, the FIND Project field trip, Budapest, 28 March 2014); see also Hansen, Keszeg and Kálai (2020: 2) and Varga (2020: 281).
- 15 Jensen, previously the President of MTV Russia, and the Director of Development at CME, was HBO Europe's CEO from 2005 until the end of 2015.
- 16 See the Czech Broadcasting Act (No. 231/2001) and the yearly reports of the Czech Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting, under which HBO Europe cable and VOD services targeting other CEE countries have also been registered.
- 17 HBO Europe has continued to build its documentary slate and in 2012 appointed its first documentary executive Hanka Kastelicová, a Czech national based in Budapest.
- 18 Originally a school assignment written by Štěpán Hulík at FAMU, it was picked and pitched to the executive producer of HBO CZ Tereza Polachová by Nutprodukce's producer Tomáš Hrubý in late 2010 (T. Hrubý, personal interview, 29 October 2014).
- 19 The largest Czech VOD directory estimated the number of Czech HBO subscribers (HBO channels and HBO GO combined) in 2018 to be 200,000 (Vyskočil 2018). The number of HBO GO's real users in Poland was estimated at 1.45 million in August 2019 (TW 2019).
- 20 A recent BA thesis used exclusively acquired internal HBO CZ data to show that releases of HBO US and original local series significantly impact month-to-month increases in free-trial subscriptions and – in some cases – their translation into paid subscriptions of HBO GO (the student was allowed to publish percentage changes only, not exact subscriber numbers). *Game of Thrones* (season eight) most significantly increased free-trial subscription numbers (in April 2019), but resulted in relatively low retention, while the Czech adaptation of *In Treatment* (a rerun of season two in November 2018 followed by a premiere of season three in January 2019) showed a more modest increase but a far more stable retention rate over the course of five months (November 2018 through April 2019) (Uhlík 2019).
- 21 A top-ten HBO GO list published by HBO Poland shows that the most popular series in 2018 was an original by HBO Poland titled *Blinded by the Lights*, followed by *Westworld* and *Game of Thrones*, with another of HBO Poland's originals, *Wataha*, at number five (Kucharski 2018).
- 22 This was a move towards consolidating HBO Nordic with HBO Europe into one organization.
- 23 For example, it has acquired the online rights for virtually the entire library of the most renowned Czech arthouse production company, Negativ: fifteen fiction features and several feature documentaries from 1995 to 2017 (as of July 2019), which have also been made available in HBO GO's catalogues in Romania and Hungary.

- 24 Netflix bought about thirty older and newer Czech feature fiction titles for its Czech catalogue in October 2019, after having only two Czech feature films between 2016 and mid-2019.
- 25 In her book on strategic management in media industries, Lucy Küng describes the HBO US Original Programming Division's focus on creative challenge, autonomy and distinction as 'intrinsic to its strategic vision and its core mandate' (Küng 2017: 180–2). Avi Santo notes that 'HBO has seemingly bought into its own rhetorical position to such an extent that it has created a work culture that, at times, appears at odds with its own long-range profitability and sustainability' (Santo 2008: 20).
- 26 The first signs that this is indeed happening can be observed in the most advanced and dynamic on-demand market of CEE: in Poland, where Netflix opened its first CEE office and established the position of Director, Local Language Originals, CEE (currently occupied by the former HBO Poland producer Anna Nagler), and invested in a slate of high-budget Polish-language series, starting with *1983* (2018), a dystopian story of Poland in 2003 under communist rule that never ended, directed by four female directors including Agnieszka Holland, who had previously worked on HBO Europe's Czech mini-series *Burning Bush*. The second of Netflix's Polish-language series is an adaptation of Harlan Coben's mystery thriller *The Woods* (*W głębi lasu*, 2020), to be followed in 2021 by *Sexify*, about young female start-uppers creating a sex app, and a co-production of a historical crime series with the PSB Telewizja Polska based on the novel *Erynie* by Marek Krajewski (Christ 2020).

CHAPTER 7

- 1 See Televize Seznam (1996–2021).
- 2 The prominence of satire in the local perception of public service media can be explained by the crucial role subversive political humour long played under state-socialist regimes across the whole region of east-central Europe, labelled by one comedy scholar an 'alternative public sphere, where the controversies and absurdities in the dominant social structures could emerge in a critical light' (Töke 2010: iii).
- 3 The failure of ČT in the field of political satire was epitomized by its rejection of the initial proposal to collaborate on the project (Holec 2015).
- 4 In 2017 and early 2018, Dorota Vašíčková and I conducted thirteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with Stream's founder Miloš Petana, chief producer Lukáš Záhoř and other production executives, the editorial staff, several associated film-makers, a prominent actor-writer and a marketing executive. This was followed by two more informal meetings I had with Lukáš Záhoř and his colleagues in 2019.
- 5 According to Seznam's own calculations from 2015 (Průchová 2015).
- 6 The European Commission (EC) has been following Google's market dominance in the European Economic Area since 2008 (EC 2017).
- 7 The data on MCNs are derived from their websites or by inquiring with the management (in the case of Tubrr) in October 2020.
- 8 Quibi, a California-based mobile-only platform for original short-form content, drew massive investment and attention but failed to attract enough subscribers and announced closure by December 2020, not even a full year after its launch.
- 9 See Henne and Kuhn (2013), Grainge and Johnson (2018), Rustad (2018), Andersen and Sundet (2019), Krüger and Rustad (2019), and Sundet (2019).

- 10 See Bennett and Medrado (2013), van Dijck and Poell (2015), Hokka (2017), Woods (2017), Grainge and Johnson (2018), and Ramsey (2018).
- 11 For a rare overview of an Eastern European PSB's online strategy, see Mitu (2015).
- 12 The name of the portal was '3min.de', and was backed by Deutsche Telekom (Klein 2014: 7).
- 13 The South-African service Showmax, which launched in 2015, is owned by multinational media giant Naspers, based in Cape Town. Although it is primarily a cheaper alternative to Netflix in Africa, it has been expanding into other markets globally. It was available in Poland between February 2017 and January 2019.
- 14 Google's data on Czech YouTube show that between March 2016 and March 2017 an overall total of 5.2 million Czech viewers were responsible for 1.9 billion views per month (half of them on mobile devices). In the 15–24 age group, YouTube's reach surpassed all free-to-air (FTA) broadcasters. In terms of monthly reach in the 15–69 age group, Stream was the third strongest video portal in the Czech internet context in early 2017 (YouTube: 68 per cent, Stream: 30 per cent) (Houzar and Fiala 2017).
- 15 Linear scheduling creates a specific problem. The EU television advertising regulation, the 2010 Audiovisual Media Services Directive, limits the amount of advertising to twelve minutes per hour; since 2020, under the 2018 revision of the Directive, the limit has been loosened to 20 per cent per two time periods, from 6.00 am to 6.00 pm, and from 6.00 pm to midnight. The limits might compel Seznam to switch to longer programmes to be divided by video commercials, which flouts its internet-based 'industry lore' ('online viewers will not watch it').
- 16 This approach, however, necessarily led to a lower success rate in terms of closed deals with clients. See also a video interview with Lukáš Záhoř at the FAMUFEST student film festival, where he comments on the low success rate in negotiations with clients interested in customized content (Záhoř 2017a).
- 17 So far, the only English-language programme to be released on YouTube has been Janek Rubeš's *Honest Guide*, famous for warning foreign visitors about tourist traps in Prague.
- 18 I assisted Záhoř in his preparation of the project for ČT by writing a report on European PSB web-only content strategies in 2018. In 2019, I was a member of ČT's pitching forum selection committee. Since 2020, I have been – together with a group of colleagues and students from two Czech universities – conducting an applied research project with ČT that is aimed to assist the new platform team in developing public service strategies for online curation, data analytics and web-only production ('Strategies for Public Service Television's Sustainability in the Internet Era: Best Practices Based on International Comparison', Technology Agency of the Czech Republic, 2020–3).

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