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From Semi-Amateur to Professional Production Conditions

The Irzykowski Film Studio and Animation in the Late People's Republic of Poland

Abstract

The present paper contextualises and closely analyses the production strategy of the Irzykowski Film Studio (a communist-era film institution founded in 1981 that produced debut films of all types and lengths) for animated films in the 1980s. In reconstructing the realities of animated film production, the author points out not only the reasons for their making, but also draws attention to production conditions. It proves that the Studio operated under semi-amateur (1980–1985) where films were produced on extremely limited budgets as well as professional (1986–1989) production conditions. The research draws on archival materials, including a variety of production documents, as well as qualitative interviews with filmmakers and production staff.

Keywords

Polish animated films, Irzykowski Film Studio, People's Republic of Poland, Solidarity, martial law, 1980s.

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The aim of this paper is to trace and reconstruct the production strategy of the Irzykowski¹⁾ Film Studio in the field of animated film production, a communist-era film institution founded in 1981 that produced debut films of all types and lengths (animated film

1) The studio was named after the first Polish film theorist Karol Irzykowski. See Elizabeth Nazarian, *The Tenth Muse: Karol Irzykowski and Early Film Theory* (Saarbrücken: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011). The choice of patron may have been influenced by the decision of Hungarian filmmakers, who in 1959 chose Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs as the patron of the Hungarian debut studio there.

was not prioritised). In this article, 'production strategy' refers primarily to creative plans and activities and their socio-political contexts. This article is based on two types of sources which can lead to a fuller understanding of the Studio's activities in the field of animated film production and will also enable a greater understanding of the mechanisms of filmmaking under a communist regime. Firstly, in line with what many researchers of the production culture have recommended, the focus in this study is on production documents²⁾ which have been hitherto neglected, such as production reports, minutes of internal meetings, memos and notes.³⁾ Examining such records provides an insight into the finer workings of animated filmmaking while allowing for the characterisation of the relationship between the below-the-line and above-the-line crew. In this sense, the archive searches that were conducted for this paper are based on a multifaceted selection of sources in which no source type is essentially discriminated against. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were used as they are a characteristic of ethnographic research. The choice of interviewees was not restricted to the authors of animated films, but as suggested by a number of production culture researchers,⁴⁾ background staff were also included. These were members of the Studio's Artistic Board and the management along with the employees of the production department.

As a result, this research has a multifaceted approach. Not only can the creative activities be characterised, but primarily, the realities of the Irzykowski Film Studio can be described in a fairly comprehensive manner. Moreover, owing to the interviews, the informal ties between the Studio's staff can be traced and reconstructed. As historian Jerzy Eisler correctly identifies,

in practice, it is only from [people's] accounts (and memoirs!) that we can learn what the actual informalities looked like in a given environment [...]. Only in this way can we find out who met with whom in private, who — regardless of their position in the system of power and authority — could be consulted on important matters, who participated in decision-making, and who often didn't get to know about those decisions until after the fact, who had only formal power, resulting from the function or position held, and who had the real power as a result of their ability to influence people in formal positions.⁵⁾

It is worth adding to Eisler's observation on the customs of the studied environment that the interviews used here excellently compliment investigations into other aspects of

2) See John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Vicky Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John T. Caldwell, eds., *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009); Petr Szczepanik and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *Behind the Screen: Inside European Production Cultures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan New York, 2013); Marcin Adamczak, *Obok ekranu: Perspektywa badań produkcyjnych a społeczne istnienie filmu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2014); Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicky Mayer, eds., *Production Studies, The Sequel!* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

3) Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 347.

4) Ibid., 351; Adamczak, *Obok ekranu*, 25.

5) Jerzy Eisler, "Refleksje nad wykorzystywaniem relacji jako źródła w badaniu historii PRL (Rozmowy z dysydentami i prominentami)", *Polska 1944/45–1989: Warsztat badawczy: Studia i materiały* 6, (2004), 52.

animated film production in the People's Republic of Poland. One example is the role that chance or technical factors played in influencing the production of animated films.

The Founding of the Irzykowski Film Studio in 1980

The work on establishing an institution as a place where young graduates of the Lodz Film School could make their first non-school films would not have started if it had not been for the socio-political changes in 1980. In the summer of 1980, negotiations between the authorities and workers resulted in the workers being granted the right to form independent, self-governing trade unions to represent the working class. As a consequence, the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity was officially registered by the court of the People's Republic of Poland on November 10, 1980. This significant social movement, which saw nearly 10 million people registered on that day, sparked an immense desire for political and social action.⁶⁾ Not only did independent professional, agricultural and student organisations emerge on the wave of freedom, but the authorities' attitude towards artists was also liberalised. In January 1981, an agreement was signed between the Polish Filmmakers' Association (SFP), under the leadership of director Andrzej Wajda, and the Ministry of Culture and Art, democratising the rules of cooperation between filmmakers and the state cinema authorities. Among other things, the agreement stipulated that 'the SFP has a guaranteed influence on the method of appointment and operation of film units, as well as selecting their members,'⁷⁾ and that 'the SFP has at least half of the votes in all committees and advisory bodies at all administrative levels.'⁸⁾ This meant that filmmakers were able to shape the programme policy of state bodies such as the committees and boards, where state officials and the party-affiliated filmmakers and writers. This included the commission that decided on which films should be approved for distribution.

The agreement also guaranteed the democratic election of the artistic directors of the film units (the basic organisational entities of the Polish full-length film production system at the time), who until that time had been appointed by the Minister of Culture and the Arts. The first free elections for the artistic directors of film units⁹⁾ caused a debate on the reform of state cinema. It envisaged the creation of independent, self-governing and self-financing creative film units, with the aim of creating 'a self-governing subsystem of

6) See Krzysztof Brzechczyn, "Communitarian Dimensions in the Socio-Political Thought of the Solidarity Movement in 1980–1981," *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* XIV, (2019), 109–128.

7) "Agreement between the Ministry of Culture and the Arts and the Polish Filmmakers Association," 23 January 1981, sign. LVI-1701, unnumbered pages, archive unit: Wydział Kultury KC PZPR, Archiwum Akt Nowych (Department of Culture of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), Archive of Modern Records), Warsaw, Poland.

8) Ibid.

9) As a result of the election the heads of the film units became renowned film directors, among others: Andrzej Wajda ('X' Film Unit), Krzysztof Zanussi ('Tor' Film Unit), Wojciech Jerzy Has ('Rondo' Film Unit), Jerzy Kawalerowicz ('Kadr' Film Unit) and Janusz Morgenstern ('Perspektywa' Film Unit). See Marcin Adamczak, "Film Units in the People Republic of Poland," in *Restart zespołów filmowych: Film units: Restart*, eds. Marcin Adamczak, Piotr Marecki, and Marcin Malatyński (Kraków and Łódź: Korporacja Ha!Art, Państwo-wa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa Telewizyjna i Teatralna w Łodzi, 2012), 232–270.

the national economy, capable of economic self-sufficiency.¹⁰⁾ Ultimately, as a result of the introduction of martial law, work on the reform was abandoned.

The wave of solidarity thaw was the catalyst for the creation of an independent studio for young filmmakers. Throughout the 1970s, young filmmakers attempted to establish this institution, but each proposal was rejected by the state cinema authorities. The proposed organisational framework for the studio included a provision that production decisions would be made by an independent Artistic Board, consisting of five filmmakers democratically elected from among all of the studio's members.¹¹⁾ The authorities were not even convinced by the fact that a similar studio, managed by an independent artistic council composed of young filmmakers, operated in socialist Hungary (Studio Balázs Béla).¹²⁾ The state cinema authorities only changed their opinion in 1980 and agreed without hindrance to the creation of an independent institution that was to provide a bridge between the film school and a full-blown career. The reason for such a decision was the socio-political situation described above, but an important factor was also the living situation of young filmmakers, which had deteriorated significantly in relation to 1970. At that time in 1980, the Young Filmmakers' Circle of the Polish Filmmakers' Association, which brought together young film school graduates, included 146 filmmakers, of which only 14 people were employed, and only two of these had permanent full-time employment. (In 1970, this problem was non-existent.) The establishment of the Studio was therefore intended to guarantee young filmmakers' permanent employment.

In 1980, two young filmmakers (Robert Gliński and Maciej Falkowski) were sent to Hungary to investigate the financing framework and the organisational and programme model of the studio there.¹³⁾ As a result of this visit, The Rules and Regulations of the Irzykowski Studio were drafted following an analysis of the regulations and registration documents of the Hungarian Balázs Béla Studio for debuting film professionals. The state cinema authorities also introduced a 'fuse' into the statute of the Studio, which stipulated that its films would not be intended for public exhibition.¹⁴⁾ The studio was able to make independent decisions regarding the production of its films; however, the distribution of these films relied entirely on the state cinema authorities. Additionally, the authorities determined that the studio's annual subsidy would equal the average production budget of a live-action full-length film from the previous year.¹⁵⁾

10) Andrzej Ochalski, "Przewagi kina uspołecznionego nad upaństwowionym," *Ekran*, no. 42 (1981), 10.

11) The first Artistic Board elected in 1981 consisted of cinematographer Jan Mogilnicki and four film directors: Maciej Falkowski, Robert Gliński, Waldemar Dziki, and Michał Tarkowski.

12) In 1970, the then Deputy Minister of Culture and the Arts made the founding of the Studio conditional on the establishing of the position of director, to be nominated by the Ministry. See Lech Pijanowski, "Studio Prób Filmowych," *Kino*, no. 6 (1970), 20.

13) Robert Gliński (film director, member of the Artistic Board of the Irzykowski Film Studio in 1981–1982), interviewed by Emil Sowiński, October 22, 2020.

14) "Regulamin Studia Filmowego im. Karola Irzykowskiego" (Rules and Regulations of the Irzykowski Film Studio), no date, sign. 2-109, pp. 26–27, archive unit: Naczelny Zarząd Kinematografii, Archiwum Akt Nowych (Central Board of Cinema, Archive of Modern Records), Warsaw, Poland.

15) Tomasz Miernowski (head of production in the Irzykowski Film Studio from 1981 to 1984), interviewed by Emil Sowiński, April 11, 2019.

The Irzykowski Film Studio Compared to Other Animation Studios

The prerogatives of the Irzykowski Film Studio should be regarded as pioneering in comparison to those vested in other film production establishments in the People's Republic of Poland. The Studio was in fact the only institution that could produce films of all lengths and types. The film production system in the People's Republic of Poland was strictly defined, with specified studios responsible for specific types of film. For example, film production units and feature film studios were in charge of producing live action films, as producers and executive producers, respectively. Newsreels were produced by the Documentary Film Studio (Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych), while the Educational Film Studio (Wytwórnia Filmów Oświatowych) in Łódź was responsible for educational films.¹⁶⁾ Animation, on the other hand, was entrusted to five specialized studios: Se-ma-for Studio of Small Film Forms (Studio Małych Form Filmowych "Se-Ma-For") in Łódź, Cartoon Film Studio (Studio Filmów Rysunkowych) in Bielsko Biała, Film Miniature Studio (Studio Miniatur Filmowych) in Warsaw, Animated Film Studio (Studio Filmów Animowanych) in Kraków, and Television Studio of Animated Films (Telewizyjne Studio Filmów Animowanych) in Poznań.

Importantly, none of the above-mentioned institutions enjoyed such lenient rules regarding production-related decisions as the Irzykowski Film Studio, where those decisions were made by a majority vote among the members of the Artistic Board. In the 1980s, the decision-making process in animated film studios involved several steps. First, reviewers in the literary division of a studio evaluated the scripts and then sent them to the head of the studio for approval. This was the first point at which the decision-makers could recommend changes to the text or reject it. The accepted scripts were then included in the so-called thematic plan, which was reviewed at the central level by the Programme Department of the Central Board of Cinema in the Ministry of Culture and the Arts. Thus, central state officials were another body, following the editors and the head of the studio, that could decide to reject a project. In practice, it meant that in order for an animated film to be sent for production, the approval of both the authorities of the studio and the officials of the centrally controlled cinema authorities was needed.

The acceptance of a film itself was also a multi-stage process. First, an internal review and approval session was held at an animation studio, in which an official of the state censorship agency and the studio's authorities participated. Next, the film was evaluated by the Artistic Evaluation Committee at the Central Board of Cinema, which made a decision regarding the range of distribution (or refused to distribute the film) and the artistic rating. Finally, an approved animated film was presented in cinemas as an addition to the main screening. At the Irzykowski Studio, the evaluation of the film depended solely on the Artistic Board, while the central authorities in charge of cinema decided whether to

16) Of course, there were exceptions in the activities of these institutions. For example, thanks to the openness of its editor-in-chief Maciej Łukowski, the Educational Film Studio produced dozens of experimental films created by emerging filmmakers in the 1970s. See Masha Shpolberg, "The Polish Educational Film Studio and the Cinema of Wojciech Wiszniewski," in *Experimental Cinemas in State-Socialist Eastern Europe*, eds. Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 125–150. Another exception was Se-Ma-For, where medium-length live-action films and series were produced.

release it for distribution. Let us recall that, according to the Rules and Regulations of the Irzykowski Studio, its films did not have to be distributed at all, but whenever a decision was made to do it, an animated film produced by the Studio went through a similar process to that of other animation studios, i.e. it was reviewed by censors and the Artistic Evaluation Committee, and then it was screened in cinemas.

While the structure of the decision-making process in the Irzykowski Film Studio gave it much more autonomy than in other animation studios, it was far behind them in terms of infrastructure. The Studio was assigned only one large room, which was located in a building at the junction of the Trębacka and Krakowskie Przedmieście Streets in Warsaw, i.e. in the same place where the Central Board of Cinema had its seat. It was a typical office space (in fact, it was previously occupied by the Director of the Programme Department of the Central Board of Cinema, Michał Misiorny,¹⁷⁾ who was dismissed at the beginning of 1981), intended for administrative and programme-related work (Artistic Board meetings). Tomasz Miernowski, the Studio's head of production, recalls that the walls were decorated with paintings loaned by the National Museum, and predominantly Biedermeier furniture.¹⁸⁾ His own desk there was a huge, richly inlaid piece with lion's feet.¹⁹⁾ Thus, in the very same setting where the most important decisions concerning the state programme policy in the field of cinema had previously been made (e.g. Michał Misiorny decided to produce Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Iron*), young directors were now to decide on the shape that young Polish cinema would take. At the end of 1982, the Studio was moved to an office building at Mazowiecka Street,²⁰⁾ where it could take up four rooms.

According to the Studio's Rules and Regulations, it could produce its films using any of the film company operating in Poland (i.e. Educational Film Studio, Feature Film Studio in Lodz or Film Miniature Studio). In order to do that, the Studio had to conclude a contract for the provision with a given film company of services regarding a production film. For that reason, the Studio itself employ beginner film directors and cinematographers and administration staff (head of production, production managers, accountants), while its technical resources were limited to office equipment. The Irzykowski Film Studio was thus a rather paradoxical institution, independent in terms of its programme on the one hand, but on the other hand very much dependent on other film production institutions when it comes to the actual filmmaking. In fact, this kind of organisational dependence was characteristic of the system of live action film production in Poland at the time (film units as producers, feature film studios as executive producers), and to some extent it also applied to other animation studios, as many of them were not fully self-sufficient. For instance, Se-ma-for, although it had adequate technical facilities, equipment and space (it probably had the best space, only second to the Cartoon Film Studio in Bielsko-Biała), sometimes occupied the sound stages of the Feature Film Studio in Łódź (this was the case during the shooting of the Oscar-winning film *Tango*, directed by Zbigniew Rybczyński)

17) Tomasz Miernowski, interviewed by Emil Sowiński.

18) Ibid.

19) Ibid.

20) Mazowiecka was also a street where state cinema institutions were located, in the building opposite the Studio there was the headquarters of the State Enterprise Film Polski, which dealt with the import and export of films.

and continuously used the laboratory of the Educational Film Studio to process the deliverables of the animated films and series it produced.²¹⁾ In terms of infrastructure, the Irzykowski Film Studio could be contrasted with the Animated Film Studio in Kraków, which also had only a few small rooms (although theirs was not only office space) and used the technical facilities of external institutions (mostly the Kraków branch of the Pol-tel Television Film Studio), but at the same time had the necessary equipment for the production of animated films (e.g. two Krass cameras).²²⁾

Freedom of Production During the Solidarity Period The Case of *Smoczy Ogon* (Dragon's Tail)

The influence of the Studio's organisational conditions and socio-political contexts on its programme policy and culture of animated film production is perfectly illustrated by the course of production of the Studio's very first animated film, *Smoczy ogon* (Dragon's Tail, 1981), directed by Michał Szczepański. Its title refers to one of the most characteristic social phenomena of the People's Republic of Poland, that is shop queues, which reached their apogee with the economic crisis of 1980 (wherever a shortage commodity appeared, a queue of people eager to buy it formed, the so-called tail).²³⁾ *Dragon's Tail* is a politically controversial story about Poland in the times of Solidarity, an observational documentary in the form of an animated film. Szczepański portrays events taking place on the streets of a Polish city and alludes to the political situation at the time. There is also a bear-hug between the leaders of two countries, with one (the larger one, symbolising the Soviet Union, according to Szczepański) eating the other (the smaller one, symbolising the other communist countries), and a rocket flying over the city that looks like the Palace of Culture and Science built in honour of Stalin.

This is how Michał Szczepański recalls the circumstances in which he decided to make the film:

Times were quite difficult. I graduated and did not really know what to do with myself. My graduation project had involved an animated piece,²⁴⁾ so I decided not to wait, just get on and start making a film [...]. I was able to do it thanks to the fact that I had a painting by Witkacy²⁵⁾, a rather poor one as for Witkacy. It was a portrait, but it was not really clear whose face it was, because, honestly, it was quite sloppy. I sold it without much remorse, and thanks to that I was able to rent a studio in

21) Michał Dondzik, Krzysztof Jajko, and Emil Sowiński, *Elementarz Wytwórni Filmów Oświatowych* (Łódź: Wytwórnia Filmów Oświatowych, 2018), 19, 97.

22) Monika Wysogład, "Kraków: Animacja '86," *Film*, no. 37 (1986), 11.

23) See Marta Mazurek, *Spółeczeństwo kolejki: O doświadczeniach niedoboru 1945–1989* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2010).

24) Animated film entitled *A* (Michał Szczepański, 1980) made under the supervision of Henryk Ryszka and Mirosław Kijowicz at the Lodz Film School.

25) Witkacy (real name: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz) was a Polish painter, philosopher and writer. He worked primarily during the period between the wars in the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939).

Warsaw's Ochota district and start doing my own thing, which meant I got down to drawing a film, drawing what I saw in the city, what I saw through the window [...].²⁶⁾

Szczepański began working on the film before the Irzykowski Film Studio was established, but after Solidarity had been formed (at the beginning of 1981). Therefore, his decision to make the film independently was influenced by the socio-political situation in the country, which indeed inspired autonomous initiatives. This was also made easier not only by the fact that Szczepański had money to rent a studio and buy the necessary artistic accessories (he had received the painting by Witkacy as a gift from his father, writer Jan Józef Szczepański),²⁷⁾ but also by the fact that he had a 16 mm Bolex camera, which he had borrowed while a student at the Film School from Sibille Wieser,²⁸⁾ a friend who lived in Switzerland.²⁹⁾ Getting film stock, which was an expensive and, more importantly, a scarce commodity was a problem though. Szczepański:

When I already had about 25 per cent of my drawings, I heard that the Irzykowski Studio had been set up by some friends of mine. I went there and asked if they were interested in animation. It turned out that they were, so I got a production manager, whom I then only saw once, because I had almost nothing to do for her except get me a few spools of Fuji film stock. In fact, I would just sit at home and draw. I did not actually need anything from the Studio [...].³⁰⁾

Among the initiators of the Studio was Michał Tarkowski, a graduate of film directing studies, musician and cabaret artist, who just before his studies at the Film School was one of the leaders of the Salon Niezależnych (Salon of Independents) cabaret group. Tarkowski was also a close friend of Szczepański's from their student days, when they had supported each other on the sets of their student films. Suffice it to say that Tarkowski's extra-curricular short film *Przerwane śniadanie braci Montgolfier* (The Interrupted Breakfast of the Montgolfier Brothers, 1980) was shot with the camera that had been lent to Szczepański.³¹⁾ Thus, when Tarkowski became a member of the Artistic Board in the Irzykowski Film Studio in 1981, he offered Szczepański his help in making the film and convinced the other members of the Board to do likewise.³²⁾

Certainly, the friendly relationship between Michał Tarkowski and Michał Szczepański was not the only reason for the creation of *Dragon's Tail*. Economic issues also played a sig-

26) Michał Szczepański (employed as a film director at the Irzykowski Film Studio from 1981 to 1987), interviewed by Emil Sowiński, September 9, 2022.

27) Ibid.

28) Interestingly, in the credits of each film made on the borrowed camera, there is special thanks to Sybille Wieser.

29) Grzegorz Rogala (employed as a cinematographer at the Irzykowski Film Studio from 1981 to 1986), interviewed by Emil Sowiński, February 9, 2023.

30) Michał Szczepański, interviewed by Emil Sowiński.

31) See Marek Hendrykowski, "Przerwane śniadanie z Braćmi Montgolfier," *Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication*, no. 26 (2015), 317–324.

32) Michał Tarkowski (film director, member of the Artistic Board of the Irzykowski Film Studio from 1981 to 1984), interviewed by Emil Sowiński, July 7, 2020.

nificant role. Cinematographer Grzegorz Rogala emphasises that the making of a film like *Dragon's Tail* involved a relatively small budget.³³⁾ Szczepański's memories are similar: 'It was a cheap film, which actually did not involve any resources at all; I did not need anything apart from some film stock. It was a convenient production for the Studio.'³⁴⁾ Michał Tarkowski confirms his words, 'I asked Tomek [Tomasz Miernowski, the Studio's head of production — note author] if we could do it. Tomek nodded and formally started the production.'³⁵⁾ Though Miernowski mentions that such a project did not require a lot of money (apart from the film stock and the filmmakers' salaries, the Studio only paid for the services of the Documentary Film Studio, which was in charge of the post-production process), he also admits that getting film stock, which was a strictly rationed commodity at the time, was a real problem, and emphasises that the Fuji stock that was needed for Michał Szczepański's film had to be obtained through informal channels. Luckily, Wiesław Wellman, director of the Film Research and Development Centre, who felt a debt of gratitude to the Studio (his son, Krzysztof Wellman, who was a unit stills photographer, found employment there),³⁶⁾ would lend a helping hand to the Studio and informed the Studio's head of production whenever he had a surplus of stock.³⁷⁾ Thus, thanks to the kind heart of Wiesław Wellman, the Studio was not condemned to making films on, as Miernowski described it many years later, 'toilet paper from the East German company ORWO.'³⁸⁾ The decision to make *Dragon's Tail* was perfectly in line with the Studio's production strategy. The Studio primarily made films which served as auteur commentary on the socio-political situation in Poland and which, due to their controversial nature, could not be made within the centrally controlled cinema framework. This applied both to the relatively liberal Solidarity period and the much more rigorous time of martial law. In the portfolio of the Studio from the first half of the 1980s, a number of live action films can be found along with documentaries tackling the subject of the blind spots in the history of Poland (e.g. the Poznań Riots, brutally suppressed by the army and the police in 1956)³⁹⁾ or referring to the realities of the early 1980s (the activities of Solidarity,⁴⁰⁾ the martial law repressions⁴¹⁾). Out of 26 films made between 1981 and 1985, as many as 12 were banned from distribution, while three were released only after censor cuts.⁴²⁾ Consequently, by looking at the short film studios, film units and animation studios which operated at the time, it can be seen

33) Grzegorz Rogala, interviewed by Emil Sowiński.

34) Michał Szczepański, interviewed by Emil Sowiński.

35) Michał Tarkowski, interviewed by Emil Sowiński.

36) Krzysztof Wellman was employed at the Studio as a unit stills photographer between 1981 and 1984.

37) Tomasz Miernowski, interviewed by Emil Sowiński.

38) ORWO film stock made in the GDR, which was used in film production in the People's Republic of Poland. Tomasz Miernowski, interviewed by Emil Sowiński.

39) *Jeszcze czekam* (I'm Still Waiting; A. Marek Drązewski, 1984), *Niepokonani* (The Undeclared; A. Marek Drązewski, 1984).

40) For example, *Choinka strachu* (Christmas Tree of Fear; Tomasz Lengren, 1982) or *Prom* (Ferry; Jacek Talczewski, 1984).

41) For example, *Wigilia* (Christmas Eve; Leszek Wosiewicz, 1982), *Słoneczna gromada* (Summer camps; Wojciech Maciejewski, 1983) or *Jest* (He has arrived; Krzysztof Krauze, 1984).

42) See Emil Sowiński, "State censorship of debut films in 1980s People's Republic of Poland: The example of the Irzykowski Film Studio," in *The Screen Censorship Companion: Critical Explorations in the Control of Film and Screen Media*, eds. Daniel Biltereyst and Ernest Mathijs (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2024), 201–214.

that the Irzykowski Studio was a record breaker in terms of the number of films without a censor's agreement.⁴³⁾

The Way Towards Professionalisation

The animated films produced during the studio's early years did not face censorship issues. Many of these films are noteworthy examples of formal experimentation. Considering the context of their production and the aesthetics involved, it is likely that they were inspired by the works of members of the Workshop of Film Form, an avant-garde group that operated at the Film School in Łódź from 1970 to 1977.⁴⁴⁾ One such title is the live-action animated film entitled *Wnętrze* (The Interior; Jacek Kasprzycki, 1986), made in 1984 — a story of a flat over the course of many years (the changing furnishings were indicative of the respective periods in which the events took place). Another such film was *Kostia* (Michał Szczepański, 1984), a short form showcasing the vibrant, motion-filled world of fantastic paintings by Bogusław Kostia, a painter from Zakopane. Szczepański also made a cartoon film joke, *Palawer* (Palaver, 1985), which introduces the viewer to a house party that is gate-crashed by uninvited guests. Cinematographers also tried directing animated films. For instance, Jacek Siwecki directed *Bajka o śpiących rycerzach* (The Tale of the Sleeping Knights, 1985), based on Jan Kasprowicz's and Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer's short stories. The lead role in this stop-motion animation is played by Giewont, a mountain massif in the Tatra Mountains of Poland and guardian of the knights (according to legend, sleeping knights on Giewont watch over Poland and will rise to come to her aid in case of danger). Michał Szczepański's close associate, cinematographer Grzegorz Rogala, also engaged in directing. First, he made *Kinolino* (1984), a short animated form depicting the world of flora, and then *Nocny seans* (Night Show, 1987), which showed a frenzy of colours and geometrical blocks changing at a truly frenetic pace.

Suffice it to say that most of the short animated forms previously mentioned were produced under homemade conditions, as was the production of *Dragon's Tail*. For example, Grzegorz Rogala made his subsequent film using a camera borrowed from Michał Szczepański, and partly also on the film stock he had received as a prize at the 1981 Munich International Film School Festival for his film *Linia* (Line, 1980).⁴⁵⁾ In the official production records, this method of production was described as 'a specific course of production involving independent work by the director equipped with basic equipment and film

43) The vast majority of banned films produced between 1980 and 1984, i.e. those the distribution of which was prohibited by censors, were the Studio's films. See "List dyrektora Zespołu Widowisk Radia i TV do dyrektora Departamentu Programowego Naczelnego Zarządu Kinematografii" (Letter from the Director of the Radio and TV Broadcasting Team of the Regional Office for the Control of Publications and Performances addressed to the Director of the Programme Department of the Central Board of Cinema), 6 December 1985, sign. 3313, k. 63, archive unit: Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, Archiwum Akt Nowych (Central Office for the Control of Press, Publications and Performances, Archive of Modern Records), Warsaw, Poland.

44) See Marika Kuźmich and Łukasz Ronduda, eds., *Workshop of the Film Form* (London: Sternberg Press, 2017).

45) Grzegorz Rogala, interviewed by Emil Sowiński.

stock.⁴⁶⁾ *Palaver*, another film by Michał Szczepański, was made in a similar way. Its production manager, Jacek Lipski, recalls years later that renting a room in Warsaw's Forum Hotel (at the time, Szczepański was not living in Warsaw, but in Bukowina Tatrzańska, several hundred kilometres away) was virtually the only extra cost. Szczepański not only lived in a hotel room, but also, equipped with a camera and the necessary tape, made a film there.⁴⁷⁾ Thus, in the case of subsequent animated films, the Studio mainly had to pay for film stock, post-production salaries (not many, because the crew was kept to a minimum, e.g. in *Palaver*, Michał Szczepański was responsible for the drawings, animation, direction and script). Importantly, salaries were strictly regulated by ministerial order and the duration of a film's production did not affect the amount.

In the case of animated films from 1982–1985, the technical facilities of the Czołówka Polish Army Film Studio (*Palaver*), the Educational Film Studio (*Night Show*), the Documentary Film Studio (*Kostia, Tale of the Sleeping Knights*), the Animated Television Film Studio in Poznań (*Interior*) and the Półtel Television Film Studio (*Kinolino*) were used. The choice of that particular post-production infrastructure was also determined by economic factors — contracts were made with those studios that offered a fast turnaround time and that, importantly, were based near the director's home address (eliminating the cost of travel and accommodation).⁴⁸⁾

At the beginning of 1985, state officials decided to observe the Irzykowski Studio more closely. These measures ended with a 'surgical cut,'⁴⁹⁾ as Jarosław Sander, the Studio's literary director from 1982 to 1996, referred to it. The cut was made by Jerzy Bajdor, Deputy Minister of Culture and the Arts, under whose decision of 30 August 1985 the operations of the Staff Board, which at the time also acted as the Artistic Board, were suspended. A day later, he appointed Leszek Kwiatek (employee of the Youth Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party) as the Studio's head.

Kwiatek introduced a new production strategy, under which the Studio stopped making politically controversial films. Instead, Leszek Kwiatek aimed to make as many medium- and full-length live action films as possible, not necessarily debut titles, in order to compete with film units. Therefore, it was a matter of ambition — the new, Party-nominated head of the Studio, not really involved with film before, wanted to show that the institution under his leadership was capable of competing with the film units led by much appreciated film directors.⁵⁰⁾ Moreover Kwiatek's idea was the expansion of the production base. This would make the studio a self-sufficient company. It would be both a producer and a maker of its own films. In the surviving documents, there is, for example, the con-

46) "Skierowanie do produkcji filmu pod roboczym tytułem *Pokoje*" (Referral for production for the film under working title *Rooms*), 21 September 1982, sign. S-31334, k. 86, Archiwum Filmoteki Narodowej — Instytutu Audiowizualnego (Archive of the National Film Archive — Audiovisual Institute), Warsaw, Poland.

47) Jacek Lipski (employed as a production manager at the Irzykowski Film Studio from 1981 to 1985), interviewed by Emil Sowiński, November 9, 2021.

48) That is why, for example, *Interior* was shot in Jacek Kasprzycki's place of residence, i.e. in Poznań, with the support of the Animated Television Film Studio there.

49) Jarosław Sander, "Kartki z historii Studia," in *Dziesięciolecie Studia Filmowego im. Karola Irzykowskiego*, eds. Tadeusz Skoczek and Piotr Wasilewski (Bochnia: Studio Filmowe im. Karola Irzykowskiego, 1991), 8.

50) Leszek Kwiatek (director of the Irzykowski Film Studio from 1985 to 1987), interviewed by Emil Sowiński, September 13, 2018.

cept of merging the studio with the Documentary Film Studio to form an autonomous Feature and Documentary Film Studio.⁵¹⁾ These plans did not ultimately come to fruition, but at the same time this concept influenced the fact that the studio under Kwiatek did not produce animation (only the production of Rogala's *Night Show* was completed).

The Return of Animated Film in the Profitability Era

The era of Leszek Kwiatek came to an end in the second half of 1987, when he resigned from his position following the change in the state's policy towards artists, initiated by the convention of the Polish United Workers' Party held in July 1986. Art historian Jakub Banasiak observed that as a consequence of the convention,

repressions diminished step by step, the scale of censorship weakened considerably, civil liberties got loosened, and a far-reaching liberalisation of culture, science and arts started. Belief in the ritualistic nature of the official sphere became widespread. The new doctrine involved the system co-opting the circles that had previously been critical or neutral towards the authorities, including those from underground opposition circles.⁵²⁾

This also resulted in changes to the organisational structure of the Irzykowski Studio. The post of the Studio's head still existed, but a new Artistic and Programme Board was appointed. It included two young filmmakers before their full-length debut — Jacek Skalski and Mariusz Treliński, two film directors after their debut at the Studio — Wiesław Saniewski and Marek Koterski, and one of the initiators of the Studio — Janusz Kijowski. Due to his extensive experience and in accordance with the Studio's new regulations, Kijowski was elected the chairman of the Board, and consequently also became the deputy artistic head. The new Artistic and Programme Board faced a difficult task of lobbying for the appointment of the Studio head who would submit to the Board's authority. Zbigniew Pepliński, former television head of Poltel and the Feature Film Studio in Wrocław, was elected, and, as it later transpired, he indeed followed the Artistic Board's instructions.⁵³⁾

There is no doubt that the marginal position of the head of the Studio meant that the Artistic and Programme Board was responsible for the Studio's programme strategy, just as in the early 1980s. This becomes even more evident upon examination at the first approval for production signed by Pepliński, one which states the title of Magdalena Łazarkiewicz's feature-length debut, *Ostatni dzwonek* (The Last Schoolbell, 1989) — it was

51) "Protokół z posiedzenia Rady Artystycznej" (Record of the Arts Board meeting), 27 September 1986, *Protokół z posiedzenia Rady Artystycznej*, 25–27 IX 1986 r., sign. 1–4, c. 65, archive unit: Studio Filmowe im. Karola Irzykowskiego, Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe (Irzykowski Film Studio, National Digital Archive), Warsaw, Poland.

52) Jakub Banasiak, *Proteuszowe czasy: Rozpad państwowego systemu sztuki 1982–1993* (Warszawa: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie and Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, 2020), 40–41.

53) Janusz Kijowski (chairman of the Artistic and Programme Board of the Irzykowski Film Studio from 1987 to 1989), interviewed by Emil Sowiński, February 4, 2021.

perfectly in line with the policy of making politically controversial films, which was initiated by the first Board of the Studio. Łazarkiewicz's film is a story of a group of high school students who, inspired by a new classmate (expelled for anti-government activity from another school), begin preparations to stage a performance entitled *History lesson*, based on the censored work of the cabaret Piwnica pod Baranami (including a mocking song using the text of the communist government's 1981 martial law decree) and the Solidarity movement bards Jacek Kaczmarski and Przemysław Gintrowski (which included the protest song 'We don't run away from here' / "A my nie chcemy uciekać stąd").

As the liberalisation progressed, titles such as *The Last Schoolbell*, were approved without any censorship interference, and even the most hardline official censors, who could sense that change was coming, described them as 'outstanding political films.'⁵⁴ On the other hand, due to the precarious economic situation of the declining communist era, film institutions were ordered to follow the logic of profit when making decisions regarding film production.⁵⁵ The new Artistic Board of the Irzykowski Studio also had to take into account the profitability of the projected film.

This context influenced the decision to produce the animated series for children entitled *Przygody smoka Rurarza* (Dragon Adventures; Jacek Siwecki, 1989). The Studio produced three pilot episodes as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Telewizja Polska (Polish Television), in order to persuade the latter to sign a contract for a whole season (scripts for 26 episodes were waiting).⁵⁶ The Studio was to be the executive producer in this case, while Telewizja Polska was to be the commissioning party. As a result, the first three pilot episodes were produced in a professional setting with the participation of the Film Miniature Studio, which specialised in animated films for children. Siwecki, fascinated by *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Robert Zemeckis, Richard Williams, 1988), decided to make the series using a combined method of putting together live-action shots with animation.⁵⁷ However, it was not possible given the technical capabilities of the Film Miniature Studio, so Siwecki combined live-action shots with stop-motion puppet animation, and treated traditional animation as a kind of addition. The friendly dragon, who helped children in each episode, appeared in two versions, i.e. as a cartoon character and as a puppet. In the end the television company did not buy the film, and that decision was largely influenced by its final form. The pilot episodes, although made in a professional cinematographic setting, were rather clumsy in the technical aspect. Members of the Ministry's Artistic Evaluation Committee remarked that the puppet shots (dragon made of plasticine) and live-action shots were put together in an awkward manner ('This idea was practically unworkable in our conditions;' 'We have plasticine that does not move, the quality of animation is not really high. There is no connectivity between these worlds;' 'I appreciate the

54) See, for example: "Stenogram z posiedzenia komisji kolaudacyjnej filmu *Ostatni dzwonek*" (Stenogram of the meeting of the review committee for *The Last Schoolbell*), 16 March 1989, sign. A-344, item 580, unnumbered cards, Archiwum Filmoteki Narodowej — Instytutu Audiowizualnego (Archive of the National Film Archive — Audiovisual Institute), Warsaw, Poland.

55) Ewa Gębicka, *Między państwowym mecenatem a rynkiem: Polska kinematografia po 1989 roku w kontekście transformacji ustrojowej* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), 37–42.

56) Jacek Siwecki, interviewed by Emil Sowiński.

57) Ibid.

idea, but the way it was implemented killed it completely').⁵⁸⁾ Consequently, none of the episodes entered official circulation.⁵⁹⁾

The decision to produce *Dragon Adventures*, the film series which no one wanted to buy for distribution, shows that those at the helm of the Studio, just like the artistic heads of most communist-era film units, were not competent enough to produce films in the then-hatching free-market film industry. The Artistic and Programme Board was far better at implementing the policy of debuts, which had been significantly marginalised under the rule of Leszek Kwiatek. As Jarosław Sander explained, that time was marked by a return to 'the rigorously understood idea of the film debut as the Studio's overarching goal.'⁶⁰⁾ Therefore, contracts with the filmmakers associated with the Studio in the first half of the 1980s were not renewed (including animated film directors Michał Szczepański and Grzegorz Rogala), which meant that the creative part of the Studio's staff consisted mainly of pre-debut directors working on their very first productions.

Under the new regulations of the Studio, it was still possible to make films regardless of metre and type.⁶¹⁾ However, not many of the young filmmakers who found employment with the Studio at that time were interested in animation. This was because of two main reasons. Firstly, many of the animation films made in the first half of 1980s, although censor-approved, were presented under irregular distribution only (short form reviews, seminars organised by Film Discussion Clubs) and were therefore known to just a small group of people.⁶²⁾ Only one of the films, *Kostia*, received a festival award,⁶³⁾ but this did not help create the image of the Studio as a place where interesting, animated films were made. Secondly, it was undoubtedly influenced by the programme policy introduced by director Kwiatek, for whom full-length films were a priority. Thus, in popular opinion the Studio was not associated with animation. As a result, at the end of the 1980s, only one debut animated film was approved for production — *W.A.L.* (Robert Turło, 1990). According to the documentation, it was the Studio's own initiative to make it.⁶⁴⁾ In 1989, at the Young Polish Cinema Festival in Gdańsk, the Artistic Board representatives (Janusz Kijowski and Jacek Skalski) invited a student of the local Academy of Fine Arts to make an animated film

58) "Protokół z posiedzenia Komisji Ocen Artystycznych Filmów Animowanych" (Record of the Meeting of the Commission for the Artistic Evaluation of Animated Films), 2 February 1989, sign. S-31416, c. 390-391, Archiwum Filмотeki Narodowej — Instytutu Audiowizualnego (Archive of the National Film Archive — Audiovisual Institute), Warsaw, Poland.

59) The technical condition of the copies of the three episodes, which are available in the archives of the National Film Archive, the Audiovisual Institute, leads one to believe that it was never shown on the big screen.

60) Sander, "Kartki z historii Studia," 12.

61) "Statut instytucji filmowej Studio Filmowe im. Karola Irzykowskiego" (Film Institution Rules and Regulations of the Irzykowski Film Studio), no date, k. 10, sign. 1-11, archive unit: Studio Filmowe im. Karola Irzykowskiego, Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe (Irzykowski Film Studio, National Digital Archive), Warsaw, Poland.

62) See Emil Sowiński, "Alternative Distribution and Its Role in the Promotion of Films Produced by the Irzykowski Film Studio Between 1981-1984," *Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication* 32, (2022), 99-111.

63) The film received an honourable mention at the 1986 Art Film Review in Zakopane.

64) "Protokół z posiedzenia Rady Artystyczno-Programowej" (Record of the meeting of the Artistic and Programme Board), 23 November 1989, sign. 1-4, k. 90, archive unit: Studio Filmowe im. Karola Irzykowskiego, Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe (Irzykowski Film Studio, National Digital Archive), Warsaw, Poland.

in professional conditions. With the co-production support of Miniature Film Studio, the work on the film began in 1990. This macabre-grotesque vision of war directed by Robert Turło, a single-sequence short funny cartoon, is the Studio's last animated film and at the same time the only one to have achieved international success (Turło's debut participated part in the short film competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 1991⁶⁵).⁶⁶

Conclusion

At one of the Irzykowski Film Studio's staff meetings at the beginning of the Kwiatek era, director Marek Koterski summarised the studio's transformation by saying: 'The craft workshop is over, the factory has begun.'⁶⁷ Koterski's terminology perfectly captures both stages of the Studio's operations including its production strategy for animated films which navigated an institutional framework balancing state control with creative freedom.

The first stage, the craft workshop and the semi-professionalism was defined on the one hand by programme autonomy with production decisions being made by an autonomous and democratic Arts Board, but on the other hand film production being constrained by minimal financial resources and existing under semi-professional conditions, as highlighted in the example of Michal Szczepanski shooting one of his animated films in the room in the Forum Hotel.

As a result, decisions to produce animated films were influenced by both socio-political and economic factors. These films were largely home-made, created outside the walls of traditional animation studios and on extremely limited budgets with only the post-production stage completed in a professional setting.

In the second stage marked by factory and professionalism, production retained its independence in the programme strategy, but was now fully professional at every stage, as the Irzykowski Film Studio collaborated with professional studios such as Miniature Film Studio. Decisions to produce animated films were driven by both profit motives, such as in the production of the *Dragon Adventures* series and by the Studio's policy of supporting debut films, as exemplified by the production of the *W.A.L.*

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65) Other Polish representatives in the short film competition were: *Ja Wałęsa* (Jacek Skalski, 1990) and the short film produced by the Lodz Film School titled *Z podniesionymi rękami* (With Raised Hands; Mitko Panov, 1985). The latter film won the main prize.

66) In the 1990s, the time that was fully controlled by the logic of profit, the Studio lost its original function and had to fight for survival by competing with emerging private-owned production companies in the free market realities. In 2005, in the process of restructuring state film studios, it was merged with the Czołówka Film Studio, which five years later became part of the structure of the Documentary Film Studio.

67) "Protokół z zebrania ogólnego Studia Filmowego im. Karola Irzykowskiego" (Record of the general meeting of the Irzykowski Film Studio), 21 February 1986, sign. 1/6, archive unit: Studio Filmowe im. Karola Irzykowskiego, Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe (Irzykowski Film Studio, National Digital Archive), Warsaw, Poland.

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- Choinka strachu* (Christmas Tree of Fear; Tomasz Lengren, 1982)
- Jest* (He has arrived; Krzysztof Krauze, 1984).
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- Kinolino* (Grzegorz Rogala, 1984)
- Kostia* (Michał Szczepański, 1984)
- Linia* (Line; Grzegorz Rogala, 1980)
- Niepokonani* (The Undefeated; A. Marek Drązewski, 1984)
- Nocny seans* (Night Show; Grzegorz Rogala, 1987)
- Ostatni dzwonek* (The Last Schoolbell; Magdalena Łazarkiewicz, 1989)
- Palawer* (Palaver; Michał Szczepański, 1985)
- Prom* (Ferry; Jacek Talczewski, 1984)
- Przerwane śniadanie braci Montgolfier* (The Interrupted Breakfast of the Montgolfier Brothers; Michał Tarkowski, 1980)
- Przygody smoka Rurarza* (Dragon Adventures; Jacek Siwecki, 1989)
- Słoneczna gromada* (Summer camps; Wojciech Maciejewski, 1983)
- Smoczy ogon* (Dragon's Tail; Michał Szczepański, 1981)
- W.A.L.* (Robert Turło, 1990)
- Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Robert Zemeckis and Richard Williams, 1988)
- Wigilia* (Christmas Eve; Leszek Wosiewicz, 1982)
- Wnętrze* (The Interior; Jacek Kasprzycki, 1986)

Biography

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