

Marcin Adamczak

Polish Cinema after 1989

A Quest for Visibility and a Voice in the Market

This essay describes the ways in which economics and state support have shaped contemporary Polish cinema. Primarily concerned with changes that have unfolded since 1989, it considers how the collapse of socialism has prompted ongoing efforts to re-establish cinema within a free market environment. The essay draws on a range of materials including published accounts of industrial and state practices, economic data provided by the Polish Film Institute, documents relating to the country's "Cinema Act" (legislation designed to provide state support for Polish cinema), and interviews that were conducted with industry-insiders as part of a separate project.¹⁾

"Imaginary Cinema": Cinema before 1989 as a Living Memory after 1989

The twentieth-century history of Poland is usually divided into three periods. The Second Republic (1918–1939) was founded after the country regained independence. The People's Republic (1944–1989), which was a socialist state, was established after WWII. And the Third Republic (1989–), a democratic state, was founded after Communist rule ended. Polish cinematic output of the postwar communist period tends to be valorized and nostalgized. In contrast to those of the Second and Third Republics, such films are very much a part of Polish film culture thanks to continued popular and academic interest. Exemplifying this situation is the book *The History of Polish Cinema: Masters, Films and Contexts*, in which Tadeusz Lubelski devotes only 67 pages to the cinema of the Second Republic, and just 79 to the Third Republic. These numbers stand in marked contrast to the 374 pages he allocates to the cinema of the People's Republic.²⁾ Lubelski's focus is em-

1) The statistical data used in this essay were produced by the author when conducting an earlier research project. While drawn from official reports, some estimates were required to ascertain the number of films in production. Those films include Polish produced feature films, coproductions between Polish companies and others, and those produced independently.

2) Tadeusz Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego: twórcy, filmy, konteksty* (Katowice: Videograf II, 2009).

blematic of broader currents in Polish film culture, wherein these periods function as mere bookends to the main body of enquiry. However, it should be stressed that, at the time of writing, the combined duration of the Second Republic (21 years) and Third Republic (23 years) is equal to that of the 44-year-long People's Republic. Estimates indicate that the number of Polish films produced in the two periods is roughly equal to that of the much-vaunted People's Republic. The disproportionate attention paid to the cinema of the People's Republic can only partly be explained as a product of the difficulties involved in accessing surviving Second Republic films or of the time-lag that often characterizes Film Studies' embracing of contemporary cinema.

Matters of economics and production practice are usually left unaddressed in discussions of the cinema of the People's Republic. Instead, claims of artistic significance have tended to be invoked to justify the attention lavished on the period, particularly those of the "Polish School" of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the so-called "cinema of moral concern" of the late 1970s. Issues arising from the roles of censorship have also dominated scholarship on the cinema of the People's Republic. What sometimes appeared to be an era in which filmmakers were beholden to the political establishment's views on the political, ideological, and artistic qualities of film, can also be seen as a time in which creative practitioners enjoyed significant economic freedom. Interviews show that minimal budgetary restraints existed for filmmakers working for the distinguished Polish film unit "Tor". "The issue of money hardly existed at that time", explained Stanisław Różewicz, "the most important thing was to go through the script commission". Różewicz went on to suggest that "after a positive evaluation of a script, one would go to the company, there they simply typed a letter of referral for production and the money was immediately available: Today such things boggle our mind".³⁾

This situation is quite different from that which has characterized the Polish production sector since 1989; a point made clear by Iwona Ziulkowska, who managed a Polish film unit:

It is difficult to believe how easy it was to produce a movie in the previous system. I am using the word "produce" on purpose, in order to set apart the issue of freedom of speech and censorship. Once you had the decision about sending the movie to production, the financial and organizational issues went smoothly, along usual schemes, although there were some plans, limits, commissions and although naturally, in different periods there were various standards and rules, which were subject to evolution. However, the magical decision about the realization of a movie automatically meant that the money was there. No one perceived the concept of financing a movie as a creative process, a concept, which exists currently in ugly borrowings such as "completion of finances" or their "closure".⁴⁾

3) "W tamtym czasie problem pieniądza właściwie nie istniał. Najważniejsze było przejście przez komisję scenariuszową. Po pozytywnej ocenie scenariusza, następnego dnia szło się do przedsiębiorstwa, tam wystukiwali skierowanie do produkcji i natychmiast uruchamiali pieniądze. Dzisiaj się to w głowie nie mieści." Barbara Hollender and Zofia Turowska, *Zespół TOR* (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2000), pp. 61–62.

4) "Trudno uwierzyć, jak łatwo było wyprodukować film w poprzednim systemie. Użyłam celowo słowa 'wyprodukować', aby zdystansować się od kwestii wolności wypowiedzi i cenzury. Z chwilą uzyskania decyzji

The People's Republic was exceptional in the sense that in the sphere of film production ideology trumped market economics, leading to what might be called a "reversed economy". It was quite easy for filmmakers to secure financing prior to production or if they went over budget when shooting a picture. In fact, between 1945 and 1989, only one film was officially suspended during shooting for financial reasons: Andrzej Żuławski's *ON THE SILVER GLOBE* (1977/1988). Indeed, even in that instance, economic grounds were used to mask the real reasons for its being closed down: political objections. The paradoxes of the socialist economy — whereby the bottom-line was not always the be all and end all, and state institutions were on hand to offer material assistance to the makers of popular cinema — provided a nurturing environment not only for artistic films but also for relatively big-budget spectacles.⁵⁾ Budgets may have been smaller than those typically used in the West, but a dozen Polish films nevertheless boasted production values comparable to those of contemporaneous Hollywood productions, from *KNIGHTS OF TEUTONIC ORDER* (1960) and *THE SARAGOSSA MANUSCRIPT* (1964) to *PHARAOH* (1966) and *PROMISED LAND* (1975).

Something of a safe haven existed for filmmakers in the People's Republic. In addition to the aforementioned budgetary freedoms, censorship could be negotiated and contested. Moreover, the monetary rewards available to filmmakers were quite impressive, especially for those working for film units, which functioned ostensibly as filmmaking cooperatives. For example, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, directors could earn up to 100 times the average monthly salary on a single film. Furthermore, after 1976, support for filmmakers grew across Polish society, particularly among those intellectuals who opposed the socialist government. Some filmmakers were seen as important counter-hegemonic agents who were capable of sidestepping the control that the State held over the media in such a way that promised to refashion Polish national culture. Therein lay a great paradox of the People's Republic: even though it controlled film financing and production, the State still underwrote the critical filmmaking that made popular heroes out of oppositional filmmakers.

There is no easy answer to the question of why the Polish State backed the production of films that were critical of its social, economic, and political systems. To some extent, this practice was likely driven by the prestige attached to supporting films whose artistic merits were signaled by their winning awards at international film festivals. This situation allowed a socialist state to position itself as a patron of the arts and to present itself to Westerners as a progressive and open institution. Ultimately, such practices led a small

o skierowaniu filmu do produkcji sprawy finansowe i organizacyjne szły gładko, według utartych schematów, choć istniały plany, limity, komisje i choć oczywiście w różnych okresach istniały odrębne wzorce i zasady, które podlegały ewolucji. Ale magiczna decyzja o realizacji filmu automatycznie oznaczała, że są pieniądze. Nikt nie rozumiał pojęcia finansowania filmu jako procesu twórczego, pojęcia, które istnieje obecnie w brzydkich zapożyczeniach językowych: 'skompletowanie finansów' lub ich 'zamknięcie". Ibid., pp. 210–211.

5) This amounted to voluntary work in film production. Consider the following observation by Filip Bajon: "In order to take advantage of the army's help, one had to bring a crate of vodka to the military training area for their general and next morning there were 300 extras available. And a few officers on top of that, who kicked their arse to keep discipline and make them stand under command no matter if in sun or snow". Quoted in Hollender and Turowska, *Zespół TOR*, p. 87.

number of directors to enjoy a measure of international recognition, which in turn put pressure on their relationship with the Polish authorities. It is also possible that on occasion such relationships might have developed out of a genuine respect that members of the political establishment felt toward cultural producers and their work. Some filmmakers cynically dubbed this union "the complex of the swineherd", a phrase that they employed to refer to an apparent inferiority complex that those in power experienced when they were exposed to the intellectual elite.⁶⁾ Other important factors that shaped the relationships between the Polish State and filmmakers were the ebbs and flows of the political character of the People's Republic, notably power struggles, shifts between liberalization and conservatism, and the various personalities of the heads of culture and cinema (thus, where Józef Tejcma was quite liberal, Janusz Wilhelmi ruled with an iron fist).⁷⁾ A final incentive may have been the appeal of reinvesting into new productions those monies that critically applauded Polish films had generated on the International Art Cinema circuit.⁸⁾

In the 1980s, financial crises brought an end to this situation. The same conditions that resulted in a shortage in basic commodities and the introduction of food stamps, also led to the pauperization of the cinematic professions, which were underwritten by State subsidies.⁹⁾ The unstable financial situation in which the nation's filmmakers found themselves is exemplified by the plight that befell one young director who was forced retire from the industry to sell computers shortly after his debut feature won the coveted Bronze Lions at the nation's Gdynia Film Festival.¹⁰⁾ Elsewhere, documentarians Maciej Dejczer and Mirosław Bork were left with little alternative than to back out of a project when their budget could not cover basic travel costs.¹¹⁾ The financial crises widened the gap between Polish filmmakers and their Western counterparts. Polish filmmakers' technological equipment — such as cameras, lighting, editing facilities — was falling behind that used in the West. It is therefore possible to suggest that the type of Polish film production that characterized the 1990s had already taken root in the late 1980s and that dominant discourse in the contemporary Polish film production sphere has tended to romanticize production during the People's Republic by transforming the period into something of an illusionary golden age.

6) Wanda Wertenstein, *Zespół filmowy "X"* (Warszawa: Oficyna, 1991), pp. 59–60.

7) On the institutional and political background of this period see Edward Zajiček, *Poza ekranem. Polska kinematografia w latach 1896–2005* (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Filmowców Polskich oraz Studio Filmowe Montevideo, 2009).

8) This led to a situation in the 1970s and early 1980s when several internationally recognized filmmakers (who were often also heads of units) began to see themselves as film producers who were responsible for the profitability of the industry. Evidence of such delusions of grandeur can be seen in a series of points outlined by the Polish director Andrzej Wajda in an open letter in which he addressed deputy minister of culture, Stanisław Stefański, after a screening of his film *INTERROGATION* (Polish: *PRZESŁUCHANIE*). Ryszard Bugajski, *Jak powstało „Przesłuchanie”* (Świat Książki: Warszawa, 2010), p. 172.

9) For a comprehensive overview of the state of the Polish economy at this time see: Janusz Kaliński and Zbigniew Landau, *Gospodarka Polski w XX wieku* (Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 2003).

10) Piotr Wasilewski, *Świadczenia metryk: polskie kino młodych w latach osiemdziesiątych* (Kraków: Oficyna Obecných, 1990), p. 154.

11) *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Transformation through Collapse and Twenty-First-Century Revival

The introduction of democracy and a free market economy, along with the abolition of restrictions on the importation of audiovisual products, exerted a profound influence on Polish cinema. With the precipitous decline in governmental support for the domestic industry, Hollywood films began to dominate Polish screens. Initially, theatrical attendance declined rapidly as a financial depression accompanied the first phase of Poland's economic transformation. The number of Poles going to the movies plummeted between 1990 and 1992, before rising across the remainder of the decade to roughly half that of the late 1980s. Attendance would only return to late-1980s levels when the Polish Film Institute was established in 2005.

Issues relating to motion picture financing undermined a viable system of supporting local film production after 1989. Operating from 1987 to 2005, the Committee of Cinema, which was made up of filmmakers, furthered the notion of creative self-management as a support mechanism for Polish cinema. This approach changed the ways production subsidies were distributed. Financial support was no longer allocated to film units (subsequently renamed "studios") in order to fulfill their individual budgetary requirements, but was instead awarded on a film by film basis.¹²⁾ Given the economic turmoil that accompanied Poland's transition to democratic rule and a free market, it is perhaps unsurprising that the State did not consider the financial support of motion picture production to be a priority.

Against the backdrop of economic turmoil, debates soon emerged over whether it was morally or financially justifiable for the State to provide subsidies for Polish cinema, and other forms of indigenous culture, that were not self-sustaining, commercially viable ventures in the country's nascent free market. Officials and decision-makers questioned whether funds could not be given to more pressing causes. For example, in 1990, Marian Terlecki, president of the Radio and TV Commission, claimed:

Let's say it honestly — this small number of movies for cinemas on photosensitive film are now produced to be put on the shelf. It is evident that nobody watches them. We cannot continue spending hundreds of billions of Polish zloty on making movies which do not get through to the audience. This should change in the nearest future.¹³⁾

Polish filmmakers and producers often discuss 1989–2005 as the worst period in the history of postwar Polish cinema. The sense of community that they considered to have existed between the nation's filmmakers and the national audience was seen to have been lost, as was the influence Polish cinema exerted on Polish perceptions of the world.¹⁴⁾ As

12) In 1991, three agencies were established with the task of dividing public funds: the Scriptwriting Agency, the Film Production Agency, and the Distribution Agency. Another institution called Polish Film had been set up at an earlier date. The Promotion Agency was established in 2000 and took over the responsibilities of both the Distribution Agency and Polish Film.

13) Zajiček, *Poza ekranem*, p. 312.

14) Tadeusz Lubelski, 'Wzlot i upadek wspólnoty, czyli kino polskie 1975–1995', *Kino*, no. 1 (1997), pp. 17–20.

filmmaker Juliusz Machulski put it: "Paradoxically, in Poland professional cinema ended with the socialist state".¹⁵⁾

At this time, two influential positions emerged in discussions of Polish cinema: what could be called the "invisible hand" and the "helping hand". The former is a reference to a well-known metaphor used by economist Adam Smith. Within this discourse, film is perceived first and foremost as a commodity subject to the demands of the market. Advocates posit that there is little justification for a national cinema that is incapable of turning a profit. They have also tended to conclude that in the long-term cinema in its current form is likely to be superseded by new media such as the Internet and interactive digital TV. The latter — the helping hand — suggests that films ought not be treated solely as commodities, but that they are first and foremost cultural or artistic artifacts.¹⁶⁾ Across the 1990s and the early years of the twenty first century, the invisible handle position dominated high-level discourse on Polish cinema; however, the balance of power shifted in 2005 towards the helping hand position. The turning point came with the ratification of a new cinema act and the establishment of a Polish film institute modeled on those of other European nations. These developments can be seen as symptoms of an increasingly interventionist stance that the Polish State has adopted with respect to cinema.

The new Act on Cinema was passed on the 7 June 2005 by the Sejm (the Lower Chamber of the Polish Parliament).¹⁷⁾ It is worth considering its most important points, which currently shape the institutional structure of the Polish film industry. The act sanctions state support of cinema (article 3), thus ostensibly foreclosing the debates that raged in the 1990s over the appropriateness of such support. The state's activities in the field of cinema fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (article 6) and the Polish Film Institute (article 7). The ministry's responsibilities as specified in the act are quite general (article 6), but those of the Institute are outlined with greater precision and in greater detail (article 8). These responsibilities include: the co-financing and promotion of Polish film production; and creating suitable conditions for the development of filmmaking, Polish film culture, independent cinema, and archives. The institute is run by a director, who is appointed every five years and can serve a maximum of two terms. An advisory body of the Council of the Institute consists of 11 members who are appointed to three year terms by the Minister of Culture. It includes three members representing filmmakers, one representing producers, one from trade unions active in the field of cinema, five from organizations financing the institute, and one proposed by the Minister of Culture. In addition to determining the direction taken by the Institute, the Council is also responsible for evaluating its annual activity plans and reports, for writing financial reports, and for designing policy and strategy. The composition of the Council seems to reflect the self-management of filmmakers on the one hand, and, on the other, the financing organizations' participation in managing the institute.

15) Konrad J. Zarębski, 'Taka piękna przygoda. Juliusz Machulski, Jacek Bromski i Jacek Moczydłowski o tym, skąd się wzięła i jak dojrzała ZEBRA', in *Kręci nas Zebra. 20 lat Studia Filmowego ZEBRA* (Warszawa: Fundacja KINO, 2009), p. 24.

16) It is likely that advocates of these two positions will butt heads over the drafting of a new cinema act.

17) 'Ustawa z dnia 30 czerwca 2005 r. o kinematografii', *Dziennik Ustaw*, no. 132 (2005), poz. 1111.

The institute's budget comes from a combination of State subsidies, capital that the institute generates from film titles it owns, and mandatory contributions from the five key players comprising the national distribution-exhibition sector. It was decided that distributors would supply 1.5% from distributions fees. Similarly, theatre chains had to donate 1.5% of the revenue they made from ticket-sales and advertizing. In addition, TV broadcasters were compelled to contribute either 1.5% of their income from commercials and telesales or 1.5% of subscription fees if that sum was the higher of the two. To these monies would be added 1.5% of the digital platform operators' turnover from providing access to TV channels, and 1.5% of the revenue cable TV operators made as service providers. This apparent uniformity of contributions masked very real discrepancies in terms of the actual amounts of money that these players contributed. According to the data from 2010, outside contributions to the institute are in descending order: Terrestrial television broadcasters: 43.07%; Digital TV operators: 34.31 per cent; Cable TV operators: 14.54%; theatres: 7.07%; distributors: 1.01%.¹⁸⁾ Because they provide the overwhelming majority of fiscal support to the institution, it is possible to conclude that television companies of one sort or another are the lifeblood of Polish cinema.

In the short time since its founding, the Polish Film Institute has become the core of Polish cinema. Its status as something of a production hegemon dominating the field is perhaps best exemplified by a series of startling statistics. First, 38 of the 39 movies registered at the 2010 Polish Film Festival in Gdynia were produced in cooperation with the Institute. A year later, out of 12 movies participating in the competition, only one was not supported by the Polish Film Institute, and out of the 9 movies in the Panorama, 6 were made with the Institute's cooperation. Then, in 2012, out of the 14 movies that featured in the main competition, 13 were made with the assistance of the Polish Film Institute, which had also supported 4 of the 6 pictures that participated in the Panorama section of the festival.

The institute's main brief was to support and finance film production. It provides up to 50% of a film's production budget, although this limit could be increased to 90% for films that are deemed to exhibit particularly strong artistic promise but little commercial potential. To date, however, the institute has capped contributions to such projects at 70%, with 90% contributions reserved for artistic projects helmed by first-time directors. Moreover, since 2010, additional subsidies have been provided by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage for certain historical films that are deemed to be particularly patriotic or to contribute to Polish national heritage.

The subsidies offered by the Polish Film Institute are pooled with capital secured from a range of different types of investor, as is typical of European film financing as a whole.

They include regional funding bodies such as the Krakow Film Commission, the Łódź Film Commission, and Silesia Film; distributors; state or private broadcasting companies; private investors; and, in the case of fairly big-budget projects, companies, banks, and the Polish Treasury. Currently, sales agents do not invest in Polish film production because they have yet to establish a firm foothold in the country.¹⁹⁾ And, in spite of vociferous calls

18) Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej, <www.pisf.pl/pl/instytut/budzet> [accessed June 20, 2012].

19) Opus Film's international co-productions such as CONGRESS (in production) are exceptions insofar as they are intended for international distribution.

for such support, tax breaks and similar financial incentives do not exist in Poland — except that is for VAT refunds. The paucity of such financial incentives for producers sets Poland apart from many other European nations. For example, in 2004, steps were taken to incentivize film production in Hungary. The initiative led to investments in the Czech film industry plummeting by 70% as those in Hungary skyrocketed by 480%; a situation which remained roughly the same in 2005 and 2006.²⁰⁾

The Polish Film Institute tends to employ a five point criteria to determine the allocation of production subsidies. Article 22 of the Cinema Act spotlights “artistic values; cognitive and ethical values; contribution to national culture and the strengthening of Polish traditions and the Polish language; potential to enrich European cultural diversity; financial viability”.²¹⁾ Ultimately, the director of the institute decides whether to offer subsidies after consulting with a pool of 120–200 advisors whom the Minister of Culture draws from “film and opinion-making circles” (article 24).²²⁾ The roles that these advisers played provoked controversy before the system was recently overhauled.

In 2012, significant changes were made to the ways in which advisers operated in the decision-making processes of the Polish Film Institute. These changes were intended to streamline the process by reducing the number of advisers considering individual applications, to introduce greater stability by limiting the turnover of advisers, and to introduce increased transparency and answerability by making public the names of those involved. These steps increased the power of six “commission leaders”. The Commission leaders are usually well-known and experienced film directors. The chosen six are appointed to one year terms by the director of the Institute after he has consulted with members of the Polish film community.²³⁾ Each leader forms a one-year commission comprising four-members drawn from the film industry, film journalism, or academe. Film producers applying for subsidies may then chose a particular commission, before which they would like to make their proposal. Following internal discussions, a commission may endorse a proposal, after which it will be handed over to the director and the six commission leaders, who will make a final decision. While the director is not obliged to accept the advice of the commission leaders, to date, 9 out of 10 decisions have respected their conclusions.

The overhaul of the Polish Film Institute can be seen as something of a gamble. It is intended to energize Polish cinema by ensuring that the fiscal responsibility developed in previous years is augmented by the nurturing of more obviously artistic projects. It is also intended to reduce suspicions that projects are supported arbitrarily, to minimize the influence of lobbying, and to prevent cronyism. Nevertheless, the reforms have excited controversies of their own. Questions have been asked about the suitability of the expert advisers and about the limited opportunities to compare applications to each other. The fact

20) ‘Incoming investments of film production companies in the Czech Republic and Hungary 2002–2006’, in *Report on the Czech Cinematography 2008* (Praha: Ministerstvo kultury České republiky, 2009), pp. 38–39. In 2010, the Czech Republic introduced a 20% rebate on production costs. See <www.ppfp.cz/clanky/program.html> [accessed November 2, 2012].

21) ‘Ustawa z dnia 30 czerwca 2005 r. o kinematografii’, *Dziennik Ustaw*, no. 132 (2005), poz. 1111.

22) Ibid.

23) This structure relates only to narrative feature film production. There are separate leaders and commissions that are responsible for documentary, animation, and script development.

Number of feature films produced in Poland (selected years)

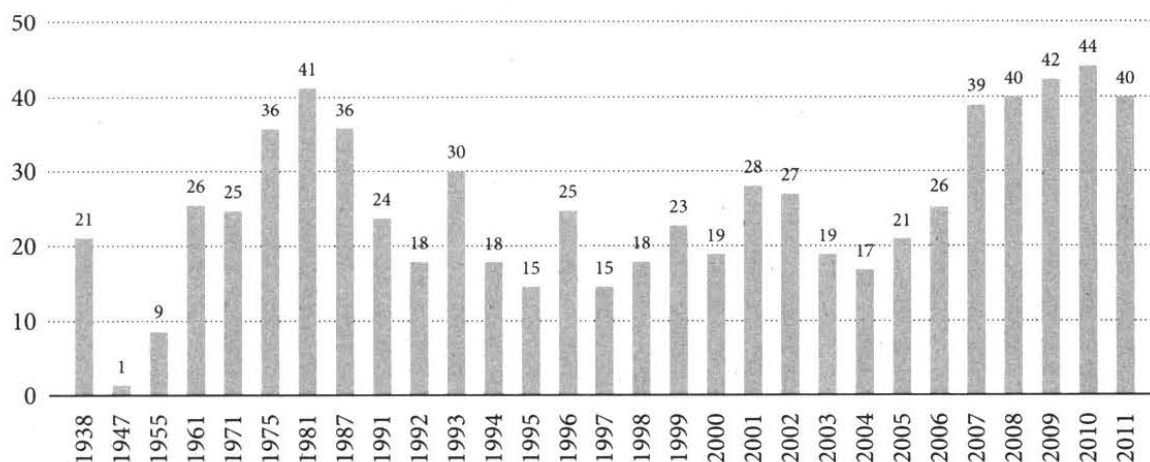


Figure 1: calculated by the author on the basis of: Jerzy Płażewski, *Historia filmu* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1995); Krzysztof Kucharski, *Kino Plus. Film i dystrybucja kinowa w Polsce 1990–2000* (Toruń: Oficyna Wydawnicza Kucharski, 2002); and data from Polish Film Institute.

Number of feature films produced in Poland (selected years)

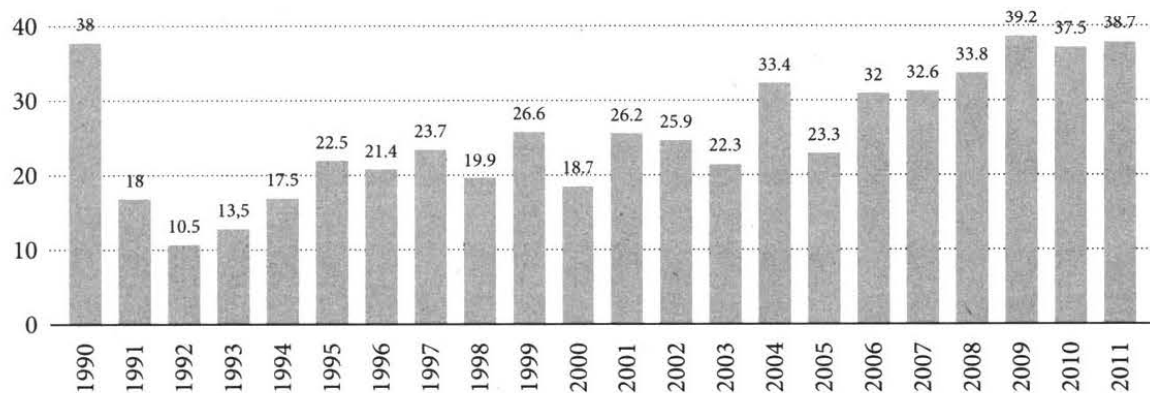


Figure 2: Krzysztof Kucharski, *Kino Plus. Film i dystrybucja kinowa w Polsce 1990–2000* (Toruń: Oficyna Wydawnicza Kucharski, 2002); and data from Polish Film Institute.

that producers are entitled to choose who evaluates their projects has also been identified as increasing the chances of cronyism. Moreover, concerns have also been raised about the implications of producers tailoring their applications — and thus the content of the films — in ways that are likely to appeal to the perceived preferences of the publicly known decision-makers or to avoid their alienation. This type of calculated practice threatens to generate safer forms of cinema which balance a measure of social critique with more accessible material, thereby undermining the institutes efforts to cultivate more artistically and ideologically diverse films. The Polish Film Institute's reforms appear to amount to a partial return to the film units of the People's Republic, albeit in such a way that respects the character of the free market. Time will tell if this gamble pays off.

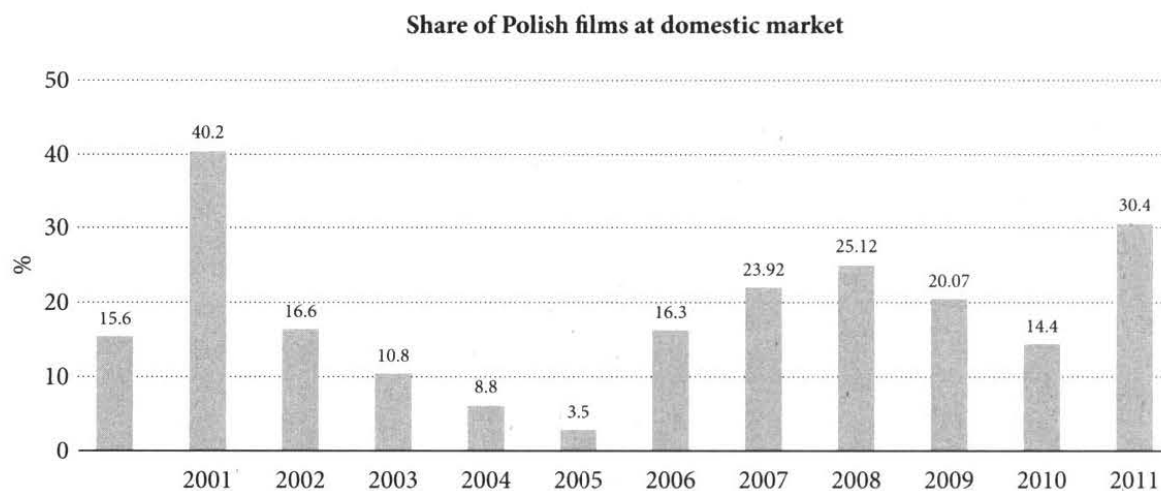


Figure 3: Polish Film Institute.

Top 20 Polish films by gross box office after 1989 (national market)

Ogniem i mieczem (1999)	7.15
Pan Tadeusz (1999)	6.16
Quo Vadis (2001)	4.30
Katyni (2007)	2.75
Lejdis (2008)	2.52
Listy do M. (2011)	2.33
W pustyni i w puszczy (2001)	2.22
Kiler (1997)	2.20
Zemsta (1997)	1.97
Przedwiośnie (2001)	1.74
Och, Karol 2 (2011)	1.70
Tylko mnie kochaj (2006)	1.65
Nigdy w życiu (2004)	1.62
Bitwa Warszawska 3D (2011)	1.51
Nie kłam, kochanie (2008)	1.39
Testosteron (2007)	1.35
Kochaj i tańcz (2009)	1.33
Popieluszko (2009)	1.31
Kiler-ów 2-óch (1999)	1.19
Ja wam pokażę! (2006)	1.17

■ patriotic blockbuster ■ romantic comedy ■ classical comedy

Figure 4: Polish Film Institute and also data from internet box-office sources, mainly at portalfilmowy.pl and stopklatka.pl.

The Contemporary Polish Market

After 2005, signs of economic and industrial progress became evident in Polish cinema. First, there is clear evidence of an injection of capital into the system and a shift towards sustainable growth. This situation stands in stark contrast to 2002 when the Polish film industry was close to collapse. Second, more feature films are being made; quantities are comparable to those of the late 1970s and early 1980s (see Figure 1). Third, after plummeting in the early 1990s, cinema admissions recovered after 2005 to reach levels enjoyed in the final years of Socialism (see Figure 2). The 20–25% share of the national market held by Polish productions also ranks strongly compared to other European markets. Thus, where 2010 was relatively poor due to a dearth of locally produced hits, 2011 saw Polish productions' share of national box office receipts climb to over 30% — one of the highest figures in Europe (see Figure 3).

Companies associated with the Hollywood majors dominate the Polish distribution sector. These companies include United International Pictures, which handles films owned by Universal, Paramount, and DreamWorks; Forum Films, which has long-term contracts with Disney; and Imperial, which has similar agreements with Twentieth Century Fox. In Poland the films that are released by these companies are consumed primarily in multiplex theaters that are owned by one of the three companies holding a combined 82% share of the nation's ticket sales. Movie-going takes place mainly in urban areas, with one in five tickets sold in Poland's capital Warsaw, and over half in the country's five largest cities.

A survey of Polish box office charts reveals that three types of film have provided the greatest number of breakaway hits since 1989. Performing best of all are historical epics that have tended to be stylistically anachronistic and either based on nineteenth-century Polish literature or twentieth-century Polish history. Romantic comedies that powerful media conglomerate ITI group bases on Hollywood models were the second most commercially successful genre. Religious biopics, which were once derided as *sacro movies* and which focus on leading figures in the Catholic Church such as Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Wyszyński, have also fared well.

The ITI group is the dominant non-subsidized film production company operating on the Polish market. It is a huge media and entertainment holding that consists of more than 50 companies that operate in various sectors of the media and entertainment industry. ITI is active in among others the TV market, with a portfolio that boasts the TV stations TVN, TVN 7, and information channel TVN 24, topical channels including TVN Meteo, TVN Turbo, and TVN Style, a business channel, a sports channel, a religion and history channel, and the digital platform "n". The group also owns the internet portal Onet, the Polish multiplex chain Multikino, the theatrical distributor ITI Cinema, DVD (and, in the past, VHS) distribution company ITI Home Cinema, the film production company ITI Film Studio, *Tygodnik Powszechny* (a prestigious weekly newsmagazine), and the football club Legia Warszawa.²⁴⁾ ITI's key holdings are market leaders. For example, its TVN channel is the most powerful private television station in Poland, Onet is the nations' preemi-

24) A major share of Onet was sold in 2012 to the German conglomerate Ringier Axel Springer.

nent internet portal, Multikino is one of Poland's two largest multiplex chains (after its acquisition of its competitor Silver Screen), and ITI Cinema is one of three largest distributors operating on the Polish film market. ITI is also a key player in the nascent digital TV market.

ITI exploits its corporate structure to maximize cross-promotion and in so doing generate high levels of synergy.²⁵⁾ An ITI produced film is promoted by its sister companies — oftentimes in the form of supposedly objective reportage. Thus, ITI's main news broadcast "Fakty" (1997–) relayed extensive information about its romantic comedies. Trivial production information such as child casting would be transformed into Boorstinian "pseudo-events" as they were promoted as hot topics on the talk show ROZMOWY W TOKU (2000–). The popular internet portal Onet also served as an inexpensive vehicle to publicize and advertize these films. The opportunities provided by its corporate structure have enabled ITI to turn low-budget productions into domestic blockbuster hits.

The Quest for a voice and visibility

Concerns remain over the commercial and artistic credentials of Polish films. A general sense of pessimism has pointed to the low key international presence of Polish cinema, as well as a perceived lack of originality and topical relevance. This downbeat perspective also pervades the industry itself. Thus an interview that I conducted with one industry insider brought to light the question of weak screenwriting.²⁶⁾

Furthermore, the generally enfeebled state of the domestic theatrical market (Polish citizens go to the movies on average once a year), coupled with the limited exportability of Polish films, has led the domestic industry to minimize risk by all but abandoning certain types of big budget film. For example, contemporary psychological dramas and romantic comedies tend to be made cheaply, and lavish patriotic historical epics are only produced sporadically with the support of banks and corporate sponsors.²⁷⁾ Although the 2005 establishment of the Film Institute has ushered in a period of relative economic health for Polish cinema, room for improvement clearly remains. In particular, the question of how best to develop an institutional framework that will nurture intelligent filmmaking has yet to be answered, with a partial return to the film units of the past being a possible solution.²⁸⁾

The near absence of Polish cinema from European screens and a lack of success at prestigious international film festivals have also been causes for concern. The current sit-

25) See <www.iti.pl/index.php/Investors/ITIGroup> [accessed: 20 June 2012].

26) The interviews were conducted during spring and summer 2012 as a part of research into the culture of production in the contemporary Polish film industry.

27) For an in-depth picture of Polish cinema see Ewa Mazierska, *Polish Postcommunist Cinema: From Pavement Level* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007)

28) Film units can be seen as forms of partial self-governance in the Polish film industry (as well as in a few other socialist film industries). They are collectives of filmmaking institutions assembled mainly from film directors and run by a head of unit (usually an experienced and rewarded film director), a dramaturgist (writer or literary critic), and chief of production. Film units also provided a nurturing environment for up and coming creative talent.

uation contrasts sharply to that of the Socialist era. With the exception of recent Kieślowski films, which were French co-productions, the Polish presence on the festival circuit has been minimal in the last twenty years.²⁹⁾ The lack of success on the festival circuit has contributed to the low key presence of Polish movies in international theatrical distribution, thus rendering largely invisible such highly regarded Polish productions as *THE DARK HOUSE*, *ALL THAT I LOVE*, *REVERSE* (all 2009), *MOTHER THERESA OF CATS*, and *THE CHRISTENING* (both 2010). Given this situation, and given the market dominance of Hollywood fare (and to some extent that enjoyed by ostensibly domestic productions), it seems unlikely that anything will change in the short-term. Ultimately, international breakthroughs seem most likely to come from Festival winners or from Polish films directed by the prestigious Auteurs of yesteryear. In light of the popularity that some Czech productions have garnered in Poland (especially among young poles), and of Hungarian productions' penetration into the market, it is perhaps worth considering the extent to which regional cooperation might help Eastern European films to break overseas markets. Such cooperation may not necessarily be restricted to co-productions like the commercially disastrous Polish-Czech effort *KARAMAZOV BROTHERS* (2008), but could also include pan-regional distribution and supporting film promotion.

Post-1989 Polish cinema is generally seen as being comprised of low-budget, formulaic films that neither export well nor comment adequately on the domestic social changes of the last quarter of a century. This view may well be fuelled by the sense that contemporary Polish cinema is found wanting when it is compared to that of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s; however, the key to progress would seem now to lie in the ways Polish film institutions confront the realities of the market. Only when such matters have been addressed is the quality of Polish films likely to improve.

Marcin Adamczak is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Cultural Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He is a graduate of and lecturer at the film production department at the National Film School in Łódź, a scholar of the Foundation for Polish Science in 2010 and 2011, a winner of the Krzysztof Mętrak award for young film critics (2010), and the author of *Globalne Hollywood, filmowa Europa i polskie kino po 1989 roku* (2010). His interests center on the economics of contemporary cinema and production culture in the Polish film industry. (Address: mad80@amu.edu.pl)

29) In recent years only two Polish films — *KATYN* (2008) and *IN DARKNESS* (2012) — received Academy Award nominations. Both failed to win statuettes however. Granted, the Jerzy Stuhr directed film *LOVE STORIES* won the FIPRESCI award at the 1997 Venice Film Festival, which of all the major International film festivals remains the most receptive to Polish productions, and, on the back of this success, Stuhr's follow-up *A WEEK OF A LIFE OF A MAN* was accepted into the competition in 1999. Moreover, in 2003, *PORNOGRAPHY* featured in the main competition, followed in 2010 by *ESSENTIAL KILLING*, while *TATARAK* was presented in competition at the 2009 Berlin Film Festival, where it received the Alfred Bauer Prize. On the whole Polish films have failed consistently to win awards at the major European film festivals. The exceptions remain: *RETRIEVAL* winning the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury at the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes in 2006; *THE COLLECTOR* winning the 2006 Prize of the Ecumenical Jury at Berlin's Panorama; *EDI* winning a prize in the "New Cinema" section of the Berlin Film Festival; *TRICKS* winning the Europa Cinemas and Lanterna Magica prize at Venice in 2007; and *ESSENTIAL KILLING* winning the CinemAwenire award at Venice in 2010.

Films Cited:

All That I Love (Wszystko co kocham; Jacek Borcuch, 2009), *The Christening* (Chrzest; Marcin Wrona, 2011), *The Collector* (Komornik; Feliks Falk, 2005), *The Dark House* (Dom zły; Wojciech Smarzowski, 2009), *Edi* (Edi; Piotr Trzaskalski, 2002), *Essential Killing* (Jerzy Skolimowski, 2010), *In Darkness* (W ciemności; Agnieszka Holland, 2012), *Interrogation* (Przesłuchanie; Ryszard Bugajski, 1982/1989), *The Karamazov Brothers* (Karamazovi; Petr Zelenka, 2008), *Katyn* (Katyń; Andrzej Wajda, 2007), *Knights of Teutonic Order* (Krzyżacy; Aleksander Ford, 1960), *Mother Teresa of Cats* (Matka Teresa od kotów; Paweł Sala, 2011), *On the Silver Globe* (Na srebrnym globie; Andrzej Żuławski, 1976/1987), *Pharaoh* (Faraon; Jerzy Kawalerowicz, 1966), *Pornography* (Pornografia; Jan Jakub Kolski, 2003), *Promised Land* (Ziemia obiecana; Andrzej Wajda, 1974), *Reverse* (Rewers; Borys Lankosz, 2009), *Retrieval* (Z odzysku; Sławomir Fabicki, 2006), *The Saragossa Manuscript* (Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie; Wojciech Jerzy Has, 1964), *Simon of the Desert* (Szymon Pustelnik; Luis Buñuel, 1965), *Tatarak* (Andrzej Wajda, 2009), *Tricks* (Sztuczki; Andrzej Jakimowski, 2007), *A Week in the Life of a Man* (Tydzień z życia mężczyzny; Jerzy Stuhr, 1999).

SUMMARY

Polish Cinema after 1989*A Quest for Visibility and a Voice in the Market***Marcin Adamczak**

This essay describes the ways in which economics and state support have shaped contemporary Polish cinema. Primarily concerned with changes that have unfolded since 1989, it considers how the collapse of socialism has prompted ongoing efforts to re-establish cinema within a free market environment. The essay draws on a range of materials including published accounts of industrial and state practices, economic data provided by the Polish Film Institute, documents relating to the country's "Cinema Act" (legislation designed to provide state support for Polish cinema), and interviews conducted with industry-insiders as part of a separate project.