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# Polish Contemporary Cinema

## *Between Right-wing Cultural Policy and Netflix Imperialism*

### Abstract

This article is the first synthesis of the social, political and economic conditions of Polish cinema in recent years and their influence on the current shape of Polish cinema. This shape is changing dynamically all the time, although the direction of the changes is not obvious at the moment. In many respects the situation of Polish cinema has been exceptional in recent years. But the processes or elements of the processes described in this article are reflected in the internal markets of Central and Eastern Europe. This situation should prompt researchers to analyse the impact of the external and internal environment on national film markets in this region. The conclusions may be useful and can be translated into formal and organisational solutions in local cinema systems.

### Keywords

film production, producers, self-censorship, platform imperialism, Polish cinema

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### Introduction

We live in a world of endless streams of audiovisual content, reaching us constantly through new fields and systems. Among this content, film still plays a distinct role as artistic work, even though cinema as an art is currently undergoing rapid transformation. The traditional model of functioning of contemporary European cinema is beginning to crumble. The harmonious system outlined by, among others, Ruth Towse<sup>1)</sup>, assuming the dominance of public support systems offering protection against the Hollywood globalization and supplemented with private funding sources, is beginning to crumble. This phenomenon results from a change in global processes, including the popularization of

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1) Ruth Towse, *A textbook of Cultural Economics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 434–460.

streaming as one of the main methods of disseminating film through the strategies of large corporations such as Netflix, Disney and Amazon.<sup>2)</sup> However, the contemporary viewer is never “just” a global viewer. Just as there is not one universal audience. European internal audiences, although highly susceptible to external influence, create their own national micro-worlds. The local filter, superimposed on global processes, determines the specificity of each small audiovisual market. Although it is worth trying to predict the effects of the exploration of large corporations in the Eastern European market, it is also worth analysing internal political factors specific to Poland, which remained under the rule of a populist conservative party from 2015 to 2023. During this period, the authorities consistently pursued a vision of culture as a factor strengthening local, national values, with particular care for historical content and the so-called “accountability stream.”

The author’s main objective is to answer the question of the impact of these two distinct external factors on the condition and character of Polish cinema in recent years. The expansion of global streaming platforms has created a demand for new content, designed for VOD and targeted at new audiences.<sup>3)</sup> This paper seeks to answer the question of whether the entry of large corporations onto the audiovisual market has significantly changed the image of Polish cinema and whether this change is permanent. One might ask to what extent the Polish market is a beneficiary of the new audiovisual content distribution system, or whether we can already speak of a specific form of cultural imperialism, i. e. “platform imperialism.”<sup>4)</sup> Yet another question comes to mind, namely what is the response of producers of audiovisual content, i. e. film producers, to these trends and what is their position in relation to such unequal, highly resourceful partners.

In the following part of the article the author discusses the impact of the cultural policy of the Law and Justice government (2015–2023) on the image of Polish cinema in recent years. A question arises here to what extent did the principle explicitly formulated by the former Minister of Culture saying: “it is my duty to shape Polish film according to the needs of Polish historical policy,”<sup>5)</sup> translate in practical terms into the selection of themes and artistic choices of producers and filmmakers. There are two main issues here, i. e. how much did Polish filmmakers succumb to self-censorship practices (present in world cinema since its inception) and how effective was the consistent historical policy of the Law and Justice in terms of attendance figures or artistic success of Polish film. A minor but interesting point here is the technique of “bypassing the system” used by feature filmmakers and producers seeking alternative sources of funding for their productions, independent of politicians and officials.

2) Amanda Lotz, *Netflix and Streaming Video* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 197–202.

3) Dawn Chmielewski and Dade Hayes, *Binge Times: Inside Hollywood’s Furious Billion-Dollar Battle to Take Down Netflix* (New York: William Morrow, 2022, e-book), 12–36.

4) Dal Yoong Jin, “The construction of platform imperialism in the globalization era,” *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism, & Critique* 11, no. 1 (2013), 145–172, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec>; Stuart Davis, “What is Netflix imperialism? Interrogating the monopoly aspirations of the World’s largest television network,” *Information, Communication and Society* 26, no. 6 (2021), 1143–1158, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1993955>.

5) Anon., “Piotr Gliński: mam demokratyczny mandat do decydowania o sprawach kinematografii,” *Wirtualnedia.pl*, November 4, 2021, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnedia.pl/arttykul/piotr-glinski-demokratyczny-mandat-do-decydowania-o-sprawach-kinematografii>.

This work should complement the currently available catalogue of analyses of Polish cinema for international audiences with a characterization of the latest trends in cinema seen from an economic, political and global perspective. International resources mainly comprise historical monographs as well as film studies discourse based on an analysis of narratives, artistic trends and the output of Polish filmmakers. Marek Haltof's milestone publication of 2002 was the first comprehensive English-language study of Polish cinema. The thoroughly updated and expanded 2018 edition is a comprehensive description of Polish cinema from the 19th century to the present day, taking into account the key filmmakers, trends and genres, also contemporary ones, against the backdrop of an increasingly transnational film culture.<sup>6)</sup> Whereas the German-language monograph *Der Polnische Film Von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*<sup>7)</sup> is a comprehensive synthesis of Polish film history based on important socio-political turns in Europe, taking into account the aesthetic, national and gender discourses of the times.

The 21st century has seen more specialized monographs dedicated to specific eras, including the contemporary era, which is of interest to the author. The 2010 *Polish Cinema Now!* monograph edited by Mateusz Werner and intended for the foreign reader presents a vibrant, multicolored picture of Polish cinema twenty years after the fall of communism, attempting to characterize the trends and directions representative of this dynamic time in Polish history.<sup>8)</sup> The most recent interpretative perspective on contemporary Polish cinema is presented in the monograph entitled *Polish Cinema Today: A Bold New Era in Film*, in which Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren take a look at the latest cinema productions in terms of key themes, such as the image of national or gender identity, the confrontation with martyrdom, the image of the modern family, the problem of migration and the influence of the Catholic Church on the lives of individuals.<sup>9)</sup>

Nevertheless, the author is most interested in the area of so-called "production culture," clearly adopted in the text and outlined in the introduction, which is being dynamically examined by Eastern European researchers such as Marcin Adamczak (Poland) and Petr Szczepanik (Czech Republic). In this approach, cinema is interpreted through the system of production practices, the organization of the audiovisual industry and the legal and economic system. This may involve adopting a historical perspective with a contemporary context, such as in the monograph entitled *Film Units: Restart*<sup>10)</sup> or primarily a contemporary perspective.<sup>11)</sup> An obvious weakness of this trend, responding to all changes in the economic, technological, social and global environment, is the rapid obsolescence of the factual layer and the resulting smooth transition from contemporary to historical discourse. The last decade was marked by extensive changes in the global audiovisual sector and in Poland itself due to the rule of a right-wing populist government, highly problem-

6) Marek Haltof, *Polish Cinema: A History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018).

7) Konrad Klejsa, Schamma Shahadat, and Margarete Wach, eds., *Der Polnische Film Von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2012).

8) Mateusz Werner, *Polish Cinema Now!* (Barnett: John Libbey Publishing, 2010).

9) Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren, *Polish Cinema Today: A Bold New Era in Film* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023).

10) Marcin Adamczak, Piotr Marecki, and Marcin Malatyński, eds., *Restart zespołów filmowych: Film Units: Restart* (Kraków and Łódź: Korporacja Ha!art and Wydawnictwo PWSFTviT, 2012).

11) Petr Szczepanik, *Screen Industries in East-central Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

atic for culture. It is the duty of a researcher studying production culture to look critically and at the same time analytically at the contemporary audiovisual market through the prism of these large and powerful trends.

### Polish Film Industry in the Phase of Initial Growth

The situation of Polish cinema in the 21st century was determined by the key turning point of 2005, i. e. the adoption of the Act on Cinema by the Polish parliament, which revolutionarily changed the conditions of financing and indirectly of the production of Polish films.<sup>12)</sup> Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej (Polish Film Institute) was established, and new sources of funding emerged. The change was evident both at the domestic box office and in the international cinema circuit. Polish cinema became professionalized, with feature films, documentaries and animated films not only regularly featured at A-class film festivals, but also receiving more and more nominations and distinctions at the Academy Awards (ten nominations and one Oscar since 2005) and the European Film Academy Awards. Over the years, there has been an ongoing cooperation based on a critical yet negotiating relationship between the film community and decision-makers, primarily represented by the Polish Film Institute and other smaller public funds. An average of sixty feature films per year were produced with an average budget of €1,2,000,000 (2015–2016, budgets are now showing an upward trend), public funds accounted for half of the feature film budget on average, and films supported by central funds — usually from the auteur stream — accounted for about two-thirds of the annual production volume.<sup>13)</sup> Although the existence of the PFI has stabilised the film market, the fact that a grant has been received or in what amount is not directly related to the reception of a film. Audiences' reactions (as in Europe as a whole, preferring Hollywood films) depend on many factors beyond the Institute's control, such as the quality of advertising and the final artistic decisions made by authors and producers. Since 2005, the Polish Film Institute has pursued its public purpose by supporting difficult, national or international studio productions that do not appeal to mainstream tastes. In 2019, on the basis of a special legal act, a system of so-called incentives was set up, operated by PFI.<sup>14)</sup> Polish film production still tends to be over-reliant on public funding. Ideally, the sources of funding for domestic cinema should be diversified. Investing private funds in film production is, however, risky due to uncertain returns.<sup>15)</sup> After 2005, Polish cinema showed developmental trends, both in terms of the number and quality of productions and the cinema market (twenty-thirty percent

12) Marcin Adamczak, *Obok ekranu: Perspektywa badań produkcyjnych a społeczne istnienie filmu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2014), 49–54.

13) Artur Majer, Agnieszka Orankiewicz, and Anna Wróblewska, *Pieniądże — produkcja — rynek: Finansowanie produkcji filmowej w Polsce* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo PWSFTvIT, 2019), 18–26.

14) Agnieszka Orankiewicz, "The Role of Public Support for the Film Industry — An Analysis of Movie Production Incentives in Europe," *Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu* 66, no. 2 (2022), 90–104.

15) Artur Majer and Agnieszka Orankiewicz, "Trends in Film Industry Development in Poland," *Humanities and Social Sciences* 25, no. 4 (2018), 263–276, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.7862/rz.2018.hss.83>.

share of local productions in the annual box office until the pandemic) and international sales.

According to the Olsberg SPI report<sup>16)</sup> commissioned by Krajowa Izba Producentów Audiowizualnych (Polish Producers Alliance), in recent years Poland has been experiencing a rapid increase in the production of films and series, and this economic sector continues to develop. The number of film and TV production companies in Poland has been growing steadily in recent years, exceeding 12,000 companies in 2022. In 2022 alone, Polish filmmakers produced a total of 367 films (of all genres)<sup>4</sup> of which 112 were feature-length films and 255 were medium-length and short films. Since 2015, broadcasters' spending on Polish films and series has also continued to grow — by an average of eight percent per annum. The arrival of streaming services such as Netflix, HBO Max, Amazon Prime Video, Viaplay and Player.pl also had a big impact on investments in the audiovisual market. In total, traditional broadcasters and streaming services spent over PLN 2,500,000,000 on Polish original content last year. However, the report points to some weaknesses in the market. In recent years, neighboring countries — such as Hungary, Lithuania and the Czech Republic — started to attract big international productions and develop their technological resources for the audiovisual industry. There are stable and well-established systems operating in those countries with incentives for producers to make films locally. In order not to waste the potential of the Polish film and series production industry, the authors of the report warn of the challenges connected to budget constraints in Poland's audiovisual incentive system.

The trends in Polish cinema indicated above can be illustrated by referring to the full volume of Polish film production (2021–2023) available on the Polish-language platform [www.filmpolski.pl](http://www.filmpolski.pl), which is a source of information on annual film production. The catalogue is compiled on the basis of opening and closing credits provided by film producers, and is thus the most reliable source of information on Polish films.

In 2022, seventy-two feature films were made in Poland, in 2023 — seventy-one. Among them, an average of ten percent are minority co-productions, which cannot be described as Polish films but only films with Polish participation. The overrepresentation of 2022 is the result of production processes delayed due to the pandemic (forty-two films were produced in 2020 and sixty-eight in 2021).

### Streaming Platforms and Post-imperial Discourse

Before the world media started circulating the rare term “pandemic,” 2019 had already proved to be a time of turning points, with the big Hollywood studios (the so-called “majors”) struggling to preserve the old order and their own position, and Netflix challenging that order. The first phase of the streaming war had already begun. It became clear that it was not the amount of the fees or the size of the marketing campaigns that would play a key role, but the content — which comes from two main sources: market purchases and

16) “Economic Impact of Screen Production in Poland,” *kipa.pl*, Olsberg SPI, 2023, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://kipa.pl/raport-olsberg-spi-wplyw-sektora-av-na-gospodarke-polski>.

in-house original productions. The consequences of disrupting the system of “holdbacks,” or distribution windows of a film, proved to be a system revolution, crushing the foundations of the business logic of global Hollywood.<sup>17)</sup> As in other countries,<sup>18)</sup> also in Poland Netflix boasts the highest number of users (over 10,000,000). Netflix has three times more users than Disney+ (over 3,300,000).<sup>19)</sup> The strategies of Netflix and other large platforms have become the subject of interesting analysis in recent years. Amanda Lotz<sup>20)</sup> notes that this hegemon is looking for content that is slightly different from typical linear TV, usually with adverts. It tries to make its catalogue stand out among others and builds its strategy on this. Most viewers only notice the section of the library that interests them, so that section becomes part of their Netflix vision. Netflix is successful insofar as it increases the number of people who are willing to pay for interesting bundled content. It is not so much about the individual “peak,” but about the attractiveness of the package. The key here is the diversity of the offer.

Since the pandemic, i. e. from 2020 onwards, Netflix Poland has published regular updates on the production of local series and feature films it has commissioned. Sylwia Szostak<sup>21)</sup> rightly points out that thanks to the platform’s investment in local content, Polish productions are gaining opportunities for international distribution, with some of them achieving impressive results internationally, such as the *High Water* (Wielka woda; Jan Holoubek, 2022) series, which has reached the threshold of 10,000,000 viewers worldwide. While the production of original films is fraught with risk, a production commissioned by the platform means greater financial security and cash flow, which is also difficult to find in productions for local broadcasters. Netflix still offers higher rates than those offered by independent producers or Polish broadcasters. Moreover, Netflix is giving more freedom to Polish content creators. Series such as *Sexify* (Kalina Alabrudzińska, Piotr Dylewski, 2021, 2023) or *Queen* (Królowa; Łukasz Kośmicki, 2022) or Piotr Domalewski’s *Operation Hyacinth* (Hiacynt; 2021) film would never have seen the light of day had they not been commissioned by Netflix. Public television, but also independent producers, avoided topics related to intimacy, sex or LGBTQA+ because they were inappropriate for the conservative, right-wing Polish government.

A recurring theme in discussions in the community is the treatment of Polish producers’ work as “third-world” or “post-colonial” practices (in the case of Poland, it would be more appropriate to speak of cultural imperialism, as the country has never had a colonial experience). This situation provides an opportunity to refer to the classic theses of,

17) Marcin Adamczak and Sławomir Salamon, “Kruszenie globalnego Hollywood: System ‘holdbacks’ i sekwencyjność okien dystrybucyjnych a rozwój platform streamingowych,” *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 108 (2019), 243–255, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://czasopisma.ispan.pl/index.php/kf/article/view/190>.

18) “Top Streaming Services by Subscribers,” *Flixpatrol*, 2023, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://flixpatrol.com/streaming-services/subscribers/>.

19) Anon., “HBO Max i Disney+ z większą przewagą nad TVP VOD i Playerem: Zyskuje Prime Video, w dół Viaplay,” *Wirtualnemedia.pl*, February 19, 2024, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artukul/hbo-max-disney-tvp-vod-player-prime-video>.

20) Lotz, *Netflix and Streaming Video*, 44–52.

21) Sylwia Szostak, “Netflix Poland — caught between a rock and a hard place,” *Flow*, October 11, 2023, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2023/10/netflix-poland/>.

among others, Edward W. Said<sup>22)</sup> and successors and to translate them into the contemporary cinema of small European audiences. Ramon Lobato<sup>23)</sup> points out that Netflix treats its strategic and less important one-off investments in original native content as a way to introduce subscribers to the platform's operation and to familiarize them with its global (i. e. American) catalogue. The platform easily combines local and global elements and, thanks to algorithms, functions as many different products at the same time. Therefore, although the economic and political aspect of its operations appears to be an extreme case of the local-global dialectic (a North American company gaining an advantage over national companies), the way the platform is constructed blurs the boundaries between local and global.

In the classic view of Edward Said<sup>24)</sup> (and his predecessors), cultural imperialism is the domination of one culture — obviously Western — over another. Imperialism, or colonialism, is not a matter of a simple act of conquering and gathering. In his works and lectures, Said always stressed that imperialism or colonialism is not just about the simple conquest of territory, but about the related staggering idea that certain peoples (or more broadly: communities, groups) require domination, or even that it is justified. In the discourse on cultural imperialism, there is a persistent theme of cultural domination based on the media superiority of cultures and patterns transmitted by global media.<sup>25)</sup>

As a result of the dynamic growth of the global audiovisual market due to the popularization of digital services, the center of gravity of the contemporary discussion on cultural imperialism shifts towards media imperialism and even “platform imperialism.”<sup>26)</sup> The debate even uses a special acronym to denote the most powerful media corporations — FAANG (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Google).<sup>27)</sup>

In an excellent article on Netflix's international activities, Stuart Davis<sup>28)</sup> points to four basic tendencies of platform imperialism, which are also visible in the streaming giant's policies: (1) the vertical integration of production and distribution centered around a proprietary platform; (2) attempts at rapid transnational scaling up within new markets; (3) a systematic avoidance of accountability to regulation; and (4) the collection and sometimes surreptitious repurposing of user data. The production and distribution of content is becoming internationalized, and integration allows for the elimination of competition and for the acquisition of small, growing companies. Internationalization and increased scale encourage global expansion, especially in terms of countries without a powerful film

22) Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Lecture delivered at York University, Toronto, 10 February 1993, accessed September 25, 2024, <http://www.turowski.uni.wroc.pl/said.htm>.

23) Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 144–150.

24) Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 1–15.

25) John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 34–67.

26) Dal Yong Jin, “The construction of platform imperialism in the globalization era,” *Triple C* 11, no. 1 (2013), 145–172, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec>.

27) Thomas W. Hazlett, “U.S. Antitrust Policy in the Age of Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Apple, Netflix and Facebook,” *Constitutional Political Economy* 35, (2024), 73–108, accessed September 25, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10602-022-09391-9>.

28) Davies, „What is Netflix imperialism?“

market or sufficient regulatory capabilities. The diversity and richness of the Netflix library does not cover up the fact that in many markets the company shows imperialist and monopolistic ambitions, expressed, among others, by building self-sustaining production and distribution systems in local markets. According to Davis, the corporation shows a tendency to undermine the role of various institutions, regulatory organizations, authorities, local content producers, which threatens the development of media industries in smaller countries. Understanding the monopolistic aspirations of platforms plays a key role in implementing ways to safeguard against their global influence and in holding them accountable in local national markets.

In the light of the discussion on the nature and effects of streaming imperialism, a question emerges, as formulated in the introduction, about the influence of large corporations on the Polish film market. A market which, as indicated in the report cited earlier, is growing rapidly in terms of the quality and number of productions on the one hand, but insufficiently uses international potential on the other. This can encourage “post-colonial practices.” A fear of them is evident in the local discourse, also in a statement by director Paweł Maślona at the 2021 industry conference:

I have only questions and no answers. We have Netflix, Viaplay, Disney coming soon. I am horrified by the prospect of several corporations being responsible for what will be produced. I worry about directors, about cinemas. Right now, we operate in a system, we have the Polish Film Institute. We can compete with each other for funding to make films. Suddenly, we are starting to work in a new reality, for platforms, we have to decide, we have to pitch immediately, everything happens very quickly. Will our auteur cinema survive?<sup>29)</sup>

However, the attitude of Polish producers towards the policies of platforms such as Netflix, Disney, Warner and Amazon seems nuanced. In 2021, the Polish Producers Alliance conducted a survey of producers to answer the question of how they are coping with the pandemic and to what extent and how it has affected their vision of the future.<sup>30)</sup> The producers surveyed felt that a new strategy would be to minimise and diversify risk, which means above all being more open to non-cinema projects, targeting slightly “more certain” productions (offering a greater chance of commercial success). The greater focus on production for broadcasters and platforms evident in the research, however, does not mean abandoning the cinema, still regarded as an important, sometimes key, area of operation. Funds generated from productions for platforms or television are intended to finance part of the budget of auteur films. Already in 2021, there was a clear increase in the number of productions planned and realized in collaboration with streaming platforms, often bypassing the cinema. The flow of production towards platforms is not only driven

29) Anna Wróblewska, “Konferencja w Serocku (IV): O producentach, kosztach, platformach i ekipach,” *Association of Polish Filmmakers*, December 7, 2021, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.sfp.org.pl/wydarzenia,5,32566,2,1,Konferencja-w-Serocku-IV-O-producentach-kosztach-platformach-i-ekipach.html>.

30) “Badanie wpływu COVID-19 na działalność producentów filmowych w Polsce,” *Box Office Lab*, 2021, accessed September 24, 2024, [https://www.boxofficelab.pl/static/15b1967f8ad233d63ad3462bc2cad2af/Badanie-covid-producenci-PISF-2021\\_PL-EN.pdf](https://www.boxofficelab.pl/static/15b1967f8ad233d63ad3462bc2cad2af/Badanie-covid-producenci-PISF-2021_PL-EN.pdf).



by financial and liquidity needs, but also by working conditions and comfort. Producers point to the partnership-based relations and the involvement of the other party in resolving crisis situations. At the same time, concerns emerge about the role of the independent producer and whether future platforms will, in effect, reduce companies to contractors.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from a survey of active feature film producers conducted in September 2023 by the author and researchers from Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań) and Szkoła Filmowa w Łodzi (Łódź Film School) for Stowarzyszenie Filmowców Polskich (Association of Polish Filmmakers).<sup>31)</sup> Polish producers admit to liquidity problems and difficulties in securing financing for the production of feature films in the widely accepted domestic co-production model. Working with broadcasters and platforms is seen to be simpler and quicker than the process of applying and accounting for grants from the most important source of cinema funding, the Polish Film Institute. Still, production for platforms complements the basic production of films in the European model.

The results of the two surveys of Polish producers in 2021 and 2023, as well as observation of the film production catalogue, lead to the conclusion that cooperation with platforms is usually a well-thought-out strategy of producers, thus minimizing the risk of disrupting cash flow and diversifying their business and sources of revenue.

The answer to the question to what extent these declarations are consistent with the producers' actual strategies can be found in an analysis of the annual production volume (according to the official database of Polish cinema maintained by the Łódź Film School [www.film Polski.pl](http://www.film Polski.pl)). Active Polish audiovisual producers such as Opus Film, Akson Film, Aurum Film, Watchout Studio, ATM and Wonder Films clearly strive to diversify the production catalogue, at the same time seeking to secure lucrative contracts with platforms and broadcasters. One of the reasons for this cooperation is the need to provide an own contribution to productions supported by the Polish Film Institute and to finance high-risk projects in development. This is how declarations of dedicating part of the revenue to auteur projects should be understood.

Producers' enthusiasm about the platforms is being dampened by the experience of the last decade: in 2019, the Showmax corporation withdrew from the Polish market overnight, and in 2022 HBO Max unexpectedly discontinued feature film production in Poland. This distance is also growing due to the fierce conflict between film organizations and platforms. It was not until 2024, after an extremely fierce fight by the creative community, that the Polish parliament adopted an act on mandatory royalties from the Internet for Polish creators. In January 2024, the largest organization of filmmakers, the Association of Polish Filmmakers, filed a report of a suspected offence of failure to implement the directive. At the same time, the Association asked the public prosecutor's office to investigate the course of the unrecorded meeting between former Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and the Head of the Netflix platform (which took place in December 2022) and its connection to the fact that immediately after the meeting a motion was made to

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31) "Badanie ogólnych warunków produkcji filmowej w Polsce" (Unpublished internal report, Warsaw: Association of Polish Filmmakers, 2023).

drop the draft regulation on Internet royalties.<sup>32)</sup> In this situation, producers cannot openly go against creators affiliated in organizations.

In the context of the imperialist practices of platforms in local markets, as defined by Stuart Davis, it is worth noting that Netflix fulfils its obligations towards the Polish film market by, among others, paying public levies to the Polish Film Institute, just like broadcasters or cinemas. However, the contentious issue of royalties raises questions about the boundaries of permissible lobbying, although film organizations direct official accusations against the state administration. The fear of imperialist practices in the Polish market has been fueled, among other things, by the tendency of corporations to drain the market and to raise the rates for crews (*below the line*), which adversely affects the conditions for the production of auteur cinema. In this way, crews inflate their financial expectations. Producers of auteur films, low-budget films, find it difficult to assemble a crew because they are not able to meet financial expectations at the same level as platforms.<sup>33)</sup>

The impact of the most active platform — Netflix — on the current film production volume in Poland is presented below.

### Transnational Films. Commissioned by Platforms

TV stations have already got viewers used to so-called premium series, but now these same stations are starting to produce series premieres for the platforms, creating the foundations for a possible future demise of linear TV. However, Netflix has introduced a new production model to the Polish market — full-length feature films made exclusively for VOD distribution. From 2021, around ten feature films per year have been produced in this way, including *365 Days. This Day* (365 dni. Ten dzień; Barbara Białowąs and Tomasz Mandes, 2022), *The Next 365 Days* (Kolejne 365 dni; Barbara Białowąs and Tomasz Mandes, 2022), *Forgotten Love* (Znachor; Michał Gazda, 2023), *Freestyle* (Maciej Bochniak, 2023), *Mother's Day* (Dzień Matki; Mateusz Rakowicz, 2023). At the same time, Netflix produced premium original feature series from local studios: (in 2021 — three, in 2022 — eight, in 2023 — four). Production of films similar to content made for VOD platforms and for TV broadcasters is a valuable source of international capital, both financial and social, for Polish producers. Most of these productions are genre films, somewhat pretending to be set in contemporary realities, which can be called transnational (e.g. the vision of a post-communist and post-industrial city in the *Queen* series or of a pre-war Eastern European village in *Forgotten Love*). This makes them more easily digestible for an international audience. They also occasionally make it into the Polish Film Festival selection in Gdynia (*Operation Hyacinth*, *Freestyle*).

This fact is not insignificant. Participation in the Gdynia Film Festival, the country's most important film festival, is seen in Polish filmmaking circles as an opportunity for

32) Anon., "SFP zawiadamia o podejrzeniu przestępstwa w sprawie tantiem," *Association of Polish Filmmakers*, February 2, 2024, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.sfp.org.pl/wydarzenia,5,35362,2,1,SFP-zawiadamia-o-podejrzeniu-przestepstwa-w-sprawie-tantiem.html>.

33) Wróblewska, „Konferencja w Serocku (IV).“

what we understand as building the symbolic capital of a new film.<sup>34)</sup> Outsider unfamiliar with the Polish film industry may find it difficult to understand the importance that filmmakers and producers attach to participating in this relatively small festival with very limited external recognition. The event, which has a clear industry character but is also open to the public, is an annual competitive review of the current output of Polish cinema. The invariably controversial list of competing films becomes a kind of annual canon of Polish cinema, similarly to the “apocryphal” list of “notable absentees,” i. e. well-regarded films that did not qualify for various reasons. Therefore, the participation of a film produced for the platforms in the Main Competition in Gdynia sends a clear internal message to the industry indicating that a Polish production financed solely by an American corporation is an integral part of Polish cinema.

During the 47th Polish Film Festival in Gdynia in 2022, Łukasz Kluskiewicz, representing Netflix Poland, stated that the platform has cumulatively invested PLN 490,000,000 in content production and acquisition; 206 jobs have been created, twelve feature series and sixteen films to date, with more productions in the pipeline.<sup>35)</sup> With an average catalogue of sixty items, ten original productions already represent a significant share, changing the landscape of Polish cinema. However, the experience of the Polish market connected to the suspended investment by the Showmax and HBO MAX platforms and the ongoing monitoring of the global policy of large corporations suggest caution in treating this trend as permanent. These productions do not earn the producers awards at festivals or a favourable critical reception, but they integrate the Polish audiovisual industry into international distribution. These films create Polish cinema in a specific way: through the use of crews, filmmakers, resources, locations, but not through content or relevance to a social message.

In answering the questions outlined in the introduction, it should be assumed that the Polish audiovisual market now forms part of the global market, if only because of the scale of investment by media corporations in the production of audiovisual content and permanent change in viewers' attitudes. At the same time, it is not possible to establish to what extent these investments will have a lasting impact on Polish cinema, understood as the system of producing feature films, documentaries and animations. Although the topic of “postcolonial practices” is discussed in the community, the term seems inadequate to the complexity of the phenomenon. It would be justified to say that transnational films produced for platforms will complement mainstream Polish cinema, as the main focus of transnational corporations is on premium series rather than feature films. Polish producers are adapting to the investors' policy as they see an opportunity to achieve liquidity and, as a result, stability, in working for large companies.

34) Marijke De Valck, “Film Festivals, Bourdieu, and the Economization of Culture,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014), 74–89.

35) Ola Salwa, “Czesi nie śpią, my też nie powinniśmy,” *Polish Film Festival Gdynia*, 2022, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://festiwalgdynia.pl/aktualnosci/gdynia-industry-podsumowanie-4-dnia-16-wrzesnia>.

## Right-wing Vision of Culture and Self-censorship Practices

The cinema has numerous resources at its disposal that it can use in its mission to support state policy. This was what the conservative (and at the same time populist) Polish government of 2015–2023 explicitly expected from filmmakers. The words of the Minister of Culture quoted in the introduction about the duties of cinema sound peculiar and striking in the realities of a democratic state. With sincerity, he articulates the principle that, as the Minister of Culture, he has a democratic mandate to decide on “these matters.”<sup>36)</sup> Cinematic popular culture creates a “fictional truth” that is a delusion of reality. Delusion replaces authenticity and the cinemagoer becomes a prisoner of history. There is no time for reflection, verification of facts or discussion.<sup>37)</sup> A certain way of thinking about the duties of cinema suggests that the story told through film should be beautiful: with impressive battles, spectacular sieges, stunning ceremonies. This is the assumption not of the historical order, but of the technical-film order.<sup>38)</sup> Such an understanding of the function of cinema is shared by the state or its representative — the Head of the Ministry of Culture, who, speaking of the duties of creators, points out that: every community pursues a historical policy because it is the source of its chances in international competition and continued existence. However, it should be noted that the strategy adopted by the conservative government did not really translate into the dominance of patriotic and historical themes or in the elimination of films dealing with contemporary reality (as discussed below). Polish cinema remained pluralistic and diverse in expression. Instead, it signified an idea, pursued for years, which determines certain choices and strategies of producers and creators.

One mechanism that is triggered in a situation of political pressure on culture is self-censorship. The issue of self-censorship in cinema from a contemporary perspective is not researched enough, although monographs on the intersection of law and media sciences<sup>39)</sup> can be a valuable point of reference, as those on cinema are primarily historical in nature. Their authors prove conclusively that the phenomenon of self-censorship in American cinema dates back to the silent film era.<sup>40)</sup> Self-censorship was one of the strongest internal mechanisms regulating film production and distribution in Poland after the country regained its independence in 1918. This shameful mechanism worked so well that the official censorship rejected only five-six percent of films distributed in Poland. This is because it was simply not worth the risk to anyone — the creators, producers, distributors or cinema owners.<sup>41)</sup>

36) Anon., “Piotr Gliński: mam demokratyczny mandat do decydowania o sprawach kinematografii.”

37) Marcin Gawrycki, *Uwikłane obrazy: Hollywoodzki film a stosunki międzynarodowe* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2011), 325–327.

38) Rafał Marszałek, *Filmowa pop-historia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie Kraków, 1984), 132–133.

39) Lewis Grossman, “Self-Censorship by Media Industries,” *Columbia-VLA Journal of Law & the Arts* 15, no. 4 (1991), accessed September 24, 2024, [https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/facsch\\_lawrev/1621](https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/facsch_lawrev/1621).

40) Carmen Guiralt, “Self-Censorship in Hollywood during the Silent Era: A Woman of Affairs (1928) by Clarence Brown,” *Film History* 28, no. 2 (2016), 81–113; Eric Schaefer, “The Exploitation Film and Self-Censorship Author(s),” *Film History* 6, no. 3 (1994), 293–313.

41) Edward Zajiček, *Zarys historii gospodarczej kinematografii polskiej: Kinematografia wolnorynkowa w latach 1896–1939* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo PWSFTViT, 2008), 221–228.

The Law and Justice party, which is leaving in 2023 after eight years in government, formulated a coherent idea of culture as an instrument of community based on the notion of nation, thus targeting the authentic needs of society. Culture is being appreciated, numerous institutions are being set up, a range of projects are being supported, while at the same time pushing out of the public sphere anything that does not fit with the vision of the “national culture.” The words of a senior culture ministry official are symptomatic here, as she spoke of the need to silence the “leftist uproar” so that a conservative work can begin on a cleared field. What we are dealing with here is not so much censorship as a deliberate shaping of cultural policy aimed at suppressing the expression of certain content in culture while enhancing other content.<sup>42)</sup>

Such policies build tension between policy makers and creators and producers, highly dependent on public funding. A certain game is played at the boundaries of a state-controlled area versus a space where artistically independent films recognised at international auteur cinema festivals continue to be made. Under political pressure, rational producers minimise risks, avoid uncomfortable topics, do not invest in development, do not apply for funds. They therefore apply self-censorship practices. A talk of “safe” topics is emerging in industry discourse. On the other hand, mechanisms are developing to circumvent possible complications through alternative ways of financing production that are not dependent on the decisions of experts and management of the film office (e.g. Agnieszka Holland’s *The Green Border* (Zielona granica; 2023) or Damian Kocur’s *Bread and Salt* (Chleb i sól; 2023)).

Around ten historical and costume films are currently being made in Poland each year. This is a lot, considering that a historical film is up to several times more expensive than the average contemporary film, which currently has an average budget of €1,400,000–€1,600,000. Since Law and Justice took over power, there has been a visible current of “national cinema” in cinema that is a de facto implementation of the cultural policy described above, a.o.: *Young Eagles* (Orleń. Grodno ’39; Krzysztof Łukaszewicz, 2022), *Witold’s Report* (Raport Pileckiego; Krzysztof Łukaszewicz, 2023), *Strawmen* (Figurant; Robert Gliński, 2023), *Wyszyński. Revenge and Forgiveness* (Wyszyński. Zemsta czy przebaczenie; Tadeusz Syka, 2021), *Below the Surface* (Orzeł. Ostatni patrol; Jacek Bławut, 2023). The artistic results of these productions vary greatly depending on the talent and experience of the filmmaker, but the low cinema attendance for these films in a society that until recently appreciated historical film productions is astonishing. As explained above, Polish historical films follow a strategy in which there is rarely room to present an alternative history, there is no room for the intricacies of motivation or the complexity of causes, and any details are banished from the world of history.<sup>43)</sup> The factual value of these films is undeniable, as is the role of their characters for the history of the countries. And yet their audience is no larger than that of the average contemporary film and often even smaller.

42) Jakub Majmurek and Iwona Kurz, “‘Dobra zmiana’ dowartościowała kulturę — ale tylko jako ‘kulturę narodową,’” *Krytyka Polityczna*, October 10, 2019, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/jakub-majmurek-iwona-kurz-dobra-zmiana-w-kulturze-wywiad/>.

43) Gawrycki, *Uwikłane obrazy*, 326.

This may be due to a number of reasons. The simplest explanation is that the public is tired of the government's intrusive cultural policies and propaganda. Cinema audiences are mainly young people, residents of large and medium-sized cities, who do not belong to the electorate of the conservative right-wing party. However, the most pertinent explanation seems to be that the viewer, accustomed to Hollywood blockbusters and modern platform productions, is looking for either attractive biographies in historical cinema, such as *Johnny* (Daniel Jaroszek, 2022), *25 Years of Innocence* (Tomasz Komenda. 20 lat niewinności; Jan Holoubek, 2020) or an alternative, authorial, dialogue-based historical message, so far poorly presented in Polish cinema, a.o. *Scarborn* (Kos; Paweł Maślona, 2023), *The Wedding* (Wesele; Wojciech Smarzowski, 2021). An interesting example of a spectacular viewership success is *The Peasants* (Chłopi; DK Welchman and Hugh Welchman, 2023) an adaptation of the novel by Władysław Reymont awarded the Nobel Prize at the beginning of the 20th century. Each frame was hand-painted by professional painters, and many of the shots referred directly to the canon of Polish painting. The extensive plot was reduced to the main character's thread. The most popular Polish production of 2023 was by 1,800,000 viewers, indicating that both the literary canon and national history can become the background of a popular film, provided they are adapted in a way that is attractive to modern audiences.

An analysis of the last three years of the Polish Film Festival leads to the conclusion that there is a lack of sufficient representation of films touching on controversial subjects, provoking social, political and historical discussion. This is not to say that a picture of reality is not consistently constructed by Polish cinema, but it is incomplete. The repertoire is dominated by historically encapsulated stories, auteur films focusing on the relationship of the human being to the surrounding world, on filtered social and personal relationships.

Over the past three years, only a few films can be categorized as political, closely linked to ongoing social debates or presenting a new take on history. These include the winner of the 46th Polish Film Festival, i. e. *All Ours Fears* (Wszystkie nasze starchy; Łukasz Ronduda and Łukasz Żal, 2021) where the protagonist is a real person — a farmer, at the same time an artist and a representative of the LGBT community. The right-wing press interpreted the biopic as a film about the political protests of a political farmers' organization and an alleged persecution of lesbians and gays in the Polish countryside by a backward, xenophobic, aggressive and ignorant society. Films that open up a new discussion on the interpretation of history also belong to this trend, including: *Scarborn* by Paweł Maślona, *The Wedding* by Wojciech Smarzowski, discussed below, or *Operation Hyacinth* by Piotr Domalewski. This last example is unique, as it is one of the first Polish Netflix original productions, and its creators made no secret of the fact that only an American corporation could have undertaken such a film. Indeed, the starting point of the drama is the infamous campaign of police officers in the 1980s against the homosexual community. So far, it is the only Polish Netflix film directly referring to recent history.

## Circumventing the System

As realists, soberly assessing the possibilities of raising funds, Polish producers look for alternative sources of funding or “bypass the system.” The example of two well-received intimate debuts is extremely interesting in this context: *Bread and Salt* by Damian Kocur, which was awarded a special prize in the Orizzonti competition at the Venice IFF, and a production that received multiple awards at the 48th Polish Film Festival, i. e. *Next to Nothing* (Tyle co nic; 2023), drama film by Grzegorz Dębowski. These films were made at the Studio Munka, which operates at the largest and strongest industry organization, the Polish Filmmakers Association. The studio runs four debut film programs for young filmmakers: documentary shorts, animated shorts, feature films and a low-cost debut feature film program. Although it has money from the Polish Film Institute and the Ministry of Culture, this is money earmarked for the professional development of young filmmakers, not from the production fund, which requires a panel of experts to assess each film project. In practice, this means that from 2019, two feature-length films have been made in Poland annually with the support of the Institute, but outside its expert system. As a result, films are made that deal with themes that are extremely bold and poorly represented in mainstream productions: a dystopian vision of a patriarchal Poland (*Eastern* (Piotr Adamski, 2019)), moral decay and corruption of politics (*Supernova* (Bartosz Kruhlik, 2019)), political and economic threat to the future of the Polish countryside (*Next to Nothing*), xenophobia, aggression and intolerance (*Bread and Salt*). In the right-wing press, generously supported by state funds, a film, which has been awarded in Venice and at a number of prestigious festivals, has been described as a racist incident in a Polish town being used to portray Poles as the epitome of xenophobia.

Interestingly, a similar mechanism for bypassing policymakers’ evaluation systems also operates in film schools, which, like Studio Munka, receive a single grant for the entire annual production. Under the school’s patronage, and with public funding, a short animated etude was created — the protest song *There Are People in the Forest* (W lesie są ludzie; 2023) by Szymon Ruczyński dedicated to the refugee and political crisis on the Polish border, remaining in opposition to the Polish government’s chosen methods of dealing with illegal emigrants.

The vast majority of films produced are entered into the competitions of the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia, which are then subject to selection. Not submitting a film to Poland’s most important film festival is always a conscious decision on the part of the producer. The festival is largely publicly funded and the ruling parliamentary majority has a strong influence on the final selection through the participation of representatives of state institutions on the Organizing Committee.<sup>44)</sup> The final selection for the main competition features between sixteen (2021, 2023, 2024) and twenty films (2022). In recent years, a dangerous practice has formed around the festival of not submitting films that might be

44) Anna Wróblewska, “Identyfikacja interesariuszy jako wstęp do analizy środowiska projektowego imprezy kulturalnej: Przykład Festiwalu Polskich Filmów Fabularnych w Gdyni,” in *Zarządzanie w sektorze kultury. Między teorią a praktyką*, eds. Ewa Kocój, Joanna Szulborska-Łukaszewicz, and Alicja Kędziora (Kraków: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2019), 199–224.

attacked by the state authorities (for example, for fear of attempts to stop distribution, reporting the filmmakers for prosecution, etc.). Wojciech Smarzowski made *Clergy* (Kler) in 2017, dedicated to the unresolved issue of pedophilia among priests; the film was seen by more than 5,200,000 viewers (Boxoffice.pl) making it the third most popular film on Polish screens since the fall of communism. The director's next work, *The Wedding*, tells the story of complicated Polish-Jewish relations and includes a reconstruction of the persecution of Jews during the Second World War. The film, called "anti-Polish" by politicians and the right-wing press while still in production<sup>45</sup>, was not submitted to the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia before its premiere. One can only suspect that the filmmakers did not want the film to be seen by hostile government officials. Finally, *The Wedding* took part in the competition a year later already after the distribution had been completed, which closed with a satisfying result of around 500,000 viewers during the difficult pandemic period. Much more than the most expensive historical film in recent years, *Witold's Report* (around 200,000) or *Below the Surface* (90,000).

Marcin Koszałka's historical film *White Courage* (Biała odwaga; 2024), portraying the collaboration of some highlanders with the Germans during the Second World War, was also not submitted for the 2023 competition in Gdynia. The film made headlines when the Minister of Justice attacked it in the right-wing press, claiming that "the issue of cultural spending is important to us because we also have to explain ourselves to the electorate for funding further artistic and historical provocations of the left."<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, the production was consistently defended by the Director of the PFI, who comes from a conservative background and who had awarded a grant for the film.

The most notable absentee from the 2023 Polish Film Festival was *Green Border* by Agnieszka Holland, Poland's best-known female director, Oscar nominee and President of the European Film Academy. The film, which takes a critical look at the attitude of the Polish state towards the refugee crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, was produced without central subsidies and premiered at the Venice IFF, which it left with awards. However, the producers did not submit the film to the Polish national festival, even though the date of the Polish premiere coincided with the date of the event. The film, which was introduced during Poland's election campaign in September 2023, became the cause of fierce political attacks from the ruling party. It has also been used in negative campaign messages created by the ruling party. The Polish President even recalled, in the context of Holland's film, the Second World War slogan "only pigs sit in the cinema." The phrase was commonly used by the Polish resistance movement during the Nazi occupation during World War II, when propaganda films of the Third Reich were screened in Polish cinemas. The campaign against Holland's film, who had to employ personal security, reverberated throughout the world of film. The Directors Guild of America has issued a statement defending Holland's film and stressing that the guild "will continue to support the free speech rights of all

45) Dawid Dróżdż, "Prawica grzmi, że PISF dał kasę na 'antypolski' film: PISF: Nie dofinansowaliśmy 'Wesela,' ale...", *Wyborcza.pl*, October 19, 2021, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,101707,27696659,prawica-pisf-dal-kase-na-wesele-smarzowskiego-pisf-zaprzecza.html>.

46) Krzysztof Spór, "'Biała odwaga' Koszałki 'lewacką prowokacją'?", *Spór w kinie*, March 22, 2021, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://sporwkinie.blogspot.com/2021/03/biaa-odwaga-koszaki-lewacka-prowokacja.html>.



Directors.”<sup>47)</sup> It is difficult to assess to what extent building a negative message around the film helped the Law and Justice party, which eventually had to give up power after the elections. Certainly, the political hype helped the film, which was seen by 800,000 viewers. On the other hand, Agnieszka Holland’s film was not submitted as a Polish candidate for an Oscar; the selection committee chose *The Peasants*, which was unsuccessful in the competition. State policy thus shaped the fate of *Green Border* by depriving it of its chance in the world’s most prestigious film competition.

The example of *Green Border* is particularly dramatic. However, the specific character of the Polish cultural landscape does not allow for simple analogies with the situation in other countries with outlined autocratic tendencies. The Law and Justice government never “closed the system” in the same way as the government of Viktor Orban, which it considers to be the ideal of right-wing rule. As a result of his cultural and media policy, contemporary Hungarian cinema was divided into two streams: high-budget, official state films and low-budget independent films. *Variety* quotes the words of director Gábor Reisz: “Nobody dares to talk about politics in film and nobody dares to call things out by their name. Everybody’s afraid.”<sup>48)</sup> As in the Polish film community, escapism and avoidance of difficult topics are clearly evident in Hungarian film, but in the latter case the state reached for specific tools of shaping film policy. In the aforementioned article, Christopher Vourlias<sup>49)</sup> cites opinions critical of the system, according to which the National Film Institute (NFI) is partly responsible for silencing dissenting voices and controversial topics in the Hungarian film industry. And the majority of the NFI budget is dedicated to lavish films promoting a triumphalist, nationalist narrative. Even during the Law and Justice rule, the Polish film landscape remained much more diverse. With the help of a system of grants, more semantically neutral financial incentives and other sources of public funding, it was possible to produce films such as the aforementioned *The Wedding, Bread and Salt*, *White Courage* and Małgorzata Szumowska’s and Michał Englert’s recent film on transgender people, *Woman Of* (Kobieta z...; 2024), which premiered at the Venice International Film Festival in 2023. Although it needs to be stressed that these decisions were often met with attack from the right-wing media and politicians, and the catalogue of “brave” films is still very limited in quantity. Under the Law and Justice government implementing a program policy consistent with the party’s guidelines, the public broadcaster, Telewizja Polska (Polish Television), as a co-producer of feature films and documentaries, remained diverse in its programming decisions. It was regularly involved in the production of historical films of different classes: the superproduction *Witold’s Report* by Krzysztof Łukaszewicz, *Filip* by Michał Kwieciński (2022) awarded at numerous Polish festivals, the winner of the main prize in Gdynia in 2023 *eastern Scarborn* by Paweł Maślona, the hagi-

47) Christopher Vourlias, “Agnieszka Holland Defiant Despite ‘Abominable,’ ‘Dangerous Attacks’ as Venice Prize-Winning Refugee Drama ‘Green Border’ Prepares for Polish Theatrical Release (EXCLUSIVE),” *Variety*, September 21, 2023, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://variety.com/2023/film/global/agnieszka-holland-green-border-backlash-poland-release-1235730878/>.

48) Christopher Vourlias, “Filmmakers Fight Back Against Deepening Chill in Viktor Orban’s Hungary: ‘People Have Nothing to Lose,’” *Variety*, September 2, 2023, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://variety.com/2023/film/global/filmmakers-fight-repression-viktor-orban-hungary-1235700898>.

49) Ibid.

ographic *Prophet* (Prorok; Michał Kondrat, 2022) and *March '68* (Marzec '68; Krzysztof Lang, 2022) referring to the events of the 20th century, while at the same time supplementing its catalogue with acclaimed auteur or genre cinema productions: *Sonata* (Bartosz Blashke, 2021), *Amateurs* (Amatorzy; Iwona Siekierzyńska, 2020) *I Never Cry* (Jak najdalej stąd; Piotr Domalewski, 2020).

In terms of the questions presented in the introduction, the rule of the Law and Justice, although characterised by a strong historical policy in the area of cinema, did not produce the intended results in terms of the dissemination of historical film and the associated awakening of civic attitudes. The opposite happened, as Polish audiences, which for many years had been accustomed to the historical trend in cinema, are now rejecting it. It is difficult to conclude how permanent this phenomenon is. The problem is that there are still expensive productions being made, initiated in recent years, with no clear prospect of attendance success. On the other hand, intrusive state policy translated into a loss of dynamism in cinema as a cultural field, as filmmakers and producers quickly learned to apply for public funds by avoiding topics that were controversial or inconvenient for government officials. The examples of ways to “bypass the system” are only a marginal experience. It seems that the question of filmmakers’ attitudes towards state policy should be analysed in terms of both the filmmaking community and film studies in the near future.

## Conclusion

Strong, expressive external stimuli and changing factoids are putting pressure on the contemporary Polish audiovisual system, changing it before our eyes. This text analyses two separate and unrelated trends that simultaneously exerted strong pressure on Polish film and its creators and producers. One is closely related to the policy of global platforms (FAANG) assuming the production of original content through the exploration of local markets; the other trend resulted directly from the cultural policies of the right-wing populist government.

This article constitutes the first attempt at a synthesis of Polish cinema in the context of these two parallel yet unrelated phenomena. The Law and Justice rule ended in December 2023, with the new government appointing new directors for Polish Television, the Polish Film Institute and Filmoteka Narodowa — Instytut Audiowizualny (National Film Archive — Audiovisual Institute) in 2024. As a symbol of the new era, the producers submitted two films from 2023 — *White Courage* and *Green Border* — to the 2024 Gdynia Film Festival. Both films received important awards, including Golden Lions for Agnieszka Holland.<sup>50)</sup> The situation is different when it comes to the “platformisation” of Polish cinema — the process is being analysed in its developmental phase, so many questions remain unanswered.

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50) Katarzyna Grynienko, “FNE at Gdynia Polish Film Festival 2024: Prize Winners,” *Film New Europe*, September 29, 2024, accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.filmneweurope.com/news/poland-news/item/126215-fne-at-gdynia-polish-film-festival-2024-prize-winners>.

After all, the mere change of power and the adoption of a liberal course in cultural policy does not mean that creators and producers will show courage and artistic risk. The question still seems to be whether the stable position of developed cinema from Central and Eastern Europe will be maintained. Or perhaps the future of Polish cinema will be determined by factors such as production comfort, guaranteed by international corporations, or stability, associated with the production of films which are commercial, but poorly represented outside the country, as well as a kind of security, which guides producers and filmmakers choosing neutral themes and genres that can count on the support of decision-making expert groups.

This article is the first synthesis of the social, political and economic conditions of Polish film in recent years and their influence on the current shape of Polish cinema. This shape is changing dynamically all the time, although the direction of the changes is not obvious at the moment. In many respects, the situation of Polish cinema has been exceptional in recent years. However, the processes or elements of the processes described in this article are reflected in the internal markets of Central and Eastern Europe. This situation should prompt researchers to conduct a joint analysis of the impact of the external and internal environment on national film markets in this region. The conclusions may be useful and can be translated into formal and organisational solutions in local cinema systems.

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## Filmography

*25 Years of Innocence* (25 lat niewinności. Sprawa Tomka Komendy; Jan Holoubek, 2020)  
*365 Days: This Day* (365 dni. Ten dzień; Barbara Białowąs and Tomasz Mandes, 2022)  
*All Our Fears* (Wszystkie nasze starchy; Łukasz Ronduda and Łukasz Żal, 2021)  
*Amateurs* (Amatorzy; Iwona Siekierzyńska, 2020)  
*Below the Surface* (Orzeł. Ostatni patrol; Jacek Bławut, 2023)  
*Bread and Salt* (Chleb i sól; Damian Kocur, 2023)  
*Clergy* (Kler; Wojciech Smarzowski, 2017)  
*Eastern* (Piotr Adamski, 2019)  
*Filip* (Michał Kwieciński, 2022)  
*Forgotten Love* (Znachor; Michał Gazda, 2023)  
*Freestyle* (Maciej Bochniak, 2023)  
*Green Border* (Zielona granica; Agnieszka Holland, 2023)  
*High Water* (Wielka woda; Jan Holoubek, 2022)  
*I Never Cry* (Jak najdalej stąd; Piotr Domalewski, 2020)  
*Johnny* (Daniel Jaroszek; 2022)  
*March '68* (Marzec '68; Krzysztof Lang, 2022)  
*Mother's Day* (Dzień Matki; Mateusz Rakowicz, 2023)  
*Next to Nothing* (Tyle co nic; Grzegorz Dębowski, 2023)  
*Operation Hyacinth* (Hiacynt; Piotr Domalewski, 2021)  
*Prophet* (Prorok; Michał Kondrat, 2022)  
*Queen* (Królowa; Łukasz Kośmicki, 2022)  
*Scarborn* (Kos; Paweł Maślona, 2023)  
*Sexify* (Kalina Alabrudzińska and Piotr Domalewski, 2021–2023)  
*Sonata* (Bartosz Blashke, 2021)  
*Strawmen* (Figurant; Robert Gliński, 2023)  
*Supernova* (Bartosz Kruhlik, 2019)  
*The Next 365 Days* (Kolejne 365 dni; Barbara Białowąs and Tomasz Mandes, 2022)  
*The Peasants* (Chłopi; DK Welchman and Hugh Welchman, 2023)  
*The Wedding* (Wesele; Wojciech Smarzowski, 2021)  
*There Are People in the Forest* (W lesie są ludzie; Szymon Ruczyński, 2023)  
*White Courage* (Biała odwaga; Marcin Koszałka, 2024)  
*Witold's Report* (Raport Pileckiego; Krzysztof Łukaszewicz, 2023)  
*Woman Of* (Kobieta z...; Małgorzata Szumowska and Michał Englert, 2024)  
*Wyszyński. Revenge and Forgiveness* (Wyszyński. Zemsta czy przebaczenie; Tadeusz Syka, 2021)  
*Young Eagles* (Orleń. Grodno '39; Krzysztof Łukaszewicz, 2022)

## Biography

**Anna Wróblewska** is holder of a doctoral degree in humanities, an academic teacher, a writer, culture manager and spokesperson. She works as an assistant professor at Szkoła Filmowa (Łódź Film School) in Łódź. Her academic interests include, first and foremost, cultural project management strategies, creative industry, the Polish film industry, animated film and children's films. She was a spokesperson for Polish Film Institute, Association of Polish Filmmakers, Munk Studio and Gdynia Polish Film Festival. She is an author and a co-author of a number of books and articles. She is a two-time laureate of Polish Film Institute prize, honoured by Polish Minister of Culture and National Heritage in 2005 and awarded the bronze Gloria Artis medal for her services to culture in 2015.