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# Post-socialist producer: The production culture of a small-nation media industry

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/cst](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/cst)**Petr Szczepanik** 

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## Abstract

This article focuses on a profession of key importance for understanding today's screen industries in Central-Eastern Europe: the independent producer. Using the approach of critical production studies, the article focuses on producers' 'reflexivity' to reveal how their professional identity is being constructed and how they are positioning themselves within the broader ecology of the media industry. By analysing a set of semi-structured interviews with Czech producers of all kinds, this article identifies five recurrent tropes related to their 'self-conceptions'. The tropes demonstrate how the producers perform their identities differently from their UK or US counterparts: as largely disempowered, dependent on public support and on the powerful public service broadcaster, desperately looking for more stability, autonomy and recognition.

## Keywords

Independent producer, production culture, post-socialist screen industries, public service television, East-Central Europe, Czech film

## Independent producer in the Central-Eastern European film/TV market

Today's European screen media industries are often characterised by a relatively low level of integration and concentration (as compared, e.g., to the United States or China), with highly subsidised production remaining the key structural component of the sector (see e.g. Jäckel, 2003). The production of feature fiction films and high-end television is organised predominantly on a project-by-project basis by a vast number of mostly small,

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under-capitalised and short-lived independent companies without permanent ties to international distributors or television networks, forming a highly fragmented and volatile environment. This is even more true for post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, where the pre-1990 state-owned studios have been closed down or turned into rental sound stages, without being replaced by a new kind of globalised conglomerates such as Polygram of the 1990s or today's Canal Plus.<sup>1</sup> Most projects are developed by an independent producer, who is the project's main 'captain' and often also their primary initiator, thus becoming a key cultural mediator of the audiovisual production. Unlike star producers of the 1960s and 1970s (such as Carlo Ponti or Dino De Laurentiis in Italy, or Pierre Braunberger in France), these figures are not very well known outside their professional environment, and their practices and professional identities are still waiting to be researched and fully understood.

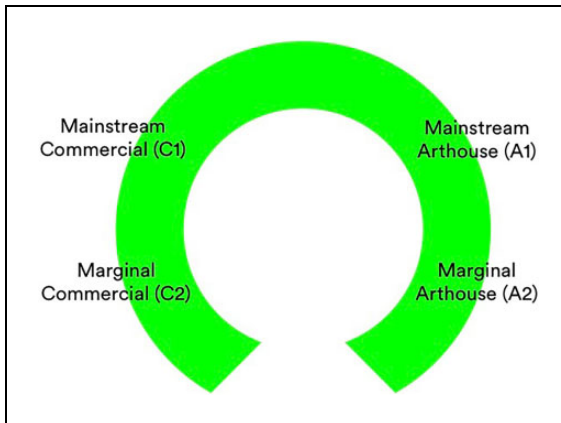
There is very little academic literature on European producers (as opposed to the much larger corpus of scholarly work on Hollywood studios, studio heads and American independents, which belong to a very different industrial environment). What are the specific features of European producers' work and talent? To what extent are European producers creative and strategic thinkers, hands-on managers or business people? What is European producers' structural position, and how are their strategies and practices limited by a national or regional market and their regulations, by technological innovations, industrial infrastructures and public support schemes? How does a European producer's approach impact the cultural, artistic and commercial values of the final product, the career of a film-maker or the 'brand' of an 'auteur'? How do European producers contribute to prominent cultural trends such as the so-called 'new waves'? These and other related questions have begun to be asked only recently in a handful of pioneering academic works.<sup>2</sup> What is mostly missing in this body of literature though, is detailed, empirical work on specific national and regional producers' practices and identities. The first examples of this kind of research have emerged only very recently – one in an edited volume on European 'production cultures' (Szczepanik and Vonderau, 2013), and another one focusing on European producers (the very first of its kind), called *Beyond the Bottom Line: The Role of the Film Producer* (Spicer et al., 2014). In television studies, the most progressive approaches are found in ethnographically based studies of television producers (both in-house and independent), commissioners, editors or so-called 'showrunners', especially in British public service television (see Bennett et al., 2012; Born, 2004) and in Denmark (Redvall, 2013), the two most globally successful centres of European high-end television production today.

Producers and production practices of post-socialist screen media industries in Central and Eastern Europe have remained even further on the periphery of current research interests. The first academic studies have started to appear only in the last 5 years, influenced by critical media industry studies, political economy of media, production studies or cultural policy studies (see e.g. Adamczak, 2014; Pjajčková and Szczepanik, 2016; Varga, 2012). The only extensive analysis of the region's producers so far is a book-length industry report I conducted together with a team of colleagues from Masaryk University, Brno, on a commission from the Czech Film Fund (Szczepanik et al., 2015).<sup>3</sup> The study described current Czech producers' practices during

development, that is, in the process of developing screenplays, composing creative teams and financing.

The present article draws on the background material of this industry report (mainly on the in-depth semi-structured interviews with producers) to propose a new and more specific reading that concentrates on the post-socialist producers' production culture. Using the approach of critical production studies,<sup>4</sup> it focuses on producers' reflexivity to reveal how their professional identity is being constructed and how they are positioning themselves within a broader industrial system, professional community and media culture. It is inspired by the Bourdieusian concept of the *habitus* in the sense of structuring individual dispositions, understood as internalised positions an individual has occupied in a social space (Bourdieu, 1996). It pays attention to the 'economy of prestige' (English, 2005) that has been crucial for the post-socialist producer generation struggling to regain their place in the professional community and to accumulate symbolic capital that would allow them to fulfil their role of business and creative leaders. It also draws on John Caldwell's concept of 'industrial identity theory', referring to cultural performances of industry insiders and acknowledging that the 'media's approach to corporate identity can be similarly contingent, slippery, volatile, changing, tactical, and theatricalized as the resistant human subject favored in cultural studies' (Caldwell, 2008: 235). However, unlike Caldwell, this article does not treat producers' cultural performances as fundamentally different from the 'below-the-line' workers' reflexivity. This conceptual shift responds to the differences in structural positions producers occupy in the US versus the East-Central European screen industries as outlined above.

There are still many reasons for carefully distinguishing between film and television, especially when taking into account all possible aspects of a medium, as identified, for example, by Lynn Spigel (2004: 2) – 'technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking' – or by Hannah Andrews (2014: 23) – 'as systems, as codes, as technologies and as cultural forms'. From the production studies perspective though, distinguishing between film and television does not make much sense anymore, because cross-media working relationships are increasingly common, especially with regard to the below-the-line crafts (Caldwell, 2008: 9). Although some directors, screenwriters and producers still identify their careers exclusively with either film or television, it is becoming increasingly rare. There have been several factors, starting or culminating from the 1990s onward, that have made it virtually impossible to discuss European producers' work practices and industrial identities in television and film as strictly separate from each other: media conglomeration and convergence (see e.g. Jenkins, 2005); the crucial importance of television rights' presales for the financing of films (La Torre, 2014: 127); so-called 'quality' television (which brought cinematic styles, production values, practices, talent and producers to TV);<sup>5</sup> and the casualisation of employment in the broadcasting industry, including public service broadcasters (PSBs), which involves the outsourcing of television producers' work (Born, 2004: 180–181). In Central and Eastern Europe, all these developments came with a delay (while conglomeration in film and TV remains negligible). In the Czech Republic, the PSB 'Česká televize' (ČT) has been the major co-producer and co-financier of feature films since the 1990s; however, a boom of independent production or co-production of television series started only in the



**Figure 1.** The spatial configuration of the development practices' typology inspired by Jean-Pierre Faye's 'horse-shoe theory'.

early 2010s, after the broadcaster's decentralisation.<sup>6</sup> At present, it is a common practice for the independent producers discussed in this article to combine feature films with television projects such as documentaries, animation shorts and TV series, while using the same or similar practices, talent and financial sources.

## A typology of producers' development practices

Based on more than 60 in-depth interviews with Czech producers (24), screenwriters (12), directors (20) and other professionals,<sup>7</sup> the aforementioned industry report on development practices presents a structural Bourdieusian model (Bourdieu, 1996) of the audiovisual production field. It identifies four systemic types of producers' development practices, calling them Mainstream Arthouse (A1); Mainstream Commercial (C1); Marginal Arthouse (A2) and Marginal Commercial (C2). Their mutual positions in the field are visualised with the help of the 'horse-shoe theory', to show that the opposing poles of the spectrum closely resemble one another in terms of producer practices, despite their apparent differences in terms of the final products' cultural values (see Figure 1).

In the *Mainstream Arthouse sector* (A1), which is the most prestigious product type (both in cultural and financial terms), producers balance the nurturing of 'their' auteurial directors-writers and their focus on socially relevant topics (typically revisionist stories about recent national history) with a strategic business approach: relatively high budgets (€1–4 million) and production values, international co-productions combining different national and European public support schemes, presales of rights to PSBs, mainstream distributors and sales agents, and a strong festival visibility. A1 producers are well-established professionals with their own style and a pool of authors; reputations of skilled grant applicants; and often combine fiction films with high-end TV series, animation and feature documentaries. They tend to actively co-initiate their

projects both in business and creative terms, remain highly invested in the whole development and production process, with the aim of finding a mainstream public for their auteurs' visions.

*Mainstream Commercial* (C1) producers work with slightly lower budgets (€1–2 million), pre-sell their projects (typically lifestyle comedies targeting mid-age urban viewers) to large national distributors and private TV networks, and use product placement. They only seldom receive national or European grants or aim for international festival awards, and they limit their co-production deals to neighbouring Slovakia. The C1 producers are well-established professionals with reputations as skilled and tough business people; they cultivate a pool of well-proven commercial directors or writers, but tend to choose story ideas and strictly control the whole production process themselves. They are mostly limited to the domestic market and are critical of A1 and A2 producers for relying on public money (although they themselves often take advantage of the national 20% rebate programme).

The *Marginal Arthouse* (A2) producers are used to very low budgets (€0.15–1 million), which are composed exclusively of public sources (PSB; national Czech and Slovak grants; sometimes rebates). A2 producers do not initiate their projects, but provide the necessary financing and managerial services to their auteur directors-writers (often shooting their first films with low production values or focusing on marginalised social groups). They occupy marginal position by choice, defying free-market principles and being proud of their creative courage, sometimes resorting to semi-professional practices (e.g. merging professional roles or making use of free labour). While more or less content with being limited to the national market and to very small arthouse audience groups, and while being strongly critical of the A1 and C1 competitors, some aspire to the A1 type and aim at smaller international festivals. They usually combine fiction films with documentaries (both short and feature-length).

The *Marginal Commercial* (C2) producers are outsiders out of necessity, working with similarly low budgets as A2, but composed of purely private sources (private TV networks; private investors; a lot of product placement; producers' own money). C2 producers do not initiate their projects (typically crime thrillers with socially controversial themes or popular comedies), but solely serve the director (financing, managing and DIY marketing); sometimes working on commissions from a non-film financier. They have low professional reputations and prestige, sometimes resorting to semi-professional practices; they aspire to C1 and combine fiction films with non-film activities.

In its conclusions, the industry report demonstrated how the typical business models of Czech film producers (especially in A2 and C2 sectors) limit possibilities for a more systematic screenplay development and for longer-term production strategies. Development is identified as a critical point of the Czech production system, responsible for weak performance of Czech films at international festivals and on foreign markets. Screenplays are underfinanced and underdeveloped, and producers approach their projects one by one, without any strategic continuity. These producers cannot afford to sustain an in-house development executive to manage the company's pool of projects and talent, and they leave their screenwriters in precarious working conditions, with no

guarantee of fair payment in the early stages of development. Apart from A1 producers, most are not used to focusing on foreign markets, to attending international workshops and to discussing their scripts with specialised script editors. They cannot afford to be selective enough to green light only the best projects for production (as opposed to the high selectivity typical for the UK or the US screen industries): Virtually all initiated projects are eventually rushed to production. They appreciate the role of the Czech Film Fund in partially compensating for this deficiency, and they rely on the Czech PSB 'Česká televize' to act as the main co-producer and commissioner; but they also criticise the two public institutions for their reliance on committee-based decision-making (as opposed to individual responsibility). Czech producers are also suspicious of collective action and negotiation, and they do not have detailed knowledge of the whole production field apart from their closest collaborative networks.

### **Studying producers' industrial identities**

In what follows, I will shift from analysing these business models and structural positions per se to the ways producers themselves understand them and incorporate them into their professional identities. However, I will occasionally digress from the identity exploration scheme in order to explain specific principles of the business models (e.g. production fee and selectivity of development) that producers consider crucial conditions defining their identity.

Unlike practices of 'performing industrial identities' typical for Hollywood above-the-line talent and executives (see Caldwell, 2008: 237), post-socialist producers do not tend to employ their 'self-conceptions' as sophisticated branding and PR – to solidify personal brands or 'corporate personas', or to manage business uncertainties. What they have in common with producers' self-portraits mapped by Caldwell are their claims of the ability to intuitively understand audiences, to choose and lead a production team, and of personal creative agency: the producers want to be involved in shaping a film's vision from the very beginning; they use their personal taste and intuition to pick a story idea or green light a project; and their professional satisfaction supposedly draws from personal aesthetic enjoyment rather than financial profit. But, unlike Hollywood above-the-line industry 'players' or 'moguls', they do not use extravagant self-mythologising (the trade narrative genre that Caldwell calls the 'genesis myth', and the industry authorship theory he refers to as 'aesthetic status metaphors') to support their glamorous social status, personal aura and professional leverage. On the contrary, they generally resort to unpretentious, humble or even self-ironic styles of self-presentation. Rather than talking of themselves in terms of 'lone-wolf artistry' or 'edgy bohemian' (Caldwell, 2008: 202–203), they are ready to accept and adopt a much drier vocabulary of policy discourse and grant schemes. They do not present their cultural sensibility as a result of an elite education or cultural pedigree, because they do not come from privileged families (unlike many actors), and their career tracks are pretty similar, since virtually all of them graduated from the same film school: FAMU's<sup>8</sup> Producer Department. This sense of homogeneity and egalitarianism is reflected also in Czech film credits and awards: the producer categories are far less diversified, inflated and hierarchical than their US

counterparts. The level of division of labour in the production department is quite low, it is easy for an outsider to determine who is the main producer, and credits like 'Associate Producer' or 'Executive Producer' are rare. What follows is a condensed overview of a series of five tropes that emerged from the qualitative analysis as key indicators of who the producer is in the current Czech production system.

### *A profession to be re-invented: Towards a 'European producer'*

Until 1990 across the whole Eastern Bloc, film projects were developed and the work on screenplays was organised by so-called 'units' – semi-autonomous groups of production chiefs, script supervisors, production managers, directors and writers, all permanent employees of the state-owned studios. Producers, as a profession and by definition, could not exist in the state-run, propaganda-focused film industries. Since the only legal producer was the state (or its bureaucratic representatives within studios' management structures), these units virtually replaced hands-on creative producers in all film industries of the region (see Adamczak et al., 2012; Ostrowska, 2012; Szczepanik, 2013). After 1990, when the state-socialist command economies gradually transformed into free markets, nobody matched the West-European definition of producer. The first professional group who jumped in to fill in the niche of the private production business were, in the Czech case, the former production managers freshly fired from the privatised Barrandov Studios in Prague. They were accompanied by adventurous business people from outside of the film industry, who, for a short period of time, thought there might be an opportunity of earning quick money by making films.

It was only after the mid-1990s that a new generation of graduates of the Czech Film Academy (FAMU) reformed producer programme adopted the standard European definition of the producer as a project's initiator and manager of the whole production process, both economically and creatively. But it took another 20 years before Czech producers (especially the A1 sector) as a professional community started integrating into the European system of co-production, support schemes, festivals, workshops, pitching forums, training programmes, and above all, transnational professional networks. This process is still not over and remains contested.

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

None of these ideas of what it means to be a 'real', 'European' producer are met with unanimous approval. While the younger generation, especially those of the A1 type, sees these ideas as goals and a modernisation programme, more nationally oriented producers of either marginal arthouse or commercial types look at them with suspicion and anxiety. One disillusioned director-producer of the A2 type lamented:



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

His words show that the 'Europeanization' of the local producer system can be seen as a clearly negative trend, too, one that endangers the very core values of the national art-house cinema. They demonstrate how deep are the internal divisions within the community along the generational and sectoral lines, and that some of the producers still adhere to the idea of being only a little more than production managers.

### *No producer without development?*

The discursive operation of identifying with the concept of development was repeatedly used by the interviewees to distance themselves from the heritage of the state-socialist production managers-turned-producers, who were limiting their job to just financing and organising a shooting. But the term 'development' was not commonly used among Czech professionals until about 10 years ago. Due to the historically conditioned confusion of 'producer' and 'production manager' mentioned above, the pre-production stage was not necessarily thought of as a producer's job. The traditional Czech term for development, used in the state-socialist studios, was 'literary preparation' and clearly indicated that developing screenplays is a job of writers and script supervisors (called 'dramaturgs') rather than producers. However, when the Czech Film Fund introduced two specialised subsidy programmes to support 'screenplay development' and 'complete development' in 2013, 'development' was already a widely circulating buzzword, although this does not mean there was a general agreement of what it actually stands for.

In the current Anglo-American industry discourse, 'development' refers to 'the work that surrounds the initial concept or story idea, the acquisition of that idea, the screen-writing process, the raising of development finance and the initial stage of production planning' (Finney, 2015: 27). Development can also include 'packaging a project (by attaching actors and other talent), and budgeting and researching the shoot' (Bloore, 2013: 35), but this latter definition already intersects with the next production stage, so-called 'soft pre-production', which includes recce, location scouting, more casting and so on. Development is thought to be a key stage for a producer to strategically plan and design their project. It is also an area of risk investment, because there are no guarantees that a project will make it to the production and exhibition stage. It is very unpredictable and volatile due to many potential differences among key players and external obstacles that could slow down or entirely stop the process somewhere between the initial story idea and the final script or the 'green light' for shooting. Development has been repeatedly described as a key factor in a film's success and as a parameter differentiating various production systems: Hollywood studios are supposedly investing 8–10% of a film's budget in development, and their average development-to-production ratio is estimated at about 1:20 (Finney, 2015: 32), as opposed to 4% of a film's budget and 16–20% of projects to be actually produced in the United Kingdom and Europe (Bloore,

2013: 22). Our interviews indicated that these relative figures are significantly lower in post-socialist Central-Eastern Europe: a vast majority of initiated projects make it to shooting, while the development investment takes up only about 1.5% of the total budget. What does it say about the post-socialist producer?

For A1 producers, systematic and well-financed development is the most crucial part of the producer's job, an indicator that the producer is a true initiator of the screen idea, in control of the whole production process. It is also a key condition to foster the Czech film production system's professionalisation, standardisation and international competitiveness. A female A1 producer in her early 40s, specialising in relatively high-budget international co-productions, criticised the current Czech films for poor development work and a low level of selectivity:

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

On the other hand, A2 producers, who generally live from public money only, are mostly conscious of their development being too hasty, underfinanced and limited to accepting finished scripts, and thus lowering the quality and international competitiveness of the final product. But they generally blame it on the lack of financial resources and the small national market. The older ones see development as a 'necessary evil' – which is a logical consequence of their mission to humbly 'serve the auteur', to move their projects to the shooting stage as soon as possible, with minimal interference with the auteur's unique vision. This seems to be changing with their younger peers: a relative A2 novice in his early 30s expressed an ambition to become more professional and European by investing more time and money into development. He plans to combine the 'producer-driven project' approach typical for the mainstream arthouse producers with the idiosyncratic, auteur-centred styles of work typical for the A2. C1 and C2 producers see development as a foreign, bureaucratic regulation, introduced artificially via grant schemes, and they are opposing the pressure to change their way of doing things. A veteran C1 producer-director with a long track record of widely successful titles, including one Oscar nomination, even rejected the whole concept of selectivity:

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

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

### *Not true entrepreneurs: The 'production fee business model'*

The interviews showed that most of local producers' business models are based not on selling movies to the audiences but on producing per se. Their most vital income is generated not by box office or other distribution channels, but comes from the so-called

production fee. The fee is calculated as a percentage of the production budget, which is largely financed from public sources: the Czech Film Fund, the national PSB, foreign public funds and PSBs (in the case of co-productions), and EU support programmes. The producer makes their money before the film enters distribution, simply by pocketing the 7% share of the total budget. This system, more typical for (but not limited to) the arthouse sector of the industry, lures producers away from searching for viable market objectives. The respondents were not proud of this, but they did not hide the fact; some even acknowledged it as a specific economic logic and a key characteristic of their professional identity. Because many of them make a living from physical production and not from selling the product, they are not motivated to be as selective as their US or even UK counterparts (i.e. to green light only the projects with the highest market potential while abandoning the rest), and they tend to rush all screenplays to the shooting stage as soon as possible, while minimising development costs and losses. Because there is no production fee coming from the development stage, they cannot afford to nurture a broader pool of projects in development and to follow a longer-term producer strategy: they just depend on collecting the next production fee.

A seasoned A1 producer acknowledged:

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

The 'production fee business model' is even more typical for the A2 sector, where audience numbers can commonly drop to several thousand per film, and where box office does not make a difference because it does not cover even a modest marketing campaign, not to mention production costs. A mid-age director-producer with a reputation as an 'enfant terrible' (who used to work with producers of this type but recently moved to more mainstream work for TV) pointed to a hidden part of the production fee-based practice:

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

The further away from the A2 sector towards commercial film-making, the more significant a role distribution rights and box office revenues play in producers' business models. However, the other extreme pole of the field, the C2, brings in a private business equivalent of the production fee model: projects co-financed by product placement. Product placement money can represent up to 50% of the total budget. The reliance on it often means that development is super-quick and limited to soft pre-production, because the final screenplay is needed for closing a deal. Again, films are not sold to consumers, but rather to business partners.

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

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

But the ‘production fee model’ is not entirely risk-free. The interviews show that the reliance on public money creates its own specific risks and competitiveness: the cash flow is unsteady, dependent on deadlines and bureaucratic operations of the support programmes; grant committees have their own preferences, and it is allegedly easy to fall out of favour with them. Many arthouse producers diversify their business activities to compensate for the slow, unpredictable income from feature fiction films: commercials and foreign production services are generally the most typical side businesses; grant-supported documentaries can also be a quicker and easier way to earn some money; TV series deals with the PSB ‘Česká televize’ or with a private network to bring the highly desired stability.<sup>9</sup> The minority who focus solely on feature films tend to be the most vulnerable.

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

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

What is reflected in this statement is his deep embeddedness in the small-nation market. According to commercial producers, it is impossible to concentrate on a particular target

group in the country of 10 million. By local measures, a successful film needs to attract at least 200,000, a true hit about 500,000 viewers. And that means addressing the widest possible audiences across all social groups: creating ‘a phenomenon’:

There is no marketing approach that could help you achieve high attendance numbers across all the age groups and the whole social spectrum, and to get near the goal of 500,000. You could commission some marketing and to define a target group, but this way you can make maximally 150,000 or 200,000. But an audience of a million or 800,000 is not a target group. It is such a wide spectrum that it intersects and goes across everything. So you need something more general than a target group definition. There are some common factors and elements, but they don't come out from a classic marketing analysis of a target group.

Since the steady decline of movie theatre attendance for Czech film in the first half of the 2010s,<sup>10</sup> commonly attributed to the digitisation of the domestic movie theatres, it has become more and more difficult for the mainstream commercial producers to achieve this kind of ‘sociological phenomenon’, and they were hit by the crisis harder than their arthouse counterparts. The interviews show signs of a change, making this kind of self-confident attitude increasingly rare: even the commercial producers have started to apply for grants, seeking co-production deals, and thinking of development more carefully.

### *Precarised producer and public service television as a ‘black box’*

The interviewees from other professional groups, namely screenwriters and script editors, often accused producers of exploiting and disempowering them. It is not just the issue of giving up rights and control over the work to the producer, and of generally low screenwriter fees (€8000–20,000, that is, roughly 1% of an average Czech film budget), but also of step deals, based on splitting the fee into gradual payments and deferring a part of them as long as possible, usually until the first or even last day of shooting or until the producer gets a grant. Since writers are often not paid (and sometimes not even given a contract) upon commencement of their work, that is, until the first screenplay draft (which may not be accepted in the end, and thus not paid for at all), they struggle throughout the early development stages, and have to take other jobs at the same time. Especially A2 producers excuse this practice by referring to their ‘shared passion’ for film-making, and it is not surprising they like to work with first-time writers or directors (who readily agree to work for free throughout the development stage just to get their film made). Screenwriters rightly see this practice as a way of producers transferring the risk of development financing upon them. But although producers seem to be much more powerful compared to the isolated and underpaid writers, their reflexivity reveals surprisingly similar references to precarisation.

First, they see themselves as being exploited and disempowered by the national PSB ‘Česká televize’. The traditionally strongest co-producer of Czech films<sup>11</sup> is their partner out of necessity, and ČT is appreciated as a stable source of co-production financing and commission or acquisition deals, and as an influential agent of standardisation of production practices, including development. The production of television series for ČT can

provide independent producers with a vital security and continuity that films cannot. But producers also criticise ČT for acting in a monopolistic, centralistic and bureaucratic way and for denying them the symbolic capital earned in the film world. They are given supposedly unfair contracts which take advantage of the monopolistic position of ČT, which pushes them to sell extremely long-lasting broadcasting rights for relatively low flat fees and to accept disadvantageous in-kind co-production contributions instead of cash. Even more importantly, producers complain about the lack of individual ‘producer responsibility’ on the side of ČT, where co-productions with independent producers are negotiated, green lit and managed not by individual commissioning editors, but by a two-level management: first, producers have to pitch their ideas to one of the ‘creative producer units’ or to the ‘Film Center’ (a unit specialised in feature films), whose heads then need to get them approved by the central ‘Programme Board’, which takes final decisions collectively and is notorious for its unpredictability. If a project is eventually green lit, the relatively weak unit heads only seldom provide – according to independent producers – a sufficiently competent and authoritative guidance throughout the whole production process. The lack of strong and trusted production executives on the side of ČT leaves the independent producers facing a ‘black box’ of the committee decision-making.

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

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

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

### *Internationalise or perish*

Another factor inciting a sense of precarisation, the most painful for the older generation and for the two marginal sectors, is the trend of internationalisation. Workshops and festival industry programmes have become an increasingly important site of networking,

dealmaking and trading of symbolic capital – and an increasingly important precondition to get public funding. Within the industry traditionally tightly bound to the small national market, the booming co-productions seem to create new demands on producers' competence, and even a new producer mindset. The art of presenting projects at pitching and co-production panels is seen as a much-needed producer skill by the younger ones, but as a humiliating and discriminating barrier by their older peers. The controversy became even more explicit when the Czech Film Fund introduced the criterion of attending workshops into its grant application forms.

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

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

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

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

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

A generational peer of the above-quoted A2 producer sees it in a similar way:

A consequence of accepting a co-producer's money is that he may get deciding influence and spoil the film, because you contractually give him the right to do that. [ . . . ] I can't imagine giving an experienced director a French female editor by force, just because of money – that's bullshit. That's the danger of co-productions. It is better not to have such

a co-producer influencing your creative vision of the film. You need to eliminate his influence, and if it is not possible, then it is better to get rid of him. It's better to shoot a film for 20 million crowns instead of 30.

Many in the commercial and especially marginal commercial sector feel excluded from this new globalising world, which adds to their sense of being outsiders in their own production system, despite bringing more money into it than many of their arthouse counterparts. A K2 producer of crime thrillers in his early 40s expresses his deep suspicion in this way:

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

The effects of the pressure to internationalise on the producers' self-conceptions are yet to be fully seen. It is likely that with the European Commission gradually implementing its Digital Single Market Strategy, the urge to develop projects for European markets will grow. It seems that the arthouse producers have a better starting position to find a survival strategy than their commercial counterparts, who are more dependent on the actual sales and will likely face much tougher competition from Hollywood and global VOD platforms.

## Conclusions

Contemporary Czech producers still have to deal with many consequences of their small national market and its state-socialist heritage. Their 'self-conceptions' reveal generational and sectoral divisions as well as deep anxieties towards the 'European producer system' and the ongoing transformations of the global media markets. Unlike industrial reflexivity typical for the Hollywood above-the-line talent or for the executive ranks mapped by Caldwell (2008), Czech producers do not resort to self-mythologising, branding narratives. Rather, they perform their volatile professional identities in terms of much-needed professionalisation, standardisation and internationalisation, as well as fears of globalisation, disempowerment vis-à-vis European cultural policy or enforced delegation of decision-making power to film funds and PSBs.

Their work world is not a highly structured environment in terms of the distribution of economic and symbolic capital. It operates as a permeable, flat, loosely interconnected network with a number of informal knots based on recurring collaborative links and personal relations. Apart from the extreme poles of the two 'marginal' sectors, everybody could potentially work with everybody else. The network is not clearly divided between tiers of 'winners' with high 'transaction rates' and 'nonwinners' waiting for work (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987: 893): most work at a similar pace of a maximum of



one or two projects per year, and their budgets differ very little across the sectors. The network does not separate an 'elite inner core' with high degrees of interconnectedness from a large 'periphery' (see Jones, 1996): the only vague 'core' is defined by producers' success rate with applying for public money and making deals with the PSB. The producers' career patterns are fairly homogenous: most graduated from or even still study at the same film school,<sup>13</sup> while the oldest generation shares memories of starting their careers in the state-socialist studios. Their social lives are not organised by a strict hierarchy; their professional world is not a 'colony' concentrated around a rich and powerful 'elite' centre, dictating the rules of business and social interaction (like Hollywood, according to Rosten, 1941). From a researcher's point of view, it is easy to talk to them: gaining access to local producers is far from being as difficult as for an ethnographer in Hollywood (Ortner, 2013).

By identifying five tropes that were re-emerging across most interviews – the production manager/producer dichotomy; development as defining a true producer; the 'production fee business model' as a symptom of not being a real producer; precarity vis-à-vis public institutions and EU cultural policy; and the urge to internationalise – I have presented key features of the post-socialist production culture. Its specificity was further foregrounded by comparing the findings with the existing literature on Anglo-American production cultures. The Central-Eastern European producers picture themselves quite differently from their UK or US counterparts: as a largely disempowered, dependent, endangered species desperately looking for more stability, autonomy and recognition. They see themselves as being at the mercy of the state's cultural policymakers and the powerful public service broadcaster. The reasons for this were identified in three interconnected areas: the heritage of the state-socialist production system, the structure of the small-market economy and the systemic reliance on public support.


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### **Notes**

1. There was not a single Central-Eastern European firm among the top 25 EU production companies of the 2000s, but in 2008, there were 2226 film and television enterprises in the Czech Republic alone (De Vinck and Lindmark, 2012: 32, 53).

2. Only several academic studies so far have elaborated on the crucial role producers played in the major artistic movements of the past (see e.g. Berthet, 1998), or in commercial traditions of European cinema (Spicer and McKenna, 2013). Among scholars focusing on contemporary European screen industries, Anne Jäckel explained how government regulations, co-production schemes and public support programmes influence producers' working practices (Jäckel, 2003). Alejandro Pardo reconstructed historical genealogy of today's 'creative producer' (Pardo, 2010). Angus Finney, himself a former producer, published several handbooks on financing, co-production practices and other business aspects of European producers' work (see e.g. Finney, 2015). Peter Bloore proposed the first theoretical treatment of European producers' management of creative work in the development stage of the production process (Bloore, 2013). Christopher Meir has launched a pioneering research on Studiocanal as an example of today's European conglomerates aspiring to global status (Meir, 2016). The French school of film economics developed a methodology for the economic analysis of European audiovisual markets and their political regulations, while also looking at how they affect producers' strategies (see e.g. Creton, 1997). Industry reports commissioned by institutions like the European Audiovisual Observatory, the British Film Institute or the French Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée present mostly quantitative data about individual media markets.
3. The team consisted of Johana Kotišová, Jakub Macek, Jan Motal and Eva Pjajčrková. The interviews with producers analysed in this article were conducted by myself, Johana Kotišová and Eva Pjajčrková.
4. More specifically, this article uses the 'integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis', proposed by John Caldwell (2008: 4), which aims at overcoming the traditional antithesis between political economy of media and cultural studies of media texts.
5. For example, HBO Europe launched an aggressive original production initiative in its four Central-Eastern European branches (Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland and Romania) in around 2010, which involves a close collaboration with prominent local film producers and talent. The most renowned examples include Czech miniseries *The Burning Bush* (*Hořící keř*, 2013) and *Wasteland* (*Pustina*, 2016).
6. The post-2012 management of Česká televize (ČT) replaced its central 'editorial office' with a set of 'creative producers' units' that were encouraged to increase TV series production volume and to co-develop them with independent producers. Unlike the BBC, ČT does not have to meet a specific quota of programmes sourced from independent producers, but the percentage of independently (co)produced programmes significantly increased since 2012 (see Pjajčrková and Szczepanik, 2016).
7. The ethnographically informed methodology employed the technique of 'elite interviewing' or 'studying up', used in production studies for interviewing influential industry 'players' (see Bruun, 2016; Mayer, 2008). Interviews were divided into 10 groups, defined by professions and the product types, and coded according to 12 analytical categories such as 'initiation of the project and composition of the development team', 'development's definition', 'development's individual steps, strategies and financing' and so on. (The first group of categories was derived from a testing set of five interviews and, later in the process of coding, supplemented by a second group that emerged from the remaining interviews.)
8. FAMU is short for the Filmová a televizní fakulta Akademie múzických umění v Praze, also known as the Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.
9. Some of the most successful Czech series of the last five years were co-developed and co-produced by an independent producer, for example, *The First Republic* (*První republika*, 2014–2017), whose development and production was the subject of an ethnographic study (Pjajčrková and Szczepanik, 2016).

10. The year of 2016 changed this trend by increasing the share of Czech films on the market from 18% to 30%, and it saw several huge domestic hits, mainly *Angel 2 (Anděl páně 2*, dir. Jiří Strach) and *The Devil's Mistress (Lída Baarová*, dir. Filip Renč). See the statistics of the Czech Union of Film Distributors (<http://www.ufd.cz>) and the top 50 list for 2016 at <http://kinomaniak.cz/navstevnost-filmu/roci/2016/>
11. For a year-by-year overview of Czech feature films co-produced by ČT, see <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/filmy/archiv>
12. For a description of the Czech Film Fund's incentive scheme, see <http://www.filmcommission.cz/en/incentives/key-points>
13. Several of the interviewees started their production companies and became established producers while still studying at the FAMU film school.

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## Author biography

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