

Introduction: East-Central European Media as Digital Peripheries

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DECONSTRUCTING THE WESTERN IMAGE OF EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN MEDIA

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

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

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

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

(Imre 2014: 128)

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

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

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

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

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

CINEMA OF SHORTAGE: THE STATE-SOCIALIST MEDIA INDUSTRIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TOWARDS THE ‘HIGH CIRCUMSCRIPTION’ MODEL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THEORIZING THE SMALLNESS AND PERIPHERALITY OF MEDIA INDUSTRIES AND MARKETS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(McElroy and Noonan 2018: 174)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RESEARCH DESIGN

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

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

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

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