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The Polish Film Industry under Communist Control

Conceptions and Misconceptions of Censorship

Introduction: The Blurred Distance between Us and Them

Poland's film directors could finally forget about the pressures of complying with government censorship when communism was pronounced dead in the country on 4 June 1989. That day, the nation's first free elections marked the transformation from socialism to capitalism and democracy.¹⁾ Before long, censors had disappeared, much like the governing Party, whose interests they had once represented. According to Edward Zajiček: “[a]s in a fairy tale [...] filmmakers’ dreams came true [...] without any interference from outside, [...] [they] could now work freely on scripts of their choice?”²⁾ Ironically, as soon as Polish cinema underwent full political liberalization, it became clear that in exchange for political freedom, it had lost something that was impossible to acquire in a free market environment: the generous financial support of the old censor, the Communist Party.

In pre-1989 Poland, film funding was not driven by the market. Popular entertainment and art cinema had an equal chance of securing Party support. Instead of commercial potential, the promise of contributing to national culture usually sufficed to justify investing state monies into feature films, despite the fact that some production capital came from revenue generated by earlier releases. The Communist Party might have been wary of its own political standing but it was also aware of Polish citizens’ appetites for both art and entertainment. Careful to preempt accusations of damaging national film culture, the Party aimed to appear to be committed to its self-proclaimed mission of supporting film. The bureaucrats who controlled the film industry did not want to be seen as tightfisted. Many of the hard-line socialists often subscribed to the view that communist cinema needed to

1) See Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, vol.2, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Ewa Mazierska, ‘Polish martial law of 1981 seen from abroad’, *New Cinemas*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2009), pp. 198–9.

2) Edward Zajiček, *Poza ekranem: Kinematografia polska 1918–1991* (Warszawa: FilMOTEKA Narodowa, Wydawnictwa Filmowe i Artystyczne, 1992), p. 269. The author is responsible for translating all Polish-language quotations into English.

be given the opportunity to demonstrate its superiority to that produced under capitalism. In the early 1990s, when memories of censorship were still relatively fresh, Polish film director Krzysztof Kieślowski confirmed:

I wouldn't say that clerks only aimed at hampering our efforts, it wasn't like that ... People, who acted as film censors, at the same time had cultural ambitions, they wanted film culture to exist ... So, almost paradoxically, they really cared about film and wanted it to be of highbrow quality.³⁾

Recognizing the dual-role played by the Party — as censor and patron — helps us to explain the various paradoxes that characterized postwar Polish cinema, wherein directors often appeared to bite the very hand that fed them; that of the generous communist patron.

Despite their generosity, Party officials, who typically liaised with top industry professionals such as directors, producers, screenwriters, and critics before approving narrative feature films, were also quite pragmatic. As a rule, once a project had been greenlighted, political or ideological concerns were put aside so that film units (*zespoły filmowe*) could go about producing a film. Censorship was therefore used to ensure a film would be completed in a timely fashion. The fact that some pre-1989 films were critical of the very political system that underwrote their production is not evidence of the censors having been duped. Rather, it was a case of the Party protecting substantial investments in the film in question. Sometimes Party officials would even go as far as to cite artistic merits over ideological concerns in order to ensure that films could be exhibited domestically. Documents from the Central Committee's Department of Culture (*Wydział Kultury KC PZPR*) reveal that this situation characterized the release of *MAN OF MARBLE* (1976), *CAMOUFLAGE* (1976/1977), and *TEDDY BEAR* (1980/1981).⁴⁾

The late 1990s saw the demise of the state subsidization of film production, with Polish state television (TVP) taking the responsibility of subsidizing some narrative films. Access to the new sources of funding that had been made available by the national broadcaster, as well as by the private sector, was usually preconditioned by a project's capacity to generate revenue. Financial security perished with censorship. Concern spread across the Polish film community. The once prosperous film units looked to survive by transforming themselves into small production houses that were subject to the ebbs and flows of the market. Among them was Film Unit "Tor", whose head, renowned director Krzysztof Zanussi, lamented in 2000:

The time of freedom and market brought speed to our lives, the rhythm that killed off our old habit of reflective meetings and non-committing informal chats... I am not in a position to predict the fate of filmmaking [in Poland-AM], or, for that ma-

3) Krzysztof Kieślowski featured in the documentary *TREN NA ŚMIERĆ CENZORA* (1992). The published version of the transcript from the film is available as 'Tren na śmierć cenzora' *Reżyser*, no. 11 (1992), p. 1.

4) See Anna Misiak, *Kinematograf Kontrolowany: Cenzura Filmowa w Kraju Socjalistycznym i Demokratycznym (PRL i USA). Analiza Socjologiczna* (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), pp. 297–311.

ter, the future of Tor, which despite all shortages has remained an enclave of such thinking that primarily locates film in the domain of arts, where the industrial side of it is only of secondary importance.⁵⁾

It took over fifteen years for the lower chamber of the Polish Parliament (Sejm) to pass an act that sanctioned the opening of the Polish Film Institute (2005), which currently offers “complex assistance to film production” and distributes funding to animators, documentarians, and feature film makers.⁶⁾ Before the institute was established, a period of economic hardship had led to contemplative reassessments of the communist era. The sense of nostalgia for a time of financial security and leisurely work pace that is evident in Zanussi’s musings was widespread among Polish filmmakers. These views stand at odds to Western thinking about Polish cinema’s past, which tends to be quite negative about the communist management of the film industry and typically pays minimal attention to the institutional foundations and practices of the nation’s system of censorship.⁷⁾ The repressive aspects of this system notwithstanding, a more objective and systematic critical assessment of the political control of the Cold War film industry is well over due, especially one that is underpinned by archival research. In 1990, the archives of the Department of Culture of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Wydział Kultury KC PZPR) were opened, thereby providing access to minutes from film-related Party meetings and letters documenting exchanges between filmmakers and the communist authorities. These materials bring to light the negotiations that took place between the officials and film directors, who usually acted as diplomatic players rather than defenseless victims of censorship.

During periods of political liberalization and less stringent control of cinema, concessions were made both by filmmakers and censors. Such periods included the 1950s Thaw (Odwilż) after the Stalinist era, when the Polish Film School flourished, and at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, which saw the first public screenings of the Cinema of Moral Concern. No decisions on censorship were deemed final because this system of control drew individuals from the government (the Ministry of Culture), the film industry, and from different levels of the Party, including the Central Committee’s Department of Culture (Wydział Kultury KC PZPR), the Central Committee (Komitet Centralny PZPR), and the Politburo. Internal checks and balances, as well as criticism of previous management practices, allowed for decisions to be reconsidered and reversed. Even if a film was shelved, there was always a chance that it would be given a reprieve by new leadership. For example, under martial law eleven previously released films including such well known titles as *SHIVERS* (1981), *FEVER* (1980/1981), *INDEX* (1977/1981), and *MAN OF IRON* (1981) were

5) Krzysztof Zanussi quoted in Barbara Hollender and Zofia Turowska, *Zespół Filmowy Tor* (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2000), p. 239.

6) “Task and structure”, Polish Film Institute, <<http://www.pisf.pl/en/about/structure>> [accessed 10 April 2012].

7) See for example Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and the Artistry of East Central European Film* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003); Marek Haltof, *Polish National Cinema* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003); Richard Taylor et al (eds), *The BFI Companion to Eastern European Cinema* (London: BFI, 2000).

withdrawn from circulation on 13 December 1981, only to be returned to distribution over the next few years, after the political climate in the country had calmed.⁸⁾ The Polish system of censorship corresponds with Christian Metz's observation that "[t]he peculiarity of censorship, and one of its most noticeable characteristics—in the absence of which we would never be able to grasp its existence—is that things are always managing to get past it."⁹⁾ It may have been the cause of much frustration but Polish film censorship boasted a flexible and ever-shifting character that also offered filmmakers hope.

Although these historical intricacies are familiar to Polish academics, critics, and audiences, they are not discussed in writings produced outside the country. English-language scholarship has barely attempted to examine the decision-making processes behind Polish censorship. The picture that has been painted in the west of the communist control of Polish cinema is therefore far from complete. It is also one that is undermined by stereotype. As the next section shows, Western critics and academics have invariably sympathized with Polish filmmakers. Whether intentionally or otherwise, this tendency has resulted in their interaction being framed as an "us and them" relationship, with filmmakers placed in opposition to Party censors. In reality, this gap was bridged on countless occasions.

The View from the West

Twenty years after the fall of communism in Poland, communist film censorship evidently remains something of an enigma in the English-speaking world. Censors are commonly pictured as Kafkaesque bureaucrats who sit in gloomy socialist-realist lairs purging completed films of content that strayed from the Party line. The sense of repression and doom that permeates such images could easily be dismissed were it not for the fact it has led to misrepresentation in histories of Polish cinema. Such misconceptions have produced misunderstandings of the forces driving film production, with notions of artistic aspiration often superseded by images of dissenting filmmakers. Consequently, discussions of banned films, and production histories that chronicle Polish directors scheming to sidestep the watchful eye of the censor, are multiple. As Dina Iordanova observes, "[i]t is still assumed that censored films had a higher artistic value than those that were not censored."¹⁰⁾ This tendency has led to the valorization of films that criticized communism, which in turn explains the cultural prestige attached in the West to films such as *ASHES AND DIAMONDS* (1958), *CAMERA BUFF* (1979), *INTERROGATION* (1982/1989), and *MAN OF MARBLE* (1977). The latter tells the story of a young documentarian who struggles single-handedly against Polish television censorship while looking to uncover the truth behind the oppression of workers in the 1950s. Its depiction of Polish censorship, as menac-

8) 'Filmy fabularne, których eksploatację wstrzymano po 13 grudnia 1981 roku', Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, KC PZPR Wydział Kultury, 889/2.

9) Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 254.

10) Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*, p. 33.

ing, senseless, and intent on disorientating the viewer, has profoundly influenced Western understandings of the subject.

Marek Haltof charts the most important developments in the history of the Polish film industry, but pays little attention to mechanisms of control in the country. Haltof's occasional discussion of censorship is usually limited to its restriction of creative freedom. Like other Anglophone scholars, Haltof uses terms such as "state censorship" but stops short of explaining who acted in the name of the state, or how the state implemented control. By portraying censorship as a faceless, alienating phenomenon, Haltof neglects to mention the extent to which filmmakers negotiated with censors, and, in so doing, reproduces the "us and them" dichotomy.¹¹⁾

English-language scholarship has also barely examined the institutional structure of Polish film censorship.¹²⁾ This is in part a product of the limited access scholars based outside Poland have had to archival material, and is, perhaps more importantly, a product of what Anikó Imre has called "widespread academic amnesia about Eastern Europe".¹³⁾ Imre argues that films produced in the region during the Cold War period are typically seen as a known quantity that offers little in the way of new points of interest to Western academics. Her diagnosis of the stagnation of the field is of particular relevance to studies of the industrial structures of censorship in Poland, which have suffered from academic apathy and from the misleading generalizations that Dina Iordanova has described as "the emerging templates of rushed historiography".¹⁴⁾

It is easy to misjudge the history of the Polish film industry under communism if one focuses exclusively on existing scholarly accounts and not on archival materials. The Communist Party rarely publicized its reasons for modifying feature films, for shelving some of them, or for reversing its decisions. Not only was this information confidential but the very processes through which those decisions were made was clouded in mystery. Time and again, the drawing of rash conclusions has led to overly pessimistic historiography. A notable exception is the revisionist work of Paul Coates, who has argued that

The myth [of the obtuse censor-AM] is fed [...] by confusion between various instances within the institution known as "censorship": for censorship was not just the

11) Haltof, *Polish National Cinema*.

12) For an exception see Paul Coates, *The Red and The White: The Cinema of People's Poland*, (London & New York: Wallflower, 2005), pp. 74–115.

For Polish-language scholarship see Edward Zajiček, *Poza ekranem: Kinematografia polska 1918–1991* (Warszawa: FilMOTEKA Narodowa, Wydawnictwa Filmowe i Artystyczne, 1992); Edward Zajiček (ed.) *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku. Film. Kinematografia* (Warszawa: Instytut Kultury, Komitet Kinematografii, 1994); Zygmunt Machwitz, 'Represje i opresje w kinematografii PRL', *Tygiel kultury*, no.1 (1996), pp. 94–100; Alina Madej, *Kino-władza publiczność* (Bielsko Biala: Wydawnictwo Prasa Beskidzka, 2002); Małgorzata Hendrykowska, *Kronika kinematografii polskiej 1895–1997* (Poznań: Ars Nova, 1999); Anna Misiak, 'Cenzura filmowa po Zjeździe w Wiśle', *Kwartalnik filmowy*, no. 43 (2003), pp. 93–102; Anna Misiak, *Kinematograf kontrolowany: Cenzura filmowa w kraju socjalistycznym i demokratycznym. Analiza socjologiczna* (Kraków: Universitas, 2006).

13) Anikó Imre, 'East European cinemas in new perspectives', in Anikó Imre (ed.) *East European Cinemas* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), p. xvi.

14) Dina Iordanova, 'The cinema of Eastern Europe: strained loyalties, elusive clusters', in Anikó Imre (ed.) *East European Cinemas* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), p. 230.

comments penciled in the margin by the anonymous drone of Mysia Street, it was also the spluttering expostulation of the Minister chairing the Script Assessment Commission, of his colleagues in the Central Committee or even the Politburo[.]¹⁵⁾

Coates draws upon archival resources painstakingly to reconstruct the process through which every screenplay went before it was shot. The close attention he pays to textual and institutional concerns enables Coates to revise a number of misconceptions about the topic, for which he deserves credit. Nevertheless, his study could be accused of failing fully to distinguish the different echelons of control, the responsibilities of each institution involved, and their methods. As Iordanova correctly points out, most Western studies of Eastern Bloc film censorship offer “simplistic explanations”. Her detailed analysis of film censorship in Hungary follows Miklós Haraszty in concluding that the absence of an institution dedicated to the task led the country to develop the region’s “most sophisticated and elusive censorship mechanisms [...]”. However, Iordanova limits her discussion of control of the Polish film industry to a single sentence: “Poland had a special body in charge of media censorship, the Main Office for Control [...]”.¹⁶⁾ Furthermore, *The BFI Companion to Eastern European and Russian Cinema* mentions some banned Polish films and explains that some high-profile Polish filmmakers ran into problems with the censors, but says little about the nature of these skirmishes and even less about those agencies that caused them.¹⁷⁾ Crucially, the companion again gives the misleading impression that the Main Office for Control of the Press, Publications, and Public Performances (Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, GUKPPIW) was the principal institution responsible for ensuring that films reflected Party ideology. In fact, from the mid-1950s, the Main Office rarely viewed narrative feature films in their entirety; its interventions, if any, were typically restricted to script development and post-production.¹⁸⁾ Similar errors occur in other historical accounts. For example, David A. Cook, discusses some of the oppression that Polish filmmakers experienced under communism, but does not fully explain how the censoring apparatus worked. His reference to *The Black Book of Polish Censorship* — a collection of papers from the Main Office that were first published in English in 1984 — again invokes the “us and them” dichotomy.¹⁹⁾

The documents that were later included in *The Black Book* were smuggled out of Poland by Main Office employee Tomasz Strzyżewski. The Polish-language version was first published in the west as *Czarna księga cenzury PRL*. It revealed the draconian and some-

15) Coates, *The Red and the White*, p. 75.

16) Iordanova, *Cinema of The Other Europe*, pp. 33–34. See also Miklós Haraszty, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

17) Anon., ‘Censorship in Eastern Europe’, in Richard Taylor et al (eds), *The BFI Companion to Eastern European Cinema* (London: BFI, 2000), pp. 44–6.

18) These were usually overseen by changing commissions of diverse personal composition. A censor from the Main Office would often sit in the meetings, but his role was of advisory nature. Scattered, rather complex, yet loosely defined, this film censorship was a porous system and by no means as efficient as the country’s control of print materials, which indeed directly passed through the hands of clerks in the Main Office.

19) David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 4th edition (New York & London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), p. 617. See also Jane Leftwitch Curry (ed.), *The Black Book of Polish Censorship*, trans. Jane Leftwitch Curry (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

times quite absurd practices of censors in 1970s Poland.²⁰⁾ At this time, the regime of Edward Gierek allowed its investment in ideology to override rationality and to blind it to a rising tide of opposition. The *Black Book* portrays communist control of print journalism and the media as repressive and hostile to individual creativity. The English-language translation of his book influenced western thinking about censoring practices in the People's Republic of Poland, which were mistakenly applied to cinema and rarely questioned thereafter. However, *The Black Book* barely mentions feature films and includes the names of only a handful of film industry-professionals, mainly those like director Aleksander Ford who fled Poland in the late 1960s in response to increasing anti-Semitism.²¹⁾ As harsh it may have been, their treatment was not a result of the political content of their films; Main Office documents listed such individuals as *personae non grata* but made no mention of their work. In addition, the Main Office was not directly involved in the censoring of such films as *HANDS UP!* (1967/1985) or *THE DEVIL* (1972/1988), whose production and distribution was interrupted by authorities operating within, or in cooperation with, the film industry. The absence of Polish feature films from *The Black Book* can be explained by the fact that Strzyżewski worked in Cracow and not in Warsaw or Łódź, where the majority of narrative films were made in the 1970s. *The Black Book* also demonstrates that the Main Office exerted minimal influence on issues related to film. Rather, the Communist Party — acting through governmental/industrial bodies — usually ensured that anti-communist sentiments had been purged from films prior to final cut, thereby rendering a professional censor superfluous to requirements on nine out of ten occasions.

Despite historical evidence to the contrary, Western visions of communist film censorship in Poland continue to be underpinned by two fallacies: that creative freedom was under continuous attack from the authorities, and that filmmakers and the authorities were completely removed from each other. These fallacies were in part shaped by misleading accounts that were passed on by exiled Polish filmmakers such as Roman Polański, Jerzy Skolimowski, and Ryszard Bugajski. They were also driven by exposure to films that dramatized the various abuses that Polish citizens suffered during the Cold War, including *MAN OF MARBLE*, *MAN OF IRON*, and *INTERROGATION*. Finally, Western perceptions were shaped by the content of *The Black Book*.

In 1984, an issue of the film magazine *Cineaste* featured numerous English-speaking critics and experts imposing on to film the framework of censorship that *The Black Book* had described as operating in other media. It included several pieces that focused on the fate of the Polish filmmaker under martial law. It also printed interviews with prominent Polish critics and filmmakers, including writer-director Feliks Falk, who had scripted *AND ALL THAT JAZZ* (1981/1984), a film that had been withdrawn from Polish theaters in 1981. In her editorial to the issue, Patricia Aufderheide highlighted “[t]he adversary [sic] relationship between Polish filmmakers and the Ministry of Culture”.²²⁾ Despite focusing exclusively on the most draconian period in Polish history, the views that were expressed in

20) *Czarna księga cenzury PRL* (London: Aneks, 1977).

21) See Anna Misiak, ‘Politically involved filmmaker: Aleksander Ford and film censorship in Poland after 1945’, *Kinema* (Fall 2003), pp. 19–31.

22) Patricia Aufderheide ‘Solidarity and the Polish cinema’, *Cineaste*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1984), p. 6.

Cineaste appear both directly and indirectly to have influenced the ways in which Western academics subsequently understood the topic, thereby giving the misleading impression that this fleeting animosity between filmmakers and the authorities applied to the entire communist era.

This “us and them” view of Polish film censorship was cemented by citing claims of antagonism attributed to émigrés such as Roman Polański and Jerzy Skolimowski. For example, in his study of Polański’s *KNIFE IN THE WATER* (1962), Coates implies that the Party was hostile to the young director’s wish to dramatize youthful morality in the manner of French New Wave, but does not explain why it objected. He also notes in passing that scriptwriter Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski was against Polański’s project, but does not mention that this position was also held by the Head of the Central Committee’s Department of Culture, Wincenty Kraśko. Kraśko felt that Polański’s characters were shallow and that the script as a whole lacked substance. “[A]ny average journalist could write a script like this [...]”, suggested Kraśko, “[w]e are not going to start this production, not to mention spend 3 million złotych on it. It is absolutely out of question”.²³⁾ The Party officials that supported Kraśko’s assessment were not merely looking to hamper the development of new creative talent. Rather, Polański’s script failed to comply with their conservative views on youth morality and art cinema. Their disinterest in seeing public monies invested into what they saw as a superficial and frivolous production was even shared by a significant number of filmmakers. Nevertheless, the Party ultimately acquiesced following the intervention of several established filmmakers, resulting in Polański making and releasing the film largely uncut.

The cooperative character of film censorship so clearly apparent in the production history of *KNIFE IN THE WATER* is all but lost in Coates’ article, which echoes Polański’s autobiography by suggesting that the film was “almost shelved by the Ministry of Culture”.²⁴⁾ In reality, the threat of shelving or banning a film was only ever used by the Party to negotiate stronger positions, to encourage filmmakers to make compromises, and to ensure that filmmakers behaved frugally. Moreover, Coates neglects to mention the fact that Party officials also took some steps to ensure that films would be appealing to Polish viewers. Perhaps surprisingly, it was actually the Catholic Church — that bastion of opposition in communist Poland — that was critical of Polański’s films, condemning *KNIFE IN THE WATER* on the grounds that “its shallowness excuse[d] free love”.²⁵⁾

The Western debates that centered on binary oppositions between filmmakers and censors were fuelled by imaginary tales of a typical director’s life under communism that were articulated by a minority of exiled filmmakers. Next to the aforementioned Aleksander Ford, only Jerzy Skolimowski and Ryszard Bugajski felt so stifled by censorship that they chose to abandon their careers in their homeland. Their influential accounts of the otherwise obscure operations of the Polish film industry need to be understood as products of quite exceptional experiences.

23) ‘Protokół z posiedzenia Komisji Oceny Scenariuszy’, 25 kwietnia 1961, Archiwum Filmoteki Narodowej w Warszawie, A-214, p. 22.

24) See Roman Polański, *Roman* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1984); Paul Coates, ‘Nóż w wodzie/Knife in the Water’, p. 83.

25) Małgorzata Hendrykowska, *Kronika kinematografii polskiej 1895–1997*, p. 245.

A similar case involved *HANDS UP!*, a film that caused problems for the party when it went into production during the social and political upheavals of 1968. The authorities did not shelve Skolimowski's surreal portrait of youth but did order cuts.²⁶⁾ It was shown in urban art houses before being withdrawn from circulation. Discussion of communist efforts to derail *HANDS UP!* surfaced time and again in the Western press, especially around 1984, when Skolimowski released *SUCCESS IS THE BEST REVENGE* (1984). The latter film tells the story of Alexander Rodak, a theater director, who leaves Poland to work in England. As Ewa Mazierska argues, the oppressive political climate of martial law-era Poland "accentuate[s] Skolimowski's identification with Rodak".²⁷⁾ The character of Rodak expresses the then-prevalent notion of Poland as a country under occupation from a ruthless communist invader when he declares: "I want to play for Poland and help her win". The demonization of Party officials was central to the manner in which Skolimowski framed his experiences in Poland. Mazierska suggests that he "constructed himself in interviews [...] as an exile who was forced in a nomadic life by the cruel communist authorities and his own pride and obstinacy".²⁸⁾ Through his films and acts of self-promotion, Skolimowski, contributed to the sense of opposition between moral filmmakers and ruthless communist authorities, and by extension to the "us and them" dichotomy.

The West's draconian image of Poland's communist officials was sealed in 1990, when *INTERROGATION* was shown at Cannes, some seven years after it was produced. The film tells the story of Tonia (Krystyna Janda), who is tortured repeatedly in prison in the 1950s. This content spotlighted the brutality and absurdity of the communist practice of subjugating individuality and personal freedom. Based, as it was, on the most infamous period of communist rule, *INTERROGATION* was shelved by the authorities who feared that it would fuel social unrest during the already tense period in which martial law was imposed.²⁹⁾ *INTERROGATION* was cited in the aforementioned issue of *Cineaste* by writer Lawrence Weschler as illustrative of the supposed antagonism that existed between Polish filmmakers and the censors.³⁰⁾ This position was developed in interviews with the film's director, who projected the experiences of the film's protagonist onto his own life. "INTERROGATION was my manifesto", claimed Bugajski, "I did show my vision of reality that had surrounded me for the most part of my life, and which was as far from my personal needs as possible, far from how it should be".³¹⁾ While the image of the Polish film industry painted by both *Cineaste* and Bugajski applied only to the martial law years, it reflects the way Western critics and intellectuals have framed the communist period as a whole.

26) 'Notatka dotycząca filmu Jerzego Skolimowskiego *Ręce do góry* oraz filmu publicystyczno-dokumentalnego Tadeusza Jaworskiego *Sekretarz*,' Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, KC PZPR Wydział Kultury, 237/XVIII/262.

27) Ewa Mazierska, 'Polish martial law of 1981 seen from abroad', p. 204.

28) Ewa Mazierska, *Jerzy Skolimowski: The Cinema of a Non-conformist* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), pp. 21–2.

29) Małgorzata Hendrykowska, *Kronika kinematografii polskiej 1895–1997*, p. 390.

30) Lawrence Weschler, 'Poland's banned films', *Cineaste*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 11–12.

31) Ryszard Bugajski quoted in "Przesłuchanie", available at <filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php/123101> [Accessed on 10 April 2012].

The Origins of the System: The Party and the Film Units

The foundations of Poland's centrally managed film industry were laid within a half a year of the end of WWII. The nationalization of the Polish production, distribution, and exhibition sectors was accompanied by the founding of the state company Film Polski (Przedsiębiorstwo Państwowe). It replaced the short-lived Department of Film Propaganda, which had previously overseen film production and the exhibition.³²⁾ In the early Stalinist years, the Polish government followed the Soviet model of censorship and propaganda, as the Main Office for Control worked with the Head of Film Polski Aleksander Ford to ensure the ideological soundness of the handful of films that were being made at the time. This model was stringent and relied heavily on the political and artistic judgment of Ford. Because it proved to be less effective than Stalinist officials had hoped, the Party swiftly took control out of the hands of Film Polski and the Main Office. Even at this early stage, it had become clear that a lack of communication between state bodies and filmmakers was leading to stagnation in the film industry; centralized control was having a stifling effect on creativity. To stimulate Polish cinema, the authorities started gradually to pay more and more attention to the views of filmmakers. This process of integration may have been gradual at first, but it paved the way for subsequent developments.

By 1947, Polish film industry professionals recognized that the Party would play an increasingly important role in their working lives. That year, the Film Sub-committee was established within the Department of Education and Culture (Wydział Oświaty i Kultury Komitetu Centralnego Polskiej Partii Robotniczej, KC PPR).³³⁾ It was responsible for planning film production and deciding whether films were fit for distribution.³⁴⁾ Where imports needed to be approved by the Movie Rental Central (Centrala Wynajmu Filmów), domestic features now required verification from various commissions that had been set up to evaluate the ideological and artistic credentials of scripts and completed films. Although the composition of the controlling bodies changed over time, the centralized system of film censorship remained in place during communist rule.

Nevertheless, in 1949, communist authorities made one final attempt to make Polish films subject to the type of incontestable ideological control that was in place in the Soviet Union. During the Congress of Filmmakers in Wisła, socialist realism was declared to be an ideological and artistic benchmark for Polish cinema; a political and aesthetic model that would drive the post-war restoration of the nation's film industry.³⁵⁾ This ideological mode of storytelling was to be implemented by the Party in a propagandistic manner. Approved scripts would be scrutinized to ensure that only those that promoted socialism

32) 'Dekret z dnia 13 listopada 1945 o utworzeniu PP Film Polski', Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, MKiS Generalna Dyrekcja Filmu Polskiego, Biuro Organizacyjno-Prawne, 1945, 102a.

33) 'Notatka tow. Trojanowskiego w sprawie Filmu Polskiego', Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, PPR, 295/XVII/10.

34) After the Unification Congress of 1948 (Zjazd Zjednoczeniowy Polskiej Partii Robotniczej /PPR/ i Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej /PPS/), the Party was officially renamed the Polish United Workers Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza PZPR). It was also restructured and reorganized. The Department of Culture and Education was renamed the Central Committee's Department of Culture (Wydział Kultury KC PZPR) but remained responsible for film production in Poland.

35) See Anna Misiak, 'Cenzura filmowa po Zjeździe w Wiśle', *Kwartalnik filmowy*, no.43 (2003), pp. 93–102.

went into production. The Department of Culture sought greater control over the film industry by announcing what it dubbed “the primacy of script writing over directing”. In a speech during the Congress of Filmmakers, renowned film critic Jerzy Toeplitz declared: “The director serves as a creator of the screen interpretation of a literary text. This literary text at the core of any film is the screenplay”.³⁶⁾ The Party also attempted to persuade some directors to produce films that would encourage viewers to support the new political system.

Party efforts to promote socialist realism often disrupted production. For example, director Wanda Jakubowska was involved in such protracted discussions with the Party and the Polish army that her WWII epic *SOLDIER OF VICTORY* lost much of its topical resonance when it was finally released in 1953. This type of case was by no means unique. Efforts to tighten the Party’s control of film content often met with resistance from filmmakers, which led to countless impasses, such as in 1952, when feature film production ground to a halt. In response to these problems, Film Polski was replaced by the Central Office of Cinema (Centralny Urząd Kinematografii). The Department of Culture concluded that it needed either to relax its control of the industry or to accept that feature film production might have to be sacrificed all together.

The death of Soviet leader Josef Stalin precipitated a measure of liberalization in the Soviet Union and its satellites which in turn hastened the death of Polish socialist realism. This shift exerted a profound influence over the ways in which the Party sought to control Polish film production. In the early post-Stalin years, the authorities increased their efforts to forge a working relationship with filmmakers by reintegrating them into the decision-making process. This step, which departed from the Soviet model, proved to be so effective that it remained in place until Communism fell in 1989. While the power that filmmakers believed they held was sometimes illusory, their opinions were consistently taken into account. To foster relations with filmmakers, the Party relaxed its vetting of screenplays and placed filmmakers in charge of shooting and postproduction. In 1955, the Central Office of Cinema founded film units — creative cooperatives that specialized in the production of narrative features — and, in so doing, it officially recognized the importance of creative talent.³⁷⁾ The office also put in place opportunities for negotiation between filmmakers and the authorities, which for the most part remained in place until 1989. As Bolesław Michałek and Frank Turaj observed:

In the 1950s, [t]here was no change to the notion of cinema as a socially engaged activity, but it was desired that the control and administration, as much as possible, be in the hands of film directors, writers and cameramen. In short, filmmakers were looking for relief from government officials. The government accepted the idea.³⁸⁾

Although the number and composition of the film units changed over the years, they operated with remarkable stability.

36) Jerzy Toeplitz, ‘Walka o film realizmu socjalistycznego’, Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, KC PZPR, Wydział Kultury, 237/XVIII/31.

37) ‘Informacja o sytuacji kinematografii’, Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, KC PZPR, 237/XVIII/117.

38) Bolesław Michałek and Frank Turaj, *The Modern Cinema of Poland*, p. xviii.

In the post-Stalin years, the Polish film industry was managed by the Chief Board of Cinema (Naczelny Zarząd Kinematografii). This body was established in 1956 to replace the Central Office of Cinema.³⁹⁾ The Head of the Chief Board served as the producer of all Polish feature films and the principal financier of the industry. He was responsible to the Minister of Culture and was in charge of distributing funds to the units. Due to the large number of films produced after 1956, the film industry functioned as a separate, almost financially self-sufficient entity.

In 1958, a new system of financing was introduced to stimulate the more efficient production of interesting films. It linked funding to the economic performance of the units, to the artistic and ideological qualities of their films, and to the size of the audience those films attracted. Production financing was therefore determined by levels of prior success at the Polish box office, which, by implication, indicated a film's capacity to reach out to the popular audience. Although this practice provided monetary rewards based on the ideological or commercial prowess of a given film, it did not directly affect filmmakers' salaries, which were not linked to the box office performances of their films. Unit employees received fixed monthly salaries related to qualifications and experience, providing them with a measure of financial security regardless of whether they made hits or flops.⁴⁰⁾

The film units only stopped production on two occasions. The first of these occasions was the result of stricter control of film industry-insiders that followed an upsurge in anti-Semitism and an intensification of Party efforts to target "enemies of the state" in 1968; there was a heavy Jewish presence in the industry at the time, and, ironically, the most high-profile casualty of this prejudice was Aleksander Ford, the man who had redesigned the Polish film industry after WWII.⁴¹⁾ In a March 1968 speech to the Politburo, the First Secretary Władysław Gomułka criticized Polish culture for what he saw as its liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and Zionism. The film industry was not granted immunity from this society-wide witch-hunt. Against the backdrop of growing nationalism and xenophobia, the Party targeted several filmmakers who had participated in co-productions with Western nations. Furthermore, to avoid exile, well known directors such as Jan Rybkowski, Wanda Jakubowska, and Jerzy Kawalerowicz were forced to engage in public self-criticism; under Gomułka, it was not uncommon to preempt or curtail opposition by forcing alleged enemies of the state to confess the error of their ways and to swear allegiance to the Party. Finally, the old units were replaced by new production groups dubbed "commissioners' units" (*zespoły komisarzy*) that were managed by Party loyalists.⁴²⁾

The industry was reorganized in 1972, when film directors were once again put in charge of the units.⁴³⁾ This new structure comprised seven units, each led by a famous industry figure: the "Illuzjon" unit was run by Czesław Petelski, "Tor" by Stanisław Różewicz, "X" by Andrzej Wajda, "Panorama" by Jerzy Passendorfer, "Silesia" by Kazimierz Kutz, "Prymat" by Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski, and "Kadr" by Jerzy Kawalerowicz. These film-

39) The most commonly used translations of the names of these two bodies are also used here, although other authors may use different English names, including the Chief Board of Cinematography (NZK) and the Central Office of Cinema (CUK).

40) See Edward Zajiček, *Poza ekranem: Kinematografia polska 1918–1991*, pp.162–7.

41) See Misiak, 'Aleksander Ford and film censorship in Poland after 1945', pp. 19–31.

42) Małgorzata Hendrykowska, *Kronika kinematografii polskiej 1895–1997*, p. 283.

makers wielded considerable influence over the industry as their positions of power permitted them to negotiate with the Party. The new political climate led to a relaxation of control that allowed for the production of films such as 1977's *MAN OF MARBLE*, which appeared from a Western perspective to bite the hand that fed them. In such cases, Party officials were willing to make concessions based on what they saw as a film's exceptional artistic merits. Supporting such films, in spite of their political positions, was deemed preferable to dealing with a backlash from filmmakers and audiences that would likely be provoked if they were banned. As Prime Minister Piotr Jaroszewicz explained "[*MAN OF MARBLE*] is politically wrong, but very attractive in terms of its artistic values. The masses will want to see it".⁴⁴ At this time, the film's director Andrzej Wajda was seen as one of Poland's most accomplished filmmakers. Moreover, *MAN OF MARBLE* had received considerable publicity while in production, and rumors had spread about its political themes. Under these circumstances, the Party wanted to avoid playing into opposition hands by giving dissenters a readymade example of the state restricting creative freedom. Rather than fooling the censors, Wajda cleverly exploited the political climate and the Party's desire to secure international praise for innovative Polish cinema; the communists' promotion of art films was reflected consistently in the conduct of the censors, but perhaps never more so than in the second half of the 1970s, when contributions to the Cinema of Moral Concern first hit Polish screens. Films such as *CAMOUFLAGE* (1977), *TOP DOG*, *WITHOUT ANESTHESIA* (both 1978), *PROVINCIAL ACTORS* (1979), and *A LONELY WOMAN* (1981) may have been highly critical of the regime, but little evidence exists to suggest that their emergence was a symptom of the Party suspending its control of Polish cinema, or of the Department of Culture suddenly taking its eye of the ball. Such films were made with the full knowledge of the regime. Party control remained in place, but was superseded by efforts to foster a world renowned film culture, an ambition of the Party's since the early 1950s. The Cinema of Moral Concern was therefore clearly facilitated by Party officials.⁴⁵

The second interruption of Polish film production came on 13 December 1981 when General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law. The units were not closed, but the Party did monitor filmmakers more closely than it had previously done. Moreover, some films were withdrawn from circulation and suspected subversives were removed from the units.⁴⁶ Among them were Andrzej Wajda, whose Film Unit "X" was shut down in 1983, and Krzysztof Kieślowski, who was dismissed from Film Unit "Tor" that year.⁴⁷ These measures may have been oppressive — even tyrannical — but they were short-lived. From 1984 to the end of communist rule in 1989, the Polish film industry reverted to pre-martial law models of production and censorship.

43) Michalek and Turaj, *The Modern Cinema of Poland*, p. 50.

44) Piotr Jaroszewicz quoted in Małgorzata Hendrykowska, *Kronika kinematografii polskiej 1895–1997*, p. 346.

45) See Dobrochna Dabert, *Kino moralnego niepokoju. Wokół wybranych problemów poetyki i etyki* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2003).

46) 'Filmy fabularne, których eksploatację wstrzymano po 13 grudnia 1981 roku,' Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, KC PZPR Wydział Kultury, 889/32; 'Zespoły filmowe 1981/1982,' Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, KC PZPR Wydział Kultury, 909/65.

47) Edward Zajiček, *Poza ekranem. Kinematografia polska 1918–1991*, p. 248.

The Approval Process: From Script to Screen

Apart from a brief period in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and when martial law was imposed in the early 1980s, film units were an integral part of Polish cinema under communism. They were intended to be production clusters that facilitated partnerships between professionals who possessed different skill-sets. These fully subsidized cooperatives enjoyed relative creative freedom during shooting, even if the end-product of their labor needed to be ratified by the communist authorities. Having invested time, energy, and capital in making a film, the authorities were reluctant to block its distribution and exhibition. They therefore, tended to rely on preemptive measures that eliminated controversial material during production. Conversely, Polish filmmakers sought to remain true to their creative agenda, which sometimes meant fashioning films that would offer audiences views that were critical of either the regime or Polish society. It was in neither side's interest to shelve a film during production. Such a step could destroy a filmmaker's career, as had been the case with Jerzy Skolimowski, who had clashed with the censors during the making of *HANDS UP!* (1967/1985), and with Ryszard Bugajski, who had done so when producing *INTERROGATION*. In most cases, the process of censoring was a balancing act, rather than all out conflict. On the whole, the Party practiced preventative — as opposed to oppressive — measures, which Polish film critic Jerzy Płażewski dubbed “prophylactic criticism”.⁴⁸⁾

Every film that was destined for public exhibition in Poland went through official channels of verification on two occasions prior to release. First, the screenplay had to be approved at several levels before production started (see Figure 1). As with scripts, first full edits of films had to be handed over to the authorities so that their ideological and artistic credentials could be considered. Decisions made by the relevant committee determined the fate of a film and would usually inform those at the upper echelons of the political hierarchy, in the event that such a step was deemed necessary (see Figure 2). As Coates points out, “[i]n Poland [...] there was no on-set Soviet style inspector to ensure the congruence between the approved script and what was actually shot. And once a work had been filmed, it was always on the cards that it would be shown”.⁴⁹⁾ The release of most films was secured by the consultations that were built into this framework; The Party relied on expert advice from an ever-changing roster of critics, scholars, and writers that included Jan Kott, Jerzy Toeplitz, Jerzy Putrament, Jerzy Andrzejewski, and Stanisław Dygat, as well as film industry professionals, who were often given the opportunity to defend their films.

The artistic and ideological control of a film began during project development. Each unit featured a Programming Board that was responsible for approving scripts before they were presented to the Commission for Evaluating Scripts and Films (*Komisja Ocen Scenariuszy i Filmów*) (see Figure 1).

The Commission for Evaluating Scripts and Films underwent reform on several occasions following its establishment in 1952.⁵⁰⁾ It should be noted that in the 1950s the De-

48) Jerzy Płażewski quoted in Janina Falkowska, *Andrzej Wajda: History, Politics and Nostalgia in Andrzej Wajda Films* (Oxford & New York, Berghahn Books, 2007), p. 167.

49) Coates, *The Red and the White*, p.74.

50) Edward Zajiček, *Poza ekranem. Kinematografia polska 1918–1991*, p. 109.

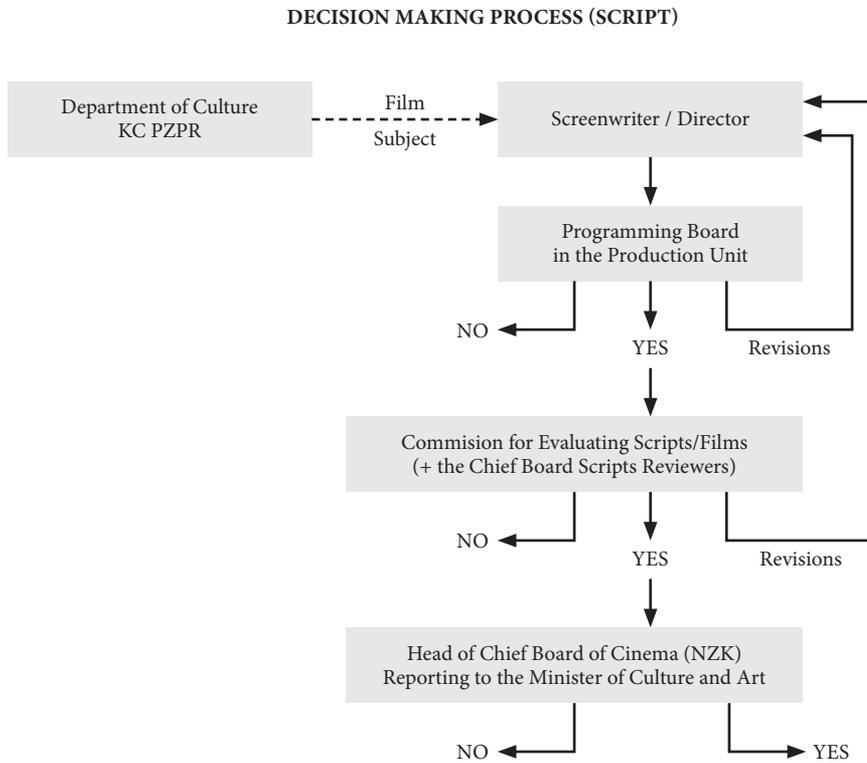


Figure 1: A Typical Script Approval Process (Pre-production)

partment of Culture and the Chief Board of Cinema considered the screenplay to be the central component of narrative film production, more important in fact than the film itself. In 1957, the commission focused on scripts, and dropped the term “film” from its name. The Commission for Evaluating Scripts (Komisja Ocen Scenariuszy), as it was henceforth known, temporarily operated independent of the Commission for Approval of Feature Films (Komisja do Odbioru Filmów Fabularnych Długometrażowych).⁵¹⁾ However, in an effort to bring greater efficiency to the system and to prevent filmmakers from disregarding the recommendations of the Commission for Evaluating Scripts when they were shooting films, the two commissions were reunified in 1973 under the title of the Commission for Evaluating Cinematic Films (Komisja Ocen Fabularnych Filmów Kinowych) (see Figure 2).⁵²⁾ Despite these changes, the process of approving scripts and completed films did not differ substantially during communist rule, even though at certain times, such as in the late 1960s and 1970s, scripts were vetted by reviewers at the Chief Board of

51) “Tryb ocen filmów fabularnych (referat na Kolegium NZK w dniu 17 stycznia 1961), Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, NZK, 1/24.

52) “Zarządzenie nr 27 MKiS z dnia 31 marca 1973 w sprawie powołania i zasad działania Komisji Oceny Fabularnych Filmów Kinowych, Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, NZK, 4/14.

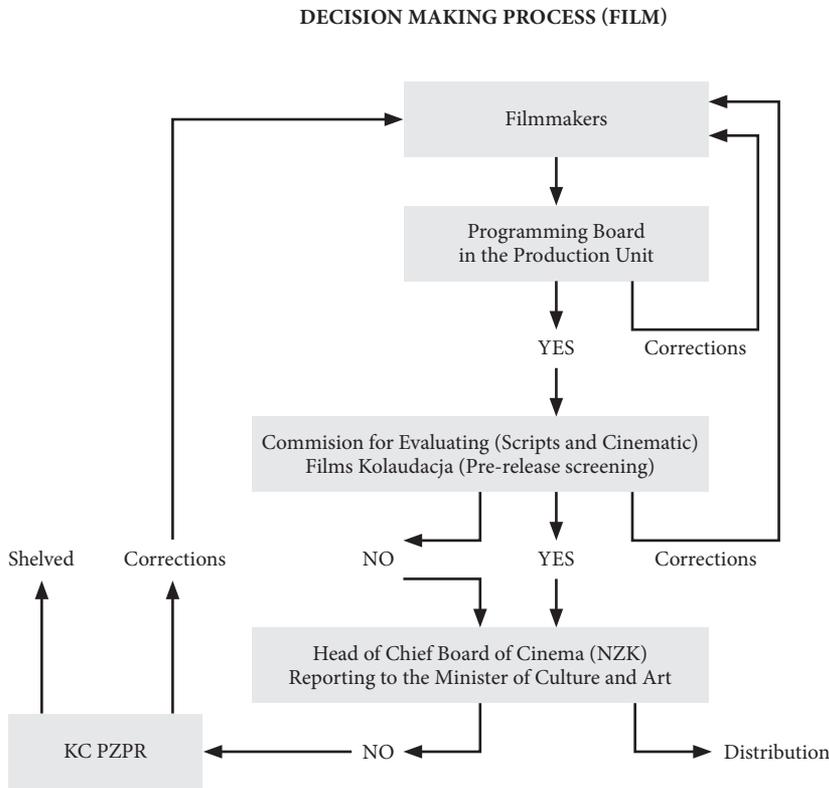


Figure 2: Typical Film Approval Process (Pre-release)

Cinema before they were discussed at commission meetings. While some screenplays were rejected, the bodies that handled completed films tended to call for revisions based on issues of art or ideology so that films could be resubmitted rather than rejected outright.

Some screenplays were withdrawn from consideration because writers found it impossible to accept the Commission's negative evaluation of their work or because they were deemed to boast little interest to Polish audiences. For example, Stanisław Dygat withdrew from consideration his script *Jeziro Bodeńskie*, "I came to the conclusion that I am not well suited to work in film", he protested, "[i]f I write a book, it is my own personal project. In the film industry the situation is different. My own criteria differ from those proposed by the industry and by my film colleagues.⁵³ Cases like *Jeziro Bodeńskie* were, however, quite uncommon. Typically, scripts were shot, albeit sometimes years later, as happened with *MAN OF MARBLE*, which took a decade and half to go before the cameras. The commission generally aimed to complete rather than forestall what it considered to be strong projects. Moreover, the Head of the Chief Board of Cinema rarely exercised his power to

53) 'Protokół z posiedzenia Komisji Ocen Scenariuszy', 10 May 1960, *Iluzjon*, no. 3–4 (1994), 105–112.

veto a script if reviewers and the commission had concluded that it was sufficiently artistic or appealing to audiences (see Figure 1).

The dual role of the commission — as censor and an advisor to the body that distributed state subsidies to filmmakers — has given rise to a number of misunderstandings in Western scholarship. Primary documentation shows that it were artistic shortcomings rather than political issues that prevented some screenplays from reaching the screen. The number of screenplays that were accepted but not ultimately filmed or distributed increased significantly from the late 1960s to the mid 1970s. The period is often cited to support claims that the Chief Board of Cinema abused his power. However, it was in fact marked by stricter control of the film industry generally, which, as noted above, had also seen an increase in the creative control granted to the commissioners that were placed in charge of the new units; commissioners who proved to be wholly incapable of producing filmable scripts or releasable quality films. These circumstances highlighted the need for genuine creative talent within the units, thereby paving the way for many renowned directors to return to the roles they had previously held in the industry. Nevertheless, according to documents housed at the Department of Culture (Wydział Kultury KC PZPR), over twenty scripts that were accepted between 1974 and the first half of 1976 were never shot.⁵⁴⁾ The industry did however pick up at decade's end, when control loosened as part of the more liberal political climate of the late 1970s. In general though, during politically stable times, scripts that were greenlighted by the commission were shot, not least because directors recognized that it was prudent to follow the commission's recommendations in order to safeguard their own careers.

Even though the minutes of Programming Board meetings are unavailable, it is likely that some projects were rejected on artistic grounds before they left the unit. Prior to the 1970s, stories were developed by professional scriptwriters who also wrote novels or short stories. Many scripts were adapted from novels or short stories, sometimes by their original author, as in the case of *THE EIGHT DAY OF THE WEEK* (1958/1983), *ASHES AND DIAMONDS* (1958), and *HOW TO BE LOVED* (1963), which were adapted respectively by Marek Hłasko, Jerzy Andrzejewski, and Kazimierz Brandys. In contrast, few films were inspired by story ideas that came from the Department of Culture (see Figure 1), a notable exception being the Polish-Russian co-production *LAST DROP OF BLOOD* (1978).⁵⁵⁾ This practice shows that the Party intervened into creative matters to a lesser degree than one might expect.

Whereas directors rarely wrote scripts at the beginning of the Cold War, a more director-driven model of screenwriting was starting to take shape by the 1970s. At this time, directors including Wojciech Marczewski, Agnieszka Holland, Janusz Kijowski, Krzysztof Kieślowski, and Feliks Falk, all penned their own screenplays. Of course, these scripts also went before the Programming Board, which had the right to ask for changes to be made to them (see Figure 1). In the interests of time management, modifications were made before the script in question was ready to be passed over to the Commission and/or the re-

54) 'Scenariusze nieskierowane do produkcji', Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, NZK, 5/94.

55) Notatka infomacyjna na temat filmu J. Hoffmana *Do krwi ostatniej?*, Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, KC PZPR Wydział Kultury, 832/93.

viewers at the Chief Board of Cinema (see Figure 1). When such projects had been shot and edited, they underwent the same process of approval that began at the Programming Board (see Figure 2). The Commission for Evaluating (Scripts and) (Cinematic) Films may in principle have served as an advisor to the Head of the Chief Board of Cinema but in practice its recommendations were rarely dismissed (see Figure 2) for the simple fact that the Politburo and the Ministry of Culture trusted its views. The Commission paired a small number of Party officials with renowned filmmakers and critics. For example, in the second half of the 1970s, Commission members included prominent directors such as Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Zanussi, Jerzy Antczak, Kazimierz Kutz, Wanda Jakubowska, and Jerzy Kawalerowicz. Known in Polish as *kolaudacje*, the formal meetings of the Commission were preceded by pre-release screenings and concluded with a formal decision that was made by the chair of the proceedings; sometimes the chair was the Head of the Department of Culture, other times the Head of the Chief Board, and, in the case of the 1970s, the Director of the Programming and Distribution Department at the Chief Board. Although Party representatives held unquestionably strong positions at the meetings, their feedback was not merely oppressive but also constructive insofar as it was intended to improve the look, sound, and structure of the film under discussion. Directors were — along with their managers, a creative supervisor, and the director of the film unit — typically invited to attend Commission meetings about their films. The commission's investment in issues that fell beyond strictly Party political concerns is exemplified by a meeting that took place in 1960 to consider a script about a nun haunted by the devil that was released as *MOTHER JOAN OF THE ANGELS* (1961), during which the commission expressed concerns about the film's capacity to anger the Catholic Church. *Kolaudacje* gave Party officials their first opportunity to view feature films. Apart from a brief period in the 1960s, when the Commission examined rushes (rough footage), the Party did not supervise the pre-production, shooting or the post-production of feature films.⁵⁶ As with scripts, mandatory revisions were often requested. However, a film would only be sent to the Chief Board of the Cinema, who had the authority to demand revisions, if a filmmaker had refused to comply with requests. The Politburo only intervened in exceptional cases that had not been dealt with by the various forms of pre- and post-production verification (see Figure 2). These circumstances help to explain why so few films were shelved by the Central Committee.

The Communist Party was nevertheless not entirely separated from the various stages of film production or from the process of control, because it had members on all of the commissions and in all of the units (see Figure 3). Although many Polish citizens were Party members, they did not necessarily subscribe to communist ideology. The extent to which they cooperated with the authorities therefore hinged on both the roles they played within the system, as well as their personal commitment to communist ideology. While some filmmakers were Party members, it did not follow that their creative contributions were driven by a political agenda. In contrast each commission boasted Party members who acted on behalf of the authorities. The presence on the commissions of both “inert”

56) “Tryb ocen filmów fabularnych (referat na Kolegium NZK w dniu 17 stycznia 1961), Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, NZK, 1/24.

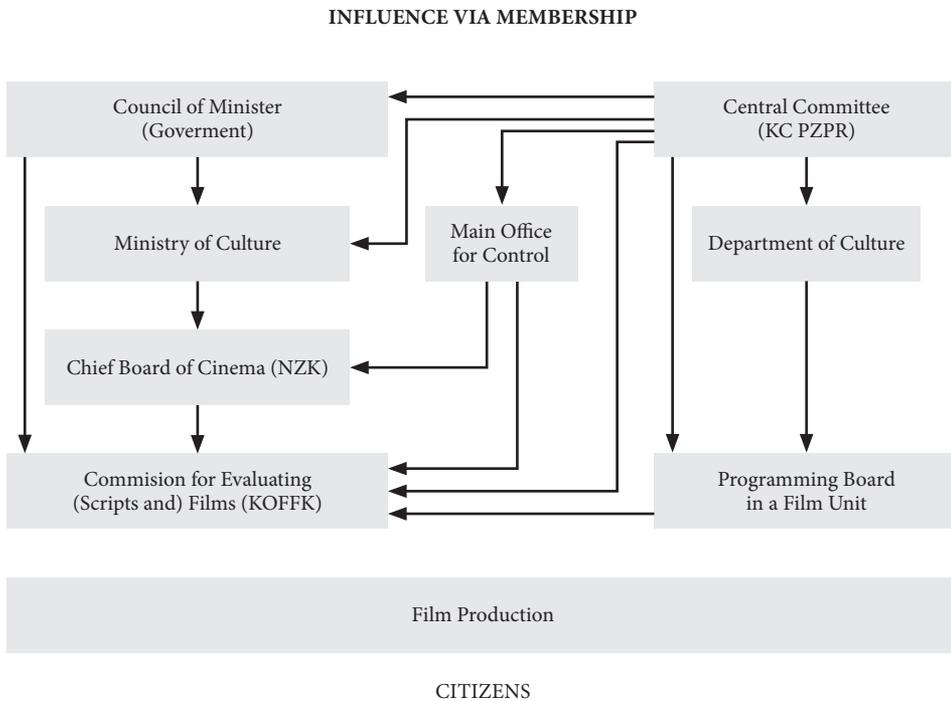


Figure 3: Communist Party influence on Censoring Decisions through its censoring bodies

and “active” Party members ensured that Party leadership possessed a solid sense of the direction a production was taking. Archival documents do however indicate that when martial law was not in effect, Party leadership tended to rely on formal channels — and not the grapevine — to keep check of filmmakers. In this sense, they had probably learned much from the Stalin years, when stricter forms of control had led to stagnation.

Given that it had high-ranking members imbedded in funding and control bodies, as well as in the film industry, it is fairly safe to conclude that the Party itself masterminded the system (see Figure 3). Such a conclusion explains why employees of the Department of Culture were the most active contributors when it came to evaluating the artistic and ideological credentials of a given film. It also explains why the Head of the Department of Culture had the power to advise the Minister of Culture and the Politburo to authorize the cutting or shelving of a film during times of political crisis. This model of controlling film remained in place throughout Communist rule.

In a manner that recalled Lenin’s declaration of cinema’s primacy among the arts, the Polish government made every effort to stimulate film, albeit in ways that benefitted the Party. As long as films followed the unwritten rule of not opposing the system in a direct way, the communist government provided a safety net, even when Polish cinema seemed to be unsustainable. For example, during an economic crisis in the late 1970s, the Council of Ministers (Rada Ministrów) passed an act establishing a new central source of film financing, ensuring the survival of the units irrespective of how their films fared with audi-

ences. Cinema therefore remained well funded and capable of competing against its new leisure time competitor, television. The Party was once again able to balance its role as controller and patron, before changing its approach in the late 1970s when opposition to the Party developed into the unified Solidarity movement that contributed to the fall of communism. The Party's wish to excel in the sphere of film led the Department of Culture to compose numerous alarmist memoranda in which they expressed what they saw as an unacceptable paucity of greenlighted scripts: so-called screenplay crises (*kryzysy scenariuszowe*). Concerns of this sort reveal that the Party actually over-financed the Polish film industry, thereby preventing cash-flow problems and guaranteeing its existence throughout the Cold War period.

Some screenplay crises were caused by the commission's overly strict forms of verification. During the first half of the 1960s, for example, an over-representation of hardliners in the commission resulted in a near-50% rejection rate. In 1960 alone, only 25 of the 42 submitted screenplays were actually permitted to go into production. The following year, only 33 of 61 were greenlighted. Instead of accepting its own culpability in this period of stagnation, the Party placed the blame squarely on industry decision-makers;⁵⁷⁾ the Party believed that it was fulfilling its obligations so long as production capital was available and no oppositional films were being made. The ideologues' refusal to accept even partial responsibility for the situation was emblematic of the Communist Party's tendency to cover up the negative consequences its political interference had on creative practice.

The Department of Culture recognized that undermining the creative control of filmmakers was not without its problems, even if official acknowledgement was not forthcoming. For this reason, the manner in which the department executed its powers tended to oscillate between periods of rigid adherence to Party ideology and a more relaxed approach. Many a time, minor rewrites or cuts allowed a previously rejected script to be greenlighted or a banned film to be released. Along with Central Committee policy shifts, the composition of the various bodies also underwent change. Financially secure filmmakers often insisted on negotiating over their projects, especially after 1973 when the Ministry of Culture's newly ratified Directive 27 stated that the Commission for Evaluating Films was required to inform a unit about the grounds for approving or rejecting a film or for calling for revisions to be made to it.⁵⁸⁾ Once the rationale was spelled out, discussions could open between a unit and the Chief Board of Cinema and/or the Department of Culture.

The influence a filmmaker wielded among Party officials was usually determined by his reputation and the perceived quality of his oeuvre. Established industry luminaries such as Andrzej Wajda therefore tended to hold greater sway than a first time director or one who had had a strained relationship with the authorities. As long as the political climate was fairly relaxed, this position of power could be used to make films that were critical of the Party. For example, Wajda's disapproving films *MAN OF MARBLE* and *MAN OF IRON* encountered only slight delays before being released, because this director, who en-

57) Untitled document, Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, KC PZPR Wydział Kultury, 237/XVIII/262.

58) 'Zarządzenie nr 27 MKiS z dnia 31 marca 1973 w sprawie powołania i zasad działania Komisji Ocen Fabularnych Filmów Kinowych,' Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, NZK, 4/14.

joyed a high standing in Polish film culture, had longstanding relations with Party officials and held pragmatic views on compromise. Unlike Wajda, newcomers to the industry and recently arrived émigré filmmakers struggled to get politically critical projects released. For example, production of Andrzej Żuławski's *THE SILVER GLOBE* (1977/1989) was stopped just as Polish audiences were given the opportunity to view Wajda's films. While these decisions may appear paradoxical, they were rationalized by the institutionalized mechanisms of control upon which the Party relied to protect its political and financial interests. In this case, Żuławski's relationship with the Party had already been strained by his production of the ideologically critical film *THE DEVIL* and by his inability to prevent the film from going over-budget. Factors such as these highlight the extent to which context-dependent logic underpinned the decision-making process. Lack of awareness of these conditions has led Westerners to conclude that the system was riddled with absurdities. Even if financial issues were not raised, it was clear to filmmakers and the authorities that the monopoly the Party enjoyed in the spheres of film production and distribution gave it major leverage during discussions between the two sides. The Party's primary objectives were to erase signs of dissent, and to maintain and promote the political system.

Conclusion: Sophisticated and Elusive Control with Artistic Ambitions

To date, Anglophone historiography has relied on early Polish writings and the claims of émigré filmmakers to paint a partial and misrepresentative picture of Polish film censorship under communism. At the same time, 'academic amnesia', as Imre called it, has exaggerated the opposition that existed between filmmakers and the authorities. However, through a close examination of archival documents, this essay has shown that irrespective of how oppressive Polish film censorship may have been at this time, it was also characterized by negotiations between filmmakers and Party officials that were intended to protect state investments in motion picture production.

Marek Hendrykowski has considered the extent to which a sense of interdependency shaped relations between Polish filmmakers and the communist government, and how it offered potential benefits to both sides.⁵⁹ Although the broad scope of his work prevents Hendrykowski from reconstructing the operations that comprised this system, his observations nevertheless develop current understandings of Polish film censorship. Hendrykowski's observation on a mutual tradition of ascribing supreme value to individual creativity helps to explain the similarities between the Polish system and that which Haraszty has described as operating in 1980s Hungary.⁶⁰ The case of Polish film censorship supports Iordanova's conclusions of the "sophisticated and elusive" character of other Eastern European systems of censorship.⁶¹

59) Marek Hendrykowski, 'Changing states in East Central Europe', in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (ed.) *The Oxford History of World Cinema: The Definitive History of Cinema Worldwide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 632–640.

60) Hendrykowski, 'Changing states in East Central Europe', p. 633; Miklós Haraszty, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

61) Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*, p. 34.

The belief that filmmakers should first and foremost be treated as artists helped to shape the institutional structure of Polish film censorship and to open up the possibility for negotiation between filmmakers and the authorities. Both sides used the notion of the filmmaker as artist to serve their respective needs. On the one hand, communist officials mainly encouraged filmmakers to make films of a high quality that promised to promote the regime, not dull political pictures but ones that stood to generate prestige for the state by winning awards at international festivals. On the other, filmmakers would invoke “artistic values” as leverage to convince the Party of the merits of their work. For these very reasons, when martial law was not in effect, a place existed in communist Poland for films that were critical of the regime.

While scholars have focused on Polish film censorship during times of political crisis, significantly less attention has been paid to comparatively relaxed periods, during which many important films were produced. The overview of processes of control that has been outlined above is intended to contribute to an ongoing program of revisionist Western historiography that will enrich understandings of the Polish film industry.

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SUMMARY

The Polish Film Industry under Communist Control
*Conceptions and Misconceptions of Censorship***Anna Misiak**

This essay makes use of archival documents and existing historiography to provide an overview of the institutional framework of film censorship that operated in Poland during the Cold War era. In contrast to scholarship that portrays the relationship between filmmakers and censors in terms of a “them and us” mentality, I demonstrate that at this time control of Polish narrative cinema resided in the interaction of the Party and the nation’s film industry. I argue that the censorship and modification of Polish films was bound up with the ways in which the state distributed production subsidies, and was underwritten by negotiation between filmmakers and the authorities. While the system was often quite oppressive, its standards changed over time, and were often relatively flexible. Ultimately, the essay seeks to counter myths that remain prevalent in Western scholarship by introducing international readers to positions that have been developed in Polish revisionist film historiography.