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Filling the Niches – Animation in Contemporary Poland. A conversation with Agnieszka Kowalska-Skowron¹

It is hardly a secret that the film community in contemporary Poland is not particularly interested in animation, which makes it, to a certain extent, a niche. Suffice it to say that the Polish Film Institute (Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej, PISF) is reluctant to co-finance animated films and funds allocated to animation are much smaller than those allocated to live action films.² So how is the animation branch of the industry coping in Poland? What is Polish animation and what problems is it facing right now?

Honorata Małaszkiwicz: What is the background of Polish animation after 1989 and what are its main traditions?

Agnieszka Kowalska-Skowron: Ever since the beginning of Polish post-World War II animation, that is after 1947, when the film *Za króla Krakusa* [In the Age of King Cracus] (dir. Zenon Wasilewski) was made, Polish animation has been appreciated for its high artistic value. *Tango* (1980, dir. Zbigniew Rybczyński) won an Oscar, and before that much praise was earned by

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² According to the PISF operational programmes reports for 2016, PLN 25 million was allocated to animated films, while live-action films received PLN 63 million (in accordance with Polish law, live-action films are referred to as “feature films”); animated films could also gain funding within the I Scriptwriting Grant Project (PLN 1 million) and II Project Development – Films for Young Viewers and Families (PLN 1 million) (the PISF operational programmes). See all films co-financed by the PISF as part of the Film Production operational project in 2016 (Projects co-financed by the PISF).

artists such as Lenica,³ Borowczyk⁴ or the Themersons.⁵ On the other hand, Polish animation after 1989 released a number of films and TV programmes addressed at children, such as *Miś Uszatek* [Floppy Bear] (1975–1987), which is very well-known in Japan, for instance, and doll animation films, such as productions made by the Se-Ma-For Studio, which used to be an internationally recognised institution. To cut a long story short: we have a wonderful tradition and great artists to admire. In the 1990s, animated films for children were still being made, but on a much smaller scale and finally their production became almost completely marginalised. This was partly caused by the fact that Polish Television cut funding for animation and thus forced animated film studios and artists to try to get by on their own on the free market. Unfortunately, it turned out they did not know how to do that. Until that moment, animation film artists were all employed by state-owned studios, since that was the only way to receive funding. Even Antoniszczak,⁶ who perceives himself as an independent artist, conducted all his projects within a state-owned studio.

HM: It seems then that in animation – in contrast to live-action feature film – there was no artistic crisis and the problem was mainly about obtaining sufficient funds?

AKS: Yes, and the after-effects of that situation are still visible today. Polish artistic animation, both new and that created by older artists, is still highly valued around the world. Interestingly, short animation seems to fare better than full-length films. If we take a look at the latter, we will discover that not only are they few in number but also most of them are not outstanding cinematographic works.

HM: You've mentioned that the West has always appreciated Polish animation. And how about Poland? I am especially curious about the films made in the People's Republic of Poland – has there been a new wave of interest in those?

AKS: There seems to be a new wave of interest in them linked to the growing interest in avant-garde movements but it is still limited to the circles connected with culture and most of it boils down to film festivals catering to animation fans. A few productions were presented on Polish Television (TVP Kultura channel) as part of an interesting cycle "Animation Now" prepared by Agata Makohin. But this still seems to be a marginal trend and we can hardly speak of any tradition or habit of watching animated films [short animated films not addressed at children – author's note] aside from the aforementioned festival cycles or retrospectives – but here we still face the problem of preaching to the choir. The situation is different as far as animated films for children are concerned – for this age group, there is a large number of older series and films available. It is part of the nostalgia – parents' wanting to share their favourite childhood stories with their children, which

³ Jan Lenica; see Culture.pl.

⁴ Walerian Borowczyk; see Culture.pl.

⁵ Stefan and Franciszka Themerson; see Culture.pl.

⁶ Julian Józef Antoniszczak, see Culture.pl.

is keenly explored by toy makers, for instance. Hence chains such as Multikino organise “Poranki” [Mornings] with *Reksio* or *Bolek and Lolek*. Older series for children are still aired on television, especially by TVP ABC channel.

HM: Can these older productions be viewed as competition for the new ones?

AKS: I would say they are complementary. They use different narrative techniques [archaic ones in comparison with the newest productions – author’s note] and because of that children often prefer contemporary animation. At the same time, the license market for using older brands and popular characters – for instance to produce toys – is still growing.

HM: And apart from these different narrative techniques, what are the main trends in Polish contemporary animation addressed at children? (Since animation for adults seems to be so niche, let us put it aside for a moment). Are they consistent with global trends or maybe there are some original phenomena, setting Polish animation apart on an international scale?

AKS: There is a visible division between the Western and Eastern markets, and it seems that the line separating these two worlds runs across Poland, or perhaps part of Germany as well. Though it is worth mentioning that the Russian *Masha and the Bear* (2009–) is very much different from other Eastern productions in terms of narrative techniques. I would call the Polish animation style “Floppy Bear” style, in which characters are still talking to one another, still walking somewhere and everything is slow and full of details, looks beautiful on screen of course, but children nowadays do not pay much attention to that. There is always a straightforward lesson and one episode lasts about ten minutes.

HM: Is ten minutes too long?

AKS: Yes, it is. Usually the best series are those that tell a story in five to seven minutes, where from one and a half up to two minutes is taken up by opening and closing sequences. Many Polish studios are still committed to the old ways of storytelling, which are moralising, detailed and very slow, but there are also new studios’ productions such as *Agi Bagi* (2015–), which is a very well-made product for international viewership. There are also Polish animations made according to Western models, which are entertaining for children and adults alike. It is difficult to identify any one trend that would account for all that is happening in Polish animation. Many new studios are being created; some of them focus on producing films based on contemporary children’s literature, which are much closer in their storytelling to *I Want My Hat Back* (Jon Klassen, 2016) than to Maria Konopnicka’s *About the Dwarfs and Mary the Orphan* (1986), while some only produce short animations.

HM: And what is the main influence behind these trends? Are there any particular artists that dictate them or is it mostly up to the producers?

AKS: With animated series you never think solely about animation; it is also about accompanying products and potential license buyers. Nobody makes

13-episode series anymore, because it is a known fact that a series needs to have 52 episodes to attract the attention of the most important broadcasters. This way of thinking makes it easier to find an international agent, too. The already mentioned *Agi Bagi* is a case in point: a well-thought out strategy implemented from the very beginning helped the producers create a brand that has sold to over 40 countries so far. Other good news is that older film studios are more and more conscious of how the market works. One example is Anima-Pol – its managing director, Jadwiga Wendorff, thinks ahead and they are always on the lookout for new scripts. Right now, Anima-Pol is working on a couple of very promising projects – precisely because their authors are very sensitive to current trends in children's culture. I very much hope that the series *Niesamowite przygody zagubionych skarpetek* [The Incredible Adventures of Missing Socks] which is currently developing, will turn out to be a massive hit. Such was the case with *Pamiętnik Florki* [Florka's Diary] (2014–). At present, its fourth season is in production, which makes it – together with *Agi Bagi* – the longest running Polish animated series in the last couple of years.

HM: Does this mean that Polish animation nowadays is first and foremost animated series for kids?

AKS: In terms of Polish animation, prizes are won by short animated films (mostly made by women) and these productions are appreciated within the industry. On the other hand, as far as broad viewership is concerned (i.e. viewers who are not particularly interested in artistic animation) animated productions are mostly animated film series for children. Polish animation for children is broadcast by TVP ABC, Telewizja Puls, Polsat Jim Jam and MiniMini+ channels as well as cinemas, for instance as part of the "Poranki" [Mornings] cycle. In my view, the Polish animation market is changing for the better – especially as far as full-length productions for children and teenagers are concerned – thanks to the PISF new main objective: Films for young viewers and families⁷ and the Film Production operational programme which offers financing for full-length animated films.

HM: Is it possible to talk about the animated film industry in Poland? Is there a unified group of artists and enthusiasts? Or would you say that it is a divided world, in which some groups are focused on artistic/festival animation defined in opposition to animation addressed at children?

AKS: All Polish animation is made by people from the same artistic milieu; everybody knows everybody else and artists frequently cooperate with one another. The Association of Polish Animation Producers was created to unify the industry.

HM: And can you identify any specific moment after 1989 that marked a breakthrough for Polish animation just like the Bill on Cinematography and

⁷ According to the 2017 operational programme: Production and Development of Films for Young Viewers and Families (full-length animated and live-action films) report, "including PLN 1 million for project development" (the PISF operational programmes).

the creation of the Polish Film Institute in 2005 proved a breakthrough for Polish live-action film?

AKS: The Bill on Cinematography was just as important for Polish animation. And even though the funds allocated to animated films are much smaller than those spent on live-action films, many animated films would never have been made without the PISF's support. All animated series for children are co-financed by the PISF. In Poland there is no developed private funding system, so the PISF – next to Komponent Media [Media Component] and the Creative Europe Programme – is virtually the only available source of funding for films. Whenever films are co-produced by Polish television, the financial input of the institution is usually small, but it still becomes the only distributor. The PISF offers funds but it also helps promote new productions, either by including them in its catalogue presented at international fairs or by financing their participation in various festivals.⁸ Returning to your question, I would say that a turning point, at least for doll animation, was the Oscar won by *Peter and the Wolf* (2006, dir. Suzie Templeton). In the course of making that film, many professionals were trained, who are now working on new productions all around the world. Polish animation was again in the spotlight. It's hard to talk about any other historical moments – as I said, Polish animation is still a niche.

HM: There has been talk about the need for a new cinematography bill. What is the opinion of the industry about the regulations concerning animation that should be included in a new bill?

AKS: It seems to me that what we need first and foremost are better legal conditions in terms of international co-productions – creating favourable tax regulations or investment funds. Another issue, so frequently neglected in Poland, is distribution and promotion. We could definitely use funds for distribution support, for instance in terms of dubbing, which is very costly (there are such practices in Scandinavia, for instance). But the main thing is about understanding that film does not end with production – it needs to be sold, too. This is one of the issues that we tackle at MOMAKIN.⁹

HM: So how does MOMAKIN respond to the problems of the Polish animation industry?

AKS: We are trying to react swiftly to all new trends on European and Polish markets, offering precisely the things that are in demand at any given point. We help producers find international co-producers. We plan how to introduce new series, develop their brands and supply them with additional products; we do our best to make sure that they mark their presence. We also introduce series for children to cinemas as part of the morning shows. We provide promotion for the

⁸ According to the 2017 operational programme: Promoting Polish Films Abroad (the PISF Operational programmes).

⁹ See Momakin.pl.

studios, in Poland and abroad. We also serve as an agency for artists, putting them in touch with international producers.

HM: In conclusion, how would you assess the Polish animation industry?

AKS: I think that there are many brilliant ideas that are increasingly well produced – also in commercial terms, as is the case with animated series for children. Artistic short animation from Poland is an international brand – in contrast to full-length productions – but domestically speaking, it is still a niche. The general public still identifies animation with children's stories. All in all, I consider the Polish animation market as very open, which provides great opportunities for future development.

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Summary

It is hardly a secret that the film community in contemporary Poland is not particularly interested in animation, which makes it, to a certain extent, a niche. So how is the animation branch of the industry coping in Poland? What is Polish animation and what problems is it facing right now? All about filling the niches and more in a conversation with Agnieszka Kowalska-Skowron, one of the organisers of the International Festival of Animation Art AnimArt in Poland.