



Summary

In search of independence in PRL-era film and culture

Sketches

In this book, the author focuses on the search for artistic independence in the Polish People's Republic (PRL), primarily in the sphere of film. The fundamental question he aims to answer is: What was the basis for independent film culture in the context of official culture?

It goes without saying that the selection of subject matter and issues in this work is open, selective and inexhaustive. There can be no other way, as a vast amount of research material is offered by Polish independent film culture (and not only this) functioning in the Polish People's Republic era and after 1989's transformation of the political system. The independence of film in that era is a far more controversial and ambiguous phenomenon than that in literature. It is not possible to speak of another way of distributing films free of censorship and evading the control of the communist authorities. Due to the financial and infrastructure constraints, film distribution could only occur through official channels. Likewise, it was impossible to produce a film unofficially and screen it in state-owned cinemas. As we are aware, artistic or political independence in this sphere led to certain parts of a work being cut by the censor or to completed films being shelved in warehouses and archives. At the other, complementary end of the spectrum, we might place fragments of films or entire films based on conversations with the audience using metaphorical and euphemistic language. Employing something akin to a code, Aesopian language comprehensible to the initiated and curious, often enabled artists to evade the communist authorities and get through to satisfy citizens' cravings for knowledge and truth. This 'double-speak' used by film-makers probably contributed to the creation of a national audiovisual idiom, one of whose key characteristics was the symbolic and metaphorical nature of the message. In many cases, this way of speaking between the lines, of 'instead-of speech', afforded a certain independence of artistic expression and the possibility to communicate with the audience through the official distribution, which, as we can see, was not entirely under the control of Party officials.

But what if we are to insist on the existence of a second route for films and their creators, who refused to accept the conditions of cinema distribution in the PRL era? This also opens up great room for manoeuvre. We can point to amateur 8- and 16-millimetre films, made and screened at amateur film clubs, and also different films made for festivals of non-professional artists. The latter emerged and became popular with the advent of video cassettes, which were much easier to produce, buy, store and transport out of the reach of the state apparatus and repression. Consequently, it became easier for independent content to reach audiences. Watching films on video was not just an individual experience but also took place in closed screenings, in this way expanding community of the emboldened. However, this was only possible during the 1980s, the final decade of the PRL and state monopoly in film distribution.

Yet another forum for the dissemination of independent content that was highly developed in Poland at that time was the network of film discussion clubs, which existed primarily in academic centres disposing cinema auditoria, or more often, projection rooms, and a more artistic and intellectual repertoire. What was shown here were films borrowed from other countries' embassies and cultural centres, works acquired for film festivals, works brought from other parts of the world by artists themselves, etc. This was not so much underground distribution as hidden beneath the surface of official film life in Poland, seeking out short-term openings and gaps in film culture not particularly well monitored by the authorities.

The book is only arranged in line with the chronological order to a certain extent, since it takes account of the successive appearance of particular phenomena, figures and subjects that were of interest to artists seeking independence in the film sphere. The diachronic examination is significant here, which often constituted an attempt to present a particular phenomenon in its entirety, in a horizontal cross-section. Together these two overlapping perspectives form a whole. The first part of the book is just one single chapter devoted to key issues related to the existence of independent film in the PRL era, namely distribution of these works. This chapter shows how before 1989 film distribution free from the communist authorities' censorship was impeded but not impossible. This was evident straight after October 1956 with the founding of film discussion clubs, in which reviews, seminars and festivals were organised. The result was that films were introduced into the cinema's repertoire that were unusual, challenging and often banned in certain countries (including socialist ones) for various reasons, and were of great artistic merit and shaped the tastes and attitudes of audiences. This phenomenon was complemented by ambitious film magazines, especially "Kultura Filmowa" and "Film na Świecie", which grew out of it, as well as the existence of amateur film clubs. In this chapter, a great deal of space is given to presenting the new grass-roots form of film distribution related to the spread of video technology, which democratized the presentation and distribution of films, including those made by Poles abroad, particularly during the difficult times of martial law. The chapters that follow describe more distinctive phenomena. The second half of the book contains profiles of three different film-makers, each with their own ways of seeking independence. They are presented chronologically, by date of birth and artistic debut. Tadeusz Konwicki, Andrzej Kondratiuk and Andrzej Żuławski represent different generations and styles, but what links them is their refusal to accept the official rules imposed by those governing Polish cinematography at that time.

The next part of the book presents Polish documentary films made by emigrees after 1981. This is represented by the films made by the Parisian Video Kontakt under the watchful eye of the centre's director, the producer Mirosław Chojecki. To a great extent this centre proved to be Polish culture's saviour during this time. From 1985–1990, a group of directors, screenwriters and camera operators, including Andrzej Wolski, Agnieszka Holland, Tomasz Łabędź, Jarosław Sypniewski and Witold Zadrowski, produced dozens of films and reportages on Polish history against the backdrop of 20th-century Europe. The dominant form was biographical film devoted to the fortunes of eminent Poles. Its subject matter of military history and culture reflected the nature of Video Kontakt, presenting foreign and domestic audiences with issues and characters that were unwanted or even banned by the Poland's communist authorities.

The essays in the next part of the book exemplify ideas on subjects deemed by the Party authorities to be illegal or dangerous for the ideological development of citizens. The author has selected one of the key ideas connected with our recent history, which refers to the so-called 'Cursed Soldiers' fighting with the nascent communist regime devised and imposed to a great extent by the Soviet Union. But what is also interesting in this case is the fate of this subject in post-transformation Poland, as it could be dealt with without any mental or censorship restrictions. The next chapter in this part of the book deals not so much with issues but phenomena presented taking into consideration pre- and post-1989 perspectives. This relates to the ethos of rock music on stages before 1989, and more precisely, its image as presented in the documentary films of that era and the present day.

The final part and final chapter contain an appendix of sorts. It is devoted to the politically and artistically bold art (as well in writing and film) of Zdzisław Beksiński, painter, writer, diarist and *home movie* and *home video* pioneer in Poland (1960s and 1970s), an artist who utilised an array of media and artistic forms of expression in his work. It is worth regarding Beksiński in terms of the independent position he carved out for himself in the socio-political reality demarcated by the totalitarian state. How did he manage to expand his sphere of creative autonomy? Did this process involve harmful effects, or was this opening up of costs new channels of communication outside art positive for Beksiński's character? We can also see the extent to which the image Beksiński created for himself coincides (or not) with that created by recent biographies, in both literature and film.

The book *In search of independence in PRL-era film and culture. Sketches* was conceived not so much as a minipanorama of topics and events related to the forms and means of expressing independence in PRL-era Polish film, but more as an invitation to the reader to engage in a further search of their own and make discoveries in this field.

Translated by Rob Pagett