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What Happened in Czech Audiovisual Industry in 2024

In 2024, the most attended title in Czech cinemas was a Czech film. Towards the end of the year, the ticket sales of this Hollywood-style drama about the heroism of reformatory communists from the Czechoslovak Radio surpassed Pixar's *Inside Out 2* (which, however, grossed several million more). In addition to competing with a limited offer of Czech titles, its popularity was arguably boosted by the heavily publicised fact that the film made the shortlist of 15 nominees for the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. According to the data collected by the Union of Film Distributors, Jiří Mádl's *Waves* (Vlny) attracted 884 thousand cinemagoers. The last time a Czech film ranked on top of the list of box office admissions was in the Covid year of 2020. In the few months the cinemas were open, documentary *Caught in the Net* (V síti) was the most popular title. In the past, the biggest Czech hits were comedies such as *Women on the Run* (Ženy v běhu, 2019), *What Men Long For* (Po čem muži touží, 2018), *Barefoot* (Po strništi bos, 2017). But the dominance of *Waves* doesn't mean that the interest in undemanding entertainment has diminished. The list of the highest-grossing Czech films of 2024 includes titles such as *The Aristocrats* (Aristokratka ve varu) and *The Sweet Life* (Sladký život). The only thing that's changed is that a well-marketed lifestyle comedy starring popular actors doesn't automatically guarantee hundreds of thousands sold tickets.

In order to get the people to the cinemas, it's necessary to make a film for the entire family (such as the animated *Proud Princess* [Pyšná princezna, 2024]) or create a society-wide event. In addition to *Waves*, the latter happened in case of *Her Drunken Diary* (Zápisník alkoholičky, 2024). More than half a million people came to see intoxicated Tereza Ramba. But it's becoming increasingly common that people will rather wait a couple of weeks and watch the film on Netflix or another streaming

service. But thanks to rights ownership, various regional subsidies (e.g. the Film Office of the Ústí nad Labem Region was very active in this respect in 2024) and product placement, it's not like the producers of films with lower box office often lose money. On the other hand, they managed to adapt to the transformation of the audiovisual market and the viewers' habits.

According to the Audiovisual Producer's Association (APA), Czech film and television production fares exceedingly well. APA's traditional presentation held in Karlovy Vary announced that in 2023, the turnover of the Czech audiovisual industry amounted to 13,5 billion CZK. Compared to 2022, the number is slightly lower, but that was because the outflow of foreign production caused by Hollywood strikes and the temporary suspension of the film incentive system. But thanks to an intervention by the Czech Ministry of Culture and an amendment of the Audiovisual Law, the system was restarted in January 2024 and the Czech Republic welcomed foreign film crews again. For instance the crew of Amazon's *Blade Runner 2099* spent about a billion crowns last year and created jobs for approximately a thousand people.

Thanks to the continuing expansion of Czech television and VoD Production, newly joined by French Canal+ and its *Daughter of the Nation* (Dcera národa, 2024) (and the upcoming *Moloch*), we can assume that the 2024 turnover will hit new heights. The question is, however, how big a share will be assigned to the 60 films for cinemas made here last year. In many cases, the films were debuts and smaller production successful mainly at festivals. Almost half of the films are documentaries which have a hard time finding its audiences due to the excessive audiovisual offer. For non-fiction, the transition from cinema distribution to online platforms is much quicker due to low ticket sales. High turnover, stemming mainly from adverts and television and foreign productions, doesn't necessarily mean that all spheres of audiovisual industry thrive.

The number of debuts and documentaries, along with the continuing boom of (short) animated films, however, shows other things, such as the stabilised system of film education and funding. Let's take a look at film schools.

IFF Karlovy Vary screened three debuts by FAMU students – Adam Martinec (*Mord*), Marie-Magdalena-Kochová (*The Other One* [Ta druhá]) and Pavol Martin Repka (*From*

March to May [Od marca do mája]). Pavel Sýkora and Viktor Horák from the Miroslav Ondříček Film Academy in Písek have won the Student Oscar for their intimate drama set in the occupied borderland *The Compatriot* (Krajan). Pola Kazak, another student of the Miroslav Ondříček Film Academy, screened her short film made with paint-on-glass animation *Weeds* (Plevel) in Cannes.

Other filmmakers were also successful at various international events. Three animated shorts produced by Czech company Maur Film were successful at the Annecy Festival. The Žižkov beer romance *Hurricane* (Hurikán) won the Audience Award, playful animated slapstick *Hello Summer* (Ahoj léto) won the category for Young Audiences and *Joko* took the award for Best Original Music. And Kristina Dufková's feature film about growing up and social ostracism *Living Large* (Život k sežrání) received the Jury Award. The film was later nominated for two European Film Awards and sold to distribution in many countries around the world. Another worldwide festival hit was Klára Tasovská's documentary portrait *I'm not Everything I Want to Be* (Ještě nejsem, kým chci být). The life story of photographer Libuše Jarcovjáková told with her own photographs and diary entries premiered at Berlinale and was screened at prestigious festivals such as CPH:DOX in Copenhagen, IndieLisboa in Lisbon and DOK.fest in Munich. Czech Republic had its representative also at the last of the three most prestigious festivals. Vojtěch Strakatý's debut drama *After Party* premiered in the Orizzoni Extra at the Venice IFF. We cannot forget the success that was *War Correspondent* (Válečný zpravodaj). The film, in which David Čálek and Benjamin Tuček create a portrait of reporter Martin Dorazín, won the award for Best Documentary Film at the Warsaw Film Festival.

Coming back to the stabilised funding, credit goes to two established institutions. Almost a half of the abovementioned 60 feature films was made with the contribution of the State Cinematography Fund and the Czech Television. But both institutions can expect changes. Until licence fees are increased, Czech Television will have to lower spending on their own productions and co-productions made with the help of its Film Centre. And some channels may even get shut down. And the Fund will undergo a transformation in the coming months. Last year, the Senate approved an amendment to the Audiovisual Bill which will turn the Cinematography Fund into the Audiovisual Fund. The change will affect more than just the name. The current Audiovisual Bill was approved in 2012. Four years later, it was significantly amended. But in the meantime,

Czech audiovisual industry had undergone changes that needed to be taken into account. Streaming platforms strengthened their positions and today, they produce a significant number of films and series. The gaming industry has also strengthened. In 2022, the turnover of Czech gaming companies exceeded 7,5 billion Czech Crowns. Because of the balance tipping from films for cinema distribution to television, streaming and gaming, the Fund will now newly contribute to 'small screen' and gaming. In addition to the possibility to support a wider range of audiovisual production, further motivation for transformation was reworking the parafiscal fees collected from individual subjects on the audiovisual market.

The crucial part of the institution's budget comes from the industry itself. The rest is covered by the state. The prevailing belief that each film supported by the Fund is paid by our taxes is therefore not true. Until now, commercial televisions paid 2 % of their income, cinemas and cinema distributors 1 % and Czech VoD platforms 0,5 %. The amendment levels that to 2 % each. With foreign streaming services which haven't been paying anything, the situation is a bit more complicated. They will newly be taxed with 3,5 % of their domestic income. But they will be able to choose whether they want to pay parafiscal fees or directly invest into local production or a combination of both.

That means that the Fund should receive more money, but the question is how much will be allocated to smaller productions for cinemas, whose representatives will have a worse negotiating position. That was apparent from various lobbying pressures already during the discussions about the new Audiovisual Bill held in an advisory group for the transformation of the State Cinematography Fund. In addition to streaming services, participants included representatives of distributors, televisions, producers, film schools and several industry associations. But for instance the Association of Film Editors wasn't represented.

Despite that, other industry associations pushed for the transformation to take into account professional standards and reflect the trends of modern society of 21st century. In cooperation with film schools, the Association of Czech Directors, Screenwriters and Script Editors (ARAS) wanted to include wording about social and environmental sustainability. In foreign countries, ratings for 'green filming' are already a standard. It's not compulsory but when the crew commits to work in an

environmentally sustainable way, it can get higher subsidies. In a similar manner, the Swedish Film Institute has been promoting gender parity since 2014. The transformation, however, doesn't promise levelling the system nor a bigger emphasis on green production. There are, however, proposals for point and financial bonuses for more socially and environmentally conscious applicants.

But there is undoubtedly some awareness of sustainable production methods here. Last year, FAMU pledged to support sustainable development in Czech audiovisual industry. As a part of the Czech Initiative NPO Green Deal, the Academy should create an educational programme for students and courses for professionals focused on environmental consulting, sustainable operation of film institutions and festivals and ethical marketing. In September 2024, several key players of the Czech audiovisual industry (including ARAS and FAMU) signed a Memorandum about the creation of a Czech platform for sustainable audiovisual industry which should serve as a centre for sustainability issues in the Czech Republic. As of now, an expert group put together the principles for sustainable film production in the Czech Republic.

Another issue are the current conditions for female filmmakers. This issue attracted the spotlight after Daria Kashcheeva won the Czech Lion Magnesia Award for her film *Electra* which shows the unrealistic and devastating requirements imposed on women by the society. She also talked about that in her acceptance speech. She mentioned her personal concerns and doubts about how hard it is for women to succeed in creative industries and combine their professional and maternal roles. But as she was cut short, she couldn't get to the point of her message meant primarily to representatives of the Czech audiovisual industry present in the hall – a concrete proposal how to level the playing field. According to the full text, which appeared on the website of her alma mater, film production budget should allocate finances for babysitters or alternative forms of childcare so that working mothers wouldn't be disadvantaged.

In reaction to Kashcheeva's speech (among other things), the Audiovisual Producer's Association commissioned a study on the representation of women in crucial profession of Czech live-action feature films in the last 30 years. The study showed that the share of female filmmakers across various professions and generations remains very low. The respondents also mentioned various forms of belittling, sexism

and discrimination. 'According to the respondents, another obstacle is a stereotypical perception of women as less suitable than men for film professions,' says one of the conclusions of the study which will hopefully be taken into account by individual production companies if not by the State Fund.

But back to the transformation. Details of the operation of the transformed Fund should be defined by its concept and statute currently being drafted during meetings with individual professional associations. It's without a doubt good that it's happening in parallel with the discussion about the position of women and the conditions in film and television industry in general. During various conferences throughout the year, directors, cinematographers, sound engineers and actors discussed low salaries, bad communication between departments and extreme overtimes.

Due to a higher number of productions, the amount of work increases (along the material filmed using digital cameras). But the amount of time and money remains more or less the same. The crews therefore need to work quickly, economically and without factoring in the demanding character of individual creative professions. In documentary filmmaking, the situation is particularly dire. According to current findings, in order for a documentary filmmaker to earn a living, they would need to work on 7 films simultaneously. The result of established production models is an enormous stress load with long-term health consequences. According to an Insight study, more than 75 % of respondents don't consider the work environment in Czech audiovisual industry to be favourable to mental health.

This year, the unification of individual film associations should continue in the hopes that collective negotiations will strengthen their position. The first step of this process was the November conference in Kampus Hybernská co-organised by the associations of cinematographers, editors and directors, screenwriters and script editors. A partial success was won last year. After a series of negotiations with the Czech Television management and its Director-General, they achieved an increase in the salary tables. The financial remuneration of individual creative employees in the Czech Television increased slightly.

Joining forces, creating unions and putting pressure on television and producers seems to be the way to remedy the deteriorating work and financial conditions of individual employees. Otherwise, the gap between the dazzling final numbers (turnover, attendance, income) and everyday reality of burnt-out people on the set will keep widening.