

Alternative distribution and its role in the promotion of films produced by the Irzykowski Film Studio between 1981–1984^[1]

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The Irzykowski Film Studio was founded in 1981 as an institution that allowed young filmmakers to start their careers directly after graduating from the Film School. The studio could produce medium-length and short feature films and documentaries as well as animation. Nevertheless, all these types of films, according to the statute confirmed by the minister, were not to be officially cinema distributed, since they were supposed to be treated as a film exercise, a kind of practice run. Finally, it turned out that the Irzykowski Film Studio productions were regarded as fully fledged films that could compete with films produced by Film Units (i.e., the professional organizational entities of the Polish film production system at the time) or short film studios. What is not without significance, most films (not to say: all) were politically controversial. Therefore, the leaders of the Studio decided to show films to the audience, but they could not do it officially by applying for referral to cinema distribution. In connection with this, they were shown at small film festivals, inner (unofficial) screenings, and illegally distributed on VHS tapes. By extension, the range of distribution was narrow, but, curiously enough, the films were attracting a lot of interest from film critics, audiences and... state authorities. The aim of this paper is to analyze the alternative distribution process that occurred at the Irzykowski Film Studio. What films were shown at festivals, at internal screenings, and which were illegally copied onto VHS tapes? Had all the films shown been censored? How did state censorship react to test screenings with the audience? How did the critics and audience perceive these films? Did the presence of films at festivals influence their cinema distribution? and finally: How did the promotion and festival distribution of these films affect the perception of the Irzykowski Film Studio among the state authorities?

KEYWORDS: film distribution, filmmaking in the People’s Republic of Poland, the Irzykowski Studio, illegal screenings

The Irzykowski Film Studio was founded in 1981 by a group of young graduates of the Łódź Film School, and was modelled on the Hungarian Béla Balázs Studio. Its main objective was to produce full-length and medium-length feature films, documentaries, and animations. In comparison to the film units (i.e., the professional organizational entities of the Polish film production system at the time) the Studio was unique in its programming independence. In the film units (it should be noted that the Studio and the film units shared the same technical base of

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filmmaking), the artistic director was responsible for programming policy, while in the Studio, a five-person Artistic Council consisting of young filmmakers was elected for a four-year term by the Studio members. The comparison of the competences of these two structures shows that the Artistic Council was a strictly democratic authority with a wide range of prerogatives; importantly, it decided whether to accept and to direct the submitted project.^[2] The artistic director of the film units, on the other hand, had to receive approval for production from the Deputy Minister of Culture and Art for Cinema before making a decision on production. Furthermore, the ideological and programming activities of the film units were supervised by ministerial officials, whereas in the case of the Studio, the Artistic Council was supervised solely by the general meeting of its members.

In view of these considerations, the most important is the fact that the Studio's films, unlike the productions of film units, were not to be presented to the public.^[3] In this sense, the Studio was regarded as a practice field for young artists. There was an exception to this rule, though, in that these films could be released if they passed the political and artistic evaluation system, which was obligatory for films produced by film units. It is important to recall that the socialist distribution system in use at that time was strictly codified, and the decision to distribute depended on the Deputy Minister of Culture and Art for Cinema. He decided whether a film should be accepted and introduced into cinemas or rejected. The minister also decided on the range of distribution, which was reflected in the number of copies produced. He made these decisions on the basis of recommendations received from state censors and members of the ministerial Pre-Release Review Committee, which consisted of filmmakers, critics and writers affiliated with the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. Therefore, it is clear that the Studio could produce whatever it wanted (of course, within the small budget granted by the authorities), but only those films that were approved by the censorship and the ministry were to be shown to audiences. In this way, the state authorities reduced the risk of introducing politically controversial films, while the Studio itself was treated as a kind of "safety valve."

Between 1981 and 1984, the Irzykowski Film Studio produced 26 films. Only eight of these were released by the state distributor, while the rest were either rejected by the state censors or sent for revision, mainly for political reasons. Nevertheless, this did not mean that these films were unavailable to audiences. The Studio's Artistic Council decided to present them successively at internal screenings, reviews and

[2] Regulations of the Irzykowski Film Studio, Archives of Modern Records (hereafter: AAN), collection: Supreme Board of Film Affairs (hereafter: NZK), no. 2–109.

[3] There was, incidentally, a parallel regulation in the Hungarian Béla Balázs Studio. Cf. B. Varga, *Co-operation. The Organisation of Studio Units in the Hungarian Film Industry of the 1950s and 1960s*, [in:] *Film units: restart*, eds. M. Adamczak, M. Malatyński, P. Marecki, Kraków – Łódź, pp. 324–329.

festivals, often obtaining censorship approval for such one-off closed screenings addressed to limited audiences, and sometimes doing so not completely legitimately. In this way, a kind of alternative and incidental distribution circuit was created. When analysing the role of a film festival in contemporary film culture, Marcin Adamczak aptly notes that the circulation set by the calendar rhythm of subsequent events may constitute a distribution channel for films without commercial value, thus enabling them to reach a specific target group.^[4] In the late PRL (People's Republic of Poland) period, this type of circulation was a chance for films devoid of commercial value and, as the case of the Studio shows, for productions that did not receive censorship approval for regular cinema distribution. As a result, politically controversial films could reach an interested audience.

The aim of this text is to reconstruct the distribution circumstances of films that were stopped by the censor, but nevertheless functioned in a limited distribution circuit. It should be mentioned that I analyse not only distribution in cinemas (in this circuit there functioned above all films that received conditional permission for a one-time screening), but also in non-cinematic distribution, including the distribution of films on video cassettes (this circuit was actually beyond the control of the state authorities and included films that had been totally blocked by censorship). I focus particularly on the activities of the Studio's authorities and the social and political contexts that determined such practices, which are of interest in the light of the dissemination of the Irzykowski Film Studio achievements. Consequently, the research question that I pose in this thesis is the following: Did screenings of films restricted by censorship, addressed to a limited audience, have an impact on the promotion of the Studio's works?

An important meeting place for the film community in the period in question was the screening room "D," located in the Documentary Film Studio (hereafter: WFD). Here, internal film reviews were carried out on full-length feature films, which were then produced by film units. They were attended by those involved in the work on a given film, although the participation of guests, e.g., the director's colleagues from another film unit indirectly related to a given production, was also possible. However, everyone had to have a pass to enter the WFD premises. So basically, they were legal screenings. At the same time, however, under the pretext of introducing amendments, screenings that were, in fact, clandestine in nature were organised. This type of screening featured films that had just been completed and it was known in advance that they would have problems with distribution. This was the case with *Nadzór* (*Custody*, dir. Wiesław Saniewski, 1983); presenting the story of

**Screening room
"D" and (un)official
internal screenings**

[4] M. Adamczak, *Instytucja festiwalu filmowego w ekonomii kina*, "Panoptikum" 2016, no. 16(23), p. 29.

a young woman sentenced to imprisonment for financial embezzlement, the film was interpreted as a metaphor for the contemporary situation in Poland, or *Niedzielne igraszki* (*Sunday pranks*, dir. Robert Gliński, 1983), which was an image of Stalinist Poland in miniature. Even during martial law, the first Polish film directly related to that period was shown in this way. Obviously, it is about about *Wigilia* (*Christmas Eve*, dir. Leszek Wosiewicz, 1982), which reflects the stifling atmosphere of martial law (a story about three women who, from December 13, are waiting for their men to return home). Tomasz Miernowski, the studio's head of production, recalls that internal screenings of these films were very popular.[5] Notably, viewers were not only representatives of the film community[6] but also Solidarity opposition activists.[7]

This type of screening was kept strictly secret, and was usually organised after the studio management's working hours, but sometimes information about this type of screening spread further. One such event that caused a stir at the highest levels of state power was the double screening of *Przechodzień* (*The Passerby*, dir. Andrzej Titkow, 1984).[8] The documentary about the controversial writer Tadeusz Konwicki, whose literary works were banned by the state censor, was shown in the WFD twice: on December 17 and 18, 1984, shortly after editing was completed. Formally, these screenings were of a working nature. Unofficially, many people from artistic circles sympathising with the Solidarity opposition were invited, including the writer Wiktor Woroszyński, literary critic Andrzej Drawicz (both were interned during martial law), actor Andrzej Łapicki, and the correspondent of the "New York Times" in Warsaw, Michael Kaufman, who also brought American embassy employees.[9] According to the documentation, nearly eighty people saw Titkow's film in two days.[10] WFD staff member Włodzimirz Stępiński, who informed the management of the company about this screening, described in his memo how it developed:

The Irzykowski Film Studio sent an official letter to the WFD asking them to rent a screening room, which was to include 5–6 people from the production group. This is usually an operation under the contract that the

[5] Years later, Miernowski said that as soon as there was information about the organization of an internal screening of a film banned by censorship, many people from the film community and critics approached the Studio with a request to arrange a pass to enter the WFD premises. Interview with Tomasz Miernowski conducted by Emil Sowiński, October 2, 2020.

[6] Saniewski recalls that Andrzej Wajda was invited to one of the screenings of *Custody*. See W. Saniewski, *Wolny strzelec pod nadzorem c.d.*, "Odra" 2020, no. 3, p. 98.

[7] Interview with Tomasz Miernowski, op.cit.

[8] The memo informing about the organization of the show was sent not only to the desk of the Minister of Culture and Art, Kazimierz Żygulski, or the head of the Culture Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Witold Nawrocki, but also to comrades: Świrgoń, Rakowski, Messner, Barcikowski and even Jaruzelski. See Attachment to the daily information, 30.12.1984, AAN, collection: Culture Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (hereafter: WKKCPZPR), no. LVI-1709.

[9] A. Titkow, *Inteligent niepokorny w kraju realnego socjalizmu*, Toruń 2020, p. 38.

[10] Attachment to the daily information, op.cit.

WFD has with the Irzykowski Film Studio. However, this time, the director invited many people who did not belong to the production group.[11]

As a result of this memo, a special meeting was organised three days later, the subject of which was “anti-socialist demonstration,”[12] as both screenings were referred to in the party documentation. The meeting was attended by employees of the Culture Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (hereafter: Culture Department of the PZPR), the Ministry of Culture and Art, WFD and the Supreme Board of Cinematography (hereafter: NZK).[13] As a result of the consultation, steps were taken to punish those responsible for organising these screenings. The deputy director of the WFD, Lucyna Nowak, was reprimanded for the lack of supervision over the personnel, the commander of the WFD’s industrial guard was reprimanded for allowing people not related to cinema to enter the premises, while the film editor Agnieszka Bojanowska was forbidden to undertake additional commissioned works for 12 months for misleading the cinema operator.[14] Nevertheless, the film director Andrzej Titkow was punished most severely, as he was deprived of a foreign scholarship by the head of cinematography.[15]

On the other hand, the WFD also hosted official screenings with invited guests organised with the authorities’ consent. One of the first such screenings occurred at the end of martial law on June 13–15, 1983.[16] This event was closed and intended for film journalists and activists promoting film culture associated the Film Clubs society (hereafter: DKF). During the event, most of the Irzykowski Film Studio films that were finished at that time were presented, including the full-length *Kartka z podróży* (*Postcard from a Journey*, dir. Waldemar Dziki, 1983) addressing the extermination of Jews; *Christmas Eve, Custody, Sunday Pranks, Jeszcze czekam* (*Still waiting*, dir. A. Marek Drązewski, 1982) (a documentary about a 13-year-old boy killed during the demonstration in Poznań in 1956); a satire on the colonial educational system of martial law – *Słoneczna gromada* (*Summer camps*, dir. Wojciech Maciejewski, 1983); a documentary entitled *Być człowiekiem* (*Being a human*, dir. Julian Pakuła, 1983), showing the environment of punks and hippies; a documentary portrait of Piotr Skrzynecki, the leader of the Piwnica pod Baranami cabaret, which was closed during martial law, i.e., *Przewodnik* (*The Guide*, dir. Tomasz Zygadło, 1983); as well as experimental animated film *Smoczy Ogon* (*Dragon’s Tail*, dir. Michał Szczepański, 1981) and *Koncert* (*The Concert*, dir. Michał Tarkowski, 1983, showing the phenomenon of Polish rock music in the 1980s.

[11] Włodzimierz Stepiński’s memo, 18.12.1984, Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance (hereafter: AIPN), no. IPN BU 0222/531.

[12] Attachment to the daily information, op.cit.

[13] Ibidem.

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Jerzy Bajdor’s memo [no date], AAN, WKKCPZPR, no. LVI-1709.

[16] Invitation to the official screening, 6.06.1983, document from the private archives of cinematographer Jan Mogilnicki.

The screening resulted in two opposite press reports. The first one, written by Marek Miller, was positive;^[17] the second, by Zbigniew Klaczyński, was exceptionally critical, not to say accusatory.^[18] To say nothing of the content of these two texts, it should be noted that the studio appeared in the media space thanks to them. First of all, viewers learned about it, especially those with a clearly defined cinephile profile. As a consequence, the Studio films were screened at reviews and festivals, primarily organised by DKF activists who flocked to screenings in room “D.”

Film reviews and festivals

One of the first external screenings of the studio's films took place in Wisła, during the Meeting of Young Creative Communities. The event was a review of the latest films by young directors. Apart from the production of the Irzykowski Film Studio, the most important student short films and TV debuts produced by the Munk Film Studio were presented. The screening of films from the Irzykowski Film Studio was held on the third day of the review. During the event, the following were presented: *Postcard from a Journey*, *Sunday Pranks*, about the August agreements, *Choinka strachu* (*The Christmas Tree of Fear*, dir. Tomasz Lengren, 1981), *Being a human*, *Dragon's Tail*, *The Concert* and *The Guide*.^[19] Thus, two films were not shown in Wisła but presented at the end of July at an unofficial screening for journalists, i.e. *Summer camps* and *Custody*.^[20]

In 1983, there were also other screenings, this time organised by DKFs. At the end of November 1983, in Czechowice-Dziedzice, DKF “Puls” organised a screening of films combined with meetings with directors associated with the studio. Among the films presented there were: *The Christmas Tree of Fear*, *Summer camps*, *Christmas Eve*, *Being a human*, *Postcard from a Journey*, *Sunday Pranks* and *Still waiting*.^[21] In November, the “Film Review of the Irzykowski Film Studio” took place at DKF

[17] A journalist of the weekly “Radar” wrote: “The films I watched do not fit into any homogeneous whole, in any particular style. If there is something that connects them, it is the sharpness of social observation, the uncompromising nature of social diagnoses, and the importance of the issues raised. We have not forgotten what we meant – the characters of these films seem to be saying [...]” See M. Miller, *Kino moralnej próby*, “Radar” 1983, no. 32, pp. 6–7.

[18] The editor-in-chief of “Film” weekly thundered: “And the idea to make the Studio a refuge for actions – to put it mildly – unfavourable towards our statehood and its social structures, does not best prove the ability of the Studio's promoters to think realistically [...]. Let no one tell me, in turn, that it is about art. It is probably not a handy coincidence for the management of the Studio, but ten films that I know and which have been produced here present as if the principle of inverse proportion of politics and

quality. The more politics, the worse the job and the poorer the thinking.” See Z. Klaczyński, *Samorządność*, “Film” 1983, no. 31, p. 3.

[19] The course of the Meeting of Young Film Communities, AAN, WKKCPZPR, no. LVI-1211.

[20] Interestingly, the official program announced a short form about the tenement house in Łódź – *Kamienica* (*Tenement House*, dir. Jacek Kowalczyk, 1982) and *Custody* (under the working title – *Klara*). Today it is difficult to clearly indicate the reasons for the absence of the above-mentioned films. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that, at least in the case of *Custody*, it was about the controversy that the film raised among decision-makers. See Program of the Meeting of Young Film Communities, a document from the private archives of the film director Bogdan Górski.

[21] *Kalendarium*, “Film na Świecie” 1984, no. 301–302, p. 116.

“Kwant.”[22] In February 1984, the studio’s film review was held in Koszalin.[23] In Gdańsk, in March 1984, during the first edition of the “Young Polish Cinema” review, the following films were presented, among others: *Sunday Pranks*, *Christmas Eve*, *Postcard from a Journey*, *Dragon’s Tail* and *The Christmas Tree of Fear*. [24]

I mention the titles of the films shown at these events to draw attention to the fact that many of them have already been formally stopped by censorship (*Christmas Eve*, *Sunday Pranks*, *Summer camps*, *Still waiting*, *The Christmas Tree of Fear*). [25] Therefore, when organising the screenings mentioned above, DKFs had to obtain censorship approval for a one-off screening. At the same time, the list of films shown at that time proves that censorship was lenient towards some of them (it is about politically controversial films present at each screening: *Christmas Eve*, *Sunday Pranks* and *The Christmas Tree of Fear*). The presence of the film *Still waiting* during the reviews of the film mentioned above is also surprising, given that the censor disallowed its wide distribution even during the liberalisation period, in 1988. [26] On the other hand, there were also carefully censored films, such as *Custody*, which was no longer shown anywhere after it appeared at the WFD review.

It is also worth mentioning that films not approved by the censor were also shown during officially functioning reviews. The scandal was caused, for example, by the illegal screening of the film *Jest* (*He has arrived*, dir. Krzysztof Krauze, 1984) during the “Young Polish Cinema” review. The documentary about the inhabitants of the village of Zbrosza Duża, who fought with the authorities to build a church, was shown, although the studio did not officially submit it to participate in the competition. [27] One of two copies [28] was brought to Gdańsk

[22] *Katalog Przeglądu Filmów Studia im. Karola Irzykowskiego*, a copy of the directory in the possession of the author. Unfortunately, the catalogue of the review does not provide information about the films shown at that time.

[23] *Kalendarium*, “Film na Świecie” 1984, no. 303–304, p. 148.

[24] See J. Dutkowski, *Młode Kino Polskie – kartki z historii*, “Powiększenie” 1988, no. 1–2, p. 196 and *Laureaci Przeglądów Młodego Kina Polskiego*, “Powiększenie” 1988, no. 1–2, p. 198.

[25] Information on films retained or not distributed, produced by the Irzykowski Studio, AAN, NZK, 5/74;

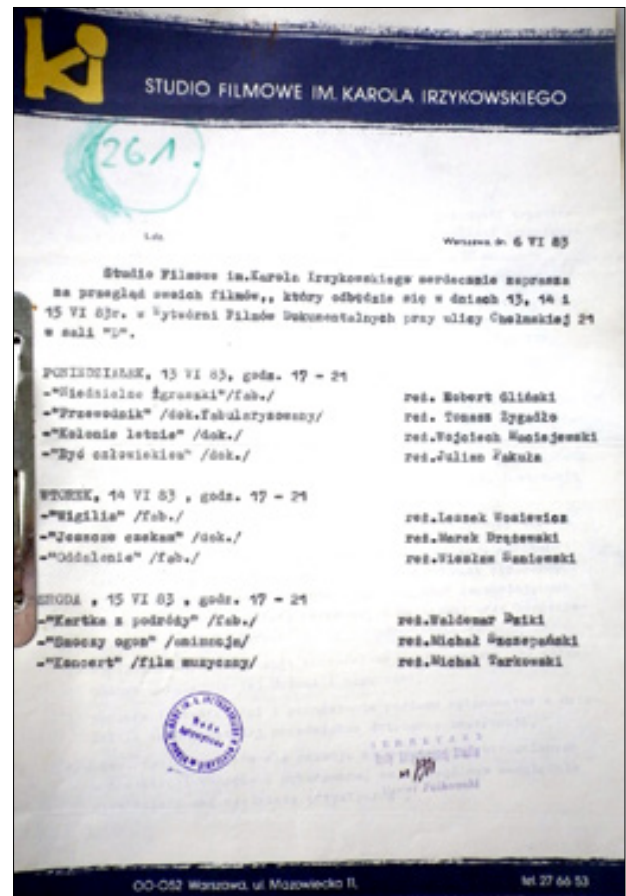


Image 1: Invitation to the first official screening of films by the Irzykowski Film Studio at the WFD, source: the private archives of cinematographer Jan Mogilnicki

Letter from the director of the Radio and TV Show Team to the director of the NZK Programming Department, 6.12.1985, AAN, collection: Main Office for the Control (hereafter: GUKPPiW), no. 3313.

[26] Decision of the Regional Office for the Control of Publications and Performances in Warsaw, 17.03.1988, document from A. Marek Drajzewski’s private archives.

[27] Memo p.p. director of the Irzykowski Film Studio Elżbieta Supa, 15.04.1985, AAN, GUKPPiW, no. 232.

[28] According to the letter p.p. director of the Studio, Elżbieta Supa, one copy was currently in the posses-

by the director Krzysztof Krauze, and the organisers decided to have an unofficial screening, rather like the internal screenings at WFD.[29] The film was also included in the jury's verdict – it was awarded one of the main awards,[30] which, of course, did not escape the attention of the political and cinema authorities, who petitioned to the relevant council to initiate proceedings against the main organiser of the event. As a result, the artistic director of the review, Jerzy Dziąba, received a fine[31] for organising *an illegal screening*.[32]

However, all the events mentioned above were of secondary importance, which prevented the studio from gaining prestige. The situation was as follows: the studio marked its presence on the Polish cinema market, but it still lacked a clear festival success that would translate into recognition. It should be noted that between 1982–1983 it was not entirely possible because the organisation of the two most prestigious Polish events, i.e. the Polish Feature Film Festival in Gdańsk and the Lubuskie Film Summer in Łagów, was suspended. Thus, the conditions for the “consecration” of a little-known institution in a reputable producer of films by talented young directors were extremely unfavourable.

The situation changed in the second half of 1984, when, after a short break, prestigious events in Gdańsk and Łagów were held again. Nevertheless, before mentioning the specific role of one of these festivals in the process of the studio's ennoblement, one more event should be noted, which took place in May 1984 in Białystok. It is the “Youth Behind and In Front of the Camera” film review, highly valued in the milieu of young filmmakers, where short and medium-length films by debutants competed for the “Klistron” award. The studio was the undisputed winner of this event, winning two of the most important awards. The award from the audience went to Robert Gliński for *Sunday Pranks*. In turn, the jury, chaired by the film director Bogdan Górski, awarded the main prize [...] to the studio for the set of films presented in the competition.[33] The jury justified this decision as follows: “The studio's achievements significantly expand the image and achievements of cinema which is an irrefutable argument for the further existence and development of the studio.”[34]

sion of the NIK auditors, and the other in the editing room. So the director probably managed to take the second copy to Gdańsk. See Letter p.p. director of the Irzykowski Film Studio to the Organizational and Legal Department of NZK, 23.04.1985, AAN, GUKP-PiW, no. 232.

[29] P. Wasilewski, *Świadectwa metryk. Polskie kino młodych w latach 80.*, Kraków 1990, p. 55.

[30] Ibidem.

[31] Jerzy Dziąba recalls: “I paid a small fine at that time, which was refunded to me by the then president of «Żak», Zbyszek Jasiewicz.” See P. Wasilewski, op.cit., p. 55.

[32] The archival documentation shows that the case was considered to be referred to the board also aga-

inst the director. However, I have found no clues that the intentions were realized. See Letter from the Main Board of Cinematography to the Main Office for the Control, 24.04.1985, AAN, GUKP-PiW, no. 232.

[33] The following films were showed during the review: *Being human*, *The Christmas Tree of Fear*, *Czuję się świetnie* (*I feel great*, dir. Waldemar Szarek, 1983) about the rock band Maanam, *Still waiting*, *The Concert*, *Pałac* (*The Palace*, dir. Jacek Siwecki, 1984) and *Sunday Pranks*. See Diploma – main award of the 7th “Youth behind and in front of the camera,” document from the private archive of the film director Bogdan Górski.

[34] “Filmowy Serwis Prasowy” 1984, no. 552, p. 21.

Another screening of the studio's films was held in Łagów. The mid-May issue of the "Film" weekly informed in a short note:

After a three-year break, preparations for the Lubuskie Film Summer in Łagów began [...]. The theme of the fourteenth event will be the transformation of the art of cinematography in a Polish feature film [...]. The Polish Federation of Film Club Society will organise a seminar devoted to the achievements of the Irzykowski Film Studio.[35]

Screenings of the studio's films were scheduled from Monday to Thursday at the "Świtez" Cinema (9:00 am – 2:00 pm), and a seminar was planned for Thursday (2:00 pm) in the knights' hall of the Łagów castle.[36] I quote the dates and times to emphasise that the review of the studio's films organised by the Polish Federation of DKF was secondary to the screenings organised as part of the cinematographers' review (these took place from 2 p.m. till late at night in a cinema and an amphitheatre). Importantly, in the Lubuskie Film Summer program, we will not find any information about specific films shown then (the program mentions *films by members of the Irzykowski Film Studio*[37]). Considering that the screenings took place over four days and lasted about five hours (about twenty hours in total), it can be assumed that all the films that were finished then were shown.

Although the Studio's film screenings were an accompanying event, the films were considered for awards. Ultimately, the studio was the runaway winner. The main award, Złote Grono, went to Wit Dąbal for cinematography in the film *Postcard from a Journey*; Don Kichot, the award of the Polish Federation of DKF, went to Wiesław Saniewski for *Custody*[38] (a few days before the screening, the authorities agreed to its limited distribution).[39] In turn, a special Złote Grono was sent to the studio for "a set of films made by young filmmakers and for developing new production methods." [40]

[35] *Po trzech latach – znowu Łagów*, "Film" 1984, no. 19, p. 2.

[36] *14th Lubuskie Film Summer Łagów '84 – program*, unnumbered pages.

[37] *Ibidem*.

[38] The verdict was as follows: "The jury of the Polish Federation of DKF composed of: Adam Radziszewski (DKF «099», Białystok) – chairman, and members: Wiesław Adamik (DKF «Rotunda» Kraków), Janusz Korosadowicz (DKF «Kinematograf» and DKF «Studenci», Kraków), Piotr Kotowski (DKF «Bariera», Lublin), Grażyna Kowalska (DKF im. Andrzeja Munka, Elbląg), Stefan Tilk (DKF at the Municipal Public Library, Łódź), Alicja Zawadzka (DKF «Kropka», Nowa Huta) debating during the

14th Lubuskie Film Summer in Łagów unanimously decided to award the «Don Kichot» award to *Custody* directed by Wiesław Saniewski, produced by the Irzykowski Film Studio. At the same time, the jury expresses special recognition to the Irzykowski Film Studio for its deeply moral attitude in addressing the topics of our reality." *Nagroda "Don Kichota" 1984*, "Film na Świecie" 1984, no. 309–310, p. 87.

[39] *Letter the director of the programming department of NZK Stanisław Goszczurny to Film Distribution Company*, 10.07.1984, National Film Archive-Audiovisual Institute, no. A-344.

[40] "Biuletyn Festiwalowy Lubuskiego Lata Filmowego" 1984, no. 4, p. 1.



Image 2: Invitation to the seminar of the Polish Federation of DKF, source: National Film Archive – Audiovisual Institute

Non-debit circulation: videotapes and underground screenings

this sense, using a religious metaphor formulated by researchers of film festivals,[41] something akin to an Eucharistic transubstantiation took place in Łagów. As a result, a production unit, considered to be marginal and unknown, turned into a renowned film producer, without which Polish cinema could not exist.

At the same time, when the studio's films functioned in the official but limited circulation, films regarding which censorship did not even consent to one-off closed screenings were shown in the underground. Until the Lubuskie Film Summer, *Custody* functioned in such unofficial circulation. In addition to the screenings in room "D" of the Warsaw studio, referred to above, Saniewski's debut was shown at the Church of Divine Mercy at Żytnia Street in Warsaw, which "became famous as a place of independent activities and artistic manifestations." [42] Wiesław Saniewski recalls the screening as follows:

Heavy winter; poor, ruined church [...], thousands of people waiting for the film. Inside – the temperature is around zero [...]. On that day, the crowd was so large that about a thousand people stood outside at minus 10 degrees throughout the screening, listening to the film. Yes, they listened to it without being able to see it. They had to make do with dialogues. It was touching and worth every effort.[43]

During the archival query, I did not come across any document that would inform about any adverse consequences of this screening. Also, Saniewski does not remember suffering any repercussions.[44] However, it is hard not to get the impression that the authorities were very well aware of the screening, as the church at Żytnia Street was constantly surveilling the Security Service.

On the other hand, the screening of a documentary entitled *Prom (Ferry)*, dir. Jacek Talczewski, 1984), a film in the form of an observational mode, showing the last days of Ludwik Juszkiewicz's life in PRL (an employee of the City Transport Company in Łódź responsible for co-organising a strike in the enterprise right after the declaration

The jury's verdict showed that films created by professionals in film units failed to compete with the debuts of young filmmakers from the Irzykowski Film Studio. In addition, one could even try to say that the idea of film units has been exhausted and the only correct organisational and artistic concept is the one represented by the Irzykowski Film Studio. In

[41] T. Elsaesser, *European Cinema. Face to face with Hollywood*, Amsterdam 2005, pp. 99–100.

[42] H. Bukowski, *Żytnia. Kto o tym pamięta?*, "Biuletyn IPN" 2011, no. 1–2, p. 74.

[43] W. Saniewski, *Wolny strzelec pod nadzorem*, "Odra" 2020, no. 3, p. 96.

[44] Interview with Wiesław Saniewski conducted by Emil Sowiński, September 9, 2021.

of martial law),^[45] who after leaving prison, decides to emigrate to Sweden, appeared completely free. The filmmakers managed to take the optical copy of the film to Paris, where, with the support of independent Video Kontakt Studio founded by Mirosław Chojecki, a gala premiere was then organised.^[46] It took place in the apartment of General de Gaulle's secretary, and most of the audience consisted of emigrants under martial law.^[47] The film was then transferred to videotape, and it was distributed by Video Kontakt Studio,^[48] which was primarily involved in documentary film production.^[49]

The films *The Passerby* and *He has arrived* also functioned on video cassettes within the non-debit circulation. The independent publishing house "NOW-a," founded in 1977 by Mirosław Chojecki, Grzegorz Boguta and Mieczysław Grudziński, was responsible for their distribution. After the huge success of *Przesłuchanie* (*Interrogation*, dir. Ryszard Bugajski, 1982),^[50] NOW-a decided to continue the "VideoNOW-a" series.^[51] The initiators of this project said in an interview for the self-published weekly "Tygodnik Mazowsze": "In time, video will be competitive with television, an alternative to the cinema. And all this goes beyond the control of the red. This is truly our weapon in the fight for an independent culture. We are about to break another power monopoly."^[52] Therefore, after Bugajski's film, a videotape was available in underground circulation (number: 002) with two documentaries by the studio. The motivation for selecting these films on the board announcing the screening was as follows:

Apparently, they are talking about something different. Krauze gives a collective portrait of pilgrimage. Titkow paints an individual portrait and tries to portray Tadeusz Konwicki using cinematic means. The writer's personal experience turns out to be embedded in our common Polish fate, and the group pilgrimage becomes an opportunity to see the fate of individual people. These are films about us and for us.^[53]

It can be assumed that the decision to place both documents on one cassette was also the result of the 1984 "Solidarity" Award in the field of culture.^[54] These awards were granted in February 1985, before

[45] <<https://odznaczeni-kwis.ipn.gov.pl/persons/view/c14ba370-ddff-4e1f-9700-7e6b6e11f8ac>>, accessed: 13.12.2021.

[46] Interview with Jacek Talczewski conducted by Emil Sowiński, September 2, 2020.

[47] Ibidem.

[48] Ibidem.

[49] K. Więch, *Re-sentymenty wobec PRL-u. Niezależna twórczość filmowa Studia Video Kontakt w Paryżu*, [in:] 1984: *Literatura i kultura schyłkowego PRL-u*, eds. K. Budrowska, W. Gardocki, E. Jurkowska, Warszawa 2015.

[50] Bartłomiej Kluska writes about the underground video cassette circulation of Bugajski's film in an

extremely interesting text devoted to the struggle of the Security Service with the illegal video market developing in the 1980s. See B. Kluska, "Nie ma silnych, by to zlikwidować", *Służba Bezpieczeństwa wobec wideorewolucji*, "Przegląd Archiwalny Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej", vol. 9, Warszawa 2016, pp. 214–217.

[51] *Obieg NOW-ej*, ed. Ł. Bertram, Warszawa 2013, p. 192.

[52] *Jak do kina. Rozmowa z VideoNOW-a*, "Tygodnik Mazowsze" 1985, no. 129, p. 2.

[53] VHS cassette issued by the Independent Publishing House "NOW-a", AIPN, no. IPN Sz 410/30.

[54] *Nagrody kulturalne „Solidarności” za rok 1984*, "Tygodnik Mazowsze" 1985, no. 121, p. 1.

NOW-a released cassette number 002. It is worth mentioning here that the Independent Culture Committee decided to award 16 awards, three of which went to film directors. In addition to Krzysztof Krauze and Andrzej Titkow, Wiesław Saniewski was also awarded for *Custody*.^[55] The fact that NOW-a did not release the cassette with *Custody* was probably since it was already available in a narrow distribution.



Image 3: Video cassette no. 002 by VideoNOW-a, source: Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance

Interestingly, VHS cassettes also featured other samizdat films of the studio, copied at their own expense, no longer under the auspices of NOW-a or Video Kontakt. For example, the film director Robert Gliński mentions that he made a copy of *Niedzielne igraszki* for a private archive, but also showed it during many unofficial screenings popular at that time.^[56] Moreover, the director admits that several copies were also made of his video cassette.^[57] Therefore, it is possible that Gliński's debut, before it received a censorship visa and hit cinemas (early 1988), was – apart from its official functioning (as written earlier, it was shown at reviews and festivals in 1983–1984) – also available in the non-debit circulation.

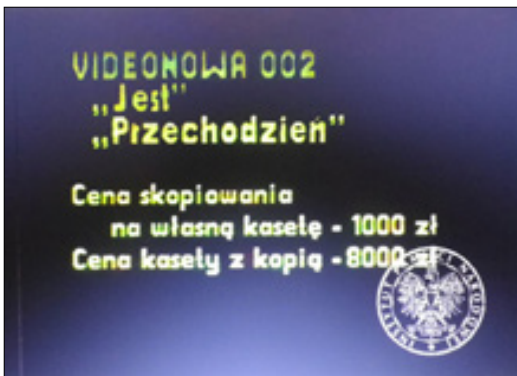


Image 4: The board on video cassette no. 002, source: Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance

Today, it is difficult to indicate clearly how popular these films were in the underground circulation. The story behind the distribution of *Interrogation* shows that it is quite likely that the studio's documentaries were also very popular. Andrzej Titkow recalled that his film “was watched at closed and open screenings, legal, semi-legal and fully open screenings, in parish halls, cellars and attics, university halls and private apartments [...]”^[58] This recollection shows very well that the film's popularity in the second circulation was mainly due to its participation in screenings, which confirmed viewers' conviction of independence and belonging.^[59]

A reconstruction of the alternative distribution system for films produced in the early 1980s by the Irzykowski Film Studio shows that films blocked by censorship and, therefore, doomed to be forgotten, had a chance, both legally and illegally, to reach an audience. Their presence at festivals, reviews, as well as internal screenings and in

[55] In one of the columns, Saniewski describes the receipt of the award as follows: “The presentation took place in Andrzej Zajączkowski's apartment, and it was presented by the outstanding documentary filmmaker Bohdan Kosiński. The award was a graphic and an envelope containing one thousand dollars. It was a large amount in those days; greater than my fee for directing *Nadzór* or my next film.” See W. Sa-

niewski, *Wolny strzelec pod nadzorem*, “Odra” 2020, no. 12, p. 93.

[56] Interview with Robert Gliński conducted by Emil Sowiński, April 4, 2020.

[57] Ibidem.

[58] A. Titkow, op.cit., p. 45.

[59] K. Jajko, M. Garda, P. Sitarski, *New Media Behind the Iron Curtain*, Łódź 2020, pp. 87–88.

non-debit cassette circulation allows us to argue that they were known not only to cinephiles but also enjoyed considerable recognition in secondary circulation among the public sympathising with the opposition. Moreover, it would probably not be an exaggeration to say that anyone interested in Polish films during the period in question had fairly easy access to these productions, contrary to appearances.

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