

SZFE University of Theatre and Film Arts, Doctoral School - DLA

AN INSIGHT INTO THE PRODUCTION BACKGROUND OF DOCUMENTARIES

DLA dissertation thesis

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Budapest, 2018.

What does a producer do?

Even if asked in professional circles, only few accurate and detailed answers would be given. The only tangible activity linked to the role of a producer is creating the required financial background for making a film. However, producing is far more complex than this, and even though there are many aspects in common, still, in different genres such as feature films, documentaries, animations or nature films some of the processes related to making a film and the producers' tasks differ from each other.

The profession of being a producer is a practical one, where most of it can only be learnt through experience. At the same time, there is a connecting transmissible and theoretical knowledge that can provide significant help for junior producers in their work. The aim of my thesis is a summary of the professional experience I have gained during the last 10 years¹, and assembling such a body of knowledge concerning the production of documentaries which attempts to draft the content of a course that could be incorporated into a producer's master degree of the University of Theatre and Film Arts in the future.

Besides the available literature on the genre of documentaries, special emphasis will be given to case studies of films. To support and understand the affected topics of the thesis, examples will be given from Hungarian and international as well as older and contemporary films and examined through emphasized issues concerning producing. Our own films of Campfilm are also going to be placed into this framework. My most complex film as a producer so far in regard to content, production and financing, called *Cain's Children* will be a recurring topic in my thesis.²

Besides summing up the fundamentally important body of knowledge, the aim of my doctoral thesis is to confirm the importance of thinking based on a long-term strategic planning and an efficient co-operation with the director. Starting with the artistic and theoretical ideas connected tightly to a

¹ We founded our film production company called Campfilm together with Marcell Gerő and Tamás Dobos in 2007, and have been working mainly on the production of documentaries since then.

² *Cain's Children* (Marcell Gerő, 2014)

producers work and moving on to chapters summarizing the practical knowledge concerning this profession, my dissertation is divided into five topics.

1. Genre outline regarding the producer's work

When establishing the body of knowledge appointed as the aim of my thesis, it should be taken into consideration that its goal is to help the education of film professionals, so called creative producers, who are able to become real collaborators to the filmmakers in developing the content of a documentary as well.

The kind of producer's work and attitude that I am studying in my thesis can't be separated from the films that are born as a result of the work. This is why I find it important to shortly mention some theoretical aspects of the genre.

The book *Making Documentary Films and Videos*-by Barry Hampe³ includes a chapter called *Documentary Genres* which defines different genre groups by the topic, its director approach while also taking their temporal position in relation to the present as a basis. When organizing my own experiences on documentary genre categories, I apply Hampe's train of thought as a guideline. One fundamental division of Hampe is based on a film's present-past timeliness, that I discuss particularly in the thesis through our own works:

- a) Recording the Present
 - Direct cinéma*
 - Cinéma vérité*
- b) Recalling the Past
- c) Past and Present Combined
- d) Investigative Documentaries

³ Barry Hampe: *Making Documentary Films and Videos*, New York, Henry Holt and Company LLC, 2007, 14-16.

2. The relationship between the producer and the director

When making a film, the director and the producer are present throughout the whole process, they have tasks connected to each stage. Assuming that the director contacts the producer with an idea consisting only of a few sentences, and the two of them decide to start realizing the project together at this stage, they will be in daily working relationship for years and have to come to an agreement in basic questions concerning the film in every stage of the production.

In the chapter dealing with the relationship between the producer and the director, my objective is to discuss typically occurring situations during different stages of the work, listing possible preparations and solutions based on my own experiences.

3. Stages of film production from the producer's point of view

In order to be able to make strategic decisions regarding the different stages of production, using the available resources optimally, weighing the additional costs or savings resulting from given decisions as well as the required time connected to these decisions, a producer has to follow the whole process in general while also being able to see through the relation between the different stages. The chapter presents the importance of examining the tasks of given stages in the light of the whole working process and its context through specific examples.

The process of producing documentaries can be divided into the following stages, all of them indicating the different stages/sources of financing apart from their significance regarding the content of the film. My aim is to discuss the tasks relating to content and production parallel within the certain stages.

- a) *Project Development / Research*
- b) *Pre-production*
- c) *Production, Principal photography*
- d) *Post-production*
- e) *Premiere*
- f) *Distribution*
- g) *Marketing*

4. *Financing*

I intend to discuss the elements of the production part of the proposal in detail (production timeline, budget, financing plan). While elaborating the subsections, I present how the different processes are built on each other.

Moreover, I deal with the system of *pitching forums* in respect of television financing and describe a new, alternative method of financing, the so called *crowdfunding* model as well as the financial aspects regarding works made in international co-production. The following topics are explained in detail through organizational datas and examples pertaining to movies:

- a) Production schedule
- b) Budget
- c) Financing plan
- d) Cashflow
- e) Television financing
- f) Documentary training programmes
- g) Crowdfunding

5. *Legal knowledge linked to the producer's work*

A documentary producer has to be familiar in depth with two areas within law, namely those questions concerning copyright and privacy rights. While making a film, legal questions connected to any of them may arise constantly, and even the film's future fate can depend on making the right decisions. The aim of agreements concluded during the process is to create the legal background of the distribution of the finished film in as many distribution platforms and geographical areas as possible, in addition to recording the given production's co-operational conditions, compliance requirements and payment.

I wish to emphasize, elaborate and demonstrate through film examples the most important laws, legal actions and definitions, which will be referred to again later on when discussing agreements regarding

production. Following the process in Chapter 3, I discuss the agreement types emerging in different stages of production separately:

- a) Option agreement
- b) License and filming agreement
- c) Agency and license agreement
- d) Agency and lease agreement
- e) Agreement with the characters in the film
- f) License agreement
- g) Co-production agreement
- h) Grant agreement
- i) Other legal questions concerning the production
- j) Distribution contracts