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Escape from the periphery. World-system of cinema and Polish film

<https://doi.org/10.19195/0860-116X.45.2>

Abstract

The main aim of this text is to outline the possibilities of applying Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory to the analysis of cinema. Concepts developed by Wallerstein, especially the notion of the relationship between the core and the periphery of international political-economic systems, can be useful in trying the hegemony of Hollywood cinema in the global circulation of film content, as well as the positions smaller film industries occupy in relation to it. The assumptions of this theory will be tested using the example of the cinema of Central and Eastern Europe in recent decades, making it possible to determine its relative hierarchy in the global chain of production and consumption of audiovisual content. Special attention has been focused on Poland, presented as a model example of a local film industry attempting to emerge from the peripheral position it occupied after the political transformation of 1989.

Keywords

world-systems, Hollywood, Polish cinema, Central and Eastern Europe

*The difference between T.S. Eliot and me
is that I have to read him and he does not have to read me*

Jakub Glatzstejn¹

Peripherality is a concept that is not only relative, but also – perhaps more importantly – relational. It is impossible to define peripherality without at least implicitly designating what this peripherality relates to, namely the centre. It is in the relation between these two terms (and the social, economic or political realities behind them) that the dynamics of what is known, valued and self-sufficient in world cinema (the centre) and what is local, hidden and subordinated (the peripheries) are generated. Thus, it is impossible to consider the elements of this juxtaposition separately from each other; instead, we should think of them as a jointly created system of dependencies, the various elements of which constantly interact with each other in complex ways.

This thought is at the heart of the theory of world-systems, formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein, who described in this way economic and political connections, but today it can also be an inspiring source for thinking about cultural peripherality, which is in any case strongly intertwined with the spheres of the economy and politics. Literature scholars interested in the project of the so-called world literature are especially eager to use Wallerstein's notions and concepts². This is less frequently the case in film studies, although cinema, due to its industrial and capital-intensive nature as well as its audiovisual character, seems to be an even more globalized medium³. This is a challenge especially for various studies traditionally dominated by a focus on specific national cinemas and their local contexts – political, cultural, linguistic, etc. Yet no film industry is an island, but, rather, part of an archipelago or perhaps even a supercontinent formed by the modern cinematic system. That is why the aim of this article will be to briefly present the applicability of this theory to the description of cinema as well as to test its basic tenets using the example of Polish (but

1 Quoted after O. Zabuzko, *Planeta Piolun*, Agora, Warszawa 2022.

2 See e.g. M. Eatough, "The Literary History of World-Systems, II: World Literature and Deep Time", *Literature Compass* 2015, vol. 11, no. 12, pp. 603–615.

3 Although we will also find some exceptions, hitherto limited to analysis of rather detailed phenomena, rather than creation of an appropriate theoretical frame of reference. See N. Daly, "From Elvis to the fugitive: Globalization and recent Irish cinema", *European Journal of English Studies* 1999, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 262–274; A. Koutsourakis, "The Politics of Humour in Kafkaesque Cinema: A World-Systems Approach", *Film-Philosophy* 2020, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 259–283.

also, more broadly, Central European) cinema of recent decades, and thus to determine its relative hierarchy in the global chain of production and consumption of audiovisual content.

The core and the periphery or the global world-system

According to the above diagnosis, for Wallerstein, world-systems analysis meant “first of all the substitution of a unit of analysis called the ‘world-system’ for the standard unit of analysis, which was the national state”⁴. This does not mean that a system defined in this manner encompasses the entire globe, but rather that it generates its own, relatively closed world, transcending the boundaries of nation states, but defined for the most part by the internal dynamics of development, transformations or balance of power – historical examples of such systems might include the Roman Empire or ancient China and its immediate environment. As Wallerstein himself explained: “A world-system is a social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence. Its life is made up of the conflicting forces which hold it together by tension, and tear it apart as each group seeks eternally to remould it to its advantage. It has the characteristics of an organism, in that it has a life-span over which its characteristics change in some respects and remain stable in others. (...) [L]ife within it is largely self-contained, and (...) the dynamics of its development are largely internal”⁵. Yet world-systems have a tendency to grow and draw into their orbit more areas, which can then be assimilated and adapted to the rules within the system. However, it is only the modern, capitalist world-system that has truly become global, encompassing virtually all parts of the world and leaving at most small enclaves, exempt from the rules of the globalized capitalist economy.

What is particularly relevant to my argument is the fact that Wallerstein described the global capitalist system as “a system that is simultaneously one, and unequal: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality”⁶. Thus, this theory

- 4 I. Wallerstein, *Analiza systemów-światów. Wprowadzenie*, trans. K. Gawlicz, M. Starnawski, Dialog, Warszawa 2007, p. 32. Quoted after, Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-System Analysis. An Introduction*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2004, p. 16.
- 5 Idem, “Nowoczesny system-świat”, trans. A. Ostolski, in *Współczesne teorie socjologiczne*, ed. A. Jasińska-Kania, L. Nijakowski, J. Szacki, M. Ziółkowski, Scholar, Warsaw 2006, p. 747. Quoted after Immanuel Wallerstein *The Modern World-System I*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2011, p. 347.
- 6 F. Moretti, “Przypuszczenia na temat literatury światowej”, trans. P. Czaplinski, *Teksty Drugie* 2014, no. 4, p. 133.

provides for a structural division of labour within the system. The division, which determines the roles of individual actors or smaller entities operating within the system, is based on economic, political, cultural, military or technological power. Its result is the existence of the above-mentioned central zones (core), which shape the rules of the system, as well as peripheral zones (periphery), which must adapt to these rules, if they want to aspire to the values created in the centre. An extreme manifestation of this dichotomy is the colonial situation, in which inferiority is openly expressed in the form of political organization, but can also serve to describe the relations between theoretically independent partners, whose ties are so strong that the decisions and functioning of the stronger entity determines the situation of the weaker one (sometimes leading to the emergence of a neocolonial relationship).

However, irrespective of the exact political organization of these ties, the core as a rule maintains its superior position not only through economic dominance, but also in the symbolic sphere, defining and shaping the discourses and concepts functioning within the system. The periphery, meanwhile, is made up of spaces of marginal importance, on the one hand dependent on the core and receiving its models or products, and on the other – working for the core as a source of cheap labour, raw materials or goods. The semi-periphery, in turn, constitutes a buffer, mediating between the two categories and having some of the characteristics of the core as well as many of the characteristics of the periphery. It aspires to the role and profits associated with the core, but is not fully autonomous and is constantly at risk of being degraded to a peripheral position. This is because mobility in this hierarchical arrangement is possible, but extremely difficult and limited, as it is blocked by large-scale structural factors, which can be overcome through long-term transformation processes. As a result, the world-system is usually characterized by a high level of inertia, based on permanent inequalities inherent in its very structure.

Naturally, this division is intuitive and cannot be measured by means of any single economic, social or political tool, since it is made up of a whole range of factors, the sum of which results in an imbalance between the various participants in the system. In addition, it is internally much more nuanced and complex than could be conveyed by the simple core-periphery typology presented above. Its individual actors may occupy a slightly different position in different areas of the relation (for example, economic power does not necessarily have to coincide with cultural or political power, etc.); besides, regardless of the overall arrangement, there are smaller interactions occurring within the system as well. Thus, the fact that, for example, two different countries are periphery of the global world-system of the capitalist economy does not mean that their position with regard to each other is the

same – different kinds of imbalances may also take emerge between them, determining the hierarchies of mutual relations and the division of labour. However, the most vivid way to illustrate the characteristics defining the position of the core and the periphery of a given system is to put them in pairs of oppositions, represented by the following table:

Core	Periphery
– developed, handles advanced processes	– backward, tries to catch up and acts as a subcontractor of simpler processes
– diverse and versatile	– specialized, niche-focused
– makes profit and controls capital	– subcontractor and market for the capital
– produces rules, sends out models, technologies	– adopts the rules, receives models and technologies, provides labour and talent
– independent from the rest	– dependent on the core, often directly, for example through take-over of capital, infrastructure, etc.
– seems universal and works globally	– stereotyped, acts locally, has no global impact, imitates formulas
– gives meaning, becoming a measure of value and consecration	– seeks validation outside

Wallerstein’s theory was developed primarily for the purpose of economic-political analysis, but its author himself repeatedly pointed to the arbitrariness and thus uselessness of dividing the social sciences into those dealing with economics, politics, society and culture. For him, a world-system was a holistic system, encompassing all these spheres and the interactions or processes taking place within them, irrespective of the division of scholarly disciplines, with a comprehensive analysis of world-systems being incomplete should any of them be omitted. Although he was the least focused on the cultural manifestations of the division of relations within a system, he explicitly emphasized the existence of cultural world-systems. This topic seemed to interest him especially in the 1990s, a period marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic triumph of neoliberalism, as well as lively discussions about globalization that it had brought about⁷. Although Wallerstein and his followers did not try to apply their diagnoses to the world of film, it seems that, taken as a metaphor for mutual relations,

7 See I. Wallerstein, “The National and the Universal: Can There Be Such a Thing as World Culture?”, [in:] *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. A.D. King, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1991, pp. 91–105; A. Kumar, F. Welz, “Culture in the World-System: An Interview with Immanuel Wallerstein”, *Social Identities* 2001, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 221–231.

the concept is perfectly suited to outlining the links that exist in today's highly globalized film industry, in both its purely commercial and more artistic or independent segments.

So what would a film world-system be? The term can be used to describe today's globalized film (and, more broadly, audiovisual) market, in which an unprecedented growth in content and forms of access to it is accompanied by gigantic concentration of attention, influence and capital. The central role in it is played by the largest US players – those traditionally setting the directions for cinema, that is the big Hollywood studios, which are part of giant media and entertainment conglomerates (today the group is limited to five companies: Disney, Warner, Paramount, Universal and Columbia), as well as the aspiring new digital giants of the Internet era (led by Amazon, Netflix and Apple). As a result, although every year there are probably several thousand feature films made in the world, produced in more than a hundred different countries, most of the profits from their distribution go to the few companies just mentioned. The scale of the concentration is the easiest to measure by means of the example of the best-monitored cinema market, where only the ten most popular films, almost without exception distributed by the above-mentioned five Hollywood giants, have been regularly responsible for roughly 25 per cent of all money spent on tickets. In the record-breaking year 2019 cinema audiences around the world left 42.3 billion dollars at the box office, with more than 13 billion dollars (or about 30 per cent) going to Disney alone and its biggest hit, *Avengers: Endgame* (dir. J. and A. Russo), accounting for 6.6 per cent of the global box office⁸.

Such a strong role of American cinema not only makes it necessary to describe it as the centre of the modern film world-system, but also to emphasize the imperial role of Hollywood (and associated Silicon Valley players) in this arrangement. Wallerstein distinguished between two main modes of organising the systems he described – less concentrated, more polycentric world-economies, that is, “systems in which ... a single political system does not exist over all, or virtually all, of the space”⁹, and world-empires dominated by an imposing, expansive hegemon “in which there is a single political system over most of the area, however attenuated the degree of its effective control”¹⁰. From the point of view of not only the economy, but also socio-cultural influence and interest generated, American mainstream

8 I discuss these mechanisms and the data representing them in detail elsewhere, see M. Stelmach, “Długi ogon światowego kina”, *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2022, no. 117, pp. 6–25.

9 Immanuel Wallerstein *The Modern World-System I*, op. cit., p. 348.

10 Ibid.

cinema and the production-narrative-reception model it imposes plays precisely such a hegemonic role within the system. In this, it clearly benefits from other signs of American cultural domination, such as the international role of the English language, the spread of other American pop culture phenomena (music, video games, television, etc.), and the strong economic and political presence of the United States in many regions of the world. In addition, Hollywood cinema is characterized by all the determinants of its central position in the world-system included in the table above.

Other players or even entire national film industries thus play a peripheral or semi-peripheral role in relation to it, trying to maintain their own identity or carve out a small niche for themselves on the US-dominated market. They are excellent markets for Hollywood films, providing ideas (for example, used in the form of remakes) and talent (in the form of gifted filmmakers from around the world trying their hand in California) as well as cheaper services (in the form of attractive outdoor locations or subcontracting services). At the same time peripheral zones are often dominated by Western capital, which usually controls key infrastructure or intellectual property, and when they try to build an independent market on their own, they mostly imitate solutions developed in the centre, with regard to organization and production, as well as narrative and content. However, they are in most cases doomed to remain local in these efforts or possibly specialized in a narrow, often (self-)stereotyping area. Thus while Hollywood can break through with a great number and variety of cultural products, (semi)peripheral film industries must try to find their niche – as they did in different periods of cinema history: with, for example, Italian spaghetti westerns in the 1960s, Hong Kong kick and action cinema in the 1970s–90s, Japanese anime from the late 1980s and early 1990s, and, in recent years, Scandinavian productions of the Nordic noir variety or Korean k-dramas. However, they are rarely associated with any broad interest in other varieties of local popular culture.

At the same time, in line with earlier definitions, the Hollywood world-system does not have to encompass the entire globe in practice, and it also largely overlaps with the map of the United States' political and economic influence. Thus, even despite extremely successful imperial efforts, leading to annexation of more territory over the past century, there are still enclaves excluded from it, such as strongly culturally isolated states like North Korea or Iran. The actions of the People's Republic of China, too, in the field of cinema, primarily very tight restriction of access to American pop culture and the promotion of local blockbusters of entertainment and propaganda nature, can be seen as China's attempts to build its own world-system, limited for the time being to the territory of one country, but having the

potential to expand to other Chinese-speaking areas, and perhaps to other countries in the region as well.

The contours of the Hollywood world-system outlined above seem fairly simple to determine, if they are to be referred primarily to strictly economic mechanisms. However, we need to complicate this picture a little, for it seems that cultural and artistic production, including filmmaking, should not leave out other important values that determine hierarchies in the art world. This was demonstrated by Pierre Bourdieu, who studied the sociology of the art field and wrote about different types of capital – in addition to economic capital, he distinguished social and symbolic capital as its basic types. The latter – denoting appreciation, culturally desirable values and qualities, as well as familiarity with the world of symbolic meanings – is an excellent explanation of the functioning of art circulation, in which, after all, it is very often not about profit, but about prestige, prizes and awards, place in the canon or recognition of one's peers and the appreciation of critics. In order to navigate through complex field, in which there are no clear boundaries separating, for example, commercial from artistic creation, Bourdieu used the concepts of consecration and autonomy. A work or a creator can thus be accompanied by a low or high level of consecration, understood precisely as peer recognition and symbolic capital, as well as a low or high level of autonomy, determining the level of dependence on market forces. The smaller the autonomy, the greater the role of economic capital in shaping the position, the greater – the stronger the impact of symbolic capital¹¹.

If we take these factors into account and apply Wallerstein's concepts to them, we will see that cinema, in fact, creates systems of reference that overlap and influence each other, but are nevertheless different and have their own logic and internal dynamics. Such systems can include both the world-empire described above, with Hollywood's hegemonic position, and smaller areas (for example, a transnational region with a shared culture, language and interests, but also the cinema of a country, or even a local slice of it, as is the case in, for example, India – Wallerstein calls such smaller wholes mini-systems). The distinctive variety of audiovisual production created by the global art cinema constitutes its own world-system as well. It, too, has its core and periphery, the hierarchy of which is determined by the flows of symbolic capital rather than economic capital – although naturally the latter, especially when combined with political power, also plays a substantial role in shaping and sustaining systemic inequalities. As Marcin Adamczak writes, “The festival circuit and studio distribution serve as a refuge from the reality of a market dominated by the hegemonic ‘Big

11 These concepts have been summarized with regard to the film art by Jakub Majmurek, see J. Majmurek, “Kina gry w prestiż”, *Ekrany* 2018, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 6–13.

Six'. At the same time, an important element of the semi-periphery, that is, concentration of the major festivals in Europe (or rather, its western part), has the above-mentioned power of consecration and is a source of multiple capitals desired by even more peripheral players. In an 'inverted economy', in which the main stakes are not financial gains, but recognition and prestige, the position of this semi-peripheral structure is extremely strong"¹².

Thus defined, the "inverted economy" (a concept also derived from Bourdieu's theory) provides for a system of relations that is separate and different from the strictly economic one, but equally hierarchical. In it, in turn, the central role is played by traditionally prestigious Western European entities, the strength of which is generated by, for example, leading institutions that distribute prestige and guarantee consecration in the art-film discourse. These include the most important festivals (headed by the "Big Three": Cannes, Venice, Berlin), influential magazines (like the French *Cahiers du Cinema* or the British *Sight & Sound*), funds to subsidize artistic creation (such as the Hubert Bals Fund associated with the Rotterdam Festival, the World Cinema Fund associated with the Berlinale or Eurimages, funded by the European Union) or the most effective, fashion-creating sales agents (the French Wild Bunch or the German Match Factory). As a result, it is France, Italy, United Kingdom or Germany that are the source of models of a well-functioning film culture as well as fashions of the day. In addition, it is enough to look at the number of scholarly or critical studies on the various filmmakers or national cinemas (as well as the place of publication of these studies) to see the location of the discursive centre of global art cinema, and of its periphery and margins. This narrative domination has been summed up by Dudley Andrew, who notes that "nearly all large-scale assessments of cinema have been made by and for the West, with the 'Prime Meridian' running through either Hollywood or Paris"¹³.

This arrangement has the marks of neo-colonial relations, in which, as Adamczak writes, "the above-mentioned systemic imbalance between the centre, and the semi-periphery and periphery is due to the replaceability of the latter for the core entities and the irreplaceability of the core for the (semi-)peripheral entities"¹⁴. In other words, Western European sales

12 M. Adamczak, "Nadzieje i złudzenia. Polskie wizje koprodukcji", *Ekrany* 2017, vol. 35, no. 1, p. 9.

13 D. Andrew, "Time Zones and Jetlag. The Flows and Phases of World Cinema", [in:] *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, eds. N. Ďurovičová, K. Newman, Routledge, New York–London 2010, p. 61.

14 M. Adamczak, "Loteria z zachętami. Jedna ustawa i cztery rozgrywki", *Ekrany* 2018, no. 6, p. 59.

agents and distributors, festival directors and programmers, producers and funders – all of whom generate this global circulation of cultural content, ideas and artistic values – can choose from a variety of proposals from different parts of the world, which, in their opinion, will diversify and enrich the offer of art cinema, open in theory to non-Western phenomena and perspectives. At the same time, participants in the system (creators, producers, organizers, popularizers, etc.) coming from these (semi-)peripheral zones, theoretically an equally indispensable link in the whole system, do not have any alternative sources of consecration, sources facilitating international appreciation, recognition and further development paths. Thus they are, in fact, replaceable and interchangeable, and their possible global success depends solely on the appreciation by the core players, who are constantly looking for new phenomena of interest to them.

Central and Eastern Europe – on the frontiers of the empire

So let us take a look at how the mechanisms defined above and governing the Hollywood world-system (but also its sub-system focused on artistic production) can be used to better understand and describe the condition of Polish film industry. However, in order to do that we need to start by outlining a broader regional context, as the world-system of cinema is not, of course, autonomous – its boundaries and specificity are determined primarily by broader political and economic processes of which the film market is an extension. An excellent example of this is provided by the transformations that took place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in Central and Eastern Europe, that is countries of the former Eastern Bloc, which gained autonomy and/or independence in 1989–1991. As it quickly turned out, this transformation, contrary to idealistic dreams, was not an exit from the Soviet house of captivity into the measureless expanse of freedom and independence. Instead, it should be seen as a transition from one system of dependency, created by the communist regime and its economic and cultural policies, to another, capitalist one – with rules that are perhaps less oppressive, but nevertheless still firm and defining the boundaries and directions of development. This is also perfectly evident in basically all of the region's national film industries.

Read in accordance with the Wallersteinian formula, the Soviet Union's actions were an attempt to create its own world-empire with (semi)peripheral zones in areas linked to it militarily, politically and economically – mainly the so-called people's democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, over which Moscow exercised direct control, as well as the communist countries of Southeast Asia (China, Vietnam, North Korea) or some African and Latin American states under the strong influence of the USSR (for example,

Angola, Mozambique and Cuba). These efforts were also visible in culture, including cinema, for which Soviet cinema was to be a model and point of reference. Obviously, this world-system was never completely resistant to the influence of American cinema (and, more broadly, Western cinema), but nevertheless remained largely independent, creating something Petr Szczepanik calls the “state-socialist mode of production”¹⁵.

Its foundation was the state nature of production, based on the state’s monopoly on production, distribution and screening, and on the work of film studios, sometimes operating as teams (like in Poland or Czechoslovakia). Another prerequisite for the system to function was technological independence – the Eastern Bloc countries not only had their own infrastructure strictly for filmmaking purposes, but also produced equipment (cameras, film stock, projectors, etc.), even if it was often archaic or modelled on Western devices. On this technical and financial base was built an independent superstructure – an own education system (already in the late 1940s and early 1950s there were film schools in the most important countries of the region, which for a while put them ahead of even such cinematically advanced Western countries as West Germany and United Kingdom); and system for career, recognition and appreciation building (provided by the local press and book publications, festivals, awards, academic courses, discussion film clubs, etc.). Finally, the Soviet Union and its satellite countries tried to produce their own narrative and aesthetic norms, based in the first few years after the war on socialist realist models in particular, but even in the following decades often having their own regional specificities (which included, on the one hand, a focus on historical themes, especially of the Second World War, and on the other – the formula of critical art cinema, which in Poland was best represented by the so-called cinema of moral anxiety).

This circulation was strongly linked, in a top-down manner, to other countries in the region (through production cooperation, exchange of personnel and reciprocal circulation of films), but only to a moderate extent to capitalist film industries. Even the import of films was sometimes far from obvious, as evidenced by the extraordinary popularity in the Soviet Union of Alfredo Crevenna’s 1971 Mexican melodrama *Yesenia* (the film attracted ninety million people to cinemas, making it the biggest hit in the history of distribution in the Soviet Union¹⁶), works from India (which

15 P. Szczepanik, “The State-Socialist Mode of Production and the Political History of Production Culture”, [in:] *Behind the Screen: Inside European Production Cultures*, Palgrave Macmillan, eds. P. Szczepanik, P. Vonderau, New York 2013, pp. 113–134.

16 A.V. Fedorov, *200 Foreign Leaders of Soviet Film Distribution: Selected Collection*, SM “Information for everyone”, Moscow 2023, p. 168.

accounted for four of the top ten most watched foreign films in the USSR¹⁷), or the incredible successes enjoyed in the Eastern Bloc even a decade after their Western release by films starring Bruce Lee, notably *Enter the Dragon* (1972, R. Clouse), and later other martial arts films as well. In doing so this world-system replicated the rules governing such systems, primarily by the hierarchical nature of relations. The central role was played by the Soviet Union through its production and aesthetic models replicated in (semi)peripheral countries. On the other hand, Moscow's All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography attracted students from Central and Eastern Europe (the Pole Jerzy Hoffman and the Hungarian Márta Mészáros) as well as Mali, which sympathized with the USSR (Abderrahmane Sissako).

The system was dysfunctional and inefficient on many levels, but it did manage to survive for several decades as relatively self-sufficient. It was not until the crisis years of the 1980s that the system's financial and technical shortcomings were painfully exposed. Combined with changes in other areas of social and economic life, this led to a gradual disintegration of the successive keystones of the film world-system of socialist cinema. During the 1980s states surrendered their monopoly on the management of film industry, while opening up more and more to Western influence, which was also evident in the growing imports of American cinema as well as imitation of Hollywood formulas and the introduction of free market mechanisms. The changes were sealed by the political transformations of the late 1980s and early 1990s (elections in successive Eastern European countries, the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany, the breakup of the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia). This resulted in two complementary processes – the collapse of national film industries and annexation to the Hollywood world-empire. The former is best illustrated by statistics from selected countries in the region:

- in Hungary, as late as in 1988 some 50 million cinema tickets were sold, including some 12 million for Hungarian films, while barely four years later it was only 12.7 million tickets in total (a fourfold decrease) and only 284,000 for Hungarian films (a nearly forty-five-fold decrease!). In the first half of the 1990s two-thirds of all cinemas across the country were closed¹⁸.

17 On the popularity and functioning of Indian films in Soviet cinemas, see S. Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas: The Culture of Movie-going after Stalin*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2008.

18 See M. Stelmach, "Węgry: W trybach historii", [in:] *Historia kina. Tom IV. Kino końca wieku*, eds. T. Lubelski, I. Sowińska, R. Syska, Universitas, Kraków 2019, pp. 1053–1054.

- in Czechoslovakia 25–30 films were produced a year on average, while in the last year of the country's existence (1992) it was only 6 films. After the breakup, Slovakia produced between 1 and 4 films a year in the 1990s – as many as 80 per cent in co-production with Czech TV because of a lack of funds and a production base¹⁹.
- in Romania the collapse by and large deepened throughout the 1990s, so much so that the year 2000 was dubbed “year zero” for the country's cinema, as not a single Romanian feature film appeared in distribution. In the entire country, which had a population of 22 million at the time, there were only a few dozen cinemas²⁰.

Similar and even more dramatic processes affected the cinema of Yugoslavia, the break-up of which in the 1990s was accompanied by a series of wars and conflicts, as well as Soviet cinema, which also began to split into numerous smaller or larger film industries after decades of shared history. Without the help of the Moscow centre, they mostly declined rapidly, even if – like those of Ukraine and Georgia, for example – they had previously had a fairly extensive production base and filmmaking traditions. Poland – the largest and most developed film industry in the former Eastern Bloc outside the USSR – was also going through the same cycle of crisis, degradation and Westernization.

At the same time there began the process of integration with the free-market Western system, which took advantage of the weaknesses of local, now divided and declining national film industries, and their legal, economic and political environment. The limes of the American world-empire began to expand to include the former mini-system which Central and Eastern Europe was, with the role of the expeditionary force, expanding the borders of the empire and establishing far-flung outposts and colonies, being played by agents of global distribution companies. Repertoires came to be dominated by Hollywood hits, with rare Western European and domestic additions (but no longer productions from other countries of the region), and newly established distribution companies were either local branches of global companies or had elaborate multi-annual contracts with them, acting as local intermediaries. This situation has continued to this day, even though the local film industries have recovered from the worst of the 1990s slump, with the share of US films in the box office remaining above 50 per cent in every country in the region, while indigenous films range from an almost negligible 0.4 per cent share (Montenegro) to an outstanding 33.3%

19 See I. Sowińska, “Obrazy starego i nowego świata. Kino Czechów i Słowaków”, [in:] *ibid.*, pp. 1073–1075.

20 M. Bartzczak, “W ogniu filmowej rewolucji”, *Ekrany* 2011, no. 1-2, pp. 29–33.

share (Poland)²¹. This is by no means unique to post-communist countries – according to the European Audiovisual Observatory, in 2019 the market share of American films in the entire European Union was 68.2 per cent²².

In the light of these data, there is no doubt that in the late 1980s and early 1990s Russia and other countries in the region joined the “global Hollywood”²³ or “Hollyworld”²⁴, to use the vivid terms of Toby Miller and Aida Hozic, respectively. Thus they became a distant periphery of the American world-empire, and this accession, in accordance with the features of the system defined earlier, took place both on the economic level (conquest of the market by the products and entities of the centre) and on the cultural-ideological level – both viewers and creators dreamed of Hollywood at the time, adopting its products, imitating its models and aspiring to be recognized and appreciated by it.

Yet it seems that Poland, especially today, has greater ambitions and, following the example of Western European countries, does not want to settle for the role of a mere market for American pop culture. We can, therefore, look at the last three and a half decades of Polish cinema as an attempt to find itself in this system, to adapt to its rules, but, at the same time, to improve its relative position and satisfy its global aspirations. Some of these were top-down processes, supported by protectionist regulations on the national as well as pan-European level, while others were the result of organic actions in the social, economic and artistic fields. Let us thus take a look at the strategies, arguments and resources used in this battle for position in the global hierarchy of the film world.

Survival strategies

Given the undisputed domination of the Hollywood centre, the functioning of virtually every developed national film industry is based on the local government’s protectionist policy, without which domestic producers would not be able to compete with the global giants. This policy usually has two basic dimensions – direct subsidies of production through regional, national or transnational public funds, or various indirect forms that facilitate production and circulation. The latter may include funding for public television, which in turn statutorily supports filmmaking and provides a window of distribution; restrictions on the share of domestic

21 See European Audiovisual Observatory, *Focus 2019. World Film Market Trends*.

22 European Audiovisual Observatory, *Yearbook 2020/2021. Key Trends*, p. 40.

23 T. Miller, *Global Hollywood*, British Film Institute, London 2001.

24 A. Hozic, *Hollyworld: Space, Power, and Fantasy in the American Economy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2001.

productions in cinema programmes or television schedules (the so-called quota system); tax breaks for audiovisual companies; funding for various film events, etc. We need to bear in mind, however, that the dimension and intended effects of such measures are not purely economic – in most systems at least part of the support is directed to productions that meet the criteria desired by the authorities. These are usually preferences for artistic productions, and thus those with less commercial potential, for films made by debutants and/or for films relating to national culture, history, etc.

Regardless of this support, however, individual cinematic entities from peripheral countries may pursue various strategies and undertake actions to occupy the most advantageous position possible in the entire ecosystem of local and global audiovisual production. In his book *Globalne Hollywood, filmowa Europa i polskie kino po 1989 roku* Marcin Adamczak distinguishes three basic strategies which, in his opinion, are possible for (semi)peripheral entities. Although he describes them, using as his example European cinema as a certain whole, it seems that they can – with appropriate modification – be adapted to Poland’s situation. They are: the “Airbus strategy” (which I will call the rivalry/imitation strategy), the “occupy a niche” strategy and the “join the stronger” strategy (in my version, the cooperative strategy)²⁵.

Before I discuss them, it is worth noting that what these three strategies have in common is a de facto recognition of the current paradigm based on the primacy of Hollywood – none of them challenges or seeks to circumvent or undermine this order, but each wants to occupy the most favourable place on the board drawn by the Californian tycoons. However, each stems from a different way of perceiving one’s own resources and room for manoeuvre. Importantly, they should by no means be regarded as separate – a measure of development of a film industry is, in a way, its ability to pursue them all at once. Below I will try to define these strategies using the example of the Polish post-transformation cinema:

1. Rivalry/imitation strategy

Adamczak describes the early 2000s “idea of consolidating the pan-European industry, capable of challenging Hollywood once it has reached a sufficient critical mass. This strategy is based on concentration of resources, production of a smaller number of high budget films with costs similar to those of Hollywood productions, and then their distribution through a pan-European network, with the help of massive advertising and

25 M. Adamczak, *Globalne Hollywood, filmowa Europa i polskie kino po 1989 roku. Przeobrażenia kultury audiowizualnej przelotem stuleci, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2010, pp. 378–402.

marketing”²⁶. Of course, in the Polish context such an ambitious undertaking is impossible, but this does not mean that it is impossible to locally create popular culture products capable of competing on the domestic market for the attention of a mass audience, and occasionally also trying to reach an international audience.

This is usually done by imitating American models in order to compete with the most popular American products by means of similar strategies and works, which are, however, closer to the tastes and cultural sensibilities of the target audience. The most visible effect of this is, of course, adaptation of the aesthetics, genre formulas or star system known from Western cinema. The most prominent examples of this are still the romantic comedies, enjoying great success in the twenty-first century, as well as thrillers (from their 1990s bandit version to contemporary productions by Patryk Vega) or biopics (biographical films, mostly set in the communist period). Today, in addition to competition for domestic viewers, there is also the opportunity to reach foreign audiences – extremely difficult in the past, but in recent years significantly facilitated by streaming-based distribution, the source of, for example, the spectacular global success of *365 Days* (2020, B. Białowas, T. Mandes) on Netflix, a film that reached the top three most-watched films on the platform in some thirty countries.

However, this aspect is quite well recognized and described, so I prefer to draw attention instead to the attempt to imitate Hollywood methods not so much on the level of products of the audiovisual market, but rather the organization of the market itself. After all, what is regarded as one of the foundations of the current power of American cinema is the emergence of huge media conglomerates in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, combining vertical integration (that is covering different chains of the same industry – such as film production, distribution and screening) with horizontal integration, that is operations in other fields. Very often these are fields chosen in such a way as to provide synergies between various products in terms of marketing or distribution – for example, those associated with the television and telecommunications, book and press, game, advertising, music and other industries.

Naturally, the Polish market has not been able to generate entities operating in this way on a scale comparable not only to American, but also to Western European or Far Eastern corporations; however, we will find on it individual, modest attempts at consolidation in a manner resembling the American models. The entities that came the closest to creating such an enterprise were two groups – ITI Corporation and Agora Spółka

Akcyjna. ITI was a media holding company, founded towards the end of the communist era in Poland, but it reached its heyday at the turn of the 2010s. At the various stages of its operations in that period the company included:

- ITI Cinema – distributor of films for cinemas and, before that, publisher of VHS cassettes under the ITI Home Video brand
- ITI Impresariat – event organizer
- ITI Film Studio – responsible for film production
- ITI Neovision – operator of the n, nc+, Canal+ platforms
- Endemol-Neovision – established in partnership with Endemol BV, the Polish branch of one of the world's leading producers of TV content
- TVN Group – media group that included TVN television, Onet.pl web portal, Pascal publishing house and Mango-Media (owner of Mango teleshopping)
- Multikino (including Silver Screen) – chain of 44 multiplex cinemas
- Legia Warsaw Football Club

Some of these ventures were set up in cooperation with Western players operating in a given industry, serving as their local subsidiaries, but as a whole the group was an independent and very strong player on the media market, controlling various complementary fields. Due to financial problems, however, the growth trajectory at the turn of the twenty-first century, based largely on acquisitions of more companies, was reversed, and from around 2013 the holding company began to divest itself of its most recognizable assets. As a result, this local media empire was parcelled out and ended up in the hands of large international players – today TVN is owned by the American conglomerate Warner Discovery, Onet by the German-Swiss media conglomerate Ringer Axel Springer, and Multikino by Vue International, a UK-based operator of cinemas in seven European countries and Taiwan.

The joint-stock company Agora, on the other hand, still has a considerable potential, with its portfolio including:

- Helios – chain of 54 multiplex cinemas
- Next Film – nationwide film distributor in Poland
- newspapers and magazines, including *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Wysokie Obcasy*, *Książki. Magazyn do czytania*, as well as the gazeta.pl news and journalistic portal
- numerous national and regional radio stations, including Tok FM, Radio Zet, Antyradio, Meloradio
- Agora publishing house, which publishes books, music as well as films and television series on DVDs
- numerous web portals dealing with marketing and recruitment, such as GoldenLine, HRLink, Hash.fm, Yieldbird and ROI Hunter

- Agora Poligrafia printing company, publico.pl and kulturalnysklep.pl online bookshops, and AMS, an outdoor advertising agency
- Pasibus chain of catering establishments

As we can thus see, Agora has the resources to secure a lasting and strong position on the Polish market. What remains an open question, however, is whether, despite this vertical as well as horizontal integration, the company will be able to create a structure stable enough to survive further turbulence and a leadership change, for example. This is because what distinguishes large Western entities from new ones modelled on them in various parts of the world is that they have decades of history behind them. Obviously, this history is full of various kinds of crises, ownership transformations or adaptations to new market or technological conditions. Through them these organizations have developed a kind of institutional memory – the ability to cope with various challenges, as well as a sense that the company is bigger than its current owners and CEOs, and that its interests are much more long-term than the management cycle. Only when this level of organization has been reached, is it possible to think about long-term competition – even if it is only going to be on the local market.

2. Occupy a niche strategy

What can complement the rivalry strategy is an attempt to do exactly the opposite – to create an alternative to Hollywood cinema, with its strength lying not in similarities, but differences from the dominant pop culture model. In fact, this is how we can define the entirety of what we call art cinema – which is less oriented towards mass audiences and benefits more from its own production, distribution and reception infrastructure, largely parallel to that used by mainstream cinema. It consists of specialised production companies, mostly constructing budgets for their productions on the basis of various forms of public funding (European, national or regional funds, TV support, tax reliefs, partnerships with various institutions, etc.), developing them during various workshops and industry meetings with an eye on the European arthouse circuit (festivals, studio cinemas, educational institutions, etc.) and living thanks to specialty reception (specialised portals and magazines, fan groups, academic courses and film studies, etc.).

Looking at them from a purely economic point of view, these are usually not profitable ventures and become possible only thanks to the public funds, or soft money. Most developed countries subsidise such productions for reasons both economic (as part of the protection of the domestic film industry and market from American domination) and cultural (believing in the importance of local artistic creation and the values behind it) as well as political (using cinema and other cultural fields to carry out their policies –

everyday and historical). Another important factor is that the products of artistic culture have a much bigger potential for internationalisation than those of typically commercial nature. Thus while Polish audiences have been eagerly watching domestic romantic comedies and thrillers for several decades now, in no way does their box office success on the local market translate into audience interest in other countries. In fact, Polish cinema is not unique in this respect – apart from American films, basically only popular French comedies have a permanent place in the Polish cinematic repertoire, occasionally alongside one-off hits from other countries. As a rule, however, a multi-million dollar audience for a local hit in Germany, India or Mexico by no means guarantees international distribution.

It is the other way round, as it were, with award-winning art films, which often win a majority of their audience in the global (and especially the best developed European) arthouse circuit. A spectacular example of such disproportion was the story of the distribution of Paweł Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2013). The Oscar-winning film represents one of the biggest prestigious successes in the history of Polish cinema, yet at the time of its premiere distribution in 2013, despite winning the Golden Lions at the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia, only 55,000 people saw it in cinemas. Then, confirmed by successive awards and favourable reviews, the growing cultural stature of Pawlikowski's film led to its release in dozens of countries and excellent performance at the box office – as in the US, where the film was seen in cinemas by nearly half a million people, and France, where this result was even surpassed.

Thus art cinema is a kind of a loophole in the Hollywood system, filling the repertoires of studio cinemas and attracting viewers who do not watch American blockbusters or like to diversify their film experience. From this perspective it represents a (semi)periphery of the global system. As Adamczak writes:

It is beneficial for the global production centre located in Hollywood to have European production focused on the niche circuit of art and festival cinema, of little relevance in strictly economic calculations. At the same time, this circuit is convenient for the subsidised European industries and its representatives.²⁷

This Western European monopoly on determining artistic value and desirable models of cinematic expression forces (semi-)peripheral countries to adapt, though not necessarily through imitation, as is the case with

27 M. Adamczak, "Nadzieje i złudzenia. Polskie wizje koprodukcji", *Ekrany* 2017, no. 1, pp. 8–9.

the attempts to compete with American cinema. On the contrary, the paradox is that the international art cinema circuit is oriented towards “universal artistic values”, but assumes that they have a very concrete, local form, highlighting cultural, ethnic, religious or political specificities. Thus a work seeking recognition from the centre should contain an element of local specificity, though understandable to the international festival cinema audience, supporting, in a way, the processes of (self-)orientation of individual national cinemas, especially non-Western ones.

An excellent example of this is Central and Eastern European cinema, which had to conform to the West’s perceptions of the region in order to attract the interest of Western selectors, programmers, grantors, jurors, etc. After the fall of communism virtually all of the most acclaimed artists from the region, which, after all, is internally diverse, upheld its image as a well-nigh barbaric land – grey, hopeless, ruled by corruption, poverty, alcoholism and violence. The region’s societies and spaces are sad, best portrayed in black and white or at least in very muted colours. History is dominated by the Second World War and colonialism, and the present – by the post-communist crisis, parochialism and social problems. From Emir Kusturica’s *Underground*, the films of Béla Tarr and Sharunas Bartas, Andrey Zvyagintsev, the Romanian New Wave and the Ukrainian *Tribe* (2014, M. Slaboshpytskyi), to the Polish films of Paweł Pawlikowski, the oeuvre of Jasmina Žbanić and Ilya Khrzhanovsky’s *DAU* project – nearly all of the high-profile Eastern European films on the festival circuit fall into this pattern. For a long time it seemed that Czech artists, most of whom are characterised by more distance and a sense of humour, and who do not fit into regional stereotypes, were breaking out of this pattern. In recent years, however, it has been not the films of Jan Svěrák or Petr Zelenka that represent Czech cinema internationally, but rather works that correspond to the descriptions outlined above, like *Shadow Country* (2020) by Bohdan Sláma or, especially, the controversial, cruelty-filled *Painted Bird* (2019, V. Marhoul) based on Jerzy Kosiński’s novel. Perhaps Krzysztof Kieślowski was simply the last European filmmaker in the region – after him we are represented only by Eastern Europeans.

Significantly, I do not think that this is a cynical move on the part of the filmmakers – most of them outstanding directors who make needed and successful films. Rather, the whole system of dependency, based on the already-mentioned stereotypes, works to support precisely these types of projects, providing them with the easiest path to screens and festivals. It is also these types of films that are usually picked out of the entire rich output of Central and Eastern European cinema. Regardless of the reasons, however, our niche in this ecosystem has been defined precisely in this way, just as, for example, the so-called Nordic noir remains the Scandinavian

niche; it is difficult to imagine that the trend will be overcome in the foreseeable future.

3. Cooperation strategy

Yet an attempt to find a place for oneself within the global cinematic system does not always have to involve subjective control of production. Instead of competing with Hollywood or filling in areas it does not control, it is also possible to try to join it as a smaller partner – a co-producer, subcontractor or service provider. This option is the clearest admission of peripherality in relation to the American world-system, but it also has its undeniable advantages, which is why many countries (as well as entities and individuals operating in them) not only accept such an arrangement, but even compete with each other for the opportunity to be part of it.

Obviously, such cooperation, depending on the strength of the partners, may happen on various levels. For instance, the United Kingdom, with its much stronger cultural position, but also shared language and history, as well as its extensive relations in other fields, has mastered this strategy to perfection, providing an important link in the film offerings of the biggest Hollywood studios. As a result, the most recognizable brands of British popular film culture are usually produced by American studios, which try to preserve the impression of Britishness, connoted mostly by the context of the origin, characters and place of action of the literary originals of such brands as well as the actors involved in the projects. For years this has been the case of the James Bond film series (to which MGM and Columbia have the rights), Harry Potter and Sherlock Holmes films (both Warner Bros.), as well as *The Lord of the Rings* (Warner Bros.) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Walt Disney Studios) series, which are set in fantastic worlds but nevertheless have a distinctly British pedigree. In these types of projects the financing and production-related decisions (and thus also the subsequent profits and product rights) are the domain of the American side, while the United Kingdom is often the location of some of the shooting, featuring local artists and companies; in addition, the country enjoys significant image benefits.

Poland, not to mention other countries in the region, is probably not capable of generating such a significant and recognizable franchise. Productions coming the closest to this status are the Netflix films set in the world of the Witcher, created by Andrzej Sapkowski, although their reception proved mixed; in addition, the rights to the brand are dispersed, so there is no connection between the series or films and the most recognizable of the Witcher franchise products, the video game series by CD Projekt Red. Thus the Polish contribution to global pop culture usually consists

of subcontracting work on major productions shot in the region, as is the case, for example, with Hungary or Czechia. In most cases this means a much smaller artistic contribution, which, however, is often associated with high remuneration as well as transfer of technology and work culture, as has been described by Petr Szczepanik, who uses Prague as his example²⁸. For the big studios, on the other hand, this is an extremely profitable situation, as they can take advantage of attractive locations in the region, a well-educated and experienced workforce (which is largely the result of the state-controlled film education system established in the communist era and the statism that maintained a relatively large number of jobs in the industry) for relatively little money (in comparison with the costs they would have to pay in the US).

Many of the countries even have a system of financial incentives, most often based on the cash rebate mechanism, that is reimbursement of some of the costs incurred by producers, to attract large productions. For years such a policy has been successfully implemented by, for example, Czechia and Hungary, and in 2019 a similar system was introduced in Poland, with the Polish Film Institute acting as its operator. In this way every year the government allocates tens of millions of zlotys as incentives to foreign producers who decide to make their films in Poland. After fulfilling the requirements of the so-called cultural test, which includes the use of Polish themes and locations or Polish creative input, they can have up to 30 per cent of the costs incurred in Poland reimbursed.

The long way to the centre

At the end it is worth returning to the initial question about the position of Polish cinema in the Hollywood world-system. The above analysis of strategies adopted clearly demonstrates that the domestic film industry is largely subordinated to global forces and trends, struggling to forge its place in the value chain of the audiovisual industry. The domestic media market remains unstable, as is evidenced by the story of the ITI holding company as well as the overview of the functioning of local film distributors carried out by Aleksandra Bartosiewicz and Agnieszka Orankiewicz. During the period they have examined, 2002–2018, “more than half of the 115 distributors analysed in the study were in business for only one year, and another 11 were in business for just two years. Throughout the entire period in question, cinema distribution in Poland was handled continuously by only seven companies (Best Film, Gutek Film, Kino Świat, Monolith,

28 P. Szczepanik, “Transnarodowe ekipy i postsocjalistyczny prekariat: przypadek Pragi”, trans. M. Stelmach, *Ekrany* 2017, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 31–36.

Solopan, UIP, Warner)”²⁹. In addition, we should note the high level of market penetration by Western companies, typical of (semi-)peripheral countries. It is well illustrated by the statistics on the share of the most significant (that is, with more than 5 per cent share) distributors on the Polish film market for 2019:

- Disney 22.8%
- Kino Świat 19.6%
- UIP 14.7%
- Warner 9.1%
- Monolith 9.0%
- NextFilm 8.1%³⁰

Together, these six companies controlled more than 83 per cent of the market, the majority of which fell to subsidiaries of US conglomerates, Disney, Warner and UIP (a joint venture of Paramount and Universal) – 46.6 per cent of the entire market. Poland is thus a market for Western products to a large extent and provides locations or cheap labour for their creation.

On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that Polish cinema is not entirely peripheral. This is because it, too, has a centre of gravity and, in a limited way, but nevertheless does influence its environment, establishing hierarchical relations with local entities with an even more peripheral position. Polish companies have attempted to expand into smaller markets, as is exemplified by the Multikino chain’s outlets in Vilnius and Riga. Polish intellectual property also occasionally gained recognition in some countries of the region, inspiring television series based on Polish licences. These included Russian adaptations of the television series *M jak miłość* (*Lyubov kak lubov*, 2006–2007) and *Glina* (*Morozov*, 2007), Ukrainian *Świat według Kiepskich* (*Niepruchi*, 2010), Estonian *Ranczo* (*Naabriplika*, 2013–2019), Lithuanian and Russian versions of *Kryminalni* (respectively *Kriminalistai*, 2013, and *Komanda Che*, 2012), Lithuanian *Recepta na życie* (*Gyvenimo receptai*, 2014) or Latvian *Dom nad rozlewiskiem* (*Māja pie ezera*, 2015). In addition, Poland seems to be an attractive destination for some artists who study or work here. The former include, in particular, the young generation of Ukrainian directors and filmmakers, like the students of Warsaw’s Wajda School – Valentyn Vasyanovych (*Atlantis*, 2019) and Maryna Er Gorbach (*Klondike*, 2022). Other directors who have achieved success in Poland include Okil Khamidov (Tajik-born director of numerous

29 A. Bartosiewicz, A. Orankiewicz, “Współczesny rynek dystrybucji kinowej w Polsce”, *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2019, no. 108, pp. 232–242.

30 Polish Film Institute’s report, *Box Office Polska 2019*, available on https://pisf.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Raport_Box_Office_2019_PL_EN.pdf

popular TV series and programmes) and Mitja Okorn (Slovenian director of such films as *Listy do M.*, 2011, and *Planeta singli*, 2016).

According to the definitions presented at the beginning, one of the main features of a world-system is the permanence of the core entities and the continued lability of those on the periphery. Polish cinema – like the Polish economy, politics and other areas of culture – will be subjected to constant pressure by international capital and interest groups seeking to consolidate its inferior position. On the other hand, the resources it has enable it to fight for as strong a position as possible and to use some of the structural features of the system to leverage its significance, for example within the framework of pan-European cooperation or exploitation of its relatively important role in Central and Eastern Europe. The above description has been an attempt to present the rules of the game as well as to determine the current position of the pawns on its board. All that remains now is to watch the game's successive phases.

Translation: Anna Kijak

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