

University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest Doctoral School

**The producer's role in documentary
Production and financing**

Dissertation summary

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1. Introduction: identifying the problem

The presentation of the producer's work in documentary film is a complex task from a production and financing point of view, both nationally and internationally. There is a large body of literature on the subject - mainly by Western European and Anglo-Saxon authors - but the up-to-date literature on the subject in Hungary leaves much to be desired. The producer profession exists in an ever-changing, evolving environment, constantly challenged and requiring constant vigilance. The environment changes, the rules, the trends change, the funding opportunities change, all of which have an impact on the development of film projects. In many cases, calls for proposals do not take into account the specificities of documentaries, they are based on feature film production processes. Film funds disappear and new ones are created, national and international laws change, new guidelines come into force, which have an impact on the attitude of financiers. In this environment, the documentary producer's task is to support and protect important stories inspired by life and reality, to provide them with the financial resources they need, preferably on an ongoing basis, and to create the best possible professional, legal and creative environment to produce and market the best possible films. My thesis explores the issue of feature-length and creative documentaries for the domestic and international market, which I call 'feature documentaries'.

In addition to presenting the knowledge available in the literature, the essay also draws on the practical experience I have gained over the last 15 years of my professional work as a documentary filmmaker.

In the first half of the essay, after outlining the situation, difficulties and changes in documentary film in Hungary, I will discuss the specificities of the role of documentary film producer embedded in the Hungarian financing structure. I will then turn to the opportunities and challenges of the international market, focusing mainly on the region and Europe. In my thesis I illustrate the case study with an analysis of my own work.

2. Aim and relevance

The primary aim of the dissertation is to highlight the importance of documentary film production by presenting the domestic and international structures and describing the different tasks and attitudes of producers.

The novelty of the research lies both in the detailed analysis of the current situation and in the fact that it focuses specifically on the realisation of Hungarian feature documentaries with international ambitions. In addition to practical experience, I have tried to draw on domestic and international literature which, because of its topicality, can serve as a real guide for future documentary film producers and possibly form the basis for further research.

3. Research theses

In the light of the above, this dissertation aims to defend three theses:

- The first thesis states that an outstanding documentary can only be created through outstanding production work based on up-to-date knowledge.
- The first thesis states that an outstanding documentary can only be created through outstanding production work based on up-to-date knowledge.
- The second thesis draws a distinction between feature film and documentary production, listing the essential points where the two differ.
- The third thesis argues that feature documentaries for this market, which operate in the international arena, require different production skills, activities and attitudes from the production of documentaries, which are mainly made for television and are aimed at a domestic audience.

In the light of my professional experience and the literature, I have assumed that although the process of documentary filmmaking is surrounded by a constant uncertainty - as there are many constant variables that filmmakers have to deal with during the production process, which often takes many years - with the right knowledge and a documentary producer's attitude, there is always a possibility of realisation, even if the way of doing it is different in each case.

4. Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is divided into six major units. The introduction (Chapter 1) describes the research in general terms and outlines its main aspects. Chapter 2 ("The situation of feature documentary film in Hungary") outlines the problems of contemporary documentary

filmmaking from a financing and marketing perspective, and describes the opportunities for funding feature documentary film in Hungary. The first half of Chapter 3 ("The Producer in Documentary Film") deals with the second thesis of the dissertation, comparing the documentary and feature film producer's approach. It then traces the importance of the role of the producer in the different phases of documentary filmmaking: development, production, post-production and marketing - distribution. Chapter 4 focuses on the international situation and opportunities, concentrating on the Central and Eastern European region, detailing international workshops, pitching forums, markets and funding sources that may be relevant to filmmakers in this part of the world. This chapter also discusses the importance of co-production and the rules of co-production in documentary filmmaking. The case study (Chapter 5), which describes the production process of the award-winning feature documentary film *Holy Dilemma* (directors: Marton Vízkelety and Julianna Ugrin) from development to the festival circuit, points out the practical use of the knowledge detailed in the previous chapters of the dissertation and shows a possible way forward. The final section of the thesis (Chapter 6) summarises the ideas presented in the previous chapters and confirms the theses put forward at the beginning of the thesis. It highlights the specificity of the documentary production profession and the importance of targeted knowledge.

5. Research methods, corpus and results

In order to support the theses outlined above, I explored the challenges of documentary filmmaking from a producer's perspective, in Hungarian and international contexts, comparing Hungarian, Western and Eastern European opportunities, and examined in detail the specificities of the documentary producer's role and the tasks to be performed in the course of filmmaking.

My aim was to create an essay based on theoretical and practical knowledge, which would provide the knowledge that a novice producer would need to understand the domestic and international documentary market and start on the path of gaining experience, bringing outstanding documentaries to life.

To this end, I first described in detail the Hungarian film funding possibilities; I presented the functioning of the National Film Institute of Hungary, which was established in 2020 with the merger of the Hungarian National Film Fund and the Television Film Grant

Programme, and the important points of its funding rules for documentaries, including the possibilities for television and cinema. I then wrote about HBO, which has produced a number of major Hungarian documentaries over the past twelve years, including the channel's transformation into HBO Max, the closure of the local original production office and the possibility of further cooperation. In terms of domestic funding, I also highlighted the role of the National Film Office, which is responsible for awarding indirect funding (30% tax incentive).

It is the producer's responsibility to take the film from idea to audience, so in this thesis I list the strategic and organisational objectives and tasks throughout the documentary filmmaking process, then describe the importance of each phase and detail the tasks to be carried out and the material to be produced:

Development: the most difficult part of development, of starting a documentary project, is dealing with the unpredictable. How do you present a film before it even exists? How to prepare a budget for it before the locations and scenarios have been finalised? To stabilise this unpredictable situation, written documents and visual material: synopsis, treatment, biography and filmography, production schedule, budget, financing plan, financing trailer, etc., can help and guide. Also, as part of the development, I analyse pitching - the formal or informal presentation of a film project - with the help of Sibylle Kurz's niche book *Pitch it!*¹

Production: 'The producer's role is to be an alchemist – to bring together the elements of a project and support them into a magical reaction'². The production schedule and the production budget - the total budget - are important elements of a production proposal, while the cash-flow plan and the cost-report are important financial documents. In this section, I highlight the importance of crew assembly, the issue of legal clarity, and I also mention production financing.

Distribution: the distribution strategy for a feature documentary starts during development - especially if the film is intended for an international market. Here I also discuss domestic and international distribution and alternative options.

¹ Kurz, Sibylle: *Pitch It! Die Kunst Filmprojekte erfolgreich zu verkaufen*, Köln, Herbert von Halem Verlag, 2015.

² Anna Higgs (interview), quoted from: Jerry Rothwell, Producing, in: de Jong, Wilma – Knudsen, Erik – Rothwell, Jerry: *Creative Documentary – Theory and Practice*, London, Routledge, 2013., p.184.

My secondary aim was to paint as detailed and accurate a picture as possible of the complexity of this task, by addressing the problems of documentary filmmaking, which has been a concern for film theorists since the beginning of the history of filmmaking, and to highlight the differences between the work of a producer in feature filmmaking and documentary production. Since the beginning of the 21st century, documentary filmmaking and production has undergone significant changes, technologically, formally, aesthetically and commercially. This is due to technological progress, the increased role of online content-sharing sites (YouTube, Vimeo, etc.), the proliferation of festivals, and the transformation and development of the TV - VoD³ broadcasting system⁴. Not all documentaries fall into one category. Film theorist Carl Plantinga, at the beginning of his 2005 essay *What a Documentary Is After All?*⁵, argues that defining and characterising documentary is a difficult thing. According to him, a documentary goes beyond the simple description of reality, or natural material, and processes it, reworks it, transforms it creatively, and thus produces a work of art. The producer of this documentary is responsible for the creation of this work of art, in a way that over the years reality shapes both the historical and the financing paths, which interact. There is an ever-present risk that the producer assumes in the production of a documentary, as Wilma de Jong points out in her introduction to her analysis of *Deep Water*⁶. Documentary expert Michael Opstrup also categorises documentaries according to their uncertainty components in his book *The Uncertainty*⁷, published in 2021. As a result of the constant risk and uncertainty, documentary film requires a specific producer's attitude. In any genre, the producer is the director of the artistic project, the owner of the rights and the one who takes responsibility for the film and is one of its leading creators. The basic processes of documentary and fiction film production are the same, but they differ in many details. The following table shows the differences:

³ Video on Demand

⁴ Drawing on the work of Wilma De Jong and Brian Winston, and Lóránt Stóhr: *Personality, Presence, Narrativity*

⁵ Plantinga, Carl R.: What a Documentary Is After All? In *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63/2 (2005.) p. 105-117.

⁶ Austin, Thomas – de Jong, Wilma (eds): *Rethinking Documentary – New Perspectives, New Practices*, Open University Press, 2008. p. 135.

⁷ Michael Opstrup, *The Uncertainty*, Micharel Opstrup, 2021.

Table 1: Basic differences between documentary and feature filmmaking

	Documentary	Fiction film
production phases	overlap	separate
script	written during filming and editing, finalised at the end of editing	written during development and approved at the end of development
shooting starts	in the research phase	during the film production phase
crew	small but carefully selected not only for professionalism but also for personal qualities	large, selected on the basis of professional criteria
characters	real people, based on trust	actors, who are paid
to secure funding	continuous during the whole production process	to be secured until the end of pre-production, that is until the start of production
production schedule	evolves as the project progresses	planned in advance
budget	low	high
risk tolerance	high	low
post-production - editing	from development onwards continuously	starts after completion of filming

As a result of the above differences, a documentary producer should have the following qualities: *flexibility, perseverance, good conflict management skills, psychological sensitivity*. They must also be aware of the *importance of thorough development, preparation and research*, and of the fact that *these require filming* - director, cinematographer, sound engineer, technician - and *must provide the financial and/or technical backing* for this, as well as the *legal and financial backing to cover the unforeseen*, the *inclusion of new characters during the filming*, the *constant change of crew members* due to the genre, or possible *personal conflicts*. I conclude that the documentary producer must operate during each phase of the filmmaking process, right up to the editing stage, with the same attitude as the feature film producer during the development and writing phase of the film project.

And my third aim was to emphasise that the work of a feature documentary producer targeting the international market is different from that of a producer making mainly

television documentaries at home. They require different skills and attitudes. What makes a feature documentary international? In his book⁸, Opstrup divides films into four categories according to their likelihood of international success:

- the easy ones - which tell an untold story about people, events or places that affect all our lives,
- the impossible - which presuppose prior knowledge and interest, can be understood by a small community, and thus remain local,
- the difficult ones - which deal with general, universal topics and can therefore be produced in each country's own language - are the most numerous, Opstrup says,
- the "beautiful exceptions" outside the category - the unrepeatable pieces of art. A character-driven documentary embedded in a strong story is internationally interesting and sells because it precludes discussion of relevance to the subject.

To be able to compete internationally, a producer must first and foremost have a sound and accurate knowledge of the domestic legal and financing system and a sufficient international network - and through this, adequate international knowledge. There is a lot of overlap in the functioning of national and regional film funds in Europe, but there are also many discrepancies, as the European Audiovisual Observatory's study *Mapping of film and audiovisual public funding criteria in the EU*⁹, carried out in 28 countries, has shown. To get a more accurate picture of documentary funding in the region, I interviewed Czech, Bulgarian, Slovenian and Romanian producers. Looking at these four countries, the amount of funding available for feature documentaries in Hungary is similar to that of Central and Eastern Europe, and in exceptional cases significantly higher, but when looking at the annual output of films, Hungary's annual output of feature documentaries lags behind countries with similar capacity.

Funding for works for the Hungarian market relies on domestic sources - direct and indirect support. Thanks to the single window system, a producer with sufficient legal and accounting knowledge can manage well within the given framework. Television productions receive funding after receiving a letter of intent from a national channel, where the film is likely to be screened once it is completed. As few documentaries are made in a year, competition is minimal.

⁸ Opstrup, Michael, idem, 2021, p. 39.

⁹ European Audiovisual Observatory: *Mapping of film and audiovisual public funding criteria in the EU*, 2019. <https://rm.coe.int/mapping-of-film-and-audiovisual-public-funding-criteria-in-the-eu/1680947b6c>

The international market is huge, competition is tough and it's not easy to stand out. To get a major documentary film into the most prestigious festivals, it is a mad scramble, with producer and director working together. International platforms; development and editing workshops, pitching forums and markets are a big help in this fight. Among the development workshops, EURODOC, based in France, and the Ex-Oriente Film Workshop, based in the Czech Republic, are described in detail, but also the EAVE Producer's workshop, EsoDoc, Archidoc and IDFA Project Space are mentioned. This is followed by a detailed description of two editing workshops, dok.incubator and Docu Rough Cut Boutique. In terms of pitching forums, the dissertation focuses on the IDFA Forum, When East Meets West in Trieste and the East Doc Forum in Prague, while the East Doc Market in Prague and the Dok Leipzig co-pro are highlighted as the markets and platforms to find production and financing partners in the filmmaking process, as well as providing essential professional creative support for film projects, which facilitate their path to an international audience. Among the EU funds, Creative Europe MEDIA and Eurimages are discussed in more detail, as well as the Sundance Documentary Film Program, the IDFA Bertha Fund and others are mentioned. It is clear from the descriptions that each funder has different rules, so a thorough knowledge of these is essential in order to be able to combine them and fit them into a possible co-production. Knowledge of the *European Co-production Convention* is also essential for international cooperation, as it is the basis for the rules of national film funds. In order to choose the right co-production partner for a film, the producer needs to know the national and regional possibilities and expectations of the country concerned, in a way that is adapted to the specificities of the documentary. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 4(d) of this thesis. At the end of this detailed list, I conclude that a producer who wants to succeed in the international field must have this expertise as the basis of his or her knowledge.

*Holy Dilemma*¹⁰, as a work targeting international forums and markets, is an inspiring example for all three theses of this thesis because the appropriate financing and market background knowledge enabled the local, Hungarian-language documentary to be co-produced internationally, despite the challenges of documentary characteristics, and ensured its international marketing and distribution. In addition to German cinema release, *Holy Dilemma* was screened and won awards at numerous international film festivals.

¹⁰ *Holy Dilemma*, (d.: Marton Vizkelety and Julianna Ugrin), Éclipse Film, Corso Film, HBO-Max, 2022.

6. Conclusion

The thesis confirmed the (hypo)theses that an outstanding documentary film can only be made with an outstanding producer with up-to-date knowledge, that the production of feature films and documentaries differs in important points, and that feature documentaries for the international market require different production skills, activities and attitudes from documentaries aimed at a domestic audience, which are mainly made for television.

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