

## **Co-production is the future!**

### **Interview with Otwin Biernat\* A Journey Through Film and Storytelling**

By Gentiana Ramadani

In this interview, we sit down with Otwin Biernat, an accomplished film director with a diverse career. From his early days studying drama in Vienna, where he later pursued a career as an actor, to transitioning into filmmaking in Berlin, Otwin has made a significant mark in the film industry. His career began with music videos and short films, including the Berlin Film Festival-featured *Codewort Mr. Bean* in 2011. In this interview, he shares insights on the challenges and opportunities within the industry, discussing everything from the evolution of filmmaking to the importance of social justice, gender (in)equality, and representation in cinema.

Takeaways from this conversation include the belief that co-productions should be considered the future of European cinema. Otwin believes that co-productions not only offer financial advantages, such as tax credits, but also serve as cultural exchanges, enriching films with diverse perspectives. Another key pillar is the importance of adapting funding models. The current funding landscape in Austria, and Europe more broadly, is facing challenges. Traditional institutional funding often favours certain genres or storytelling styles, which can limit creative freedom.

Additionally, Otwin addresses navigating industry inequality, emphasizing that the industry is heavily influenced by connections and networks, which can create inequalities for young filmmakers without the right resources or background. He stresses that while talent is essential, connections and luck also play a significant role in career progression. This leads to the final pillar, the role of passion and merit in filmmaking. Despite the challenges posed by industry competition and structural inequalities, Otwin believes that the key to success is staying true to one's vision.

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *What are your insights into the state of the European film industry? Where do we currently stand, and what challenges do young filmmakers face when entering the market?*

**Otwin Biernat:** It's difficult to define the situation uniformly across Europe because conditions vary from country to country. In Austria, for example, the direction of the industry is uncertain at the moment. It's not an easy time. That said, Europe presents significant opportunities, particularly in co-productions. Different countries offer unique advantages for filmmaking. This is why countries like Romania and Bulgaria have become attractive production hubs because of lower costs. Romania offers a 35% tax rebate. Certain regions in Europe are thriving in film production. I lived in Naples for six years and witnessed the high volume of films being produced there, including many American productions. On the other hand, some areas are struggling. In Germany, for instance, industry professionals are facing uncertainty. Many producers and filmmakers are unsure about the future, which has created a temporary standstill in production. One thing is clear: European filmmakers need to

strengthen connections and collaborations across countries. Co-productions are becoming increasingly essential. I recently spoke with an Austrian producer who confirmed the difficulties of producing films within Austria alone. He suggested that my project would be more feasible as a co-production with Italy or another country.

Another concern is the role of national broadcasters like ORF in Austria, whose cooperation with filmmakers plays a significant role in funding and production. Uncertainty surrounding public broadcasters adds to the challenges faced by the industry.

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *Given these circumstances, what do you see as the most promising path forward for European filmmakers?*

**Otwin Biernat:** Collaboration is key. The future of European cinema lies in co-productions and cross-border partnerships. Filmmakers must explore international opportunities and leverage the strengths of different countries to overcome financial and structural barriers. By fostering a more interconnected industry, we can create a stronger, more sustainable filmmaking environment in Europe.

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *How are Austrian filmmakers currently navigating funding challenges, and what alternative funding opportunities are emerging?*

**Otwin Pierna:** The Austrian film industry is closely tied to institutions like the Austrian Film Institute. However, many filmmakers' express frustration over the limitations of institutional funding. Some projects, particularly those with more commercial or genre-driven storytelling, struggle to receive support. There is a growing sentiment that funding decisions do not always reflect the quality or potential of a project but rather align with institutional preferences. Some filmmakers have even suggested adopting a more anonymous selection process to ensure fairness in funding allocation.

Another shift is happening with private investment. A new private TV channel in Austria, owned by the Red Bull group, has started providing funding for fiction feature films. This marks a change in Austria's funding landscape, introducing more market-driven financial support.

Internationally, filmmakers are also exploring alternative financing models inspired by the American system. In Italy, for example, state funding alone is often insufficient, prompting filmmakers to seek funding from private investors, large brands, or wealthy individuals. This approach allows them to produce films much faster than relying solely on government grants. Some Austrian filmmakers, including myself, are now exploring similar models by collaborating with producers from the United States to access a different funding structure that prioritizes commercial viability and speed.

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *If you were to propose changes in institutional support within Austria, what would they be?*

**Otwin Biernat:** Reforming funding policies to be more inclusive of different genres and storytelling styles would be a step in the right direction. Filmmakers should not feel limited to certain themes or artistic styles simply because they align with institutional preferences. Additionally, increasing the transparency of funding decisions and potentially implementing more anonymous project evaluations could improve fairness and diversity in Austrian film

production. Furthermore, establishing stronger connections between Austrian filmmakers and international funding sources would be beneficial. This could involve fostering more co-production agreements, encouraging private-sector investment, and adapting funding models to be more dynamic and responsive to industry needs.

Ultimately, Austria must evolve to remain competitive in the European and global film markets. By embracing both traditional funding structures and new financing models, Austrian filmmakers can have greater creative freedom and access to the resources necessary to bring their stories to life.

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *As a producer and head of a company, what are the biggest challenges you face in the industry economic, social, or cultural?*

**Otwin Biernat:** I consider myself lucky because my company operates in two areas. On one side, I shoot commercials, which provide a stable income. This is crucial because film funding can take a long time, and there are periods when no money is coming in. Some projects go months or even years without financial support.

I made the decision five years ago to establish a steady income stream. I had experience shooting music videos, but working with larger brands on commercials provided more financial stability. While it is time-consuming, I love it because it constantly sharpens my directing skills.

The second part of my work involves developing film projects, writing, pitching, and applying for funding. The biggest challenge, by far, is securing funding. Without financial support, a project cannot move forward.

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *You've mentioned co-productions. Many see co-production as primarily a financial strategy. Do you believe it has a broader cultural impact, such as fostering audience engagement, democratic values, and public interest?*

**Otwin Biernat:** Absolutely. For my historical film, we would need funding from Austria, Italy, and European grants. Without that, it would be impossible. I certainly hope so. Personally, I view co-productions as cultural exchanges. I want to work with different countries to create films that blend perspectives and traditions. My goal is to shoot ten films in ten different countries.

Collaboration between nations naturally leads to cultural exchange, not only among the cast and crew but also for the audience. For instance, my historical film follows an Austrian who falls in love with an Italian during a war between their countries. Viewers in both Austria and Italy would be able to connect with the story from different angles. This is the essence of co-production, it brings people together, offering new perspectives and fostering understanding

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *What does competitiveness mean to you, and how does it relate to public value in the context of filmmaking?*

**Otwin Biernat:** Competitiveness is inevitable when pitching a project, as not everything will receive support or funding. However, the real mistake is when filmmakers focus too much on outshining others. If you approach filmmaking with the sole aim of being better than someone else, you lose sight of your passion and your project's true essence. Success comes from focusing on your story, your vision. While it's important to be aware of what topics are

relevant today, the key is to remain true to your project without letting competition overwhelm you. There will always be talented people out there, and trying to beat them will only drive you crazy.

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *How do you perceive the inclusivity and fairness in the film industry, especially for young filmmakers?*

**Otwin Biernat:** The film industry, much like the economy, isn't entirely fair. It's shaped by the larger global system, geopolitics, economics, and sometimes even venality. In the film industry, this manifests as favouritism, where certain people get preferences because of personal connections or networks. It's a common practice in every industry. For example, if you go to a doctor, you may prefer one you know, and they'll likely treat you differently. The film industry operates similarly, connections play a significant role, and that's just the way the world works. However, the idea of inclusivity is complex. All groups and communities should be part of the market, but that's not always the case. Some young people, for example, might not have the formal education required but are incredibly talented in what they do. The problem is that without certain connections, it's harder for them to break through. Yes, you need "vitamin B" (Beziehung-connections) to succeed in this industry. It depends on your education, your projects, and the recognition you receive through festivals or awards. Some creative people just don't have the luck or the right connections to be seen, while others, who might not be as talented, are given preference because of their networks.

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *Based on your description, it seems like the film industry doesn't truly value meritocracy. Connections, socioeconomic background, and other factors seem to play a significant role in career progression.*

**Otwin Biernat:** Yes, I agree. While connections and luck are important, we should also remember how less exclusive the industry used to be. Forty or fifty years ago, only a select few could afford to make films because of the equipment needed. Now, anyone can pick up a camera and make a film. Funding opportunities have also expanded. It's no longer just about state funding, you can find private sponsors or partners to help finance projects. This has opened doors for more diverse voices and ideas.

**Gentiana Ramadani:** *What changes would you suggest to promote diversity, meritocracy, and social justice in the film industry?*

**Otwin Biernat:** One change would be to provide equal opportunities for everyone, ensuring that quality is the main factor in determining success. However, this is a difficult issue, and I'm not sure if it's entirely possible to eliminate the influence of connections. I know a producer in Europe who made Hollywood-style genre films, but the filmmaker community never took his projects seriously. This is something that happens everywhere, long time industry professionals sometimes aren't taken seriously because they don't fit into the "right" genre. I think this is part of human nature, but we should focus more on the content of the films themselves. Evaluating a screenplay based on its merits, whether people want to watch it or not, is essential. If the story resonates, it will find an audience. That's where support should go behind projects with strong, compelling stories.

\* **Otwin's** journey as both a director and editor has led him to become the founder of Otwin Film, a production company specializing in commercials. He continues to blend his passion for fiction filmmaking with commercial work. For more, visit: <https://www.otwin.info/about-otwin/>