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An Autoethnographic Inquiry into the Role of the Film Producer in Sri Lankan Cinema

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Background: The film producer holds one of the most crucial roles in filmmaking, overseeing all aspects of the film production process. Globally, producers actively manage the creative, technical, and business aspects of production. However, in the Sri Lankan film industry, the role of the producer is often limited or misunderstood.

Objective: This study explores how the role of the film producer is understood and practised in Sri Lanka through the lived experiences of the researcher, an industry practitioner with over ten years of experience in the Sri Lankan film industry.

Methods: Based on relativism as the ontological position and interpretivism as the epistemological position, an autoethnographic strategy was employed in combination with two case studies. The first, as a researcher serving as an executive producer for a veteran film producer; the second, as a line producer for a newcomer producer. The primary data were gathered using reflexive writing, memory recall, production documents, informal interviews and conversations with crew members. The gathered data were analysed by conducting a thematic analysis.

Results: The research revealed that the producer's role in the Sri Lankan film industry is predominantly limited to financial investments, with minimal contribution and engagement in the creative, technical, and managerial aspects of filmmaking. Most of the time, producers are wealthy individuals (businessmen or politicians) who lack theoretical and practical knowledge of film production. Additionally, some investors engage in film production for non-artistic reasons, such as leveraging the industry for financial advantages or social prestige. And those very reasons lead them to passive participation, confusion, frequent exploitation and disappointment. Because of the absence of clarity and authority of the producer's role in film production, the collaborative relationship between the director and the producer breaks and discourages future investments in the industry. Since the contemporary Sri Lankan film industry is director-centric, the creative and operational control heavily lies with the director, marginalising the producer's voice in key decision-making. The film crew develops a culture of disrespect towards the producer, seeing them as outsiders or mere financiers rather than creative stakeholders.

Conclusion: The study concluded with a strong opinion emphasising the need to redefine the role of the film producer, recognising the profession not only as funders but also as active creative and managerial partners.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Film producer, Film industry, Role, Sri Lanka