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# Songs of home (and away): Ethnically-coded diegetic music and multidirectional nostalgia in fiction films about Polish migrants

Kris Van Heuckelom & Iwona Guśc

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**Keywords:** (multidirectional) nostalgia, ethnically-coded music, film music, home, migration film, Polish migrants

'More, Olek, more, please ... Sing, sing ... sing a song!' – Norwegian host addressing his Polish guest (in *Cabin Fever*) [1]

## Introduction

One of the understudied aspects of the expanding body of migration-themed European fiction film is the widespread use of ethnically-coded music. So far, research on the subject has dealt primarily with the most prominent strands of migrant and diasporic cinema: German-Turkish, French-Maghrebi, and British-Asian. Some of its practitioners (Fatih Akin, Tony Gatlif, and Gurinder Chadha, to name the most notable examples) have become known for the hybridity of their film scores (which typically blur linguistic, generic, and cultural boundaries).[2] Other cinematic treatments of the postcolonial diaspora, in turn, tend to foreground the subversive potential of 'impure' music genres such as raï, Reggae, and hip hop (which serve as aural signifiers of [sub]cultural difference and resistance against the socio-political mainstream).[3] Yosefa Loshitzky, for her part, has pointed to the orientalisising effect of ethnic singing performances carried out by immigrant characters with a non-European background.[4]

Inasmuch as films revolving around migrants and ethnics of Asian and African extraction combine a sense of auditory (linguistic and musical) Otherness with a sense of visual (racial) difference, the question arises as to how musical performances are functionalised on screen in the case of narratives about ethnically-distinct but racially 'invisible' immigrants. In order to address this question we have chosen to focus on the 'musical' representation of one such group: migrants from Poland. The Polish sample, we believe, offers an interesting frame of reference, not only in view of the Poles' ethnic yet non-racial Otherness but also because newcomers from Poland have received considerable on-screen visibility (and audibility) across the European continent, especially after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Another significant element that adds to the relevance of the Polish case is the long-standing cultural (literary and cinematic) tradition of associating Polishness with musicality.

While taking an empirical approach towards the subject, this article draws on a corpus of approximately 20 films featuring expatriate Polish characters and produced in a wide variety of (mainly European) countries (Figure 1). Throughout the analysis we will rely not only on the film texts themselves but also on the input which we received from various film professionals involved (directors, screenwriters, and actors), as it will allow us to shed an insider's light on the directorial and editorial choices that led to the ultimate version of the film text and the soundtrack.[5] Conceptually and theoretically, we will closely engage with the notion of nostalgia and its intricate connection with (film) music. Informed by Svetlana Boym's writings on the subject as well as by Caryl Flinn's discussion of gender and nostalgia in the classical Hollywood film score and Phil Powrie's observations on 'soundscapes of loss' in French cinema,[6] our analysis of the Polish sample will lead to the detection of a particular form of nostalgic affect which can be labelled 'multidirectional nostalgia'. As we will argue, this recurring musical trope in films dealing with Polish migrants is indicative of their status as 'close relatives' rather than as distant, racially-different Others.

Original title, year and English title	Director / Screenplay
<i>Stormy Monday</i> , 1988	Dir. & scr. Mike Figgis
<i>Überall ist es besser wo wir nicht sein</i> , 1989 [The Grass is Greener Everywhere Else]	Dir. Michael Klier / Scr. Klier & Gustaw Barwicki
<i>„Av Carmela“</i> , 1990	Dir. Carlos Saura / Scr. Saura & Rafael Azcona
<i>Le brasier</i> [The Blaze], 1991	Dir. Eric Barbier / Scr. Eric & Jean-Pierre Barbier
<i>Trois couleurs: Blanc</i> [Three Colours: White], 1994	Dir. Krzysztof Kieslowski / Scr. Kieslowski & Krzysztof Piesiewicz
<i>Gli occhi stanchi</i> , 1995 [Weary Eyes]	Dir. Corso Salani / Scr. Salani & Monica Rametta
<i>Herz aus Stein</i> , 1995 [Heart of Stone]	Dir. Nikos Ligouris / Scr. Ligouris & Claus Wilbrandt
<i>Engelchen</i> , 1996 [Little Angel]	Dir. & scr. Helke Misselwitz
<i>Svenska hjältar</i> , 1997 [Expectations]	Dir. Daniel Bergman / Scr. Reidar Jönsson
<i>Une minute de silence</i> , 1998 [One Minute of Silence]	Dir. & scr. Florent Emilio Siri
<i>De Poolse bruid</i> , 1998 [The Polish Bride]	Dir. Karim Traïdia / Scr. Kees van der Hulst
<i>La ballata dei lavavetri</i> , 1998 [The Ballad of the Windscreen Washers]	Dir. Peter Del Monte / Scr. Del Monte, Edoardo Albinati & Sergio Bazzini
<i>Small Time Obsession</i> , 2000	Dir. & scr. Piotr Szkopiak
<i>Når nettene blir lange</i> , 2000 [Cabin Fever]	Dir. & scr. Mona J. Hoel
<i>Jedermanns Fest</i> , 2002 [Everyman's Feast]	Dir. & scr. Fritz Lehner
<i>Polonaise</i> , 2002	Dir. Nicole van Kilsdonk / Scr. Kilsdonk, Olivier Nilsson-Julie, Justus van Oel
<i>Zutaten für Träume</i> , 2003 [Ingredients for Dreams]	Dir. & scr. Gordian Maugg
<i>Ladies in Lavender</i> , 2004	Dir. & scr. Charles Dance
<i>Upperdog</i> , 2009	Dir. & scr. Sara Johansen
<i>Ima Shel Valentina</i> , 2009 [Valentina's Mother]	Dir. Matti Harari, Arik Lubetzki / Scr. Satyom Liebrecht & Lubetzki
<i>Lena</i> , 2011	Dir. Christophe Van Rompaey / Scr. Mieke de Jong
<i>Onder ons</i> , 2011 [Among Us]	Dir. Marco van Geffen / Scr. Van Geffen & Jolein Laarman
<i>Le femme du Péme</i> , 2011 [The Woman in the Fifth]	Dir. Pawel Pawlikowski / Scr. Douglas Kennedy (novel) & Pawlikowski

Fig. 1: Fiction films dealing with Polish expatriates and featuring diegetic Polish music.

## The Polish ‘musical genius’

Set in a coastal village in the mid-1930s, the 2004 British drama *Ladies in Lavender* (Charles Dance) offers the story of two elderly sisters looking after a young foreigner who washed up on the shore of Cornwall. The mysterious stranger turns out to be a violinist from Poland (Andrea Marowski) whose artistic personality and energetic musical performances shake things up in the small village (while also seriously affecting the daily routines of his two caring hosts). Based on the eponymous short story written by William J. Locke (1916), the film casts German actor Daniel Brühl in a role that is solidly anchored in 19th and early 20th century perceptions of the Polish national temperament: the ‘musical genius’ as ‘a typically Polish gene’.[7] This particular musical blend of ‘patriotism, genius, melancholy, and exile’[8] – as Thomas Gladsky aptly calls it – was initiated by the iconic figure of Frédéric Chopin and gained expression in a wide variety of representational practices. As film historian Jerzy Maśnicki has indicated, European silent film abounds in portrayals of particularly gifted composers and musicians of Polish (or vaguely Slavic) extraction whose fame reaches across the continent (and even across the Atlantic Ocean).[9] In early sound cinema this widespread trope was continued by the on-screen musical performances of the Poland-born tenor Jan Kiepura and his world-renowned compatriot, the pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski. Quite typically, the productions in which Kiepura and Paderewski appeared served first and foremost as a vehicle to showcase their artistic

skills (rather than to tell fully-fledged cinematic stories).[10] Meanwhile, they also indicate that Polish music (in spite of its specific national or Slavic 'aura') has a well-established place in the canon of European culture.

By tapping into the long-standing tradition of portraying (expatriate) Poles (including Polish Jews) as particularly talented musicians and composers, *Ladies in Lavender* significantly diverges from most of the contemporary films that will be discussed in this article. Undoubtedly, the advent of a new representational paradigm should at least partly be linked to the shifting patterns of migration: the Polish expatriates making their appearance in contemporary European film are no longer the typical bearers of high art and culture but rather belong to the masses of labour migrants in search of a better life and new opportunities. Along these lines one may say that the well-established association between Polishness and musicality has been subject to a far-reaching (narrative and audiovisual) reconfiguration.

However, this does not mean that the ancient paradigm has lost its relevance. An interesting case in point is the rather syncretistic treatment of Polishness in *Polonaise* (Nicole van Kilsdonk, 2002), a Dutch TV film that tells the interwoven stories of people being stuck on a Dutch highway (including a Polish labour immigrant). While one of Chopin's waltzes fulfils an important role in the diegesis, the film title refers not so much to classical Polish music and dance culture but rather to a popular Dutch type of march dance, nicknamed 'Polonaise' in the Netherlands (typically practiced during carnivals and festivals of schlager music). As such, the title comes to serve as a metaphor of the traffic jam in which Dutch society got caught up. A similar merging of contemporary and historical Poland-related associations (including the 'Polish musical genius') is offered by the screenplay of an earlier Dutch film, *The Polish Bride* (Karim Traïdia, 1998). As we learned from screenwriter Kees van der Hulst, he decided to build his narrative around a female Polish character in order to be able to use some fragments from Karol Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater*. Along similar lines, he named the Polish immigrant protagonist Krzyżanowska as a reference to the maiden name of Chopin's mother.[11]

## Polish diegetic music from pre-production to post-production

Significantly, the corpus under discussion contains only a few films in which the diegetic use of Polish songs and melodies was clearly scripted in the pre-production phase (such as Mike Figgis's *Stormy Monday* [1988] and the aforementioned *The Polish Bride*). In most other cases the initial screenplays included only vague suggestions (for instance, generic indications such as 'a lullaby' or 'a popular war song') without mentioning actual titles. Unlike what one may expect, this strategy also pertains to migration-themed films made by Polish directors (Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colours: White* [1994] being the most notable example). In the original screenplay for *White* the Parisian busking performance of the hapless Polish immigrant Karol Karol is described in the following way:

Karol, his stubble even longer and his face haggard, is sitting in a metro subway, playing on a comb. (...) Karol puts a lot of heart into the melodious, Polish songs remembered from childhood. People pass by indifferently; music played on a comb is a little too quiet to draw attention. [12]

What is more, as ensues from the interviews we conducted with the film professionals involved, it was (not surprisingly) the actors with Polish backgrounds who usually came up with the actual songs and melodies. As a rule most (non-Polish) directors intuitively relied on the musical input they received from their Polish actors (including information about the meaning of the lyrics) and refrained from delving further into the historical background of the musical piece and its cultural inscriptions in the Polish context (the item's primary function being to aurally mark the performer's Otherness).

On the surface, this 'improvisatory' approach towards the diegetic inclusion of ethnically-coded music seems to be reflected by the usually minimalist and eclectic outlook of the actual musical performances; hardly, if ever, does a character perform a song in its entirety, and the lyrics themselves sometimes deviate from the established song texts. However, this should not imply that the included diegetic music does not play any substantial role in the final film text. If its affective and/or narrative functionality ensues already from the fact that these performances made it to the final cut then there are quite a few cases in which the initial 'vagueness' about the song or melody to be used (if any) eventually resulted into something much more prominent and meaningful. The 'sonic' imprints left on the further stages of production and post-production may vary: reprisal of the musical item in a

later segment of the film, either diegetically[13] or non-diegetically;[14] extension of its sound to the film score as a whole;[15] inclusion of the song/melody over the end credits;[16] or its foregrounding in the film trailer.



Fig. 2: The trailer for *Among Us*, featuring the Polish lullaby *Once There Was a King* (with Dutch subtitles).

More often than not the Polish-language tunes are the only a capella fragments in the film, which makes them stand out from the rest of the soundtrack.[17] Finally, another editorial decision indicative of a song's relevance for the film text is the insertion of subtitles during post-production, as it points to the willingness, on the part of the makers, to activate the Polish lyrics' narrative and dramatic potential.[18]

## Polish music performances, gender, and genre

In the corpus under scrutiny two productions diverge from the rest in the sense that they feature Polish music audible in the diegetic background (rather than being performed in the foreground).[19] All remaining films provide one or more scenes in which Polish immigrants or ethnics actively engage in performing music (vocal or instrumental). Generally speaking, there appears to be a strong gender dimension to the diegetic use of these songs and melodies in migration-themed narratives, both in terms of genre and in terms of performance. With only a few notable exceptions on-screen singing seems to be a gesture typically associated with the female immigrant. If men

do engage in musical activity in the diasporic space then their on-screen performances tend to be shorter and less vocally-oriented. Furthermore, their performances often occur in group, as a form of homosocial ethnic bonding. A case in point is the 1991 French historical drama *The Blaze* (Eric Barbier), about the rise of xenophobia in a French mining town in the 1930s. Well over halfway into the film a high-angled tracking shot navigates towards a crew of Polish miners on strike and then slowly pans over their faces while they are communally singing a fragment of the first stanza of *Rota* (Oath), the unofficial anthem of partitioned Poland.

The issue of gender division also closely relates to the genre of songs performed by the immigrant characters. Significantly, Polish lullabies constitute the most prominent generic category and appear in no less than six productions. Historically speaking, the cradle song is a typically feminine genre, sung by the mother as a sleep aid for babies and infants (without instrumental accompaniment). It usually combines a simple and repetitive melodic structure with a storyline that helps young children in dealing with fears and anxieties. If the lullaby fosters intergenerational (maternal) bonding in a sphere of protective domesticity then a second category of songs (which may be labelled 'military and partisan songs') draws its subject matter from the age-old gendered construction of mobility as a typically masculine activity. More often than not the lyrics of these songs revolve around intra-generational heterosexual relationships (for instance, a soldier who leaves behind his spouse or girlfriend and goes off to war in defence of the home country). Importantly, if the cradle song is a typical domestic song then the military romance song deals with the nostalgic feeling of being away from home (which brings to mind the medical roots of the concept of nostalgia, as a mental condition originally observed among 17th century Swiss mercenaries fighting on foreign soil).

## Music, nostalgia, and migration

In her study on nostalgia, Svetlana Boym refers to 'music of home, whether a rustic cantilena or a pop song' as 'the permanent accompaniment of nostalgia'.<sup>[20]</sup> Quite obviously, apart from giving expression to a condition of 'homesickness' (on the part of the performer or the player), music can also induce and reinforce in those who listen the very same sentiment. Therefore, if many of the songs under discussion – either in terms of genre or in terms



of lyrics – revolve around a sense of domestic, familial, or romantic togetherness (and the possible loss thereof), then the very fact that these songs are performed ‘away’ from home adds to their expressive force as signifiers of nostalgia.

Such a reading pertains, first and foremost, to those stories that clearly elaborate on the immigrant’s enduring attachment to the ‘home front’ (mostly relatives who stayed behind). In the Norwegian-German coproduction *Upperdog* (Sara Johnsen, 2009), to give one typical example, the fact that the Polish domestic help (Maria) starts to sing a Polish lullaby while cleaning glassware in the house of her Norwegian employer cannot be separated from the fact that she feels guilty about the young boy she left behind in Poland. Originally being a typical ‘song of home’, the lullaby quite literally becomes a ‘song of away’. More or less similar is the case of the Polish-language songs performed by female immigrants in films such as *The Woman in the Fifth* (Paweł Pawlikowski, 2011), *Among Us* (Marco van Geffen, 2011), *Valentina’s Mother* (Matti Harari & Arik Lubetzki, 2009), and *The Polish Bride*. Apart from adding some ethnic flavour to the protagonists involved one may say that the Polish-language singing performance also serves to develop their character and helps to expose – directly or indirectly – their emotional state and the bond they maintain with their Polish kin.

Only in a few cases does the musical performance actually lead up to what Svetlana Boym calls ‘auditory nostalgia’:[21] the song or melody loses its primarily musical dimension and functions as a personal ‘son de mémoire’,[22] taking the listener back to his or her roots (and another, distant way of life). Such is the narrative function of an emotion-laden ethnic celebration scene in Mike Figgis’s stylised crime thriller *Stormy Monday*. [23] A similar experience of déjà entendu, albeit in a different narrative and aesthetic configuration, appears in the final segment of Michael Klier’s 1989 film *The Grass is Greener Everywhere Else*, about a young Pole (Jerzy) who illegally moves from Warsaw through Berlin to the United States. The old-fashioned Polish tune played by an accordion player from Warsaw busking on the streets of a run-down New York district (‘I remember this melody’, Jerzy confides to him) comes to serve as an aural indicator of the circularity of the Pole’s journey. In the case of Kieślowski’s *White*, finally, the sense of recognition evoked by Karol’s busking of ‘Polish songs remembered from childhood’ in the Parisian metro not only allows him to bond with his compatriot Mikołaj but also leads up to their joint return to post-Communist Poland.

In most other cases the aural perception of the Polish song triggers a reaction that cannot be defined in terms of ‘auditory nostalgia’ – simply because the (local) beholders hear the song for the first time and have no memories whatsoever associated with it. This does not mean that the most typical response is one of indifference or neglect. It is the audiovisual and narrative configuration in which these songs and melodies are performed and functionalised on screen that helps to clarify the affective impact they have on the beholder.

### **Polish voices of (substitute) motherhood (and alternative fatherhood)**

As indicated before, the diegetic deployment of Polish songs and melodies in migration-themed film appears to follow gender-specific patterns. Through the very nature of the physical jobs they tend to perform (caretaking, nursing, cleaning, nurturing) female Polish immigrants often come to serve as stand-ins for absent local mothers. What is more, the domestic services they execute on screen often extend to the emotional and psychological level, especially in those narratives that revolve around dysfunctional families or single-person households from which the maternal (or, by extension, the feminine) element has disappeared. A case in point is the aforementioned Norwegian-German co-production *Upperdog*. One of its main characters is Axel, a twenty-something of Vietnamese descent who was adopted into an upper-class Norwegian family as a young infant (after being separated from his biological mother and sister). Still traumatised by this experience, he has great difficulty in bonding with other people, especially women. Axel’s bully-like attitude pertains in particular to Maria, the foreign domestic help at work in his parents’ villa. Early in the film, when he hears the girl singing a Polish lullaby while cleaning the house, he refrains from showing any kind of emotional response and treats her as a mere object rather than acknowledging her (maternal) subjectivity. However, towards the end of the film his attitude changes, especially after Maria succeeds in reuniting him with his biological sister. As part of an intimate bed sequence, during which Axel discloses his grief about his biological mother’s miserable fate, a medium close-up shot frames Maria’s face (and one of Axel’s ears) while she starts to sing the very same lullaby (Figure 3). While the meaning of the Polish lyrics remains unclear to him, he now finds himself in a position similar to the pre-linguistic

condition in which young babies identify with the comforting maternal voice.[24]



Fig. 3: Maria sings the Polish lullaby *Once There Was a King* (with Norwegian subtitles) © Friland & Riva Filmproduktion.

Another Scandinavian production, Daniel Bergman's *Expectations* (1997), offers a similar account of substitute (Polish) motherhood combined with a musical performance. One of the stories interwoven in the film focuses on the interaction between a solitary middle-aged farmer and a young Polish couple, Helena and Izydor, stranded on the Swedish countryside. Both literally and symbolically, the scenes set at the farm reveal a sense of what Svetlana Boym terms 'restorative nostalgia': a longing for the past 'that proposes to rebuild the lost home' (as opposed to 'reflective nostalgia', which acknowledges the fragmentation of memory and is directed towards the future).[25] Significantly, while the Polish guests assist the farmer in re-establishing order in his cluttered and dilapidated house and in creating a sphere of familial togetherness, the Swede starts to set his mind on the Polish girl – a situation which comes to a dramatic climax at the time of Christmas. After a festive dinner scene (during which the farmer nostalgically recalls his childhood years and his late parents), the montage shifts to a close-up of an open fire in front of which the girl sings the Polish Christmas lullaby *Lulajże Jezuniu* (Hush Little Jesus). Right after, the camera zooms in on the farmer's desirous gaze and then cuts (while the singing continues off screen) to a shot of the farmer entering a bedroom decorated with black-and-white pictures of his ancestors and taking out his mother's bridal gown. The farmer's symbolic gestures of what may be called 'nostalgic restoration' (initiated by the mother-child-

themed song and leading up to the girl being covered with a bridal veil) ultimately fail when the Polish character tries to wriggle out of his powerful embrace and cries out for help.

A less dramatic manifestation of music-related 'restorative nostalgia' is offered by the *The Polish Bride*, about a disenfranchised immigrant from Poland (Anna Krzyżanowska) who finds shelter in the house of an unmarried Groninger farmer (Henk Wolderink). Halfway into the film we get to see a few medium close-ups of Anna while she is dusting some objects in Henk's bedroom – an old record-player and a framed black-and-white photograph of a young woman (the farmer's mother, as we may suspect). In the subsequent shot Anna takes the picture from the wall and attentively observes the woman's face while carefully removing the dust from the frame's surface. In the next scene the Polish character discovers a hidden wardrobe full of dresses formerly belonging to Henk's mother. The film then cuts to an outdoor shot of the farmer approaching the open bedroom window while he hears Anna singing a Polish song. In the very same shot the camera swings to the right, back into the house, and halts on Anna who is posing in a long dress in front of the mirror. As Henk's reflection appears in the mirror she abruptly breaks off the song.

Diegetic (Polish) music makes its reappearance in another scene that foregrounds Anna's maternal identity. In an attempt to make his Polish guest feel more at home Henk donates her a gramophone recording of Karol Szymanowski's famous *Stabat Mater*. In another instance of maternal doubling, Anna unpacks the present while a framed picture of Henk's mother is hanging on the background wall (Figure 4). The well-intended gift turns out to have quite the opposite effect. While hearing the second stanza of the Polish lyrics ('And Her wearied soul, / Torn and riven by sorrow / Was pierced by the sword of human guilt') the viewer is given a close-up of Anna's deeply saddened face. The melodramatic scene ends with a shot of the woman looking out the window at the pouring rain (once again with the black-and-white photograph of the farmer's mother hanging on the background wall).

Both domestic sequences aptly disclose the versatile character of nostalgically-loaded diegetic music and singing in the films under discussion – a cinematic trope which we would like to call 'multidirectional nostalgia'. While affecting both the local and the immigrant character the foreign-language musical performance creates a shared acoustic environment in which 'homesickness' ceases to be the exclusive property of the displaced new-

comer. For the Polish woman, singing and hearing Polish music closely intertwines with a sense of longing for the home country and a feeling of guilt about the young child whom she left behind. From the position of the Dutch host, in turn, the female voice and its visual (pictorial and sartorial) identification with the figure of the deceased mother signal the possibility of restoring the old order. Ultimately, the sense of ‘restorative nostalgia’ that pervades *The Polish Bride* is given closure in the form of a happy ending: after going back to Poland, Anna returns to the Dutch farm in the company of her daughter (which will enable the future ‘Polish bride’ to take up the maternal role at full scale).



Fig. 4: Henk gives a gramophone record to Anna (Karol Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater*) © IJswater Films & Topkapi Films.

Not all female protagonists equally (or happily) consent to the perspective of substitute motherhood in the diasporic space. The title character of another Dutch production, *Lena* (Christophe Van Rompaey, 2011), is a teenager of Polish descent who has a love-hate relationship with her single mother and who decides to move in with her Dutch boyfriend and his widowed father. Lena's role as a stand-in mother ensues not only from her work as an intern in a local day care centre but also closely relates to the maternal duties she decides to take over in the 'defeminised' household of her male hosts (with both of whom she enters into a sexual relationship). Significantly, while Lena

usually refuses to speak Polish, the final part of the film features two remarkable scenes in which the girl switches to her mother's native language. First we see her caressing a toddler in the day care while singing the fourth stanza of the Polish lullaby *Ach, śpij kochanie* (Oh Sleep, My Love) – the lyrics of which underscore a sense of cosy togetherness embodied by 'two little cats'. Apart from underscoring, once more, the girl's precocious sense of maternal responsibility, the Polish lullaby scene also serves as a symbolic 'leg up' into the next scene. Lena now switches positions in the mother-child dyad and addresses her own mother in Polish in an (unsuccessful) attempt to pair her off with her boyfriend's father. The girl's desperate move not only points to her willingness to get out of the fatal triangular relationship with her two male partners and to re-establish the bond with her mother but also exemplifies her desire to part with the ominous role of the substitute mother and to develop a 'normal' feminine identity. Giving a twist to Phil Powrie's discussion of 'soundscapes of loss' in French film, one may speak here of a 'soundscape of (failed) restoration'.<sup>[26]</sup>

Obviously, while the corpus under scrutiny strongly differs from the classical Hollywood film scores discussed by Caryl Flinn in her influential study *Strains of Utopia*, it is difficult not to discern some striking convergences, especially as far as the close nexus between music, anteriority, and femininity is concerned.<sup>[27]</sup> If a significant number of the films involved revolves around the loss or absence of the comforting maternal subject then the diegetically-performed lullaby comes to function as the most prototypical musical signifier of a past, nostalgic attitude that hints at the possible return of the mother figure. Although much less prominent than their female counterparts, Polish songs performed by male characters occasionally fulfil a somewhat similar function. This applies, most notably, to the Norwegian production *Cabin Fever* (Mona J. Hoel, 2000), which revolves around a family gathering that gets out of hand (not unlike its famous *Dogma* forerunner, Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* [1998]). In more than one way the Polish family who has been invited to a Norwegian Christmas party comes to serve as the antithesis of the dysfunctional host family. Such a diagnosis ensues from the Polish musical performances included in the film.

In the first musical sequence the Polish grandfather Olek sings the Second World War partisan song *Leśna kotysanka* (Forest Lullaby, about a partisan soldier who parts from his beloved right before hiding in the woods) while being accompanied on the guitar by his son Stanisław. After the first two stanzas the old man suddenly interrupts his performance in order to make a secret

confession to his son (about a murder he committed as a partisan soldier during the war). Repeatedly exhorted by the nostalgically-minded Norwegian *pater familias* Gunnar to continue the performance, Olek then sings the final three stanzas of the war-themed romantic lullaby. Subsequently, after a very violent confrontation between the alcohol-addicted Gunnar and two of his children, the film shifts focus to another Polish musical performance: Olek's son Stanisław enters the bedroom of his two sons (who fail to fall asleep because of the turmoil in the cabin) and attempts to comfort them by singing the first lines of the Polish lullaby *Idzie niebo ciemną nocą* (The Sky Is Walking through the Dark Night). As a significant counterpoint to the problematic fatherhood represented by the Norwegian host both performances may be said to offer genuine instances of intergenerational bonding and parental affiliation.

A similar perspective of alternative fatherhood offered by the arrival of an ethnic outsider is also at stake in the German feature film *Little Angel* (Helke Misselwitz, 1996), which brings into view the romantic encounters between a Polish immigrant (Andrzej) and a socially-isolated factory worker from East Berlin (Ramona). With its prominent focus on dysfunctional German families (violent and abusive fathers who traumatise their immediate environment), the film casts the Pole in the position of an affectionate and tender lover and father. Symbolically, Andrzej's assumption of the paternal position is given confirmation in an idyllic scene set in a sunlit park. While holding their newborn baby in his arms he offers a bridal veil to his future German wife and starts to sing the fourth stanza of the previously mentioned lullaby *Oh Sleep, My Love* (Figure 5). However, his musical performance is remarkably short (hardly ten seconds), which seems to be indicative of his premonition that something is oddly wrong (Ramona did not tell him that she had a miscarriage, after which she stole someone else's baby).



Fig. 5: Andrzej singing the Polish lullaby Oh Sleep, My Love © Thomas Wilkening Filmgesellschaft & ZDF.

## Polish(-Jewish) music, ‘nostalgic restoration’, and the Holocaust

For various reasons, the Israeli production *Valentina’s Mother* represents an exceptional case in the corpus under discussion. Although not a European picture, it shares with the other films a range of thematic and narrative features (particularly the focus on contemporary Polish labour migration and the diegetic use of Polish music). Furthermore, the film’s soundtrack reveals variations of the aforementioned guises of nostalgia (‘auditory’, ‘multidirectional’, ‘restorative’). It does so not so much in terms of intra-generational (romantic) bonding or in terms of cross-generational (parental) affiliation as in terms of female homo-sociality (the trope of ‘inseparable girlfriends’).

Based on the eponymous short story by the Israeli writer Savyon Liebrecht (2000), *Valentina’s Mother* tells the story of the Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivor Paula Lewinsky, who has been living in Israel for more than 50 years. No longer capable of looking after herself, she hires domestic help from Poland, a young girl named Walentyna. A key moment in the story takes place some ten minutes into the film. While sitting at the breakfast table Paula hears Walentyna singing in the kitchen and immediately recognises a song from her childhood in Poland: the popular interwar tango *Umówiłem się z nią*



*na dziewiątą* (I Have a Date with Her at 9), featured in the comedy *Piętro wyżej* (One Floor Higher; Leon Trystan) from 1937. Paula calls Walentyna into the living room and invites her to sing the lyrics again ('I want you to sing it for me. I want to hear the words. I used to sing it with Walentyna. It was a long time ago, before the war', she says). As it turns out, hearing the song – and singing it along with the Polish housemaid – conjures up a whole range of memories of her life in pre-war and wartime Poland. Back in those days, as Paula confides to her domestic assistant, the tango used to be her favourite song and the favourite song of Walentyna (Paula's best friend, who lived across the street). The lives of the two girls separated during the war when the Polish girl refused to offer help to her Jewish neighbours (as a result of which Paula and her family ended up in a Nazi concentration camp, where most of them died). Triggered by Walentyna's musical performance, Paula starts to relive certain situations from her childhood years and increasingly fails to distinguish between the two Walentynas. The Polish girl then comes to play a prominent role in what turns out to be a highly dramatic form of 'nostalgic restoration' (in which joint singing, looking at old pictures, and (ex)changing clothes occupy an important place). At the film's conclusion Paula makes a very radical and unexpected move. Not eager to let the homesick Polish girl return to her family in Poland (which would mean one more 'separation' between herself and Walentyna), she invites the girl over to her apartment for a 'last supper'. However, this time the 'date at 9' turns out to be the final one: behind Walentyna's back, Paula turns on the gas tap in the kitchen and takes the girl with her into death.



Fig. 6: Paula and Walentyna jointly singing the interwar tango I Have a Date with Her at 9 (with subtitles) © INDY Film Productions.

Interestingly, the original short story does not mention any particular song title (Liebrecht vaguely writes about ‘the sounds of a hidden melody’), nor does the text include the lyrics of the song that triggered Paula’s memories. As ensues from the interviews we conducted with co-director Matti Harari and the Polish actress Sylwia Drori (who played the role of Walentyna), the song was chosen during the rehearsals by Drori (who is well acquainted with interwar Polish cinema and music). Not unlike other films discussed in this article, the production process of *Valentina’s Mother* aptly shows how a minor (and quite indefinite) musical motif appearing in the original script eventually may turn into a key element in the finalised film text. Not only does the song make its reappearance in the dramatic ‘last supper’ scene, its lyrics also foreground the sense of togetherness (and fear of separation) which underlies Paula’s eventual decision to take Walentyna with her into the grave (which, for the makers, was a sufficient reason to have the lyrics subtitled) (Figure 6). Unintentionally, but quite symbolically, the fact that the tango was authored by two Polish-Jewish artists – the songwriter Emanuel Schlechter (killed during the Second World War) and the composer Henryk Wars – adds a particular twist to the film’s thematic engagement with the Holocaust and the troubled legacy of Polish-Jewish relations.

## Conclusion

Read against the background of the traditional association between (expatriate) Polishness and musicality, the corpus under scrutiny attracts attention with its predominant focus on deprofessionalised musical performances carried out by ‘ordinary’ Poles and characterised by brevity, fragmentariness, and eclecticism. If in the early days of sound cinema and musical film high art performers like Kiepura and Paderewski were expected to entertain, impress, and move audiences with their extraordinary skills and artistic genius, then their cinematic successors of today are typically cast (and exhorted) to ‘sing’ as people of flesh and blood, as ordinary mothers, daughters, fathers, and sons.

By featuring foreign-language lyrics and melodies relatively unknown to the (non-Polish) beholder, the songs performed in the films under scrutiny can be termed ‘songs of away’: indicative of the performer’s ethnic Otherness and displacement (separation from origins, family, culture, etc.). At the same

time, however, as ensues from our analysis, a significant part of these performances take place in domestic or familial settings and seem to be subject to a certain degree of ‘domestication’; witnessing the singing provides the local characters (who often come across as dysfunctional, traumatised, or disoriented) with the perspective of regaining and restoring the ‘lost home’ of their ancestors. Therefore, at the hands of the filmmakers (and actors) involved, traditional Polish songs that typically revolve around protective domesticity and bonding (especially lullabies) cinematically transform into ‘songs of home’ – as illusory as this ‘home’ may be – and hint at the possibility of re-installing a sense of domesticity and intergenerational affinity at the core of the local household.

Undoubtedly, the ‘multidirectional’ shape of the nostalgic soundscapes that reverberate in these film productions sets the Polish sample apart from the strongly rooted view of nostalgia as the typical affliction of ‘homesick’ expatriates. Furthermore, when compared to the soundtrack-related approaches that prevail in films about postcolonial migrants and ethnics – multicultural hybridisation, (sub)cultural resistance against the mainstream, orientalisation – the corpus described in this article cannot but strike us with its highly different take on ethnically-coded music. Inasmuch as the racial markedness of the Polish immigrant protagonists (as ‘Whites’) creates visual ambiguity and makes them indistinguishable from the local characters, the musical performances in which they engage do not radically change their position within the diegesis but instead typically cast them in the role of ‘close relatives’ capable of taking up substitute familial roles in the dysfunctional host community. Or, to put it in a different way, even if the actual lyrics and melodies of the songs remain opaque for the non-Polish beholder, the recurring trope of ‘multidirectional nostalgia’ makes clear that the musical performances are able to evoke a significant sense of familiarity and recognition in those who witness them.

Ultimately, the fact that this prominent motif makes its appearance in a variety of cinemas across (and beyond) Europe suggests that the traditional association between Polishness and musicality rather than disappearing altogether has taken up a new form, becoming largely adjusted to the contemporary reality of economy-driven migration and mobility across the European continent. To what extent this new ‘sonic’ paradigm of expatriate Polishness is in tune with the representation of other ‘White’ immigrant groups – especially those from the former Eastern Bloc – remains to be seen (and heard).

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## Notes

- \* We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.
- [1] For all production-related information about the films discussed in this article see the table in the introductory section (Figure 1).
- [2] See Guarracino 2009, Göktürk 2010, and Blum-Reid 2013.
- [3] See Orlando 2003.
- [4] Loshitzky 2010, p. 33.
- [5] We would like to thank the following film practitioners for their valuable input during the preparation of this article: Andrzej Maria Borkowski (actor, *Stormy Monday*), Agnieszka Czekańska (actress, *Weary Eyes*), Sylwia Drori (actress, *Valentina's Mother*), Matti Harari (co-director, *Valentina's Mother*), Mona J. Hoel (director, *Cabin Fever*), Kees van der Hulst (screenplay writer, *The Polish Bride*), Marco van Geffen (director, *Among Us*), Michael Klier (director, *The Grass is Greener Everywhere Else*), Marta Klubowicz (actress, *The Grass is Greener Everywhere Else*), Joanna Kulig (actress, *The Woman in the Fifth*), Reidar Jönsson (screenplay writer, *Expectations*), Sara Johnsen (director, *Upperdog*), Stanisław Latek (assistant director, *Blanc*), Christophe Van Rompaey (director, *Lena*), Dorota Zięciowska, (actress, *Stormy Monday & Heart of Stone*).
- [6] Boym 2001, Flinn 1992, and Powrie 2015.
- [7] Gladsky 1992, p. 31.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- [9] Maśnicki 2006, pp. 22-42.
- [10] See, for instance, Kiepura's role in *Ich liebe alle Frauen* (I Love All the Women; Carl Lamac, 1935) and Paderewski playing himself in *Moonlight Sonata* (Lothar Mendes, 1937).
- [11] According to pre-production plans, *The Polish Bride* was supposed to have even more traditional Polish tunes (folk songs), but these plans fell through (due to copyright issues). E-mail from Kees van der Hulst (28 July 2016).
- [12] Kieślowski & Piesiewicz 1998, pp. 116-117. See also Reyland 2012, pp. 264-265.
- [13] *The Grass is Greener Everywhere Else*, *Upperdog*, *Valentina's Mother*.
- [14] *Weary Eyes*, *The Woman in the Fifth*.

- [15] *White*.
- [16] *The Grass is Greener Everywhere Else, The Woman in the Fifth*.
- [17] The repeated songs and tunes fit into Claudia Gorbman's definition of the leitmotif as 'any music – melody, melody-fragment, or distinctive harmonic progression – heard more than once during the course of a film' (1987, p. 26), but given their key position in the film text they may equally be called, after Phil Powrie (2015, p. 531), 'signature songs'.
- [18] Interestingly, while the film productions from the 1990s rarely have subtitles included for the lyrics this post-production strategy has become more common in the recent films (*Cabin Fever, Valentina's Mother, Uppercut, Among Us*).
- [19] In both cases the character's exalted engagement with Polish-language pop songs collides with his or her far-reaching state of displacement and alienation in the host country. In the Austrian film *Everyman's Feast* (Fritz Lehner, 2002) the disenfranchised Polish immigrant Maria is usually framed with headphones and a walkman while intensely listening to a live recording of herself at a Polish pop concert. A deranged and disturbed soul, she is literally out of synch with Austrian realities and seals herself off – mentally and aurally – from the immediate environment. In a somewhat similar vein the alcohol-addicted immigrant Zygmunt who roams the streets of Rome in the Italian production *The Ballad of the Windscreen Washers* (Peter Del Monte, 1998) falls prey to hallucinations and oneiric visions that ultimately lead him back – much to his own satisfaction – to an old-time Polish dancing club (where a live band plays Polish hits from the 1960s).
- [20] Boym 2001, p. 4.
- [21] *Ibid*.
- [22] Powrie 2015, p. 542.
- [23] The film features a long sequence shot in the Polish Club in Newcastle during which the female protagonist (an American waitress) rediscovers her Polish roots.
- [24] The non-diegetic viewer, in turn, learns from the subtitles that the lyrics bear relevance for Axel's position in the story world. The lullaby *Był sobie król* (Once There Was a King) tells the apparently cruel story of a king, his squire, and a princess who lead a happy life – until they get eaten by animals. Only in the final (fifth) stanza of the lullaby is it revealed that they were not people of flesh and blood but instead candy figures.
- [25] Boym 2001, p. 41.
- [26] Powrie 2015.
- [27] See Flinn 1992, especially chapters 2, 4, and 5.