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## Between Regionalization and Europeanization: Migrant Characters of Polish Extraction in Belgian Audiovisual Fiction (1970–2020)

This chapter was inspired by a recently finished book project that investigates the representation of Polish migrants in European cinema of the past century.<sup>2</sup> Inasmuch as one of the main objectives of the aforementioned monograph was to cast a longitudinal and transnational perspective on the screen image of Polish expatriate characters (derived from a heterogenous corpus of more than 170 films), the research presented in this contribution is much more limited in scope, as it concentrates on a relatively small number of Belgian – both Francophone and Dutch-language – audiovisual productions from the past fifty years that feature migrant characters of Polish extraction (in major or in minor roles).

Drawing further on the assumption that the large degree of Polish involvement in international migration flows constitutes one of the cornerstones of present-day perceptions of Polishness beyond Polish borders, the primary objective of this chapter is to describe and contextualize the

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<sup>2</sup> Kris Van Heuckelom, *Polish Migrants in European Film 1918–2017*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

emergence and development of migration-related Polish subject matter in Belgian film (and, to a lesser extent, television) against the historical backdrop of the Cold War and its aftermath. Apart from highlighting the significant impact of cultural exchanges, political ruptures, and socio-economic factors on the shifting image of Poland and Polish migrants in Belgian society, this text will also tackle the question of the extent to which the representational practices involved may be said to have a “unitarian” Belgian dimension or instead reveal a regional (Flemish/Francophone) or transnational (European) scope. This issue is all the more important in view of the fact that the period covered in this chapter largely coincides with two political processes that have had – and continue to have – a significant impact on the workings of the Belgian state; namely, growing erosion of the national level on the one hand and increasing integration on the European level on the other.

### The Embryonic Phase: Growing Cultural Collaboration Between the Polish People’s Republic and Belgium in the 1960s

Although the first Belgium-set film productions featuring Polish immigrant characters appeared only in the 1970s, the foundations for the growing interest in Poland-related topics were laid in the preceding decade. In 1963, the year that saw the signing of the first bilateral cultural agreement between Belgium and the Polish People’s Republic, a delegation of Belgian artists took part in the Tenth Congress of the International Theatre Institute (which included a visit to Jerzy Grotowski’s experimental theatre studio in Wrocław).

One of the delegation members was the avant-garde director Tone Brulin (1926–2019) who worked as a lecturer at the Dutch-language branch of the freshly established national film and drama school in Brussels (RITCS, founded in 1962).<sup>3</sup> Greatly impressed by Grotowski’s innovative take on theatre and directing, Brulin would become one of the chief propagators of his work in the Low Countries (which, in turn, had a decisive impact on the professional trajectory of one of Brulin’s students at RITCS, the promising director Franz Marijnen).<sup>4</sup>

Importantly, similar artistic exchanges came into being in the realm of cinema and film education. André Delvaux, one of Brulin’s colleagues at the Francophone branch of the National Film and Drama School in

3 Luk Van den Dries, “Les aventures américaines de Franz Marijnen”, *Théâtre Public. Revue trimestrielle publiée par le Théâtre de Gennevilliers*, vol. 191, n° 4, 2008, p. 38.

4 *Ibid.*, 38.

Brussels (INSAS, founded in 1962) repeatedly traveled to Poland in the early 1960s. After presenting, at the International Film Festival in Bergamo, a multipart documentary entitled *Le cinéma polonais* (“*Polish Cinema*,” 1964), Delvaux continued his close engagement with Polish directors and film professionals by casting the young actress Beata Tyszkiewicz in the (Flemish) female lead role of his Dutch-language feature debut *De man die zijn haar kort liet knippen* (“*The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*,” 1965).<sup>5</sup>

In the latter half of the 1960s, the INSAS – co-founded by Delvaux, who also became the head of the school’s film department – contracted Antoni Bohdziewicz, one of the leading figures of the National Film School in Łódź, as a visiting lecturer (1966–1969).<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of the decade, the artistic input of Polish film practitioners into the expanding field of Belgian cinema and film culture took on a very concrete shape when the highly talented New Wave director Jerzy Skolimowski came to Brussels in order to shoot his first picture outside the People’s Republic (*Le départ*; “*The Departure*,” 1969). Importantly, while these early forms of Belgian-Polish artistic collaboration and cultural exchange did not result in explicitly Poland-themed audiovisual content – with the exception of Delvaux’ 1964 documentary on Polish cinema – Polish accents became more prominent after the turn of the next decade.

### The Intra- and International Mobility of Polish Screen Talent in the 1970s

If the 1960s saw a growing professionalization and institutionalization of Belgian cinema – both in terms of education and in terms of state support – then the subsequent decade witnessed an increasing bifurcation of

5 Krzysztof Błoński and Bogdan Zmudziński, “André Delvaux et la Pologne”, *Degrés. Revue de synthèse à orientation sémiologique*, vol. 32, n° 119–120, 2004, p. 6.

6 Ibid., p. 10; Andrzej Wajda, “O Antonim Bohdziewicz. W stulecie urodzin”, *Zeszyty literackie*, vol. 24, n° 3 (95), 2006, pp. 55–56; Małgorzata Hendrykowska, “Poszukiwania i fascynacje Antoniego Bohdziewicza (1906–1970)”, *IMAGES*, vol. 19, n° 28, 2017, p. 261. It is also interesting to note that exchanges in the realm of cinema also occurred in the opposite direction. An archival document stored at the Institute of National Remembrance indicates that two alumni from RITCS (Pierre Drouot and Guido Henderickx) received a scholarship for a stay in Łódź in 1966–1967 (IPN BU 00231/299, Materiały dot. obywateli belgijskich przyjeżdżających do Polski oraz obywateli polskich przyjeżdżających do Belgii, June 24, 1966.) I would like to thank Idesbald Goddeeris for sharing this document with me.

the cinematographic landscape along linguistic and cultural divides. In the wake of state reforms initiated in the late 1960s (and further developed in the decades to come), Belgium was gradually transformed into a federal state consisting, apart from multilingual Brussels, of two largely homogenous linguistic and cultural communities and regions with their own institutions, policies and largely divided audiovisual markets (in terms of financing, production and distribution alike).

In the realm of state-subsidized filmmaking, one of the most prominent features of this cultural bifurcation was the urge of Flemish decision-makers (and their representatives within the freshly established Selection Committee for Dutch-language Cultural Films) to support co-productions with Dutch rather than with Francophone partners.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of these divergences, however, there remained a certain degree of interregional mobility (and artistic convergence) within the field of Belgian cinema, which is exemplified, among other things, by the way in which Belgian filmmakers developed their artistic engagement with Polish topics and Polish-born film practitioners throughout the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> This trend is observable in the work of several directors who were closely connected to the INSAS/RITCS in Brussels, such as Jean-Jacques Andrien (on the Francophone side) and the bilingual Emile Degelin (who operated mainly, but not exclusively, on the Flemish side), but also in the output of lesser-known (not professionally trained) filmmakers such as Luc Monheim and Charles Conrad.

Significantly, a connecting thread between some of the Poland-related productions of the 1970s is the on-screen appearance of the very same actress in the female lead role, namely the non-professionally trained Marysia de Pourbaix (in the credits often simply referred to as “Marysia”).

Born in early post-World War II Poland to a family of nobles with Belgian roots, de Pourbaix moved to the country of her ancestors in the early 1960s and started to work as a model for various Belgian media.<sup>9</sup> After appearing

7 Kris Van Heuckelom, “Beneluks”, in: Tadeusz Lubelski, Iwona Sowińska, and Rafał Syska (eds), *Kino końca wieku*, Kraków, Universitas, 2019, p. 1126.

8 The cinematic output of second-generation Belgian filmmakers of Polish-Jewish descent, such as Chantal Akerman and Samy Szlingerbaum, deserves a separate discussion (as well as the films of third-generation director Micha Wald). See, for instance, Michael Gott, “West/East Crossings: Positive Travel in Post-1989 French-Language Cinema”, in: Leen Engelen and Kris Van Heuckelom (eds), *European Cinema After the Wall. Screening East-West Mobility*, Lanham, Md, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014, pp. 1–17.

9 De Pourbaix, personal communication, 13 January 2020.

and performing in a wide range of shorts and features as well as some variety shows on Belgian television throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s, de Pourbaix eventually embarked on a career as a visual artist (while making a living as a sociocultural worker in a community center in Brussels).

At the very outset of her film career, she was cast by INSAS alumnus (and former student of Bohdziewicz) Andrien to play the lead role in his second short, the internationally awarded *Le rouge, le rouge et le rouge* (“*The Red, the Red and the Red*,” 1972). In this poetic etude, the Polish-Belgian de Pourbaix plays a young woman all dressed up in red who embarks on a road trip to the countryside in order to meet up with her lover but is then chased away by an aggressive rooster. Although Andrien saw this film, first and foremost, as a finger exercise in cinematic experimentation, it also bears ample evidence of his early fascination with East-Central European cinema, most notably by featuring a long (non-subtitled) voice-over in Polish written and performed by de Pourbaix herself. Strikingly, while the Polish background of the lead character does not seem to have any relevance whatsoever for the actual storyline, Adrien claims to have been interested in the musicality of “Marysia’s” mother tongue rather than in the actual meaning of her Polish monologue.<sup>10</sup>

In the next couple of years, de Pourbaix starred in two Belgian feature film debuts, both directed by Antwerp-born artists (Luc Monheim and Charles Conrad) and both casting her in the female lead role alongside the bilingual actor Roger Van Hool (who was also born in Antwerp). Significantly, whereas Monheim’s Antwerp-set *Verloren Maandag* (“*The Way Out*,” 1973) came into being as a Flemish-Dutch (and hence largely Dutch-language) co-production (with some 100,000 € of state subsidy) and was widely released across Belgium and in the Netherlands,<sup>11</sup> Conrad’s Brussels-set low-budget film *Krystyna et sa nuit* (“*Krystyna and Her Night*,” 1976) was an exclusively Francophone project (albeit directed by a Flemish-born filmmaker).<sup>12</sup>

In the former film, Van Hool and de Pourbaix play the role of two young refugees (Tadeusz Sobolewski and Lenka Opania) who flee the Polish People’s Republic but lose track of each other upon their arrival in Belgium. The film then chronicles Sobolewski’s desperate attempts to reunite with his Polish love interest in the rather harsh and aggressive surroundings of

10 Andrien, personal communication, 8 February 2020.

11 Marianne Thys, *Belgian Cinema/Le Cinéma Belge/De Belgische Film*, Brussel, Koninklijk Belgisch filmarchief, 1999, p. 526.

12 Ibid., 579.

the Antwerp dock area and its red-light district, which explains why the film has been compared with Frans Buyens's 1973 adaptation of the Willem Elsschot classic *Het dwaallicht* ("Will-o'-the-Wisp"), a production to which Monheim contributed as a set designer. As I have argued elsewhere, Monheim does not refrain from situating this miserabilist story of East-West defection against the historical backdrop of the Cold War, but these references are occasional and superficial rather than structural or central to the narrative.<sup>13</sup>

The very fact that the long post-World War II period saw a growing decontextualization of Polish screen performances in migration-related European film is even more obvious in Conrad's *Krystyna and Her Night*, which casts de Pourbaix in the role of a young woman of vaguely Polish extraction named Krystyna who has become blind after a failed suicide attempt and then becomes the love interest of a pianist working for the National Ballet in Brussels (Pierre, played by Roger Van Hool). While the female lead's slight foreign accent and the non-French spelling of her name seem to serve as additional markers of her outsider status in the artistic milieu of the Belgian capital, Krystyna's non-Belgian background is made explicit only some thirty-five minutes into the film, when one of the French-speaking ballet dancers exchanges a couple of sentences with her in (broken) Polish (while also referring to the fact that he has worked several years with Grotowski in Poland).

Such a largely decontextualized focus on the quality of artistic performance rather than on the actual (Polish) background of the performer involved is also at stake in two films that came into being in the late 1970s, namely Emile Degelin's *Exit 7* (1978) and Andrien's breakthrough film *Le grand paysage d'Alexis Droeven* ("The Great Landscape of Alexis Droeven," 1981). As ensues from personal interviews with the two directors involved, it was the Belgian filmmaker's personal familiarity with East-Central European cinema that led up to the actual decision to invite Polish screen talent for the lead role (respectively, Jadwiga Jankowska-Cieślak and Jerzy Radziwiłowicz).<sup>14</sup>

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13 Kris Van Heuckelom, *Polish Migrants...*, op. cit., pp. 106–107. Highly indicative in this regard is the opening sequence of the film, in which a group of defectors makes its way through a snow-covered landscape and eventually succeeds in crossing a barbed-wire state border guarded by two Polish-speaking soldiers and their dogs. Right after, the defectors seemingly reach freedom on the other side of the Iron Curtain (as if Poland had an immediate border with "the free West").

14 Degelin, personal communication, 12 January 2012, and Andrien, personal communication, 8 February 2020.

By the same token, both productions testify to the growing international prestige and visibility of Polish cinema (especially that of Andrzej Wajda) and Polish film personnel throughout the 1970s. Significantly, however, whereas Radziwiłowicz was cast by Andrien in the role of the son of a Walloon peasant (in a plot with no Polish connection whatsoever), Jankowska-Cieślak did play the role of a Polish immigrant (her Polishness, however, being coincidental rather than essential to the actual storyline). What is more, in the case of *The Great Landscape of Alexis Droeven* it is important to note that this was Jerzy Radziwiłowicz's very first screen performance outside the Eastern Bloc, even before he became the iconic face of Solidarity in Wajda's award-winning *Człowiek z żelaza* ("Man of Iron," 1981) and before he appeared as the émigré Polish filmmaker Jerzy in Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* (1982).<sup>15</sup>

### The Solidarity Effect: Merging Topical and Historical Stories of Emigration

The reference to the Solidarity-related films by Wajda and Godard in the previous section is indicative of the major representational shift that took place in the early 1980s in a broad range of North and West European countries. Whereas, over the course of the long postwar period, the on-screen image of Polish expatriates in European cinema had become increasingly detached from the actual socioeconomic and political situation behind the Iron Curtain (as the previously discussed Belgian films from the 1970s neatly illustrate), the crisis that broke out across Poland in the early 1980s awoke the interest (and the imagination) of the international community on an almost global scale.

In Belgian audiovisual production, its effect can be seen most clearly in the socially engaged output of the Dardenne brothers, both in their early (documentary) video productions and in their later feature films. In the beginning of 1982, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne directed a one-hour documentary entitled *Leçons d'une université volante* ("Lessons from a University on the Fly" for the Liège branch of RTBF. Divided into five interconnected episodes – each of which starts with a brief historical overview of political oppression and revolt in the Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc – the

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15 Alison Smith, "Polish Performance in French Space: Jerzy Radziwiłowicz as a Transnational Actor," in: Ewa Mazierska and Michael Goddard (eds), *Polish Cinema in a Transnational Context*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2014, pp. 174–193.

film brings into view various stories of migration from Poland to Belgium, while using the early 1980s “Polish crisis” as a dramatic amplifier for the personal testimonies given by the Polish migrants.

The interviewees of the Dardenne brothers include the children and grandchildren of two Polish miners who came to Belgium (Liège and Limburg) in the interwar period, a peasant from Greater Poland who ended up in Western Europe after being liberated from a German labor camp in 1945; a teacher who decided not to return to the Eastern Bloc after paying a visit to his sister in Belgium in 1957; a young Polish Jew who was forced to leave the country in 1968; and, finally, a female Solidarity collaborator who got stuck in Brussels at the end of 1981 (after the imposition of martial law). Throughout the episodes, the “talking heads” mode of the documentary is enriched with a wide variety of illustrative materials: maps, pictures, literary texts, radio broadcasts, and songs (all of which are in Polish).

One could, of course, argue that the omnipresence of historical context and background in *Lessons from a University on the Fly* – in contrast with the previously discussed films from the 1970s – is directly related to the documentary mode embraced by the Dardenne brothers. Significantly, however, the same factographic drive also informs the vast majority of European feature films from the early 1980s that bring into view Polish migrant characters in a largely fictional configuration. A case in point is *Traversées* (“Crossings,” 1983), the feature debut of the Tunis-born, Brussels-based director Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud.

Financed as a Belgian-Tunisian co-production (produced thanks to some additional French funding), this seemingly strictly “Francophone” project actually crosses a wide range of linguistic, cultural, and territorial borders and should, therefore, be seen as a genuinely transnational undertaking. Largely in English (with some additional dialogues in Dutch) and partly set in the Flemish sea resort Ostend, the story revolves around the failed attempts of two disenfranchised refugees – the Maghrebi Youssef and the Pole Bogdan – to cross the Channel on a ferry and legally enter the United Kingdom. Significantly, although Bogdan never explicitly mentions his Polish background, the diegesis offers a series of direct references to the ongoing crisis in Poland, the Polish workers’ movement, and its charismatic leader Lech Wałęsa, including a direct signifier of “Western solidarity with Solidarity” (namely a street wall in Ostend decorated with the Dutch graffiti text *Solidariteit met het Poolse volk*).

Interestingly, however, not unlike some other Solidarity-related films produced in early-1980s Europe, Ben Mahmoud’s film offers a highly disruptive and discomfiting take on the fate of refugees (Polish or otherwise)



once they try to gain access to the so-called Promised Land. What is more, in contrast with the rather undefined outsider status attributed to some Polish expatriate characters in 1970s cinema, the disenchanting portrayal of the newcomer and the far-reaching marginalization and emasculation that befalls him upon arrival now acquires overtly geopolitical undertones (partly related to the so-called Second Cold War of the early 1980s).<sup>16</sup>

The Dardenne brothers, for their part, did not embrace, however, such a demystifying approach towards the intrinsically positive notion of solidarity (and the uplifting associations the word continued to evoke, throughout the 1980s, with the eponymous Polish opposition movement). After finishing their feature debut *Falsch* (1986) – adapted from a play by René Kalisky – they further developed their interest in the topic of forced migration and international mobility in their second feature *Je pense à vous/You Are on My Mind* (1992).

Set in the early 1980s in multicultural Seraing, the film features an older character of Polish birth (Marek) whose rural background and World War II-related story of westbound migration seem to be at least partly inspired by one of the Polish migrants the Dardenne brothers interviewed for their 1982 documentary. In the first part of the film, Marek (whose role is played by the Russian-born actor Vladimir Kotlyarov) is portrayed as “the moral stronghold and conscience of the local working-class community,” which eventually turns him into the epitome of “that seemingly most Polish of moral obligations, solidarity.”<sup>17</sup>

What is more, apart from evoking the romantic aura surrounding the 1980s Polish workers’ movement, *You Are on My Mind* shares with some other European films from the same period the willingness to historicize and contextualize the impact and dynamics of international migration in the long post-World War II period (including the guest worker era). At the same time, it is obviously a transitional film in the cinematic output of the Dardenne brothers, who – starting from their international breakthrough film *La promesse* (“*The Promise*” 1996) – shifted their focus from historically oriented storytelling to strongly topical portrayals of labor migration (and economic exploitation) in contemporary (post-industrial) Wallonia.

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16 Kris Van Heuckelom, *Polish Migrants...*, op. cit., pp. 133–139. Interestingly, a strongly antagonistic Cold War atmosphere is also hinted at in the opening part of Dominique Derudder’s acclaimed feature debut *Crazy Love* (1986), which features a sadistic *femme fatale* who makes her appearance at a fairground attraction at the Flemish countryside and who is presented to the audience as “Vera Pavlova [*sic*], the terror of Warsaw.”

17 Ibid., pp. 195–196.

## Post-1989 Polish Labor Migration Through a Regional (and a European) Lens

The status of European *auteurs* which the Dardenne brothers acquired around the turn of millennium implies that their French-language films began to circulate in the international festival circuit, which – as a paradoxical side-effect – also reinforced the visibility of their work on the other side of the intranational (linguistic) border, among Flemish audiences. One should bear in mind that the bifurcation of Belgian linguistic and cultural policies since the late 1960s described earlier indeed increasingly contributed to the formation of linguistically divided mediascapes and social imaginaries.

Importantly, however, with its strong independentist and self-emancipatory struggles, the Flemish region developed its media and film market differently from its Francophone counterpart, especially when it comes to upholding (or not) a privileged partnership with a larger neighbor (the Netherlands and France, respectively).

Significantly, while Wallonia continues to have a rather weak media market that largely depends on France's geo-linguistic and geo-cultural primacy, Flanders has seen the emergence of a strong media ecosystem (which operates autonomously from the Netherlands), especially in the aftermath of the introduction of Dutch-language commercial television (VTM) in the late 1980s. This is exemplified, among other things, by the fact that Flemish broadcasters make up more than 80 percent of the market share of TV spectatorship, which is approximately double that of their Francophone counterparts in the France-dominated multichannel market on the other side of the linguistic border, and have developed a solid reputation in producing domestic audiovisual content (especially homemade fiction).<sup>18</sup>

Alongside this process of intensifying regionalization (on a sub-Belgian level), the past three decades have simultaneously witnessed a significant increase in supranational (European) collaboration, especially in the realm of film production. This phenomenon is inextricably bound up with the introduction – as early as in the late 1980s – of European-wide support programs, such as EURIMAGES (Council of Europe) and MEDIA

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18 Tim Raats, "The Flemish TV Market: Crime Drama as a Driver for Market Sustainability?" in: Kim Toft Hansen, Steven Peacock, and Sue Turnbull (eds), *European Television Crime Drama and Beyond*, New York–London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, pp. 237–239.

(European Union), the aim of which has been to facilitate the production and circulation of film (and other audiovisual content) across national borders. As a small country with two small audiovisual markets, Belgium has come to play a pivotal role in these co-productional activities (being involved, as Philip Mosley has noted, in more than eighty European co-productions throughout the first half of the 1990s).<sup>19</sup>

In this particular domain, however, it is the Francophone part of Belgium that has shown a stronger track record than its Flemish counterpart, partly thanks to the widespread participation of local production companies – either as a majority or as a minority partner – in international film projects (usually but not exclusively with France).

Albeit in different ways, both processes – regionalization and Europeanization – are particularly relevant for the way in which migration-related Polish subject matter has been further developed on Belgian screens over the past three decades. First of all, it is important to bear in mind that the gradual crumbling of the Eastern Bloc in the late 1980s initiated a far-reaching geopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural reshuffling of the European continent, not least in terms of international mobility. Its physical and psychological impact can be measured not only by looking at pan-European migration statistics (before and after EU enlargement) but also by highlighting the increasing visibility of labor migrants from the former Eastern Bloc in various kinds of representational practices.

The eagerness of European filmmakers to become involved in the imaginative project of reconfiguring and rethinking post-Cold War Europe – for instance, by telling engaging stories of East-West migration – is particularly obvious in the case of post-1989 Poland. As I have indicated in the already mentioned monograph, “[i]n the period that stretches between the fall of the Iron Curtain and the time of EU accession, fictional characters from Poland rapidly became Europe’s most prototypical labor migrants, making their appearance (in major or minor roles) in more than forty feature films across a wide variety of countries.”<sup>20</sup> Strikingly, however, with the exception of the aforementioned 1992 Dardenne film, this prominent focus on Polish economic migration is almost entirely absent from Belgian filmmaking in the 1990s and 2000s.

In the case of Flanders, one could argue that the absence of Polish migrant characters from the silver screen is almost entirely made up for

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19 Philip Mosley, *Split Screen. Belgian Cinema and Cultural Identity*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2001, p. 200.

20 Kris Van Heuckelom, *Polish Migrants...*, op. cit., p. 161.

by the large exposure which these characters have been given on Flemish television (both public and commercial). A case in point is the highly popular daily soap *Thuis* (“At Home”), which has been running during prime time since 1995 on the first channel of the Dutch-language public broadcaster (VRT) and which – since October 2001 – features a Polish-born plumber/handyman among its core characters (Waldek Kosiński, played by a Flemish actor). Strikingly, over the course of these twenty years, Waldek’s on-screen performance has become less ethnically and linguistically marked, thus allowing him to blend in with the ethno-cultural majority of the predominantly white cast.

In the latter half of the 2000s, already after EU enlargement, cliché-ridden portrayals of working-class migrants from Poland – usually construction workers and cleaning ladies – gained prominence on an even broader scale, for instance in one of the episodes of the sixteenth season (VRT, 2005–2006) of the all-time Flemish hit series *F.C. De Kampioenen* (“F.C. The Champions”), which features an alcohol-addicted cleaning lady from Poland named Barbara. Around the same time, more sophisticated meta and counter-stereotypical treatments of East-West labor migration in the aftermath of EU enlargement were offered in the subversive comedy show *Willy’s & Marjetten* (VRT, 2006, episode 7) and in the high-budget family saga *Katarakt* (“Cataract;” VRT, 2007–2008).<sup>21</sup>

A couple of years later, Flemish commercial television (VTM) followed in VRT’s footsteps by producing and broadcasting a two-season prime-time dramedy entirely devoted to a lower-class character of Polish extraction, a female hairdresser-turned-lawyer (*Danni Lowinski*, 2012–2013).<sup>22</sup> The very fact that this series was based on a German original (Sat.1, 2010–2014, five seasons) which sometime later would also be remade in the Netherlands (SBS6, 2013–2016, four seasons), indicates that the exposure given to fictional Polish economic migrants in mainstream audiovisual was actually part of a larger European phenomenon. One could add to this list the repeated appearance of Polish working-class characters in recent seasons of major British soaps such as *Coronation Street* or *EastEnders* as well as two other recently launched television shows which largely revolve around migrant protagonists of Polish extraction, namely the Norwegian drama

21 Kris Van Heuckelom, “Borat is een Pool. Euro-oriëntalisme in de Vlaamse media”, *Streven*, n° 2, 2009, pp. 131–139.

22 Each of the two seasons reached a significant market share of almost 40 per cent. See Hilde Van Den Bulck, Kathleen Custers, and Jan Van Den Bulck, “Belgium (Flanders)”, in: Peter Robson and Jennifer L. Schulz (eds), *A Transnational Study of Law and Justice on TV*, Oxford, Hart Publishing, 2016, p. 34.

*Kampen for tilværelsen* (“*Struggle for Life*,” (NRK, 2014–2015, two seasons) and the German sitcom *Magda macht das schon!* (“*Magda Is Already Doing It*,” RTL, 2017–2020, three seasons so far).

Importantly, the very fact that a similar televisual phenomenon cannot be observed in Francophone Belgium does not relate to a supposedly less significant presence of Polish labor migrants in Brussels and Wallonia but should be linked, first and foremost, to the different shape and dynamics of the French-language audiovisual landscape, which until recently was characterized by a rather poor demand and supply for homemade fiction.

In this sense, the rapidly growing popularity of online streaming platforms and video-on-demand services such as Netflix and the increasing involvement of these new media players in creating local content is likely to bring a new (global) dimension to the impact radius of locally produced television fiction. While most of the previously discussed TV shows were distributed on a rather limited (regional) basis (or adapted for local audiences, as in the case of *Danni Lowinski*), the proliferation of non-linear television available through Internet platforms is already making the borders between “national” audiences increasingly diffuse and porous. A case in point that also bears relevance for this chapter is the Dutch-spoken crime drama *Undercover* (2019–2020, two seasons), a Flemish-Dutch co-production which has been co-financed, in return for worldwide distribution rights, by Netflix. The first season of the popular series features a partly Poland-set episode that largely revolves around the clandestine activities of a Polish migrant worker (Episode 5, “Across the Border”). The serial’s status as a “Netflix original” implies that *Undercover* – despite being shot in a globally insignificant language – is now being circulated on an almost worldwide scale (and can be viewed, for example, by Netflix subscribers in Francophone Belgium, but also in Poland), which significantly alters the dynamics (and impact) of audiovisual fiction and representational practices in the post-digital age.

### Brussels as the Capital of Europe, or the Multiple Faces of Europeanization

As has already been indicated, Francophone Belgian filmmakers and producers have been more successful than their Flemish colleagues in securing money within the framework of European-wide support programs, such as EURIMAGES and MEDIA. More often than not, these productions try to find their way into the international festival circuit and manage to continue their life cycle through screenings in arthouse cinemas, which

means that they target a niche viewership that differs from mainstream television audiences. Also, whereas many of the previously discussed serials are typical middle-brow productions that put Polish migrants in the position of blue-collar employees working for the thriving Flemish middle class, these European film co-productions tend to be more sophisticated in terms of approach and scope, in the sense that the narratives involved pay much more attention to the geopolitical dynamics underlying economically motivated East-West migration.

The past decade has seen at least two international co-productions that explore the changing position of Polish “free movers” in the aftermath of EU enlargement, with a particular focus on Brussels as the unofficial capital of the European Union (and, hence, one of the power centers of post-Cold War Europe). This means that these films engage with Europeanization not only in terms of financing, production, and distribution, but also on the level of narrative. A case in point is the Brussels-set Belgian-French-Luxembourgish co-production *Illégal* (“*Illegal*,” 2010) directed by the Franco-phone Belgian director Olivier Masset-Depasset. Financed – on the Belgian side – by both the French and the Flemish communities and – on the European side – by the MEDIA program, the film chronicles the desperate attempts of a female asylum seeker from Russia to obtain legal residence in Brussels. A secondary (but nonetheless important) character in the story is “Monsieur Nowak,” a migrant of Polish extraction who uses his more privileged position (as a EU citizen) to turn the power hierarchies from the Cold War era upside down, for instance, when he helps her, in exchange for a hefty fee, to obtain a forged Belgian passport. Significantly, although Nowak’s portrayal is not devoid of stereotypical features – the cliché of the Eastern European mobster – EU citizenship is a crucial part of his identity which puts him higher on the socioeconomic ladder.<sup>23</sup>

This narrative thread is even more prominent in *Oleg* (2018), the second feature film of the Latvian filmmaker Juris Kursietis. A Latvian-Belgian-French-Lithuanian co-production supported by EURIMAGES, *Oleg* is almost entirely set in Belgium (specifically, in Ghent and Brussels) and offers a highly critical take on the exploitation of East European labor force in the heart of the European Union. The main character is a Russian-speaking man from Latvia who does not have full citizenship, neither in his country of origin nor in the European Union at large. Over the course of the story, Oleg falls victim to extreme physical and mental exploitation by Andrzej, an immigrant from Poland who, like Nowak in

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23 Kris Van Heuckelom, *Polish Migrants...*, op. cit., pp. 215–217.

*Illegal*, fashions himself as the newcomer's protector (for instance, by providing him with an official EU passport). Therefore, not unlike many other post-2004 European feature films that deal with East-West migration, Kursietis's *Oleg* lays bare the powerful mechanism of "ethnic succession," thus setting EU citizens apart from (and above) less privileged visitors of the Schengen zone.

## Conclusion

Over the past five decades, the screen portrayal of Polish expatriates in Belgian audiovisual fiction has significantly changed, both in qualitative and in quantitative terms. As we have seen, these changes can be related to shifting dynamics in the field of audiovisual production (on subnational and supranational levels alike), but they also tie in with important political and geopolitical developments (both inside and outside Belgium). At the same time, while it is difficult to speak of a rather stable and homogeneous treatment of migration-related Polish subject matter in Belgian audiovisual fiction of the past fifty years, several points of intersection and convergence can indeed be detected, across linguistic borders (within the country) and across state borders (within Europe). Therefore, taken as a whole, the Belgian case does not significantly differ from tendencies observable in other European countries (especially since the early 1980s); namely, a growing attention (on the part of filmmakers and storytellers) for migration and cross-border mobility as a key element of the contemporary Polish experience.