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Into the Writers' Room: Looking at Polish Characters in Contemporary Dutch-Language Audiovisual Fiction Through the Lens of Production Research

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This article looks into the genesis and development of Poland-related subject matter in foreign audiovisual media. It does so by adding a production-oriented perspective to the scholarly debate surrounding the appearance and instrumentalization of Polish characters in non-Polish TV shows. While pointing to the contingency – rather than the inevitability or the complete arbitrariness – of certain representational practices, this research draws on a series of samples and examples taken from the media landscape that the author is most familiar with, namely, contemporary audiovisual fiction produced in the Dutch language. The article is largely based on a range of semi-structured interviews conducted with Belgian screenwriters who have been closely involved in the creation and development of Polish characters for Flemish TV and film over the past three decades.

Keywords: production studies, imagology, Polish characters, Dutch-language TV shows

> "How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation"
>
> Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images*[1]

This article serves as a complement to a recently finished research project revolving around the portrayal of Polish migrants in European film over the past century.[2] Importantly, while the primary goal of the aforementioned project has been to cast a diachronic perspective on the emergence and development of migration-themed cinema in a distinctly European context, the two book-length monographs that came out of the longitudinal research not only took their cues from the

[1] R. Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, Routledge, London 1993, p. 1.
[2] K. Van Heuckelom, *Polish Migrants in European Film 1918–2017*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2019; K. Van Heuckelom, *Nostalgia, solidarność, (im)potencja: obrazy polskiej migracji w kinie europejskim (od niepodległości do współczesności)*, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych UNIVERSITAS and Filmoteka Narodowa – Instytut Audiowizualny, Kraków 2022.

burgeoning field of transnational film studies, but also engaged – implicitly rather than directly – with the domain of so-called imagology, i.e., the academic discipline that investigates the function and circulation of ethnic and national stereotypes in a wide variety of texts and contexts.[3] Presented in the guise of a context-sensitive comparative discussion of some 200 European feature films produced over the past 100 years, one of the project's underlying claims is that any profound analysis of the image of Poland and Poles in foreign audiovisual media cannot be separated from the strong and long-standing Polish involvement in international migration waves. Or, to put it differently, it is Poland's firm position and reputation as an immigrant-sending country that has had – and continues to have – a substantial impact on how Poles and their homeland have been perceived and represented abroad.

Drawing further on the central tenets of the aforementioned project, the thrust of this article is to add a production-oriented dimension to the scholarly debate surrounding the appearance and instrumentalization of Polish characters in foreign audiovisual media. As I will argue, the proposed approach not only allows the general imagological framework to be refined – especially in the field of scripted TV and cinematographic content – it also aspires to contribute to a better understanding of the genesis and development of Poland-related subject matter in foreign audiovisual media. While pointing to the contingency – rather than the inevitability or the complete arbitrariness – of certain representational practices, I will equally attempt to further contextualize some findings and outcomes presented in the aforementioned monographs. For the sake of feasibility, however, the corpus used and discussed in this article will be rather limited in scope, as it will consist predominantly of samples and examples taken from the media landscape that I am most familiar with, namely, contemporary audiovisual fiction produced in the Dutch language. I will largely base my considerations and findings on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with Belgian screenwriters who have been closely involved in the creation and development of Polish characters for Flemish TV and film over the past three decades.[4]

[3] *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey*, eds. M. Beller, J.T. Leerssen, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2007.

[4] The list of interviewed screenwriters includes (in alphabetical order and with indication of the date(s) on which the interview(s) were conducted): Geert Bouckaert (August 7, 2023), Frans Ceusters (August 11, 2023), Charles De Weerdt (August 20, 2023), Pierre De Clercq (July 18 & 20, 2023), Rik D'hiet (August 14, 2023), Nathalie Haspeslagh (August 3, 2023), Luc Vancampenhout (August 2, 2023), Miel Van Hoogenbemt (July 25 & 26, 2023), Knarf Van Pellecom (August 19, 2023), Jean-Claude Van Ryckegem (July 18 & 20, 2023), and Geert Vermeulen (July 14 & 15, August 14, 2023). Most of the interviews started out from the following three questions: 1. Which (f)actors led to the inclusion of a Polish character in your screenplay? 2. Could the Polish character involved have been replaced by a character from a different ethno-cultural background? 3. Were you, at the time of writing your screenplay, aware of or familiar with other Flemish/Belgian/foreign productions that feature characters from Poland (or from the wider region)? Throughout this article, the input received from the aforementioned screenwriters will be enriched with additional information gathered among other Flemish TV professionals.

Admittedly, with a population of some six and a half million viewers, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium represents only a tiny part of the European and the global media market – in both of which it is, quite obviously, profoundly entangled. But in spite of its small size and its limited resources and production capacities, the region of Flanders demonstrates a rather strong track record in producing high-rated domestic audiovisual content, both in the domain of lowbrow and middlebrow TV genres (e.g., sitcoms and soap operas) and in the domain of high-quality (so-called "prestigious") fiction.[5] Although there are no full data available for the past three decades, it can be estimated that more than 250 TV series were produced in Flanders alone in the period between 1989 and 2023.[6] For the particular purpose of this article, the year 1989 is important from two points of view, a geopolitical one and a media-related one: not only does 1989 mark the fall of the Iron Curtain and the emergence of a new mobility paradigm across Europe, it is also the year when the monolithic Flemish media landscape, dominated for many decades by the public service broadcaster VRT, was shaken up by the appearance of its first commercial competitor, the Vlaamse Televisiemaatschappij (Flemish Television Company, or VTM). In hindsight, the end of the long-standing monopoly of the non-commercial TV network has not only given a significant boost to the production of domestic audiovisual fiction, it has also contributed to the further development of a Flemish cultural identity (against the backdrop of the growing bifurcation of Belgian politics).

Last but not least, before shifting the focus to the actual corpus and the imagological underpinnings of this research, some additional background information needs to be provided when it comes to the earlier (pre-1989) development of Polish-Belgian interactions in the audiovisual domain. As I have argued elsewhere, in the embryonic phase of these cross-cultural encounters, Belgian film pioneers such as André Delvaux and Jean-Jacques Andrien were not particularly interested in exploring and developing specifically Polish or Poland-related subject matter in audiovisual fiction, but were rather drawn to Polish culture because of the high quality of the country's artistic production and its individual practitioners and performers, most notably in the realm of theatre (Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor), but also in cinema.[7] From the mid-1960s up to the late 1970s, this growing interest led to various forms of Polish creative involvement in Belgian

[5] T. Raats, T. Evens, S. Ruelens, *Challenges for Sustaining Local Audio-Visual Ecosystems: Analysis of Financing and Production of Domestic TV Fiction in Small Media Markets*, "The Journal of Popular Television" 2016, no. 4(1), pp. 129–147.

[6] Media researchers from Ghent University have counted 156 domestic fiction series produced in Flanders between 2001 and 2016. See F. Vanlee, S. Van Bauwel, F. Dhaenens, *Distinctively Queer in the Parish: Performances of Distinction and LGBTQ+ Representations in Flemish Prestige Television Fiction*, "European Journal of Cultural Studies" 2020, no. 4, p. 552.

[7] K. Van Heuckelom, *Between Regionalization and Europeanization: Migrant Characters of Polish Extraction in Belgian Audiovisual Fiction (1970–2020)*, [in:] *La Pologne des Belges: évolution d'un regard (XXe-XXIe siècles)*, ed. P. Szczur, Unum Press, Kraków 2021, pp. 299–313.

feature film projects (in Dutch, English and French alike), including on-screen performances by actors as diverse as Beata Tyszkiewicz, Jadwiga Cieślak-Jankowska and Jerzy Radziwiłowicz (but typically without any particular focus on Polish subject matter).

For obvious reasons, a far-reaching shift would take place in the early 1980s, when the political turmoil and the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland awoke the interest and the sympathies of the international community on an almost global scale – a phenomenon of which, in the Belgian context, the early work of the Dardenne brothers provides obvious evidence.[8] Perhaps the most curious example of this new representational paradigm is the 1983 immigration drama *Traversées* (*Crossings*), the feature film debut of the Tunis-born but Brussels-based director Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud: largely spoken in English (with some additional dialogues in Dutch) and partly set in a Flemish sea resort, the film features a highly symbolic scene in which a working-class refugee from the Polish People's Republic passes by an authentic mural in the city of Ostend containing the slogan "Solidariteit met het Poolse volk" ("Solidarity with the Polish people"). Another revealing scene offers a close-up of two international news outlets from 1980 (*Time Magazine* and *L'Express*) prominently featuring on the cover of their December issues an image of trade union leader Lech Wałęsa (proclaimed at that time "Man of the Year"). As we will see below, the legacy of Solidarity would also leave a certain imprint on audiovisual fiction produced after the fall of the Iron Curtain (but not for long).

Reconciling the Imagological Framework with the Collaborative Production Mode of Audiovisual Fiction

Turning now our attention to imagology as a research discipline, it is important to recall at this point that the imagological framework does not aspire to verify the (un)truthfulness of ethnic and national stereotypes. Quite the contrary is true: as a field of study born out of comparative literature and averse to any kind of naive essentialism it rather focuses on the way in which these images (of Self and Other, of Us and Them) operate in a wide variety of representational practices, across time and space. As Joep Leerssen has recently pointed out in a state-of-the-art article, imagological research typically combines context-sensitive close readings with aspects of intertextual analysis.[9] As Leerssen observes with specific regard to the intertextual dimension of the imagological framework, "any given instance of an ethnotype refers, not to empirical reality as such, as to the established commonplaces, and the imagologist's task is to retrieve these implied commonplaces."[10] The contextual dimension, for its part, is inextricably bound up with "the historical, political and social conditions within which a given ethnotype is brought forward."[11] Self-evidently,

[8] Ibidem, pp. 305–307.
[9] J. Leerssen, *Imagology: On Using Ethnicity to Make Sense of the World*, "Iberic@l, Revue d'études Ibériques et Ibéro-Américaines" 2016, no. 10, pp. 13–31.
[10] Ibidem, p. 20.
[11] Ibidem.

in view of the discipline's historical indebtedness to comparative literary studies, most imagological research has been devoted to literary texts, but it goes without saying that its concepts and tools can be equally applied to other realms of cultural production, including film and TV. As Frank Degler has observed with regard to audiovisual production, "the imagology of cinema presents an important area of research, in that it involves a direct access to the visualized 'images' of Others and the production process of these standardized «pictures»."[12] Remarkably, however, while highlighting cinema and TV's multimodal capacity to produce and disseminate standardized images of ethnic Others – in combination with their lesser dependence on linguistic borders – Degler fails to acknowledge the substantial difference between the strongly individualized creation process of literary texts, on the one hand, and the collaborative and multi-stage production mode of audiovisual fiction, on the other.[13] Therefore, inasmuch as the procedures of genetic criticism make it possible to compare various versions of a single script with the final product that eventually makes it to the screen, conducting interviews with the creative personnel involved – especially screenwriters – may add significantly to our understanding of the processes of reflection and negotiation that precede and shape the appearance and portrayal of a given character in audiovisual fiction. Therefore, in what follows below, the input of a series of experts and professionals employed in the Flemish media sector will be used to highlight the most prominent mechanisms at play in the process of introducing to the screen lead, side and guest characters of Polish extraction.

In view of what has been said before about the post-1989 transformation of the Flemish media landscape, it should not come as a surprise that practically all audiovisual fiction projects selected for discussion in this article were produced either by the public service broadcaster VRT (4) or by its commercial competitor VTM (2). At the same time, the productions involved significantly differ from each other, not only in terms of genre features and aesthetics, but also in terms of airing frequency and production values. The oldest TV show under scrutiny here is *F.C. De Kampioenen* (*F.C. The Champions*). This weekly sitcom ran for 21 seasons on the generalist channel of VRT (1990–2011) and can be called the most successful and best-known Flemish comedy hit of all times (amassing an average audience of 1.5 million viewers during its first airtime, but also enjoying multiple reruns for many years afterwards, up till today). In 1991, the commercial network VTM responded to the success of *F.C. The Champions* by launching its own weekly sitcom, *De Kotmadam* (*The Student Landlady*) – the second production that will be discussed here. Over the past three decades, *The Student Landlady* has earned itself the reputation of being the

[12] F. Degler, *Cinema*, [in:] *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey*, eds. M. Beller, J. Leerssen, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2007, p. 295.

[13] *How to Watch Television*, eds. E. Thompson, J. Mittell, New York University Press, New York 2020.

longest running comedy series on Flemish television, totaling no less than 25 seasons – of which only the final one still has to be aired – and some 350 episodes. The third production to be discussed in this article is the Dutch-language community soap *Thuis* (*At Home*), which was launched by the Flemish public service broadcaster VRT in December 1995, partly in response to the growing popularity of VTM's daily soap *Familie* (*Family*, 1991–).[14] Entering its 29th season in the fall of 2023, *At Home* has become the most-liked Flemish soap of the past two decades, attracting a daily audience of approximately one million viewers and reaching an average market share of more than 30 percent. In the domain of middlebrow crime fiction, in turn, we will turn our attention to the hit series *Flikken* (*Cops*), which ran on the generalist channel of VRT from 1999 to 2009. Revolving around an ensemble of cops who work for the local police department in the city of Ghent, the popular show weekly attracted up to 1.5 million viewers in prime time. The family saga *Katarakt* (*Cataract*), in turn, belongs to the upper market segment of what is termed "prestige fiction", with one of the largest budgets ever spent on a Flemish drama series (more than 5 million €). Consisting of thirteen episodes, the first and only season of *Cataract* was aired by the public broadcaster VRT in 2007–2008 (in the Sunday evening prime time slot). Significantly, 2007 was also the time when the Belgian-Dutch co-production *Man Zkt Vrouw* (*A Perfect Match*) – a romantic comedy directed by Miel Van Hoogenbemt – made it to the screens. Quite obviously, as a full-fledged feature film project, *A Perfect Match* stands out from the previously mentioned projects, but its rather complicated production history (with the direct involvement of some prominent TV professionals) makes it a very interesting case to look at. Last but not least, the seventh production to be discussed in more detail in this article is *Danni Lowinski*, the Flemish remake of the eponymous dramedy that ran on German commercial TV in the 2010s.[15] Produced and aired by the Flemish commercial broadcaster VTM in 2012 and 2013, the two seasons of the series – each consisting of thirteen episodes – managed to secure a substantial market share among Flemish TV audiences.[16]

The Short-Lived Aftermath of the "Solidarity Effect"

Chronologically speaking, the very first on-screen appearance of a Polish character on Flemish TV can be traced back to the first half of the 1990s. On May 30, 1994, the commercial network VTM

[14] J. Franco, *Cultural Identity in the Community Soap: A Comparative Analysis of* Thuis (At Home) *and* EastEnders, "European Journal of Cultural Studies" 2001, no. 4(4).

[15] The original series ran on the German network Sat.1 for five seasons (2010–2014). Shortly after the Flemish remake, the Dutch broadcaster SBS6 launched a different version that would run for four seasons (2013–2016). Most recently, the German series has been adapted for a Polish viewership (by the commercial TV network Polsat), under the title *Mecenas Porada* (*Attorney Porada*, 2021–2022). The very fact that *Danni Lowinski* has been remade in a variety of cultural and linguistic contexts turns the German series into a highly interesting case for cross-cultural comparative research, not the least from an imagological perspective.

[16] Each of the two seasons reached a market share of almost 40%. See H. Van Den Bulck, K. Custers, J. Van Den Bulck, *Belgium (Flanders)*, [in:] *A Transna-*

broadcasted "De Poolse" ("The Polish Girl"), the final episode of the 3rd season of the comedy series *The Student Landlady*. Set in the city of Leuven, each instalment of the sitcom revolves around the comic interactions between the female owner of a sweet shop in the city center (the eponymous landlady) and a mixed group of university students that rent a room in her multi-floor house. The eponymous Polish girl is a young student from Poland (Olga), who has been invited on a short field trip to Leuven in order to get acquainted with Belgian society. While the female residents of the student house are very much looking forward to the girl's arrival, their male colleagues are far less enthusiastic and turn out to be full of prejudice, up till the moment when they discover that Olga is smart, fluent in at least five languages and, last but not least, very good-looking (which rapidly turns her into an object of fierce competition between the boys). As ensues from an interview conducted with screenwriter Frans Ceusters (who also created the original format of the sitcom), the script of this particular episode came into being in the early 1990s, with the explicit objective being "to create something positive about Poland", notwithstanding the fact that Ceusters himself did not have any personal connection to the country or its inhabitants. Since the early 1980s, however, Ceusters had been following the events in Poland very closely, while also cherishing a lot of sympathy for the Solidarity movement and its struggle for democracy (and freedom as humanity's highest good). In the screenwriter's own words, the "Polish" episode of *The Student Landlady* was "a unique opportunity to make this clear to an audience of more than one million viewers, albeit in a comical and folksy way." Along similar lines, as Ceusters further emphasized in his response, the visiting student could not have come from any other country than Poland ("because I felt that they were the forerunners in the Eastern Bloc in breaking away from communism").[17]

Significantly, however, in order to create the character and the storyline, Ceusters did not conduct any specific research, but "only used the stereotypes that in those days were common here when it came to people from the Eastern Bloc" (mostly revolving around cultural backwardness and economic underdevelopment). What is more, at the time of writing the script, he was not aware of or familiar with any other audiovisual productions featuring Polish lead or supporting characters. In turn, the surname of the Polish girl ("Kornatovski", as it is spelled in the opening sequence of the episode) was inspired by the name of a fellow student of distant Polish heritage whom Ceusters had met during a drama course. Characteristically, throughout the episode, the Polish girl (played by a young Flemish actress) does utter some

tional Study of Law and Justice on TV, eds. P. Robson, J.L. Schulz, Hart Publishing, Oxford 2016, p. 34. Importantly, unlike the German and the Dutch version, the Flemish remake was discontinued after two seasons, because lead actress Nathalie Meskens did not want to commit longer than two years.

[17] For the sake of clarity, it should be added here that there are no direct references whatsoever to the Solidarity movement in the actual script of "The Polish Girl."

words in Polish – for instance, the rather unpronounceable dish name "móżdżek wieprzowy z czerwoną kapustą i kartoflami" – but these dialogues were added in Polish only during the production phase.[18]

Through the lens of hindsight, as the very first post-1989 Flemish TV production that introduces a guest character from Poland to the screen, *The Student Landlady* may be called both typical and atypical in its approach of the topic. On the one hand, the production process of the script and the episode involved is indicative of certain strategies that will be used by other Flemish screenwriters in the years to come. These include (but are not limited to): not conducting any specific research into the Polish connection, relying on and engaging with highly recognizable tropes and commonplaces, not being familiar with other TV productions that feature characters from Poland or the wider region. On the other hand, however, Ceusters's self-proclaimed eagerness to introduce a female "model student" from Poland in order to pay tribute to the freedom-loving spirit of the Polish people is a quite untypical and unusual position. As such, the "Polish" episode of *The Student Landlady* should not be seen as the beginning of a new paradigm (post-1989), but rather as a belated offshoot of the "Solidarity effect" of the 1980s.

The blurry contours of the new paradigm can be traced by looking into the complex and protracted production history of the 2007 Dutch-language romcom *A Perfect Match*. Largely set in the city of Ghent, the film offers the story of the rapprochement between an elderly Flemish school principal (Leopold Vossius) who has lost his wife to cancer right before retiring and a much younger cleaning lady of Eastern European extraction (Alina). As my interviewees – director Miel Van Hoogenbemt and screenwriters Pierre De Clercq and Jean-Claude Van Ryckeghem – indicated in their responses, it took a very long time to bring this genre film project to fruition. As a matter of fact, its very first phase began in the early 1990s, when Van Hoogenbemt was hired by commercial broadcaster VTM to co-direct a brand new Dutch-language soap opera (*Wittekerke*, 1993–2008). Afraid of having to bury his artistic ambitions to serve middlebrow TV fiction, Van Hoogenbemt decided to write a short synopsis of a feature film that was largely inspired by personal experiences: shortly after the director's mother had passed away in 1991, his elderly father – a retired school teacher in his sixties – decided to employ a cleaning lady from Poland (Elżbieta), with whom he would fall in love after a certain period of time. This preliminary outline was turned into a film treatment by the aforementioned Pierre De Clercq and then transformed into a full-fledged screenplay (with financial support granted by the Flemish Film Commission in 1994). The original script of the film – which in those

[18] As transpires from practically all interviews conducted for this article, this is the typical way in which dialogues in a lesser-known language such as Polish are dealt with during pre-production and production: the screenwriter simply adds the label "*(Polish)*" to those dialogues that should be rendered in Polish during the actual shooting of the scene, whereas the actual process of translation is initiated only during the first reading of the screenplay (with the actors involved).

days went by the provisional title *Niet Ernstig Zich Onthouden* (*Please Abstain If Not Seriously Interested*) – included a road trip to Prague, the city where the fictional Elżbieta had spent some time as a student, but also the place where the romantic rapprochement between the elderly Flemish protagonist and his Polish love interest would come to a dramatic climax. In December 1995, De Clercq and Van Hoogenbemt even travelled to the Czech capital in order to carry out some preliminary fieldwork for the road movie part of the narrative.

In the end, however, it proved to be very difficult to secure sufficient funding for the actual production of the film, as a result of which the entire endeavor was put to sleep. The project would enter its second phase only ten years later (2005), when the Ghent-based film and TV producer Jean-Pierre Van Ryckeghem came on board and made some decisive changes to the original screenplay: the character of the Polish cleaning lady was made much younger and her relocation to Belgium was no longer exclusively money-driven, but also romantically motivated (she wanted to run away from an adulterous and abusive partner in Poland, who was also the father of her unborn child). For the role of the pregnant domestic aid Elżbieta, extensive casting sessions were set up both in Poland and in the Low Countries, without yielding satisfactory results, however.[19] The search for a suitable lead actress was finalized after Pierre De Clercq came across the Romanian actress Maria Popistaşu (who had played a supporting role in the British-Canadian mini-series *Sex Traffic* from 2004).[20] As a result, the Polish Elżbieta from the original synopsis and screenplay was turned into the Romanian-speaking Alina, and the Polish realia of the original storyline were adjusted accordingly, in close collaboration with Popistaşu. The road movie segment in Prague, for its part, was replaced by a journey to northern France.[21]

The particular production history of *A Perfect Match* – with the screenplay's initial focus on a working-class female migrant worker from Poland – is indicative of the major imagological shift that would take place over the course of the 1990s (not only in Belgium, but also

[19] Interestingly, as Van Hoogenbemt indicated during our conversation, the Polish actresses that took part in the auditions in Warsaw were all very good and professional, but they looked "too holy." A Russian actress based in the Netherlands, in turn, was not selected because there was not a good match with the actor who would play the Flemish lead character (Jan Decleir).

[20] Significantly, the makers of *A Perfect Match* were the only ones among my interviewees explicitly indicating that they were indeed familiar with other (international) productions dealing with East-West labor migration. Apart from the English-language mini-series *Sex Traffic*, De Clercq and Van Ryckeghem also knew the successful Dutch film *De Poolse bruid* (*The Polish Bride*) from 1998. Van Hoogenbemt, for his part, indicated that he refrained from watching the Dutch film, fearing that it may have an impact on his own film, but also aware of the fact that the Dutch film explored a different register (being much more a social problem narrative than a romantic comedy).

[21] Ironically, the very fact that the Polish character was eventually replaced by a Romanian one negatively impacted on the film's reception in the Francophone festival and distribution circuit, in view of its thematic similarity to Isabelle Mergault's feature film debut *Je vous trouve très beau* (*You Are So Beautiful*) from 2005, which equally focuses on interethnic romance and features a female lead character from Romania.

in other parts of Western Europe), namely a shift in thematic emphasis from Cold War-era political migration (exile) to economy-driven East-West mobility, with the on-screen appearance of blue-collar, often unofficial, migrant workers from Poland as its most prominent manifestation.[22] On Flemish TV, this new representational paradigm was embodied by the introduction of a new character – by the name of Waldek Kosiński – in the 7th season of the popular soap opera *At Home*. Waldek (played by the Flemish actor Bart Van Avermaet) made his screen debut on the public service broadcaster VRT on October 10, 2001, and has managed to stick around – with some very brief interruptions – ever since, rapidly becoming one of the most popular characters of the daily TV show.[23] As ensues from interviews conducted with two long-standing members of the soap's writers' room, Luc Vancampenhout and Nathalie Haspeslagh, the character of Waldek was introduced to the audience not because of some real-life encounters or experiences with Polish migrant workers – as in the case of the aforementioned Van Hoogenbemt – but because "something was in the air" around the turn of the millennium: many people in Flanders knew manual laborers from Poland at first or second hand and the figures of the "Polish construction worker" and the "Polish cleaning lady" were slowly but surely becoming commonplace. Or, to put it differently, Van Hoogenbemt's strongly autobiographically inspired engagement with a domestic aid from Poland in the early 1990s was now turning into a much more widespread phenomenon to which many Flemings could relate, not the least because immigration from Poland had been steadily growing since the mid-1990s.[24]

[22] For a contextual discussion of this phenomenon, which can be termed "the Great Labor Migration", see K. Van Heuckelom, *Polish Migrants…*, pp. 161–166.

[23] This is how the Polish character introduced himself in the story world of *At Home* (episode 1073, October 2001): "Waldek from Poland. Płock. 100 km north of Warsaw. Poland is a magnificent country. The Carpathians in the south, great lakes, Cracow, Zakopane, lots of vodka, polka, mazurka, … In my country, we always dance the polka. And the food is almost as good as here."

[24] See M. Galent, I. Goddeeris, D. Niedźwiedzki, *Migration and Europeanisation: Changing Identities and Values among Polish Pendulum Migrants and Their Belgian Employers*, Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos, Kraków 2009. The growing prominence and relatability of the new – socioeconomically overdetermined – Polish ethnotype can be illustrated, for instance, by looking into its dissemination in Flemish literary and cultural production of the late 1990s. A case in point is the output of the prolific Flemish writer Tom Lanoye, known for his outspoken political statements and his talent to mix elements of high culture with popular culture. In 1997–1998, Lanoye toured through Flanders with a stand-up comedy show devoted to contemporary politics (one of its baselines being the statement "Belgian politics, the only job that is too dirty to leave it to Turks or Poles"). A couple of months earlier, Lanoye had published his critically acclaimed novel *Het Goddelijke Monster* (*The Divine Monster*, 1997), a family saga set in a milieu of Flemish entrepreneurs (the Deschryvers). In the opening chapter, the narrator renders the thoughts of the female lead character (Katrien Deschryver) about her family's domestic aid in the following way (using free indirect speech): "That sweet Zofia. What all she had not given that child! Preserves, blankets, attention. By the end, Katrien was dusting herself and the Polish girl sat sniveling at the kitchen table, once again telling about her poverty-stricken village, begging for even more dough and canned food. Katrien had always given her what she asked for. Out of compassion, but also because she could not have done otherwise."

On a conceptual level, Joseph Straubhaar's notion of "cultural proximity" may serve as a useful analytical framework here, as it stipulates that the makers of domestic, locally produced fiction tend to incorporate topics and tropes that are recognizable and familiar to their local viewership.[25] Importantly, however, "proximity" should be understood here not only in spatial but also in temporal terms. As the Belgian media scholar Florian Vanlee has observed with regard to the situation in Flanders, "centralizing cultural proximity relies on temporal contingency too – which invites the import of cues articulating contemporaneity in Flemish fiction series, such as prominent themes shaping public debate."[26] In Haspeslagh's view, although the influx of Polish labor was a widespread and hence "contemporaneous" phenomenon in the late 1990s, very little was actually known about the backgrounds and the aspirations of these "mysterious" newcomers, which was an additional motivation for the screenwriters to introduce such a character to the story world of the prime-time soap.

What is more, in the case of *At Home*, the social realist inclinations of the people in the writers' room coincided with the growing prominence and importance of diversity policies in public broadcasting. As the aforementioned Florian Vanlee notes, "[s]ince the 1990s, VRT fiction has adopted an observational perspective on the representation of everyday Flemish life, allowing for a relatively inconspicuous inclusion of socio-cultural minorities in VRT programming."[27] Over the past two decades, the VRT's "eye for diversity" has been regulated by the management contracts concluded every five years between the public broadcaster and the Flemish government (typically imposing that 5% of "new Flemings" should be present across all TV programming).[28] After a Dutch and a Moroccan character had made their appearance in the soap in the late 1990s, the Polish plumber Waldek Kosiński was the third foreigner to be introduced to the viewers of *At Home*. As the aforementioned interviewees have indicated, it was the obvious intention of the producers to portray Waldek as a sympathetic and likeable character, although his sudden appearance in the close-knit rural community of *At Home* was expected to arouse some prejudices and suspicions among the local characters. The very fact that a Polish plumber rather than a Polish cleaning lady was chosen to enter the soap turns out to have been a matter of narrative necessity (since a male love interest was missing in one of the family clusters that constitute the heart of the story world).

[25] J. Straubhaar, *Cultural Proximity*, [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Media and Globalization*, ed. D.Y. Jin, Routledge, New York and London 2021, pp. 24–33.

[26] F. Vanlee, *Acknowledging/Denying LGBT+ Difference: Understanding Homonormativity and LGBT+ Homogeneity in Flemish TV Fiction through Production Research*, "European Journal of Communication" 2019, no. 34(5), p. 526.

[27] Ibidem, p. 522.

[28] A. Dhoest, *Contextualising Diversity in TV Drama. Policies, Practices and Discourses*, "International Journal of TV Serial Narratives" 2015, no. 1(2), p. 172.

> As there was no difference in skin color involved, it was decided to give the role of Kosiński to a local actor, Bart Van Avermaet, who would put great effort into creating a Slavic-sounding accent (his character facing particular problems with the pronunciation of certain Dutch diphthongs and with the use of definite and indefinite articles). What is more, as ensues from detailed input provided by the actor,[29] over the course of the past twenty years, Van Avermaet himself has had a rather substantial impact on the way in which the figure of Waldek was shaped (and reshaped), not the least in terms of character development.[30] Interestingly, one of the ethno-cultural identity markers that were occasionally highlighted in the first seasons of Waldek's presence in the story world of *At Home* is his (and his Polish family's) firmly Roman Catholic background. However, as both Haspeslagh and Vancampenhout have indicated, Waldek's Polish background was not something the makers of the soap wanted to foreground or to explore in more depth, unless it would be functional for the development of the storyline (dramatic potential) or unless it would help the viewer feel more connected to the character (a strategy of which Waldek's singing performances in various episodes bear evidence).[31] Along similar lines, the character's attachment to traditional family values and his sporadic outbursts of nostalgia occasionally served to hold a mirror up to his Flemish acquaintances and friends, especially his local love interest, Rosa. This approach was exemplified most prominently in the 10th season of the soap (September 2003 – June 2004), which includes no fewer than ten episodes (1715–1724) partly set and shot on Polish soil and mostly revolving around Waldek's growing desire to permanently relocate to his country of origin (ideally in the company of his Belgian spouse Rosa). Over the course of the past two decades, Waldek's oc-

[29] Bart Van Avermaet, personal communication, August 13, 2023.

[30] Quite obviously, the character was created in the writers' room of *At Home*, but it was very much molded under the influence of the actor's performance, his personal input and his interactions with the rest of the cast and the crew. Throughout the years, Van Avermaet has made repeated use of the services of a personal coach (with native-speaker skills in Polish), for instance when he was expected to sing – in the 2008 Christmas episode of *At Home* – an *a capella* version of the Polish Christmas carol *Cicha noc, święta noc* (*Silent Night, Holy Night*). What is more, from the very outset, Van Avermaet regularly consulted his brother – a professor of linguistics at Ghent University – in order to give Waldek's increasing proficiency in Dutch a realistic twist. Interestingly, when the producers of the soap insisted that he should get rid of his foreign accent altogether, Van Avermaet managed to convince them that it would be better to keep certain aspects of his "accented" speech (in phonetic, lexical and syntactic terms alike). Although his character has become much less ethnically marked over the course of the past two decades, Van Avermaet finds it important to keep on adding a "Waldek touch" to the scripts and dialogues produced by the screenwriters of *At Home* (for instance, by occasionally using the diminutive form "Różyczka" when he addresses his friend and former partner Rosa, but also by including distant reminders of his Polish origins, such as his preference for vodka over beer and his Roman Catholic upbringing).

[31] In the interview, Vancampenhout repeatedly insisted that for screenwriters "dramatic development" is always the main objective. Quite significantly, the long-time member of the writers' room of *At Home* concluded his response to my questions about Waldek's Polishness with a quote taken from Mark Twain ("Never let the truth get in the way of a good story").

casional "disappearances" to Poland have not only allowed the makers of *At Home* to thematically engage with the central tagline of the soap ("There is no place like home"), but they would also serve as test cases for the popularity of the character among the audience.[32] When it was announced in September 2018 that Van Avermaet's character would go back to Poland for a longer period of time, the prospect of the actor possibly leaving the cast for good provoked a notable outcry both in traditional and social media. Only two months later, Waldek made his unexpected return to the story world of the soap.[33]

Generally speaking, however, apart from his slight Slavic-sounding accent, which has become the hallmark of Van Avermaet's character over the past twenty-two seasons of the soap, the Polish plumber quickly managed to blend in with the ethno-cultural majority of the host society, which makes Waldek a good example of what Christine Geraghty has called the "incorporation strategy" in conventional prime-time soap operas: the Polish migrant's presence (and that of other ethnic minority characters in the story world) is taken for granted and is not used to develop a social problem narrative that would disrupt or unsettle the local community.[34] What is more, in keeping with the narrative dynamics of the soap format, the figure of Waldek has gone through quite some personal turmoil over the course of the past two decades (including various dramatic break-ups and romantic reunions), while also switching jobs (from initially being a plumber to becoming a cab driver and then ending up – for the time being – as a winegrower).

2006–2007: The Apogee of a Stereotype (and Its Exhaustion)

The introduction of a Polish character in a daily prime-time Flemish soap proved to be precursory in the sense that a variety of other screenwriters started to draw attention to the visibility of Polish immigrants on the Belgian labor market. Or to put it in metaphorical terms: what had been "in the air" for quite some time was now becoming much more visible "on air" as well. The apogee of this phenomenon came in the years 2006–2007. On January 29, 2006, the public service broadcaster VRT aired "Zwart" ("Black"), the 11th episode of the 7th season of the highly successful police series *Cops*, with prominent guest roles attributed to a couple of Polish construction workers involved in shady (semi-criminal) affairs. The female counterpart of the ethnic stereotype – the "Polish cleaning lady" – made its appearance during prime time less than two weeks later (February 11, 2006), when the very same generalist VRT channel aired "Valentijn" ("Valentine"), the 11th episode of the 16th season of the all-time Flemish hit series *F.C. The Champions*, the comic storyline of which was largely dedicated to the

[32] It should be added here that the (un)popularity of a given character in a daily soap such as *At Home* is also regularly investigated in the form of audience studies commissioned by the public service broadcaster.

[33] The more mundane reality was that Van Avermaet had to undergo hip surgery and was on sick leave for two months.

[34] Ch. Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps*, Wiley, Cambridge 1991, pp. 143–147.

disruptive behavior and loose manners of an alcohol-addicted domestic aid from Poland (Barbara).

Quite significantly, when asked about the actual reason for including Polish immigrant characters in their respective TV shows, the screenwriters of the series involved came up with very different explanations. As Rik D'hiet (head writer of *Cops*) and Charles De Weerdt (the writer of the episode involved) indicated in their responses, the crime plots of *Cops* were often inspired by specific input received from the local police department in Ghent (the city where each single episode of the series is set) and by news reports from mainstream media. In this particular case, the topical subject of clandestine work was narratively connected with a growing wave of home-jackings and car thefts in the wider area. De Weerdt, who came to screenwriting with an academic degree in criminology, indicated in his response that the thread of clandestine labor was part of a longer story arc developed throughout the entire 7th season of *Cops*: one of the police officers and his partner had recently bought an apartment that was in urgent need of renovation, as a result of which the couple got in touch with a local contractor involved in the (illegal) employment of construction workers from Poland. Although De Weerdt failed to remember which specific source (inside information from the Ghent police or a media report) led to the development of this particular storyline, his claim that writers of crime series do not tend to make things up, but typically take their cues from what they see, hear and read in their immediate surroundings, is confirmed by the results of news media research carried out around the same time. By using concordance software for a textual analysis of some 4,000 Poland-related articles that appeared in Flemish newspapers between October 21, 2005 and July 26, 2006, the authors of the study found out that the most common associations with the Dutch word "Polen" (both the country and its people) were "moonlighting" ("zwartwerk"), "illegal" and "illegality."[35] Significantly, the label "zwart" ("black") was literally used in the title of this particular instalment of the TV show.

The Polish episode of *Cops* is emblematic not only in view of its narrative focus on (clandestine) Polish labor migration and its potential connection with organized crime, but also in view of the props that help convey the Polish background of the characters in the mise-en-scene, namely a Bible that contains a picture of Pope John Paul II and a case of bison-grass vodka.[36] In the interview, De Weerdt openly indicated that he did not carry out additional research for the Polish connection in the plot, but mostly relied on information taken from the internet, as a result of which easily "recognizable" ethnic identity markers entered

[35] M. Peirs, P. De Roo, T. Vanhove, *Gluren bij de nieuwe buren. Een onderzoek naar de beeldvorming over Poolse immigranten in de Vlaamse dagbladpers*, Arteveldehogeschool Ghent, Belgium 2008, pp. 148–151.

[36] One of the local characters makes the following comparison during the police investigation: "For a Pole, a box of Żubrówka bottles is the same as a case of beer for a Belgian."

the screenplay. In hindsight, while looking back at this *Cops* episode from almost 20 years ago, he would try to be "less lazy," while also pointing out that new developments in audiovisual storytelling – most notably the shift from stand-alone episodes to plots and characters that are developed over the course of an entire series – would make it easier to avoid the trap of relying on all too easily recognizable identity markers. That being said, it should be noted here that the crime plot of "Zwart" does not put all the blame unilaterally on the guest characters from Poland: quite on the contrary, the Flemish "employers" of the Poles are held even more responsible for what is going wrong (some of them not wanting to hire Polish workers under an official contract, while others turn out to be the actual commissioners of the home-jackings).

As far as the appearance of a Polish cleaning lady (Barbara) in the aforementioned episode of *F.C. The Champions* is concerned, screenwriter Knarf Van Pellecom pointed to a rather specific conjunction of internal and external circumstances. Within the story world of the sitcom, the position of the cleaning lady working for the owner of the local football club had become vacant, which means that it had to be filled by a new character. At the same time, Van Pellecom himself had a cleaning lady of Polish origin (Barbara) working at his house in Antwerp, which triggered his imagination while working on the screenplay of the episode. However, as he further emphasized, the Polish character could equally have come from any other country if, for instance, at the time of writing his domestic aid would have been from the Philippines (which a couple of years later would indeed be the case). What is more, when asked about the Polish guest character's alcohol addiction, Van Pellecom stressed that this trope simply fitted into the script and that in his mind, there was no association whatsoever between Polish people and the trope of alcohol abuse.[37]

Quite obviously – and partly in defense of the screenwriters involved – the rather negative and cliché-ridden portrayal of Polish immigrant characters in these two stand-alone episodes of a mainstream Flemish TV show cannot be separated from the binding logic of genre conventions. In the case of *F.C. The Champions*, a lowbrow sitcom that focuses on a group of close friends gathered around a badly performing football club in the Flemish countryside, the plotline of an average episode typically revolves around the emergence of external forces that put the cohesive spirit of the club and its members to the test, after which the balance is eventually restored (and the "transgressive" outsider expelled). As media scholars Nathalie Claessens and Alexander Dhoest have indicated, "the plot [of an *F.C. The Champions* episode – K. Van H.] is simple and predictable, concluded with a happy ending, while the humor is straightforward, using (stereo-)types,

[37] This statement by the screenwriter of the popular show stands in sharp contrast with what actually happens in the episode. At one point, the local employer of the Polish cleaning lady attempts to explain her eccentric behavior by saying: "In Poland, people drink vodka as if it were coffee."

funny costumes and voices, exaggerations and canned laughter."[38] In a somewhat different vain, mainstream police procedurals such as *Cops* equally revolve around the disruption of the status quo within a given community (through crime) and its ultimate restoration (through the solving of the crime). Admittedly, in both cases discussed here, the outsider character was given a non-Flemish ethnic profile, but there are far more episodes of *Cops* and *F.C. The Champions* in which the figure of the transgressive "intruder" remains ethnically unmarked.

The aforementioned recognizability of the Polish ethnotype across broad segments of Flemish society became very obvious some time later when similar working-class characters – a crew of Polish construction workers and a Polish cleaning lady – made their appearance in two absurdist TV shows targeted at a more sophisticated and niche audience, respectively in the 7th episode of *Willy's & Marjetten* (aired by VRT on November 26, 2006) and the 2007 edition of the *Jos Bosmans Kerstshow (Jos Bosmans's Christmas Show*, aired by VRT on December 24, 2007). In view of both productions' reflexive – ironic and hence counter-stereotypical – take on the clichéd image of the blue-collar Polish migrant worker – typically employed in construction or in cleaning services and typically associated with religious zeal and bad drinking habits – one could argue that the stereotype was now on the verge of reaching its exhaustion.

From "Cultural Proximity" to the Growing Impact of Marketing Incentives

The case of the 2007 high-budget drama series *Cataract*, in turn, indicates that less conventional avenues could be explored and investigated before actually bringing Polish characters to the screen. As the main screenwriter of the series – Geert Vermeulen – has indicated, the development of the show and its main storyline was strongly influenced by the growing prominence and importance of city marketing and film-induced tourism right after the turn of the millennium. Whereas some Flemish cities (such as Antwerp, Bruges and Ghent) had received reasonable media exposure by serving as filming locations for various Flemish TV shows, the public broadcaster VRT wanted to reserve its most exclusive prime-time slot – Sunday evening between 8 and 9 pm – for a high-budget series set in the eastern province of Limburg, a region known for its post-industrial landscapes (deactivated coal mines) and green rural areas (massive fruit orchards and vineyards). In 2003, Vermeulen's screenplay proposal – about a multigenerational family of Limburg fruit growers who try to modernize and expand their business – was selected for further development and production. Apart from allowing the makers of *Cataract* to showcase the picturesque rolling landscape of the Haspengouw area, head writer Vermeulen could also draw extensively on his personal experiences from his student days as a fruit picker in Norway. What followed in the years 2003–2005

[38] N. Claessens, A. Dhoest, *Comedy Taste: Highbrow/Lowbrow Comedy and Cultural Capital*, "Participations. Journal of Audience and Reception Studies" 2010, no. 7(1), p. 54.

was extensive field research in the shape of multiple conversations and interviews with professionals employed in the Limburg fruit business (including fruit growers, auctioneers, carriers, farmer's unionists, landowners and notaries), in order to further develop the characters and storylines and to write the scripts for no less than thirteen episodes (three of which would be written with the assistance of the aforementioned Nathalie Haspeslagh).

Importantly, the substantial financial support offered by the province of Limburg and its tourist agency would allow the makers of *Cataract* to achieve high production values (at least by Flemish standards), including extensive outdoor photography (covering all seasons), shooting on foreign locations (Poland) and commissioning a film score. As Vermeulen further indicated, the Polish subplot grew organically out of the research he carried out in the region: in the early 2000s, there were many fruit pickers from Poland employed as seasonal workers in the Haspengouw area, in addition to the fact that some local fruit-growing companies were actively exploring and pursuing expansion possibilities on the Polish and the Russian retail market. Theoretically speaking, this meant that the foreign supporting characters featured in *Cataract* could equally have come from Russia, but in Vermeulen's own words, "purely instinctively, I thought Poland made more sense to the viewer (and myself) and was closer than Russia." The Polish subplot already rises to the surface in the 5th episode of the series and gains importance and salience throughout the second half of the series. Speaking in terms of dramatic potential, the Polish thread mainly serves to add tension to the inter- and intragenerational conflict within a Limburg family of fruit growers: while some of them prefer to stick to tried and tested methods and markets, the female lead character of the show, Elisabeth Donkers (who is diagnosed with a hereditary eye disease, hence the title of the series), imposes her will on her in-laws and embarks on a double business trip to Poland in order to find new distribution channels and customers. While her first trip in eastern direction ends in utter failure – a shady businessman tricks Elisabeth's company out of thousands of euros – she eventually manages to establish good relations with the Jaruzelskis, a family of fruit growers based close to Warsaw. In addition to helping out as mediators and facilitators on the Polish market, father Jarek and his son Vlad pay a couple of return visits to Limburg (while being employed as seasonal workers). As Vermeulen indicated in the interview, he wanted to be sure to have a correct Polish name, which is why he took the surname of the eponymous communist-era leader and Solidarity opponent. At the same time, the onomastic overlap between a real-life figure and a fictional character also served as an opportunity to engage in a succinct but telling way with the far-reaching changes taking place in Poland after the fall of communism: when introducing himself to his Belgian colleagues, Jarek Jaruzelski comments upon his familiar-sounding surname by saying "Like our General, but no family!" Along these lines, a rather strong

pro-European discourse pervades the final episodes of *Cataract*. "Long live Europe" is the slogan that Jarek enthusiastically exclaims during a harvest party thrown by his Haspengouw hosts, while his son Vlad enters into a blossoming romance with Elisabeth's daughter and starts to develop plans for a Polish-Flemish fruit growing joint venture.

As the extensive inside information provided by Geert Vermeulen indicates, it was already quite clear at the early production stage that the supporting role of Jarek Jaruzelski would go to the Belgian-Polish actor Ryszard Turbiasz, a well-known and acclaimed figure in the Flemish performing arts, who has made various guest appearances in Dutch-, French- and English-language audiovisual fiction (mostly being typecast as a character of vaguely Slavic or Eastern European extraction, for instance, in the already discussed "Polish" episode of *Cops*). The role of his son Vlad, in turn, was given to a Flemish actor. In hindsight, Vermeulen openly regrets that he did not put more effort into documenting the Polish subplot of *Cataract*: most input about the Polish connection came from his Flemish interviewees in the Limburg fruit-growing business, while the first name Vlad came from a quick internet search (quite obviously a rather clumsy choice, not unlike the worn-out Trabant that is used by the Jaruzelskis to travel back and forth to Poland). Other Polish details were added during the actual production phase, either by set designers or by the supporting actor Turbiasz (who translated some of the Dutch dialogues into Polish).

Synchronic Transnational Remakes and City Marketing: The Case of *Danni Lowinski*

As the production history of *Cataract* reveals, its makers came to a Polish subplot in a roundabout way, as the unexpected side-effect of the eagerness of both the public service broadcaster and provincial authorities to showcase lesser known and lesser promoted areas of Flanders. A partly similar contingency on production circumstances and marketing opportunities was also at play in the development of the Flemish remake of the German hit series *Danni Lowinski*, a legal dramedy that revolves around a hairdresser of distant Polish extraction who manages to obtain a degree in law, after which she decides to set up her office in a Cologne shopping center. As indicated by screenwriter Geert Bouckaert, who adapted the screenplays of the first two seasons for the Flemish market in 2011 and 2012, the remake project was initiated already in 2010, right after the first season of the series had won over German audiences. In the aftermath of the annual MIPCOM trade show in Cannes, the CEO of the Flemish TV production company Sultan Sushi pitched the format of the German series to the commercial broadcaster VTM, which found it a perfect fit for their main channel. Not only was it the successful dramedy format they were looking for, it also provided them with the opportunity to exploit the commercial potential and appeal of a young and promising actress and TV star who had recently moved from the public service broadcaster to its main commercial rival (Nathalie Meskens). What is more, the very fact that the German series revolves around a protagonist of Polish heritage made it possible for

the commercial broadcaster to chart new territory for city sponsoring, namely, the northern part of the province of Limburg (where a substantial community of Polish miners had been established in the interwar and the early post-WWII years). One of the main urban centers of the now deactivated coal mining industry, the city of Genk, agreed to contribute to the budget (250,000 € for the first season, 125,000 € for the second season) and came to replace the German city of Cologne as the setting of the Flemish remake. As such, the adaptation of *Danni Lowinski* may be said to provide a neat example of the interplay between the increasingly prominent phenomenon of synchronic transnational remaking and marketing-oriented localization strategies in a distinctly European context.[39] In Bouckaert's view, the collaboration with the city of Genk made it very easy to adapt the screenplay for a Dutch-language viewership, most notably by turning the lead character's father (Roman Lowinski) into a former coal miner hailing from Upper Silesia (Katowice). The only minor challenge in the adaptation and translation process was to adjust certain aspects of German legal culture to the Belgian judicial framework (a duty for which a jurist was consulted). When it comes to the actual dialogues, it was decided – at the suggestion of lead actress Nathalie Meskens during the first collective reading of the screenplay – to add some Polish pet names ("Danielka," "tatuś," "córeczko," …) to the scenes that feature father and daughter Lowinski (in order to make their interactions sound more realistic).

Both in the German and the Flemish version of the series, it is the very first episode of the first season that suggests a certain continuity and connection between pre-1989 and post-communist migration waves from Poland, most notably when the female lead character – in broken Polish – calls on the "solidarity" of the freshly arrived migrant worker Marek (employed as a gardener), whom she would like to use as a chief witness in a legal case. Meanwhile, however, although the Polish background of the protagonist helped to establish a seemingly natural connection with the ethnically diverse city of Genk, Bouckaert does not consider the issue of ethnicity essential to the storyline of the hit series: quite on the contrary, much more important in his view is the tension between the main character's desire for social mobility, on the one hand, and the unwillingness of the people that surround her – especially those higher up on the ladder – to actually treat her as a lawyer (and not as the hairdresser she used to be). As Bouckaert further indicated, the Flemish production team decided to make the unbridgeable socio-economic divide more palpable by giving the voluptuously dressed lead character (who usually wears short skirts, gaudy colors and plunging necklines) a more "vulgar" appearance than her German counterpart. Ultimately, however, by remaining the perpetual underdog who sides with a wide

[39] K. Van Heuckelom, *9 Remakes à* la polonaise*: From National Re-Adaptations to Internationally Inspired Rom-Coms*, [in:] *European Film Remakes*, eds. E. Cuelenaere, G. Willems, S. Joye, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2021, pp. 133–148.

range of people that are crushed by the Belgian legal system, Lowinski is the one who gains and maintains the viewer's sympathy throughout the series. Along these lines, one could argue that *Danni Lowinski* provides one more example of a contemporary audiovisual production in which the ethnically different background of the lead character is taken for granted rather than presented as a source of conflict or tension (an approach that has been called the "incorporation strategy" in TV fiction). Be that as it may, it is difficult to deny that in the case of *Danni Lowinski,* the attribution of a Polish background seems to work in close conjunction with other identity markers and frames (in terms of class, gender and age alike).

In Lieu of a Conclusion: The (In)visible Hand(s) of Polish Migrant Labor

Taken together, the productions discussed in this article and the interviews conducted with the screenwriters involved reveal the substantial diversity of personal, social and institutional triggers and factors that led up to the creation and introduction of Polish characters in Flemish audiovisual productions of the past three decades. Importantly, however, with the exception of the 1994 episode of *The Student Landlady* (the Polish plot of which grew out the screenwriter's personal sympathy for the country and its people), it is the social reality of increasing East-West labor migration after the fall of state socialism that constitutes the structural link connecting all the productions involved and their respective (sub)plots: one by one, the Polish lead, side and guest characters that have made their on-screen appearance in the TV shows under scrutiny here are lower-class migrant workers (or their second-generation offspring, as in the case of *Danni Lowinski*). Speaking in imagological terms, this means that the Polish ethnotype has become overemphasised in terms of class, occupation, gender and even age (attributing to these characters a limited number of strongly gendered professions in the lower segments of the economy). Quite obviously, this thematic focus sets the productions involved apart from what happened in earlier decades (prior to the fall of communism), most notably the strong interest of Belgian film professionals (pre-1980) in the artistic track record of high-profile Polish directors, actors and performers, which was then followed (after 1980) by a sudden shift towards (geo)politically inspired film projects (typically revolving around the Solidarity movement). Perhaps not surprisingly, the significant exposure given to manual workers from Poland in Flemish audiovisual fiction over the past twenty-something years is part and parcel of a much larger phenomenon that has become widely observable across Europe, in film and TV productions alike.[40]

[**40**] While the emergence of this phenomenon in the domain of cinema has been exhaustively covered by the two book projects mentioned at the very outset of this article, its prominence in TV fiction can be illustrated by referring, for instance, to the repeated appearance of Polish working-class characters in recent seasons of major British soaps such as *Coronation Street* (Jan Lozinski) or *EastEnders* (Konrad Topolski) as well as two other TV shows that largely revolve around migrant protagonists of Polish extraction, namely the Norwegian drama *Kampen for tilværelsen* (*Struggle for Life*, NRK, 2014–2015, two seasons) and the German weekly sitcom *Magda macht das schon!* (*Magda Is Already Doing It!*, RTL, 2017–2021, four seasons).

If we look at these post-1989 media projects through a quantitative lens, then it seems fair to say that "fictional" Poles have come to occupy a rather prominent (and visible) position in Flemish audiovisual fiction of the past three decades. On the one hand, of course, these dozen of characters of Polish extraction that have made their appearance on Flemish screens since the early 1990s represent only a few tiny points in a massive web of plotlines and story worlds developed across hundreds of TV shows and thousands of episodes. What is more, in the case of long-running sitcoms such as *The Student Landlady* and *F.C. The Champions* and multi-season police procedurals like *Cops*, their entry into the story world is merely episodical and ephemeral: the "guest" characters from Poland briefly appear and then leave the scene again, while their "disappearance" quite literally means a return to the status quo. On the other hand, however, most of the TV shows discussed here enjoyed massive viewership when first broadcast, subsequently enjoyed multiple reruns and finally ended up on the streaming platforms of the broadcasters involved (adding to the abundance of media content in the post-digital age). What is more, in quite a number of the productions discussed here, the Polish "guests" were prominently promoted to the rank of supporting characters, appearing in multiple episodes of a single-season high-budget series, as in the case of *Cataract*, or even to the status of a lead character, as in the case of *Danni Lowinski*. Self-evidently, the most prominent example in this regard is the character of Waldek Kosiński who has so far appeared in no less than 1,500 episodes of the Flemish prime-time soap *At Home*.

Importantly, however, as transpires from the interviews conducted for this article, hardly if ever did the work of the screenwriters involved entail any specific research into the cultural background or the back story of the Polish characters. On the contrary, more often than not, bringing a "fictional" Pole to the Flemish screens has been a combination of rather limited preparation and subsequent co-creation, most notably in the form of close collaboration with the actors and the production team involved (typically after the first reading of the script). Irrespective of the question whether we understand this dominant approach in terms of "laziness" (Charles De Weerdt), of "privileging drama over information" (Vancampenhout) or within the context of the fast-paced production cycle of television, it reminds us of the importance of what Joep Leerssen has called "the historical laxity of the ethnotyping, and the degrees of indifference, offhandedness, or mixed feelings that were also at work" in the production of a given text.[41]

No less significantly, barely any of the screenwriters involved turned out to be familiar with other Flemish, let alone foreign productions revolving around Polish immigrant characters.[42] Along similar

[41] J. Leerssen, op. cit., p. 26.

[42] Self-evidently, the only notable exception here is the character of Waldek who – because of the long-standing popularity of the VRT soap *At Home* – quite literally has become a household name in Flemish TV entertainment.

lines, my interviewees were completely unaware of the representational "acceleration" that took place in the years 2006–2007 (at a time when topics such as clandestine labor migration were strongly present in the Flemish mainstream media). While this unawareness clearly indicates that there was no coordinated or orchestrated campaign taking place in the Flemish TV landscape, it does not mean – as the writer of the "Polish" episode of *F.C. The Champions* clearly wanted to maintain in his response to my inquiry – that the on-screen appearance of Polish characters was a purely incidental and arbitrary phenomenon. The relatively similar cases of Van Hoogenbemt, whose widowed father fell in love with a domestic aid from Poland in the early 1990s, and of Van Pellecom, who had a Polish cleaning lady in the mid-2000s, at the time of writing the "Polish" episode of *F.C. The Champions*, indeed point to the importance of "personal proximity." Meanwhile, however, these seemingly disparate and exclusively personal experiences are also part and parcel of a much larger phenomenon that eventually turned the presence of labor immigrants from Poland into a matter of "cultural proximity" and "contemporaneity." Using the economic metaphor of the "invisible hand," one could argue that it was the societal impact of economy-driven East-West migration that led to a sudden accumulation of seemingly disparate and unconnected fiction projects in the audiovisual domain, from lowbrow sitcoms over middlebrow crime drama to "prestige fiction."[43] Along the way, institutional policies (such as the VRT's government-imposed "eye for diversity"), regional marketing incentives (as in the case of *Cataract* and *Danni Lowinski*), but also production-related circumstances (such as the casting troubles in the case of Van Hoogenbemt's *A Perfect Match*) turned out to have a substantial impact on the final product presented to the viewer.

After a marked peak in the mid-2000s, the phenomenon of Polish labor migration gradually lost its topicality and salience in the Flemish sociocultural imaginarium. Meanwhile, however, the intricate interplay between "personal" and "cultural proximity" demonstrates its continuing relevance, if we look at the first seasons of a couple of high-quality Flemish TV shows produced and released over the past few years, namely, the crime series *Undercover* (aired on VRT in 2019), the acclaimed courtroom drama *De twaalf* (*The Twelve*, aired on VRT in 2019–2020) and the popular police comedy *Chantal* (aired by VRT in 2022). Reaching out to some of the screenwriters involved provided highly illuminating inside information about the origin of the Polish subplots woven into the main story of these three audiovisual productions. Screenwriter and showrunner Nico Moolenaar, to begin with, explained the prominent role played by a Polish migrant worker (Arek) in the 5th episode of the first season of *Undercover* – "Over de grens" ("Across the Border") – in the following way: "The character of Arek

[43] Significantly, if casting issues had not decided differently, a full-fledged film production featuring a cleaning lady from Poland – Van Hoogenbemt's *A Perfect Match* – could have been added to this list.

was slightly based on the Polish contractor who had carried out the renovation of my bathroom."[44] Screenwriter Bert Van Dael, for his part, gave a very similar explanation regarding the Polish subplot in the 6th episode of the first season of *The Twelve* (entitled "Guy"): "It was a bit of an inside joke and a reference to my former roommate, who is Belgian-Polish. Sometimes it is nice to put in some inside references."[45] In turn, Matthias Sercu, the director and screenwriter of *Chantal*, elaborated on the appearance of a female guest character from Poland (Gośka) in the 5th episode of the first season – "Bruid in het bos" ("Bride in the Forest") – in the following way: "I personally know here in Ghent the mother of a former classmate of my son, and that mom's name is Gośka. And she is Polish. As simple as that."[46] Taken together, these three short quotes nicely illustrate how artistic and content-driven choices can go hand in hand with very personal, seemingly quite arbitrary triggers. Here again, however, the underlying structural factor that determines these representational practices are the rather high immigration rates of Polish nationals in Belgium, which makes it much more likely for Belgian people – including film and TV professionals – to actually become acquainted with people of Polish extraction (a "contractor from Poland," a "Belgian-Polish friend," or the "Polish mom" of a child's classmate). As it turns out, this is how many of these Polish subplots and characters take shape: when screenwriters or directors decide to weave an element of "foreignness" into a local story, they sometimes take immediate inspiration from their personal connections or networks (which also include people of Polish extraction).

Ultimately, in terms of representational dynamics, what may be said to underlie many of the Flemish productions discussed in this article is the tension between a defensive (parochialist) worldview and a more open-minded attitude (susceptible to external influences and to the influx of foreigners). In the Flemish (and Belgian) context, the first position has become widely known as the "church tower mentality," which relies on a profound attachment to the familiar (typically rural) surroundings in which one was born and raised. This type of tension is central, for instance, to the intra- and intergenerational conflict that runs like a thread through the family saga *Cataract*, with Poland and Polish characters being cast in the ambivalent role of the possibly threatening Other. As the romantic subplot developed in the final episodes of *Cataract* indicates, interethnic romance tends to be a highly viable and productive way to overcome mutual prejudice and suspicion across linguistic and cultural borders. Similar dynamics were at work in *At Home*, where a Polish-born plumber made his successful entry in a close-knit rural community – living quite literally under a Flemish "church tower" – while falling in love with the local (lower-class)

[44] Nico Moolenaar, personal communication, January 20, 2020.
[45] Bert Van Dael, personal communication, January 19, 2020.
[46] Matthias Sercu, personal communication, October 15, 2022.

hairdresser Rosa. At the same time, the considerable impact of regional and city marketing on the productional trajectory of series like *Cataract* and *Danni Lowinski* reveals that the increasing impetus to showcase and promote particular cities and regions through audiovisual fiction does not exclude the possibility of exposing the growing ethnocultural diversity of both urban and rural communities across Flanders, most notably through the so-called strategy of "incorporation."

Meanwhile, however, even if the productions discussed here engage in portraying the "changing" of the status quo under the Flemish "church tower," it is difficult to deny that there has been a strong tendency among Flemish screenwriters to reduce "fictional" newcomers from Poland and their offspring to a limited set of recurring and sometimes exaggerated features (lower-class background, poorly remunerated professions of usually low esteem, devoutness, alcohol abuse, loose manners, …) and to locate them predominantly in the lower segments of the host society, which obviously distorts the internal diversity of the minority group involved. Although it may seem a broad interpretive stretch, a case in point here is the rather unusual career path of the female lead character as depicted in the dramedy *Danni Lowinski*. When asked about the importance of the ethnic framework in the series, screenwriter Geert Bouckaert pointed out that the lead character's Polishness should be seen as an incidental – and hence easily interchangeable – attribute of her personality rather than a crucial characteristic that drives and motivates her actions and behavior. That being said, even if we acknowledge the fact that ethnic identity markers in fiction never operate in isolation from other elements (such as social position, age and gender) and therefore should not be absolutized, the professional struggles of the hairdresser-turned-lawyer "Danielka" do seem to exemplify how difficult it is to dismantle the widespread association of a Polish background with poorly remunerated and less esteemed manual labor (rather than with artistic or intellectual labor, as it used to be the case in earlier times).

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