

“Poles of Attraction” – Kris Van Heuckelom’s Study of International Migration on Screen

Elżbieta Rokosz-Piejko

Uniwersytet Rzeszowski

ORCID: 0000-0002-7311-6165

Abstract: The article is a review of Kris Van Heuckelom’s 2019 book titled *Polish Migrants in European Film 1918–2017*, which is – as the title suggests – a comprehensive study of the representation of Polish migrants in over 150 European film productions from the interwar period up to contemporary times. The author discusses those films made in Western European countries, in which immigrants from Poland appeared, both as protagonists and as background characters, placing them in a wider social and historical context. The chapters into which the book is divided correspond with the periods of political changes which had an impact on who emigrated from Poland and why. The films analysed, belonging to a wide variety of genres, illustrate the evolving image of Polish migrants and their roles in the societies in which they found themselves.

Key words: European cinema, Polish immigrants, migration, “close Otherness”

Polscy emigranci w kinie europejskim – recenzja książki pt. *Polish Migrants in European Film 1918–2017* autorstwa Krisa Van Heuckeloma

Abstrakt: Artykuł jest recenzją monografii Krisa Van Heuckeloma poświęconej analizie obrazu polskich migrantów w kinie europejskim na przestrzeni stu lat – od 1918 do 2017 r. Autor omawia filmy, w których pojawili się w mniejszej lub większej roli imigranci z Polski, umieszczając je w szerszym kontekście społeczno-historycznym. Podział na poszczególne rozdziały jest powiązany z okresami, w których zmiany polityczne przekładały się zarówno na natężenie ruchów migracyjnych, jak i na profil imigrantów przybywających zza wschodniej granicy. Analizie poddano filmy, które powstały w krajach Europy Zachodniej, bardzo różnorodne gatunkowo, wykazując zmieniający się na przestrzeni omawianych stu lat obraz Polaków i ich roli w społeczeństwach, w których znaleźli się po opuszczeniu swojego kraju.

Słowa kluczowe: kino europejskie, polscy emigranci, migracja, „bliska inność”

Polish Migrants in European Film 1918–2017 is a 2019 Palgrave MacMillan publication which appeared within the European Film and Media Studies Series. Its author, Kris Van Heuckelom, is Professor of Polish Studies and

Cultural Studies at KU Leuven, Belgium, who specialises in late modern Polish culture, with a particular focus on comparative and transnational perspectives. The aim of the study, well accomplished, was to present – in a long-term and transnational approach – the cinematic treatment of Polish emigrant characters from the interwar period to contemporary times.

The period selected covers one hundred years, during which on the one hand European cinema developed immeasurably, and on the other the political situation changed dramatically on a number of occasions. In that latter context one thing, however, remained stable over the decades – Polish people were leaving their home country and migrating to Western Europe, either for economic or political reasons. That fact – as Van Heuckelom proves – has found its reflection in European cinematography, in which characters of Polish descent consistently reappear.

The book opens with an introductory chapter in which the author defines the objectives and the scope of the research, specifies what the corpus of his study is and what methodological approach he takes. The chronological structure of the book results from his intention to analyse the films as reflecting “the socio-political developments and ruptures that affected Poland and its shifting position within the larger European context” (11). Van Heuckelom also refers to the growing academic interest in the representation of migrants and representatives of various diasporas in European film. As his research shows, despite limiting the focus to one ethnic group only, the material for analysis is vast and has the potential to lead to some more general reflection. He has selected over 150 films made in Western or Northern Europe, that is in those regions Polish expatriates were settling in the period studied.

Van Heuckelom introduces the notion of “close Otherness” to distinguish what separates Polish migrant characters from migrants of other ethnicities: although they remain to some extent “the Other”, their skin colour and cultural rootedness in the Judeo-Christian tradition make them less “exotic” than migrants from Asia or Africa. As the author suggests, however, Polish migrants’ liminal position should be analysed with reference to two “seminal concepts, namely modernisation and Europeanisation” (7). In other words, what encourages the depiction of Polish characters as Others is the fact that they come from a world perceived for decades as the Second World, due to political turbulences (World War II and the Cold War, among others¹) and resulting from it their assumed backwardness.

Although the study excludes the discussion of the depiction of Polish migrant characters in Polish cinema (without questioning, however, the

¹ The publications Van Heuckelom is referring to in this respect include, among others, G. Fantoni’s 2014 article “The War of Others: How the Italian Cinema Exorcised and Domesticated the Cold War” included in *Cold War on Film: Then and Now*, Moscow: German Historical Institute, and R. Wright’s 1998 book *The Visible Wall: Jews and Other Ethnic Outsiders in Swedish Film*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

fact that Polish cinema is part of the European heritage), it does include the contribution of Polish-born directors and actors to the development of European film, also in that relatively narrow thematic scope which is the Western European group of immigrants of Polish descent. One of the unquestionable assets of the study is its inclusiveness – the films analysed include both those critically acclaimed and those which the author calls "the middle-of-the-road type of genre film" (11), like melodramas, romantic comedies or thrillers. Another asset – which I believe can be particularly helpful for non-Polish readers – is the social and historical context which can be found at the beginning of each chapter. To provide an even deeper background, the author includes a separate chapter devoted to what he calls in its title "Polish Romanticism" and "Poland's Europeanisation" (19). The author – by all means rightly – goes as far back into the troubled past of our country as the 18th century and the Partitions of Poland, which resulted eventually in the "Great Emigration" – not depicted in the films to be discussed, but relevant for understanding the history – if not an actual "tradition" – of Polish migration and the significance of Polish émigré culture. The chapter in a very synthetic way provides an insight into the specificity of Polish migration in the 20th century, be it the interwar period, the behind-the-Iron-Curtain times, or the times of the post-1989 economic migration.

Subsequent chapters (from three to seven) are devoted to the discussion of films made in the periods into which the 100-year span can be logically divided. Thus, Chapter 3 covers the interwar period and gives us an insight into the depiction of Poles as entertainers. The films discussed include those featuring two stars of Polish descent – Pola Negri (a trained ballerina) and Jan Kiepura (a professional tenor). The former was most frequently cast as "an exotic vamp breaking the heart of her male antagonist(s)" (61), the latter starred in musical films. Interestingly enough, Negri was hardly ever cast as a Pole. However, Van Heuckelom gives one conspicuous example of a German 1918 film, in which the actress plays the part of Mania, a Polish cigarette factory worker, who eventually becomes a professional dancer, and mentions also another German production, from 1935, titled *Mazurka*, in which she plays a former Polish opera star. In the period discussed there were also productions which featured characters of possible Polish (or Russian – as the author notices the dividing line between Polish and Russian ethnicity is frequently blurred in the films from that period) descent frequently played by an actress of Romanian origin, Elvire Popesco. As Van Heuckelom notes, in the interwar period in European films "it is the passionate female characters that most strongly epitomise Polish 'close Otherness'" (63). As long as the difference they represent is "entertaining," they are allowed to function within the dominant culture. When their otherness appears as threatening to the existing social order, they find themselves back in the marginal position.

The next chapter covers the period of forty years, including films made during the Cold War, hence, as the author suggests, introducing “ideological Othering” of the characters coming from behind the Iron Curtain, to strengthen the conviction that the West was superior to the Eastern Block. As it is in the case of the earlier chapters, Van Heuckelom in an insightful and very synthetic way presents the political and social context of the migrations and relocations of Poles in the post-war decades. We can also find reference to the Polish “film practitioners” (71), such as film directors Roman Polanski or Jerzy Skolimowski, or actors, such as Anna Prucnal, Władysław Sheybal and Izabela Teleżyńska, who left Poland in the post-war decades. An interesting trait discussed is a certain “Polish romanticism” of the migrant characters – their patriotism, longing for the homeland, courage, and artistic talent. That romantic ethos is most conspicuously represented in British and Italian cinema, which reflects the involvement of Polish men in the military struggle in those two countries, in particular. There are also numerous films coming from the post-war decades in which Poles are depicted as Cold War agents/defectors. The author indicates that in the late 1940s and the 1950s we can observe what he calls “remasculinisation of expatriate Polishness, while in the 1970s a different trope appears: “masculine breakdown in foreign space” (105). He discusses a number of films (including Polanski’s *The Tenant* (1976)) in which male characters display psychological fragility which eventually leads them to a downfall.

A separate chapter is devoted to the years 1980–1989 and so-called Late Cold War films. Those nine years in Polish history are the time of the development of Solidarity, then of the introduction of the martial law and the final collapse of socialist power. It was also the time of increased emigration – for both political and economic reasons. As Van Heuckelom claims, the fact that the Polish cause caught the attention of the international publicity found its reflection in the increased number of films which touch upon the problem of Polish migrants. He mentions the Andrzej Wajda effect, which – after the Palme d’Or being awarded to the Polish director in 1981 for his *Man of Iron* – led to a rising interest not only in Polish issues, but also in Polish film directors and actors, Jerzy Skolimowski, Jerzy Radziwiłowicz, Daniel Olbrychski or Andrzej Seweryn, among others. The predominant focus of the films exposing Poland-related problems is on male Polish expatriates and their escape across the Iron Curtain. They are frequently dissident artists or exiled intellectuals, who find themselves in the new environment, with no way back to the home country facing a political turmoil. The Solidarity-related films discussed in more detail in this chapter include Skolimowski’s *Moonlighting* (1982) and *Success is the Best Revenge* (1984), Goddard’s *Passion* (1982), Christofis’s *Roza* (1982), Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud’s *Crossings*, Nemes’s *TLA fiancée qui venait du froid* (1983) and Peter Kassovitz’s *Mariage blanc* (1986). The analyses end

up with the conclusion, that the productions show a similar evaluation of the migration of Poles in the Solidarity era. The protagonists either commit crimes and end up in jail (two films), or find themselves back in their home country, voluntarily or not. All the films refer somehow to the “proximity between the East and the West” which turns out to be “illusive” (145). Those films tell stories of mutual discovery and rediscovery of the connections between the two worlds, exposing the difficulties and ambiguities that may appear in the process.

The subsequent chapter discusses the films depicting Polish migrants of the capitalist times, made between 1990 and 2004; that is within the period between the end of the rule of the communist government and Poland’s accession to the European Union. In that period, as Van Heuckelom notes and proves in his analysis, “fictional characters from Poland rapidly became Europe’s most prototypical labour migrants” (161). It is illustrated by the very number of films touching upon the subject in a wider context of East-West mobility – there are over forty of them made in eleven countries. Those include also films directed by one of the most acknowledged Polish directors, Krzysztof Kieślowski, as well as Costa-Gavras’ *La petite apocalypse* (1992), loosely based on Tadeusz Konwicki’s 1979 novel. One of the interesting tropes that the author points out is that of diagnosis and restoration – Polish migrants (or, more generally, those from the Eastern Block) help diagnose the problems the Western society faces (social fragmentation and loosening of familial ties, among others) and tend to function as “healers” (e.g. in *Le clandestine*, France 1994, *De Poolsebruid*, Netherlands 1998). The films discussed focus also on the existing exploitation of migrant labourers, which is gender-related (women become victims of the sex industry, men tend to work in hazardous conditions which jeopardize their lives). Van Heuckelom summarizes that part of his considerations by concluding that the picture of Polish migrants in the post-Iron-Curtain decade is “highly ambiguous” and that “stripped of its geopolitical odium cemented by the Cold War, Polish ‘close Otherness’ now helps to address the unwelcome side-effects of postwar modernisation and to blunt some of the sharp edges of capitalism in its late modern manifestation” (198).

The last analytical chapter covers the films produced after 2004, i.e. the year in which Poland became an EU member. Since then economic migration has continued, but a shift in job seekers’ destination can be observed – rather than in Germany, Polish migrant workers have found themselves in the UK and Ireland. That contributed to an increased visibility of Polish migrants in English-language films produced in the last decade. As far as the film industry is concerned, of significance is the fact that in 2005 the Polish Film Institute was established, which resulted in increased international cooperation of Polish film producers. Van Heuckelom also points out that numerous talented Polish actors, including Andrzej Chyra (in Urszula Antoniak’s *Beyond Words*), Lesław Żurek (in Ken Loach’s *It’s a Free World*), Joanna Kulig (in Małgorzata

Szumowska's *Elles*) or Jakub Gierszał whose photograph from Urszula Antoniak's *Beyond Words* can be found on the covers of the publication, have gained an opportunity to perform in co-produced films. Also the number of film directors of Polish descent working in Western Europe has increased, including Antoniak, Szumowska, or Pawlikowski, among others. Polish migrants continue to appear as exploited labourers, as "close Others" with certain restorative function, but also as second-generation hyphenated European citizens (e.g. in *Lena*, a 2011 Dutch production, featuring Agata Buzek as a single mother of the title character). Summarizing the analysis of the films discussed in this section of the book the author also notices the "diminishing degree of conflation and confusion between Polish identities and Russian ones" (249) and the fact that more frequently Polish-Russian antagonism can be observed in the films made after the fall of the Iron Curtain, leading to what the author calls "the cinematic decomposition – or reconfiguration – of Eastern Europeanness" (249).

The book closes with a conclusive chapter summarizing the most relevant elements of the analyses carried out, focusing on the way in which "Poland's long-standing status as an immigrant-sending country" (257) found its varied reflection in European cinematography. The publication is completed with a very rich, comprehensive bibliography and filmography, very helpful to anybody interested in European cinema and "the Polish cause" in particular.

As a Polish reader, painfully familiar with Polish troubled history, and moderately conscious of the presence of Polish migrants in European cinema, I have found Kris Van Heuckelom's publication very informative and insightful. Although 150 films out of the hundreds of thousands of European cinematic productions made during the hundred years discussed constitute a fraction of the overall output, the number is, from my perspective, unexpectedly high. Van Heuckelom's study, well-grounded in the state of art and based on a very thorough research, provides a comprehensive picture of the way the depiction of Polish migrants in European cinema has been changing to reflect the political and social transformations taking place in Europe. It is very sensitively written, showing great understanding of the complexity of Polish history and an ability to refer to it in a very synthetic way. The author shows impressive expert knowledge of the subject and his genuine interest in it. Clearly argued, engaging, written in a lively style, Van Heuckelom's book can be of interest to film and culture specialists, those interested in Polish history and in European film in general, or in the depiction of contemporary social problems connected with and resulting from transnational migration.

[Reviewed: Kris Van Heuckelom *Polish Migrants in European Film 1918–2017*. Palgrave European Film and Media Studies, Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, 284 pp.]