

Softening of Polish Rock of the 1960s and Early 1970s through Screen Media

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the representation of Polish rock in Polish cinema and television in the 1960s and the 1970s, in other words (roughly) the first decade of the existence of Polish rock. My argument is that these films minimize their associations with youth, contemporaneity, modernity, rebellion and a western outlook — typical of rock — amplifying connotations which are not seen as central to the genre, such as its closeness to folk music and national culture. In my research I will draw on the history of Polish popular music and Polish cinema in the 1960s and its interface, and the division between pop and rock.

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A Very Short Introduction to Polish Rock and Cinema of the 1960s

According to historians of Polish popular music, the symbolic date of the birth of Polish rock is the first concert of the band Rhythm and Blues, which took place on 24 March 1959.¹ The concert occurred six years after the death of Stalin and his Polish counterpart, Bolesław Bierut, and his replacement by Władysław Gomułka as the leader of the Polish United Workers Party (the PZPR). This change coincided with a cultural shift in the position of socialist realism from dominant to residual. Gomułka, who was seen as a “nationalist communist”, gave up on many of the policies of his predecessor. There was more political and cultural freedom under his rule, although political censorship was by no means abolished and his style became more authoritarian the longer he remained in office. Admittedly, artists had greater freedom in the first years of his rule than in the 1960s, known as the period of “small stabilization”. This term conveys hostility toward grand projects and encouragement to focus one’s energy on everyday life, leaving politics to professional politicians.²

Polish rock in the 1960s, known as bigbit, big-beat or bigbeat, reflected both its western influences, as conveyed by the foreign name of the band Rhythm and Blues, and the conditions of “small stabilization”. Its creators and promoters, most importantly Franciszek Walicki, the manager of several early Polish rock bands, tried to ensure its existence and flourishing by convincing the authorities that it was not an alien and hostile force coming from the West, but a phenomenon which was rooted in Polish culture.³ This was important because

Władysław Gomułka treated the Western world with suspicion and never understood it. The Western mass culture was seen by him as a threat to socialism, Polish national culture, and to formation of the young generation. He spoke about artists that some of them were forgetting [...] about these social duties, their own nation and its needs, and look only at the West, searching there for artistic inspiration. This wish to catch up with Paris or New York, these snobbish attempts to keep up with various art movements, that appeared in the West and

¹ Przemysław Zieliński, *Scena rockowa w PRL-u: Historia, organizacja znaczenie* (Warsaw: Trio, 2005), p. 15; Tomasz Leszkowicz, ‘Od rock and rolla nie było odwrotu’, *Histman.org*, 22 January 2015, <<https://histmag.org/Od-rock-and-rolla-nie-bylo-odwrotu-10569>> [accessed 4 November 2018].

² The term “small stabilization” is borrowed from Tadeusz Różewicz’s play *Świadkowie albo nasza mała stabilizacja* (*Witnesses or Our Small Stabilization*), published in 1962. Its protagonists, He and She, define this crucial term as the diminishing of requirements and responsibilities. During small stabilization morality takes a back seat, as people were preoccupied with material pursuits. However, they did not complain because they were anxious not to lose what they had gained. The personality type described by Różewicz can be equated with ‘homo sovieticus’, also marked by passivity and a lack of ambition.

³ Anna Idzikowska-Czubaj, *Rock w PRL-u: O paradoksach współistnienia* (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2011), p. 137.

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soon disappeared, would be funny if they had not entailed concrete ideological, cultural, and moral damages.⁴

Walicki did so by coining the slogan 'Polish Youth Sings Polish Songs' which encouraged Polish rockers-to-be to switch from English (or any other language) to Polish. Such a move also reflected a wider trend of "polonization" of state socialism during the 1960s,⁵ a trend that was acknowledged by the leading authorities of Polish rock.⁶ As a result, the 1960s saw a mushrooming of bands, influenced by western rock, but singing in Polish, such as Niebiesko-Czarni, Czerwono-Czarni, Czerwone Gitary, Skaldowie and Trubadurzy. Of them, Niebiesko-Czarni, founded by Walicki, deserves special attention, as it was a super-band, with a number of distinctive personalities, such as Michaj Burano, Wojciech Korda, Czesław Niemen, Andrzej Nebeski, Helena Majdaniec and Ada Rusowicz. The idea behind it was to create an incubator of new talents. It was assumed that after proving their skill and getting some experience, the more creative members would set up their own bands with their own styles, which is precisely what happened. From the perspective of the entire history of rock music in Poland in the state socialist period, the 1960s are regarded as a period of success, as testified by the fact that the first Polish Golden Record, for the highest number of records sold, was rewarded to Czesław Niemen: the greatest bigbit star of this period. By contrast, in the 1970s such awards were dominated by Estrada singers, such as Maryla Rodowicz and Halina Kunicka.⁷

The crucial factor in the development of Polish cinema in the 1960s was a resolution from the Central Committee of the Party, which demanded that Polish filmmakers produce films that were popular but socialist in spirit, and avoided vulgarity.⁸ This directive resulted in an increase in the production of genre films,

⁴ Władysław Gomułka, quoted in Piotr Zwierzchowski, 'Socialist Content, Hollywood Form: Crime Films and Musicals in the Polish Cinema of the 1960s', *Panoptikum*, 17 (2017), 199.

⁵ Bartosz Machalica, 'Polityka historyczna PRL-u. Tezy o zmienności i niezmienności', in *PRL bez uprzedzeń*, ed. by Jakub Majmurek and Piotr Szumlewicz (Warsaw: Książka i Prasa, 2010), pp. 89–101.

⁶ Przemysław Zieliński, *Scena rockowa w PRL-u: Historia, organizacja znaczenie* (Warsaw: Trio, 2005); Idzikowska-Czubaj, pp. 117–77.

⁷ Jotem 'Kilogram złota', *Magazyn Muzyczny*, 1, 1989, 22. The term 'Estrada' has multiple meanings. Aimar Ventsel, drawing on the work of the scholar of Russian popular music David MacFadyen, argues that in the French tradition *estrada* means 'small stage,' and defines it as 'a wide ranging term that includes pop music as well as modern dance, comedy, circus arts, and any other performance not on the "big", "classical" stage'. *Estrada* artists could have also performed stand up, or as circus artists, and were often officially named so. However, in the popular understanding of Soviet people, the term *estrada* was interchangeably associated with the term "popular music" or 'pop music' and the term *svezdy estrady* (*estrada* stars) was generally (but not exclusively) used to indicate successful and well-known singers. The musical output is probably not so defining for the genre as the form: typical for *estrada* music was (and still is) that the singers were — as a rule — accompanied by huge orchestras dominated by the wind instruments. See Aimar Ventsel, 'Estonian Invasion as Western Ersatz-pop', in *Popular Music in Eastern Europe: Breaking the Cold War Paradigm*, ed. by Ewa Mazierska (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 69–88.

⁸ 'Uchwała Sekretariatu KC w sprawie kinematografii', in *Syndrom konformizmu: Kino polskie lat*

including criminal films, comedies and musicals, and a strict division between popular and arthouse directors. This included two musical comedies made between the beginning of the 1960s and early 1970s, which were “bigbit films”, *The Big Beat* and *Million for Laura*. During this decade rock music was also used in other films, such as *Dwa zebra Adama* (*Adam's Two Ribs*, 1963), directed by Janusz Morgenstern, which included a fragment from a rock concert.

Cinema was not the only audiovisual medium, which tried to capitalize on the popularity of bigbit music. The other was television, which, from the 1960s, started to include in its schedules short films showing musicians singing not for a live audience, but for the camera, typically against a picturesque landscape. These short films, which can be regarded as predecessors of Polish music videos, often featured bigbit stars. This period saw the production of two longer television films, *Sleigh Ride* and *How Skaldowie Were Born*, which appeared simply as a collection of clips, held together by a thin narrative.

Many of the musicals of the 1960s were popular among viewers, but typically lambasted by the critics, who reproached them for fragmented narrative, low-quality humour, low production values and inability to develop its own formula for a successful genre film. Some critics openly or tacitly assumed that it is impossible to make a good genre Polish film; for that, Polish cinema lacked the required tradition and budgets.⁹ Subsequently the focus of historians of Polish cinema was on arthouse cinema, to the detriment of research on popular cinema and musical films especially. For example, the seminal history of Polish cinema written by Tadeusz Lubelski in Polish, does not mention the two bigbit films I consider in this article.¹⁰ Similarly, the histories of Polish cinema published in English, by Marek Haltof and Paul Coates do not examine these films.¹¹ In the last decade or so, this situation has been addressed, in some measure, thanks to several articles about Polish musicals by Polish film scholars.¹² Other forms of interface between music and the audiovisual media, such as television films and the early music clips, however, have never been studied.

In the subsequent part of this article, I describe the character and the context in which rock performers appeared and, consequently, the connotations of their performances.

sześćdziesiątych, ed. by Tadeusz Miczka and Alina Madej (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1994), p. 33.

⁹ See, for example, Mieczysław Skąpski, ‘Pierwszy polski musical’, *Głos Wielkopolski*, 76 (1967), 12; ZeD, ‘Pastwię się nad Laurą’, *Trybuna Robotnicza*, 142 (1971), 16.

¹⁰ Tadeusz Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego: Twórcy, filmy, konteksty* (Katowice: Videograf II, 2009).

¹¹ Marek Haltof, *Polish National Cinema* (Berghahn: Oxford, 2002); Paul Coates, *The Red and the White: The Cinema of People's Poland* (London: Wallflower, 2005).

¹² Piotr Fortuna, ‘Muzykol – kulturowa metafora PRL’, *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, 91 (2015), 121–40; Zwierzchowski.

The Folkization and Popization of Bigbit on the Polish Screen

The Big Beat is hailed as the first Polish rock film, and on occasions even as the first Polish postwar musical.¹³ However, judging by the film's crew, its rock credentials were not particularly strong. The film's scriptwriter, Ludwik Starski, started his career before the Second World War, writing the scripts of many Polish musical comedies of the 1930s, as well as for the first postwar musical films, *Zakazane piosenki* (*Forbidden Songs*, 1946) and *Przygoda na Mariensztacie* (*An Adventure at Marienstadt*, 1954), both directed by Leonard Buczkowski. He was 63 when the film went into production, hence represented a very different generation from the film's target audience. The director, Jerzy Passendorfer, was only 43 but, judging on his subsequent career — he is best known for television series about the Polish Tatra folk hero, *Janosik* — he was seemingly not interested in the genre of musicals and was known for being hostile to bigbit.¹⁴ Most likely he was entrusted with directing the first Polish musical for a young audience simply because he had acted as an assistant to Buczkowski, when he directed *An Adventure at Marienstadt*.

As the title *The Big Beat* suggests, the film was meant to capture the new phenomenon of the fascination of young Poles with rock music. The plot concerns a young man named Kuba who on the day of his wedding is hit by his “girlfriend”, who accuses him of leaving her without saying goodbye. It turns out that she had mistaken him for Johnny Tomala, a bigbit star who looks exactly like Kuba. Inevitably, Kuba's fiancée Majka is taken aback by this discovery and the wedding is called off. This story of mistaken identities, typical of Polish musical comedies from the interwar period, serves as an opportunity to present the work of two popular bands of the 1960s, Niebiesko-Czarni and Skaldowie. Skaldowie accompany Tomala — or rather, Kuba impersonating Tomala. Such a choice can be explained by the simple fact that Skaldowie were very popular at the time, winning several competitions for young bands and being awarded the “band of the year” by the *Jazz* magazine, albeit less popular than Czerwone Gitary and less associated with youth culture. *Jazz*, in particular, described them as ‘not appreciated by the Polish youth’.¹⁵

My hypothesis is that they had a privileged position on the Polish screen in relation to all the Polish bigbit bands who started out in the 1960s because they were, together with No To Co, most closely connected with folk music.¹⁶ The leaders of the band, brothers Andrzej and Jacek Zieliński, came from the Tatra mountains (Podhale), where, used musical motifs from this regions

¹³ Skapski.

¹⁴ Barbara Wachowicz, ‘Mocne uderzenie’, *Ekran*, 30 (1966), 16.

¹⁵ Cfr. the description on the Polish *Wikipedia* page: <<https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skaldowie>> [accessed 4 November 2018].

¹⁶ Przemysław Zieliński, *Scena rockowa w PRL-u*, pp. 86 and 148; Timothy Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 95–6.

and frequently performed in folk clothes. Being a bigbit band, they did not play authentic folk music, but one adjusted to the taste of wider audiences, particularly those living in the cities. One Polish historian described the result of this approach as ‘folklorist, to differentiate it from the authentic folklore’.¹⁷ Folk music and music inspired by folklore was promoted in all state socialist countries as an expression of the authentic ‘spirit of the people’ and an antidote to supposedly poisonous western influences. However, Poland seemed to take the task of preserving its musical folklore more seriously than the rest of the bloc, as demonstrated by the nationwide collection of Polish folk music (Akcja Zbierania Folkloru Muzycznego) in the years 1949–1954, recording songs and transcribing their lyrics. In subsequent decades this action was scaled down and limited to certain regions. Nevertheless, it resulted in the collection and cataloguing of over 40,000 items. According to Ryszard Krawczyk, who was himself engaged in this initiative, it was the most comprehensive collection in Europe.¹⁸ There also existed numerous state institutions, including a special department of the Ministry of Culture, devoted to folk music and art. Although such actions did not have a direct effect on the development of Polish rock music, they sent a signal to the musicians, their managers and the music establishment that it paid to be “folklore-friendly”. Another sign of privileging folklore was the organization of a youth folklore festival in Miechów from 1970.

In *The Big Beat* Skaldowie do not play up their folklorist identity, but they come across as tame. Contrary to the title of the film, they do not use “big beat” — their clothes are neat and they sing quietly about love and everyday life, not about youth rebellion. To employ the widely used, albeit not unproblematic distinctions between “rock” and “pop”, according to which rock is a more authentic and artistic sector of popular music and “pop” as its more commercial, “inauthentic” and watered-down version designed to appeal to everyone,¹⁹ Skaldowie comes across in *The Big Beat* as a pop band. In fact, even though the reviewers of this film did not use such vocabulary, they criticized this way of using Skaldowie, depicting the band as bland and not sitting comfortably with the concept of “bigbit”.²⁰ The same argument can be used in relation to the second band playing in the film, Niebiesko-Czarni, the super-band who had many leading singers. On this occasion its pop credential manifests itself by showing performance of the least “rock” singers of the band: Ada Rusowicz and Piotr Janczerski. Significantly, a year after the film premiere Janczerski left Czerwone-

¹⁷ Józef Burszta, *Kultura ludowa – kultura narodowa* (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1974), p. 299; Karolina Bittner, *Partia z piosenką, piosenka z partią. PZPR wobec muzyki rozrywkowej* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2017), p. 138.

¹⁸ Ryszard Krawczyk, ‘30 lat Ogólnopolskiej Akcji Zbierania Folkloru Muzycznego’, *Ruch Muzyczny*, 14, 1980, 3–4.

¹⁹ Simon Frith, ‘Pop Music’, and Keir Keightley, ‘Reconsidering Rock’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. by Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), resp. pp. 93–108 (p. 94–5) and pp. 109–142 (p. 109).

²⁰ Skąpski.

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Czarni to set up the band No To Co, which in an even more conspicuous way than Skaldowie would use folk motives. The director himself described his film as something for a 'wide audience', full of 'nice songs'.²¹

No To Co were cast in the second Polish rock film, *Million for Laura* by Hieronim Przybył, a director who specialized in comedies and television series, typically derided after their premiere and nowadays mostly forgotten. To a large extent the film repeats the formula, used for the first time in *The Big Beat*. There are again mistaken identities, of people and objects. Most importantly this happens to the eponymous Laura, a baroque Italian guitar which by accident finds itself in the house of the main character, a trader at the Różycki bazaar in Warsaw, and eventually is offered as the main award in a competition for the best bigbit band. The competition, however, does not take place in Warsaw, but in the remote mountain region of Bieszczady, which forces all the characters to travel to there, either in search of fame, of the guitar, worth million dollars, or lost love.

This setting can be explained by the filmmakers' search for the best scenery to showcase the work of the band Łobuzy, played by No To Co. Once the band moves to Bieszczady, we hear them singing about the pleasures of rural life while performing such tasks as raking hay, walking in the hills among the sheep and talking to shepherds clad in traditional costumes. In dialogue, they allude to the fact that they might exchange their repertoire with the shepherds. The competition in which No To Co take part turns out to be a music festival, in which all kinds of acts are welcome and where bigbit music is in minority.

Skaldowie appeared two years later in the television film *Sleigh Ride* directed by Stanisław Kokesz, which offers another example of connections between bigbit and folk. During his career, which lasted from 1950 until his emigration to the United States in 1981, Kokesz made a large number of short and middle-length films, many of which were devoted to artists, mostly musicians, and some to tourism. None of them made a lasting mark on Polish documentary cinema and most of them are forgotten, in part because he stayed away from politics and was perceived as a producer of "useful films". *Sleigh Ride* is his best-known production, due to repeated screenings on Polish television, usually in winter, when its events take place. Anecdotal evidence which I collected, mostly among people in their fifties and sixties, suggests that for this age category it was the most important television production about Polish popular music, along with Marek Piwowski's film about Czesław Niemen. *Sleigh Ride* can be seen as a Polish response to the Beatles films, directed by Richard Lester in the 1960s, particularly *Help!* (1965). This is suggested by the similarity of certain episodes of these two films. However, *Sleigh Ride* has nothing of the narrative complexity and production values of Lester's film — it only lasts 28 minutes, it is set in practically just one location and it has a weak plot, concerning a professional

²¹ Julian Woźniak, 'Jerzy Passendorfer i Mocne uderzenie', *Nowiny Rzeszowskie*, 304 (1966), 15.

photographer or a tourist with a high-class camera, whose car breaks down in the Tatra mountains during winter. The photographer is rescued when joining a sleigh ride, in which some of the most popular performers of the time participate: Skaldowie, Niebiesko-Czarni, Alibabki and Maryla Rodowicz, who sing their songs while speeding through the wintry landscape and engaging in winter sports such as skiing, until they reach a large house, where they continue performing. The film comes across as a collection of music clips joined together by the motif of a journey through the mountains with the photographer, the only character who does not sing.

On this occasion we can identify three ways through which the rock connotations of Polish bigbit are “softened”. The first is via a blurring of the division between rock and pop. Although Skaldowie and Niebiesko-Czarni are normally categorized as rock, while Alibabki and Maryla Rodowicz as pop, in the film they all take part in the same sleigh ride and their performances merge seamlessly. This happens because most of the songs concern winter, and in the outdoor scenes we do not see the main attributes of rockers, their guitars, as their hands are occupied with skis or the reins of horses. The second way is by linking rock to the mountain folk culture, which the sleigh ride epitomizes. This also happens through the costumes of the performers, who wear traditional mountain dress, and the depiction of a party where the attendees, also clad in traditional costumes, dance to the songs of the rockers. The title song, *Sleigh Ride*, is sung by Skaldowie and Alibabki, who begin with high-pitched voices, reminiscent of mountain singing. Finally, stripping rock of its sense of rebellion and the present moment happens through their association with the photographer. This character, played by one of the greatest Polish stars of the 1960s, Bogumił Kobiela, seems to come from a different epoch. His car is from before the Second World War; his clothes are also typical of a gentleman from the early 20th: he wears breeches and knee-high socks and sports a curled moustache. Although the photographer is presented as an eccentric outsider, in line with the way Kobiela was cast in most films, ultimately the film’s message is that rock music and the rock lifestyle are innocuous and can coexist with different cultures: pop, folk and archaic. As well as being influenced by these cultures, rock manages to update them, for example rendering mountain culture folk sexier and more contemporary. Skaldowie’s ski acrobatics brings to mind the scene in the Alps in Lester’s *Help!*, in which the Beatles show their physical prowess.

One year later Kokesz made another film about Skaldowie, *How Skaldowie Were Born*, this time bringing the band to the Baltic coast. Again, this film in some way emulates the work of Lester, who in turn followed the first film about the Beatles with another. In the main database devoted to Polish film, filmpolski.pl, *How Skaldowie Were Born* is described as documentary, but in fact it is a mockumentary, filled mostly with music clips, presenting the most popular songs of this band. The mockumentary part consists of a voice over belonging to the leader of the band, Andrzej Zieliński, who presents the beginnings of the band in a humorous way. He says that the second member was easy to find because it was

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his own brother, Jacek. However, the next member, a drummer, was playing in a brass band and he was snatched during this performance, using chloroform. In this way the film suggests that Skaldowie's origins lie in part in Polish brass bands, and hence a military tradition. This idea is reinforced by the use of costumes. Skaldowie are shown in white mock military costumes with epaulettes, bringing to mind the costumes of the Beatles from the cover of their album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, released two years earlier. The drummer is shown sporting a similar costume. In this way Kokesz shows the continuity between the Polish military tradition and bigbit, as well as pointing to the similarity between Polish and western (British) rock. Another member of the band is spotted when singing 'O Sole Mio' in a mock opera voice, when working as a welder in the shipyard. Andrzej Zieliński explains in the voice-over that if the guy was able to sing with enthusiasm in such conditions, this means that he will fit into the band. Although this is meant to be a humorous comment, it suggests that there is no conflict between rock and this Neapolitan song. The rest of the film shows the band performing against the background of the Baltic Sea: riding the pedalo, sitting on a boat, jumping from a boat into the sea, juxtaposing with the image of attractive female holidaymakers. The film thus acts as an advertisement for the Baltic tourist industry. An exception is a clip to one of Skaldowie's greatest hits, *Prześliczna wiolonczelistka* (*A Super-Beautiful Cellist*) performed with a female cellist (played by popular actress, Ewa Szykulska) and a military orchestra. Such a performance evidently suggests that Skaldowie's music fits into such a non-rock context very well.

The tendency to "soften" the image of Polish bigbit can also be observed in the early "music clips", produced by Polish television, the forerunners of music videos which started to be shot in Poland in the 1980s. One of the best known clips to Polish songs from this period is of the band Breakout, *Gdybyś kochał hej* (*If You Loved Me, Hey*) from 1969. The lyrics for this song were written by the previously mentioned Walicki, who inevitably tried to make the songs come across as Polish not only by virtue of the Polish language, but also in view of the topics, lexical choices and rhetorical figures. 'If You Loved Me, Hey' reads:

If you loved me just a little bit, hey
If you loved me as much you don't love me,
If you weren't as you are,
wanted me as much as you don't want me...

You would be a wind and I would be a field, hey
You would be a sky and I would be a poplar, hey
You would be sun and I would be a shadow
If you just changed yourself...

If you weren't in my dreams at night, hey
If you finally left me alone, hey

Maybe I would forgive you,
Maybe I would forget...

The frequent use of the word 'hey' and the choice of nouns which refer to nature (wind, field, sky, poplar) renders the verse similar to a folk song, although it is performed in a distinctly rock style. The video adds much to the rustic character of the song. It is set somewhere in rural Poland, whose agricultural methods and way of life look like interwar or an earlier period, rather than pertaining to modern times. We see a windmill, a field covered with stacks of hay and a singer, Mira Kubasińska, drawing water from a well, putting pots on the fence to dry, and feeding chickens some grain from a bucket while sitting on the steps of a simple farmhouse. Its doors are open, perhaps to signify the openness and hospitality of Polish peasants. Kubasińska has her long hair plaited in braids and wears a waistcoat made of sheepskin on a simple white shirt. She plays a peasant woman and represents nature. In contrast to her, the three male members of the band have a rock outlook, sporting long hair, and are playing their instruments, standing on the stairs of the mill, rather than being engaged in any peasant activities. The conflict and unfulfilled love, as described in the song, is reflected in the position of the male and female members of the band. The conflict can also be seen as reflecting the two sides or roots of Polish bigbit: Polish folk and western rock. The lyrics suggest that it can be solved, if there was only good will on both sides; a view that can be attributed to Walicki himself.

Niemen and the Polish Ideals of High Art

Czesław Niemen was the greatest Polish rock star of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960s Niemen had many hits with songs about love and everyday life, but gradually he moved to more lofty themes. Rather than relying on texts written by authors specialising in popular songs, he increasingly used poetry, particularly that written by Polish Romantic poets. Niemen was also among the best travelled Polish stars, playing concerts in the socialist East, especially the Soviet Union, where he was a major star, and the capitalist West, to countries such as Germany and the USA, as well as performing in more exotic places, such as India and Cuba.

Given that Niemen played such an important role in popular music, it is natural that he and his music featured extensively in Polish films of the 1960s and 1970s. Not only can we find numerous traces of his screen presence in this period, but they are remarkably versatile. They include a documentary, a poetic film centred around one of his most acclaimed songs and a full-length fiction film where he is cast in an important role (even though he remains off-screen). On top of that, in several films his music was used as a soundtrack. Let us examine some of these examples. The best known of them and most controversial is *Sukces* (*Success*, 1968), directed by Marek Piwowski, who at the time was already an outstanding documentarist and subsequently author of the ultimate Polish cult

film, *Rejs* (*Cruise*, 1969). Piwowski's specialized in capturing on camera the gulf between the way people see themselves and how they are seen by others. *Success* is based on such a premise. The director allows Niemen to talk about himself, but what we hear is somewhat inconsistent, pointing to two features of Niemen, which no doubt he would like to have hidden from his fans: his conceit and his hypocrisy. For example, he claims that he 'feels life deeper' than ordinary people, therefore he tends to be misunderstood and muses on the privileges he enjoys thanks to his fame, such as being allowed into crowded restaurants, which he shuns because he wants to be treated like everybody else. However, the very fact that he ponders on his fame suggests that he is not immune to its pleasures.²² At the same time as denouncing Niemen as falling short of the high moral and aesthetic standards required of the rockers, Piwowski also underscores Niemen's folkishness, by showing him dressed during rehearsals in a sheep-skin waistcoat, as worn by people living in the Tatra mountains.

A more respectful image of Niemen is offered in *Bema pamięci żałobny rapsod*. (*Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem*, 1969), directed by Janusz Rzeszewski, who subsequently specialized in nostalgic musical films set in interwar Poland. The film is a musical clip, although much longer than what Polish viewers could watch on television at the time. The song 'Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem', which lasts over sixteen minutes, is regarded by many critics as Niemen's greatest artistic achievement, on account of both its lyrics and music. For example, Piotr Chlebowski, in an essay entirely devoted to 'Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem', argues that recording this piece by Niemen was a breakthrough in Polish popular music, because it 'moved popular music from a song to artwork, from a simple to a complex form... From 1969 in Poland a rock record became a coherent whole, as opposed to being a collection of banal songs'.²³ The song is based on a poem by Cyprian Kamil Norwid, a Polish poet typically regarded as a Romantic, but with a strong affinity to the Classical tradition, as demonstrated by the fact that 'Mournful Rhapsody' is written partly in Latin. It concerns the death of the Polish General Józef Bem, (1794–1850) a hero of the Polish fight for sovereignty during the time of partitions, who was also a leader of the Hungarian Uprising of 1848–49. Bem thus epitomized the ideal pairing of patriotism with universalism. Apparently, it was not Niemen himself who discovered Norwid's poem: it was suggested to him by a popular songwriter Wojciech Młynarski. What is more important, however, from my perspective, is that the figure of Bem and 'Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem' perfectly capture the position adopted by Gomułka in the 1960s, which was a mixture of nationalism, yet one

²² Niemen was so unhappy with the way Piwowski portrayed him in his film, that he wanted it to be banned, see Dariusz Michalski, *Czesław Niemen: Czy go jeszcze pamiętasz?* (Warsaw: MG, 2009), pp. 99–102.

²³ Piotr Chlebowski, 'Norwidowy Rapsod w interpretacji Niemena', in *Unisono na pomieszane języki: O rocku, jego twórcach i dziełach (w 70-lecie Czesława Niemena)*, ed. by Radosław Marcinkiewicz (Sosnowiec: Gad Records, 2010), p. 61.

that did not denounce the ideal of internationalism, which was the official stance of Marxism-Leninism. Choosing such a poem was also in tune with “turning to the classics”, as was the trend in the 1960s in Poland. This turn could be explained by the fact that the classics were popular but also seen as innocuous, simply because they were safely embalmed in their graves.²⁴ I am not suggesting that Niemen used Norwid cunningly, to avoid political controversy, but this was an outcome of his choice. The fact that television decided to produce a video to this song confirms it. Musically, ‘Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem’ bears many similarities with the precursor of progressive rock, ‘In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida’ (1968) by Iron Butterfly, on account of such characteristics as its excessive length, the long passages of instrumental music, when Niemen plays the organ, and its solemn mood. Rzeszewski’s film strengthens these connotations. Its setting is a room filled with burning candles, which looks like a forest. Among them we see a group of people, dressed in black and white with their heads bowed, as if attending a funeral. Against this image we hear a chorus of female voices singing in Latin. Only after their voices are silenced, do we see Niemen singing in Polish and playing an electric organ, which is also decorated with burning candles. The image brings to mind a church, with Niemen as the church organist. Later we see him walking in this “forest of candles”. He wears something like a black military uniform with white or silver decorations, with a large medal hanging round his neck. Such attire can be traced back to the cover of the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s*, as in the case of Skaldowie, however, the Beatles’ costumes were playful while Niemen’s is solemn. Progressive rock was inevitably a subgenre of rock, whose purpose was to legitimize rock as a serious form. It can, however, be argued, that in ‘Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem’ Niemen took it to a different level, rendering it as the type of music which would fit school curriculums, and Rzeszewski’s film strengthened this claim to be considered as patriotic high art.

A similar effect is achieved by Andrzej Wajda, who cast Niemen in the role of Chochoł (The Mulch) in his film *Wesele* (*The Wedding*, 1973), based on the 1901 play by the Polish post-Romantic author, Stanisław Wyspiański. Wyspiański’s *The Wedding* is considered one of the most important works engaging with the Polish national character, and Wajda’s film enjoys a similar reputation. Wajda himself is lauded as the greatest master of Polish cinema and being cast in his films was regarded as a privilege. In the last scene of the film we hear (but not see) Chochoł, who sings the song ‘You had, Yokel, a Golden Horn’, which accuses Poles of having lofty ideas, but not being able to implement them. This vice has particular importance in the light of the fact that the play was written

²⁴ The importance attached by the state to the classics in the 1960s is well captured in *Adam’s Two Ribs*, directed by Janusz Morgenstern. We find there a leader of the local council, somewhere in the province, who proposes to name a street in his town after a local engineer, who achieved successes working in Africa. This idea, however, is opposed by other members of the council who want the street to be named after Adam Mickiewicz, which in this context reflects both the nationalistic bias of Gomułka’s regime and a desire for stabilisation, for the return to a “safe”, depoliticized tradition.

during the times of partitions, when Poland did not exist as a separate state. Chochoł is a symbolic “soul of the nation”; his role is to make Poles realise who they really are. Assigning Niemen such a role points to Wajda’s recognition of the significance of Niemen in Polish contemporary culture at large, as opposed to merely Polish popular culture.

My final example of using Niemen’s music on screen in the 1960s is *Korowód* (*Pageant*, 1967) by Krzysztof Trzost, a docudrama about three young men who steal a western car and travel to the Baltic coast. Here they meet a group of girls and enjoy themselves, swimming and sunbathing, and attending a party, until they are caught by the police. The background of their adventure is pop-rock music. The film begins with an episode showing the three men dancing at a party and finishes with a large group of people dancing a conga line. Slow motion is used during these scenes which makes the characters look ecstatic and oblivious to the outside world. In the middle of the film we also see Niemen singing his most popular song, *Dziwny jest ten świat* (‘Strange Is This World’). The performance appears to be extradiegetic, although it is possible that the characters see it during their stay in Sopot, where the International Festival of Songs was held, and where Niemen performed this song the year the film was made. At some point Niemen’s performance is cut and the camera returns to the characters, who most likely rest in a hotel after a day full of adventure. At this stage the song appears to be played by the radio as it stops when one of them gets up and switches the radio off, as if he wanted to silence anybody who might challenge his behaviour. The episode showing Niemen’s performance is quite long, lasting over two minutes, constituting about ten per cent of the duration of the film. Given that the subject of ‘Strange Is This World’ is the fight between goodness and evil, and the hope that goodness will prevail, it can be seen as a commentary about the wrong path taken by the characters and an expression of hope that they will be redeemed. Conversely, Niemen’s song can be regarded as part of the pop-rock culture which contributed to the moral decline of the characters. It is also worth mentioning that what in this film stands for the soundtrack of the characters’ criminal activities is in fact a jazzy tune rather than proper rock music. This most likely reflects the ignorance of the director (and scriptwriter) about the music to which his characters were most likely listening at that time.

The conviction that there is a link between rock music on the one hand and delinquency and criminality on the other, was not confined to Polish or Eastern European cultures of state socialism; such an idea also applies to the capitalist West. However, what is characteristic of this film in particular is that the danger of rock music is accompanied by an opposite idea: that it can be a source of illumination and redemption or, at least, that Niemen’s song can perform such a function.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Polish screen media in the 1960s and early 1970s typically placed Polish bigbit in a non-rock context, by associating it with a softer version of popular music (pop), folk music and folk culture, military music, the high culture of Polish Romantic and post-Romantic literature, tourism, and humour. Instead, typical associations of rock with youth and rebellion, are absent in these films. Rendering rock music as non-rock (according to western standards) in part reflected the character of bigbit, which was not particularly rebellious or anti-establishment, but instead affirmative, testifying to the pleasures of being young and falling in love. It can also be seen as reflecting a higher level of censorship and self-censorship in film and television than in popular music industry. At live concerts Polish bands could sing and behave practically how they wanted, because Estrada, which organized live events, was decentralized and thus more difficult to control, and concerts were rarely visited by censors²⁵. It was, however, more difficult to achieve such a level of independence in cinema where scripts were assessed by a special committee before they went into production. Television production was even more censored, it being a more centralized institution and hence more dependent on the government's approval than semi-independent film units, which decided about film production. Hence, television had to conform even more closely to official ideology. The softening of Polish bigbit on the way from live environment to the screen media reflects a trend which also applies to western media, as exemplified by films with Elvis Presley, and 'audiovisual performances by Pat Boone, Frankie Avalon, Fabian, Bobby Rydell and other "teen-idols" in the late 1950s and early 1960s which were widely perceived as inappropriate, sanitized and tamed versions of the original, raw and rawdy rock'n'roll stars of the mid-1950s'.²⁶

The examples considered in this study also speak to a certain level of ignorance and confusion about the nature of rock among Polish filmmakers, reflecting the age gap between them and Polish rock musicians. Furthermore, one aspect of this representation, namely accentuating the link between rock and Polish folk and Romantic culture, reflects on the drive for "polonization", pertaining to Polish culture of the 1960s and, to some extent, the 1970s. The screen image of Polish rock would considerably change in the 1980s when it would become more rebellious and overtly political, and many filmmakers, often of the same age as the rockers, would attempt to record it and amplify its edginess and counter-cultural character.

²⁵ Raymond Patton, 'The Communist Culture Industry: The Music Business in 1980s Poland', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2 (2012), 433–37.

²⁶ Antti-Ville Kärjä, 'Ridiculous Infantile Acrobatics, or Why They Never Made Any Rock'n'roll Movies in Finland', in *Popular Music and Film*, ed. by Ian Inglis (London: Wallflower, 2003), pp. 117–130 (p. 123).