

Peripheral Voices in American Cinema: Emergent Russian and Eastern European Self-Representations in a Post-Ethnic Era

Flavia Ciontu



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/filmj/1945>

DOI: 10.4000/15gwb

ISSN: 2556-4161

Publisher

SERCIA (Société d'études et de recherches sur le cinéma anglophone)

Electronic reference

Flavia Ciontu, "Peripheral Voices in American Cinema: Emergent Russian and Eastern European Self-Representations in a Post-Ethnic Era", *Film journal* [Online], 11 | 2025, Online since 01 June 2025, connection on 26 February 2026. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/filmj/1945> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/15gwb>

This text was automatically generated on February 26, 2026.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) may be subject to specific use terms.

Peripheral Voices in American Cinema: Emergent Russian and Eastern European Self-Representations in a Post-Ethnic Era

Flavia Ciontu

- 1 James Baldwin noted in his essay “On being ‘white,’ and other lies...” that “No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country.”¹ When around 6 million migrants from Central and Eastern Europe arrived to the United States between 1900 and 1926,² the norm of whiteness³ was defined as Protestant and Northern European. For them, as for many European immigrants who preceded them, becoming American meant shedding all external signs of foreignness and embracing whiteness. Toni Morrison compellingly demonstrated in *Playing in the Dark* that European settlers defined their whiteness as a corollary to blackness and enslavement, be it in reality or fiction.⁴ Later waves of European immigrants also negotiated their identity between the white ideal and the already-established representations of blackness they were often associated with.
- 2 Emerging as a new cultural form during the era of mass migration from Europe, cinema not only registered the gradual incorporation of these “new immigrants” into the category of whiteness, but actively participated in this process through fictionalized representations.⁵ Since its beginnings, the cinematic medium has contributed to delineating the internal and external boundaries of the American identity, engaging in a constant negotiation between groups deemed assimilable into the national melting pot and those excluded from it. Oscillating between sameness and otherness, the representations of Eastern European immigrants throughout the 20th century proved essential to shaping this new national identity.

- 3 While Eastern Europeans have always played an important role in the American film industry,⁶ their contribution to representations of their own ethnic communities is relatively recent. Nonetheless since the era of silent cinema, Eastern European actors, filmmakers, producers, and other film professionals have also left their mark on how immigrant characters have been represented. As David Roediger argued, the assimilation of Eastern and Southern European immigrants into white culture during the 20th century was rife with polarized attitudes concerning their status in the U.S. social order. While some demonstrated proactive adherence to whiteness or passive acceptance of dominant models, some groups made active attempts at resistance through preserving their ethnic heritage or showing solidarity with African Americans and other marginalized groups.⁷ These ambivalences can also be observed in the film industry, where contributions from film professionals to the representation of their own ethnic cultures oscillated between feeding into the dominant narrative of assimilation and striving to reclaim ethnic distinctiveness. Their productions reveal that whiteness constituted a point of contention, occasionally questioned, yet often celebrated. While Eastern European perspectives have generally been underrepresented and insufficiently explored in American cinema, their self-representations can provide a lens to examine historical and current discourses of whiteness and immigration. This article aims to recover the less audible voices of Eastern European immigrants and ethnic minorities who, working in the film industry, participated in telling the story of immigration and played a role in shaping representations of whiteness within the cinematic discourse.
- 4 By comparing mainstream portrayals of Eastern European immigrants with representations of the immigrant and ethnic experiences by members of the Russian and Eastern European communities in the US, this article investigates how the specific whiteness of Eastern European immigrants has been made, remade, and unmade on screen. As such, the article follows a chronological, four-stage model that corresponds to the evolution of mainstream representations of Eastern European immigrants. The first period covers roughly the silent film era, in which the new immigrants were portrayed as “not quite white,” but capable of reform. A second stage, of the interwar and post-war years, witnessed disparaging stereotypes alternating with glorifying portrayals, finally resulting in the crystallization of white ethnicity. The heightened ethnic consciousness of the post-civil rights era constitutes a third moment, also marked by the increased participation of members of the Eastern European communities in the film industry. Finally, a fourth stage emerged with the new wave of migration from post-socialist countries, which triggered a return to derogatory portrayals and to representations of unstable and ambiguous whiteness.
- 5 Simultaneously, a number of Eastern European filmmakers and actors created their own representations, sometimes departing from the dominant model and yet other times reinforcing white norms. How has this ambivalence of Eastern European filmmakers in relation to the ideology of whiteness impacted the formation of a distinctive voice for this particular group in the US film industry? To address this question, this article surveys both mainstream portrayals and self-representations, focusing on a detailed analysis of eight films that are considered representative of each period. The silent film *Making an American Citizen* (Alice Guy, 1912) reflects early twentieth century attitudes towards Eastern European newcomers, whereas *An American Romance* (King Vidor, 1944) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951)

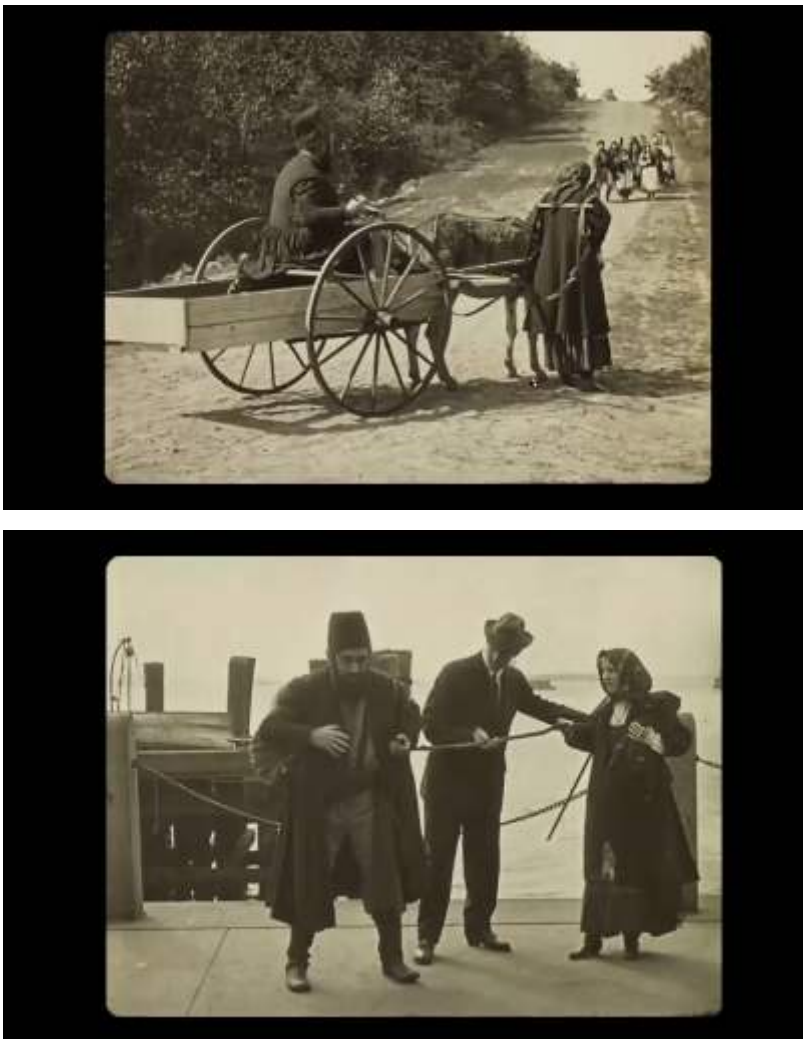
exemplify the shifting perception of Eastern European ethnicity during the classical Hollywood era. The third section focuses on two films—*The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) and *Blue Collar* (Paul Schrader, 1978)—which foreground the post-civil rights era’s fascination with working-class white ethnicity. Paul Mazursky’s *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984) provides a sympathetic portrayal of Russian émigrés during the Cold War, but ultimately succumbs to an idealized vision of immigrant assimilation that erases the realities of racial inequality. Finally, James Gray’s *Armageddon Time* (2022) and Kirill Michanovsky’s *Give Me Liberty* (2019) illustrate a different approach to self-representation that interrogates the foundations of whiteness and the discourse of assimilation. Taken together, these examples suggest that if whiteness, like race, is a public fiction, then the on-screen representations of Eastern European whiteness contributed to this fiction in a subtle yet powerful way.

Probationary whiteness and the power of reformation

- 6 The experience of Eastern European immigrants and ethnic minorities in the United States has been a recurring theme on the silver screen since the beginning of fictional narrative cinema. Even before the emergence of nickelodeons in 1905, the new immigrants appeared in the “actualities” produced by the Edison Manufacturing Company, in films like *Emigrants Landing at Ellis Island* (Alfred C. Abadie, 1903) and *Arrival of Emigrants, Ellis Island* (G. W. Billy Bitzer, 1906). Immigrants also featured in one-reelers portraying the daily lives of urban populations, for instance in *Move On* (Alfred C. Abadie, 1903) and *New York City “Ghetto” Fish Market* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903). Later on, with the development of narrative cinema, emerged a specific iconography of the Eastern European immigrant, associated with assimilation plots focusing on the challenges and opportunities of Americanization.
- 7 The first Eastern European characters in an American film were created by a French woman, Alice Guy, while she was working as a director and producer in the United States between 1907 and 1920. Her 1912 silent short feature *Making an American Citizen* focuses on an immigrant couple, Ivan Orloff and his wife. The one-reeler follows the transformation of Ivan from an unkept and abusive husband to a “completely Americanized” man who treats his wife with respect. This process is illustrated through a series of four stages, superseded by intertitles that provide context and mark Ivan’s journey towards Americanization as the couple relocates from their homeland to Ellis Island, then to a tenement apartment in the ghetto, and finally to a house in the countryside. In each of these moments, a recurring plot unfolds: Ivan physically assaults his wife, only to be reprimanded by American men who step in to protect her. These “lessons in Americanism,” as indicated by the intertitles, culminate in the intervention of the American justice system (10:33): Ivan is sentenced to six months of penal servitude for domestic abuse. Serving his sentence marks the completion of the process of Americanization and his transformation into a caring husband.
- 8 As Gwendolyn A. Foster astutely remarked, these four “lessons in Americanism” given to Ivan by white or assimilated American men function as lessons into proper white behavior.⁸ Upon his arrival in the United States, Ivan’s whiteness is conditional, as emphasized by his association with an Eastern European and peasant background and his depiction as bestial, violent, and culturally backward. His initial description reproduces the racialized tropes used to describe Slavic immigrants in sociological

writings of the era,⁹ echoing the anti-immigration discourse that dominated the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, Alice Guy's film endorses a progressive stance on immigration, closer to the assimilationist spirit of the Americanization movement of the 1910s aiming to mold the new immigrants into loyal and submissive Americans. This process was predicated on a national identity defined on racial terms, with Anglo-Saxon or Nordic whiteness serving as the normative ideal to which all other groups were expected to conform.¹⁰ The whiteness of Slavic and other Eastern European immigrants was thus contingent upon their ability to assimilate into the prevailing white norms of American society. By focusing on Ivan, a generic immigrant of presumably Russian origin, the film erases ethnic nuances and implicitly posits Eastern European immigrants as easily reformable subjects who may become Americanized with some polishing.

Figure 1





The relation between the two spouses, as well as their appearance, evolves with the integration of American norms (*Making an American Citizen*, Alice Guy, 1912)

© Solax

- 9 This film's innovative approach entails framing the story of Americanization through a feminist lens, wherein the acquisition of whiteness hinges upon integrating new gender norms of masculine chivalry and feminine frailty. In the final scene (fig. 1), the two spouses are portrayed as embodying an idealized model of the American family. The wife, dressed in white and no longer wearing her headscarf, now occupies the domestic space, while Ivan tends to the garden, evoking the ideal of the self-sufficient American farmer. This new division of roles within the family is subtly conveyed through the actors' performance. Before taking their seats at the table, which the wife has carefully adorned with flowers, Ivan offers her the fruits of the garden, kisses her, and puts on his coat. The couple then joins in prayer. These acts convey an image of domestic harmony and symbolically mark their successful integration into American society.
- 10 Through its message, Alice Guy's film set the tone for other assimilation narratives in which Eastern European immigrants were learning and reproducing dominant white values. In *An American in the Making* (Carl Gregory, 1913), a film produced by US Steel Corporation for educational purposes, a Hungarian immigrant, Bella, becomes a model American worker by learning the company safety instructions, but also by marrying his English teacher. *Sold for Marriage* (Christy Cabanne, 1916), which features silent cinema

icon Lilian Gish in the role of Marfa, a Russian girl forced into marriage by her family, delivers a moral lesson by punishing culturally unacceptable practices committed by Russian immigrants through imprisonment. The narratives of reform and transformation popularized during the silent film era continued to shape the representation of Eastern European immigrants to the US in the period that followed.

Hunkies and heroes: becoming white Americans?

- 11 During the era of classical Hollywood cinema, the roles attributed to characters from Eastern Europe became more varied, as the narrative complexity of film productions increased. However, certain formulas used to represent immigrants in silent movies persisted and evolved during the classical period. As the differences between the various national groups that composed the Eastern European immigrant cohort were flattened out, they increasingly became associated with working-class culture, as attested by the indiscriminate use of the term “hunky” to describe all Slavic workers. Additionally, the practice of representing Eastern Europeans as aspiring immigrants, striving to attain whiteness and gain full acceptance in US society, persisted. At the same time, as the perceived threat posed by immigration diminished following the 1924 Immigration Act,¹¹ the focus shifted towards narratives of economic mobility, typically following the (usually male) protagonist’s rise to prosperity and middle-class whiteness. These two seemingly contradictory discourses regarding the Eastern European immigrants reflect their ambiguous status within American hierarchies of race and class during this period.
- 12 The “hunky” stereotype, evoked in films such as *Black Fury* (Michael Curtiz, 1935), *The Wedding Night* (King Vidor, 1935), *Black Legion* (Archie Mayo, 1937), and *Anna Lucasta* (Irving Rapper, 1949), has its origins in the social reality of the US industrial environment. Until at least the World War II period, most immigrants from Eastern Europe were concentrated in ethnic enclaves and working-class neighborhoods in industrial cities in the Midwest, where they toiled in coal mines, steel factories, and other physically demanding industries.¹² They were collectively perceived as “not quite white” and were labelled as “bohunks” (derived from the contraction of Bohemian and Hungarian) or “hunkies,” terms that connected poor immigrants to the hard, unskilled work they performed.¹³ Over time, the term “hunky” acquired derogatory connotations, being applied indiscriminately to all Slavic groups and associated with notions of physical strength, primitiveness, and intellectual deficiency.¹⁴ Together with the term “Polack,” it evolved into a racial slur that served to categorize Eastern European immigrants along gendered, origin-based, and socio-economic lines and mark them as Other.
- 13 Stanley Kowalski, as portrayed by Marlon Brando in Elia Kazan’s film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), epitomizes the hunky stereotype. In one of the early scenes of the film, Stanley is introduced as part of a group of brawling men in a bowling alley. Stella, his wife, designates him as “the one that’s making all the rhubarb” (5:06). Even before he starts speaking, Stanley is established as embodying working-class masculinity through his participation in activities such as drinking, gambling, and getting into fights. Stanley’s character is constructed as a brutish, unrefined, violent man of low social standing, in opposition to Blanche DuBois, Stella’s sister, a symbol of the decaying Southern aristocracy.

- 14 Despite being a second-generation Polish American and a war veteran, Stanley's whiteness is called into question by the DuBois sisters. Stella warns Blanche: "Stanley is Polish, you know," to which Blanche responds, "Oh, yeah. Something like Irish, isn't it?" (7:56). By comparing Stanley's ethnicity to the Irish, an older group of immigrants, whose whiteness had been contested,¹⁵ Blanche connects him to a tradition of disparaging representations of non-WASP immigrants. Other epithets used to describe Stanley—"a little bit on the primitive side," (23:39) "He's like an animal. Has an animal's habits. There's even something subhuman about him," (48:35) "healthy Polack" (1:26:18)—further underscore his lower social standing and associate it with an ethnicity conventionally perceived as lacking in culture, refinement and chivalry.¹⁶ According to Mary Brewer, "his Polish identity alone suffices to render him a possible destabilizing presence in genteel White society," as he represents "a variegated, alien Whiteness."¹⁷ Stanley's response to this alienating discourse is in many ways similar to that of second-generation immigrants who reclaimed whiteness and Americanness as a shield against discrimination: "I am not a Polack! People from Poland are Poles, they are not Polacks! But what I am is 100 percent American! Born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud of it!" (1:26:25). Reproducing the rhetoric of "100% Americanism" popularized during the First World War, Stanley associates his American identity with the adherence to a patriotic creed, while at the same time rejecting the hyphen and any ethnic affiliation.
- 15 Alongside the "hunky" stereotype, the long-standing cinematic formula of reform and assimilation of the individual immigrant provided an alternative model of Eastern European masculinity. An example is provided by *An American Romance* (King Vidor, 1944). The film follows Stefan Dangosbiblichek (Brian Donlevy), a poor and illiterate Czech immigrant who arrives in the United States in the 1890s. Ambitious and determined, Stefan transforms himself into a fully Americanized man and a pioneer in the steel industry, who contributes to the war effort by converting the car factory he founded into an aircraft production facility.
- 16 Although he initially presents the characteristics associated with being a "hunky," such as poverty, illiteracy, immersion in the US industrial setting, as well as a certain degree of naivety and stubbornness, Stefan's character arc deviates from this stereotype by showcasing a remarkable social mobility. Stefan, who lacks any visible ethnic or national ties, is portrayed as raw material, a blank slate that is shaped through Americanization into the ideal "self-made man." This process is illustrated in the scene (5:36) in which, after having walked from New York to Minnesota, Stefan meets his cousin Anton (John Qualen) and finds his first job in an iron mine. The foreman, struggling with Stefan's name, quickly gives him a new, Americanized one—Steve Dangos—thus marking his entry into the US workforce by a symbolic baptism. Steve's "rags-to-riches" story can be read as a conversion from "hunky" to "hero" that reiterates the superiority and appeal of white Protestant values such as hard work, family, and rationality, as well as patriotism—ongoing war *oblige*.
- 17 By endowing these former "not quite white" characters with heroic attributes, and insisting on their evolution from marginalized to normative positions, classical Hollywood cinema produced a generic immigrant whiteness that blurred the boundaries between white ethnic groups. The practice of dividing Europeans into distinct races (intra-white racialization) had become obsolete after the Second World War.¹⁸ The discourse on race gradually crystallized around the idea of a unitary

Caucasian race that was contrasted with blackness. According to historian Matthew Fry Jacobson, “the civic story of assimilation (the process by which the Irish, Russian Jews, Poles, and Greeks became Americans) is inseparable from the cultural story of racial alchemy (the process by which Celts, Hebrews, Slavs, and Mediterraneans became Caucasians).”¹⁹ The prevailing expectation was that the new immigrants would quickly assimilate into American society. Under the combined forces of post-war anti-fascism, economic prosperity and federal programs such as the GI Bill favoring upward social mobility,²⁰ the post-war years saw the upward mobility of Southern and Eastern European immigrants, together with their incorporation into an expanding notion of whiteness.

White ethnicity and its discontents

- 18 During the white ethnic revival that swept the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, many descendants of the turn-of-the-century immigrants began to rediscover their ethnic roots and embrace their working-class backgrounds. This renewed interest in ethnicity and class sparked a surge in film and television narratives centered on these themes. As Daniel Golden observed, “America’s media heroes are wearing blue collars in the late 1970s, as the ethnic working-class experience has become a hot commodity in the television and film studios in California.”²¹ Among European ethnic groups, Eastern Europeans remained most strongly associated with blue-collar occupations and the stereotypes they evoked.²² In fact, two landmark films of the 1970s, *Blue Collar* (Paul Schrader) and *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino)—both released in 1978—feature Eastern European characters defined primarily by their working-class identities.
- 19 *The Deer Hunter*, directed by Italian-American director Michael Cimino, is especially interesting for its treatment of ethnic masculinity. The film centers on the experiences of three friends, Michael (Robert De Niro), Steve (John Savage) and Nick (Christopher Walken), who quit their jobs as steelworkers in the Ukrainian-American community of Clairton, Pennsylvania, to join the US army in Vietnam. Although the film dedicates significant attention to the characters’ ethnic background by extensively depicting an Orthodox wedding, ethnicity serves as a mere smoke screen against the backdrop of the characters’ whiteness and Americanness. In a scene set in a Saigon military hospital (1:38:06), Nick is asked by a doctor if his name—Cevotarevich—is Russian, to which he responds, “American,” thus reasserting his American identity over his Ukrainian roots. While the tension between their ethnic heritage and their participation in the war as American soldiers against Soviet-aligned forces (which included Ukraine as part of the Soviet Union at that time) is evident, at no point in the film are the characters outspoken about their conflicting identities and allegiances. They are rather defined as white American heroes, “men of integrity and courage,” against the Vietnamese, who are portrayed as “chillingly malevolent figures.”²³ In a final scene reuniting the main characters following Nick’s funeral (2:57:42), they come together to sing “God Bless America,” symbolizing their collective belief in a shared American identity.
- 20 In *Blue Collar*, Polish American Jerry Bartowski (played by Harvey Keitel) is an auto-worker from Detroit who faces the same economic hardships and exploitation as his two Black friends and co-workers, Zeke Brown (Richard Pryor) and Smokey James (Yaphet Kotto). Yet, after their blackmail attempt on their union results in the death of Smokey, the solidarity between Jerry and Zeke starts to weaken. While Jerry suggests

revealing everything to the police, Zeke, who has been offered a promotion in exchange for his silence, believes he can change the union from the inside. During a pivotal scene (1:33:20), Zeke defends his position by invoking racial inequalities: “You’re my friend, Jerry. But you’re thinking white,” he says, adding, “It means that you got more chances than I got, Jerry, and you’re always gonna have more chances than me. I got one chance and I’m gonna take it. I’m Black, Jerry. The police ain’t gonna protect me.” Zeke’s speech establishes Jerry as a white person, that is, someone who enjoys white privilege. This identity is further shaped by the absence of the slightest trace of Polishness from Jerry’s character, who is only defined as a worker, a friend, a husband, and a father. The essential difference understood in terms of privilege between whiteness and blackness that Zeke foregrounds is all the more striking as it overcomes class solidarity. Both Zeke’s agreeing to the promotion that buys his silence and Jerry’s decision to go to the authorities and denounce the union are interpreted as acts of treason by the other party, leading to a final clash filled with racial tension (fig. 2).

Figure 2





Jerry Bartowski (Harvey Keitel) and Zeke Brown (Richard Pryor) in *Blue Collar*: from friends to antagonists.

© Universal Pictures

- 21 Both *Blue Collar* and *The Deer Hunter* attest to the incorporation of Eastern European ethnicities into whiteness in the post-civil rights era. While Cimino's film constructs their whiteness in opposition to the racialized otherness of the Vietnamese, *Blue Collar* represents it as a structural privilege sustained by the capitalist system to suppress class solidarity. In both films, the prevalence of whiteness over ethnic and class identities obscures the ways in which Eastern European ethnicity may complicate the characters' position in the US racial hierarchy.

Eastern Europeans and white ethnic revival cinema: from celebrating to decrying mainstream American culture

- 22 As white ethnic identification became increasingly a "symbolic" choice,²⁴ rather than an identity with solid consequences, a number of American filmmakers and screenwriters attempted to recover their cultural heritage by turning to ethnic themes. Spearheaded by hyphenated American filmmakers like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola and Woody Allen, the cycle of "white ethnic revival"²⁵ films gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s. Celebrating ethnic particularity and cultural heritage, these movies created new immigrant sagas that challenged the melting-pot ideal by foregrounding tales of failed assimilation and revealing the persistence of ethnicity²⁶ among second- and third-generation immigrants.
- 23 For filmmakers exploring their Eastern European roots, the renewed ethnic consciousness was often connected to a sense of nostalgia, as exemplified by Barry Levinson's film *Avalon* (1990), which focuses on his childhood in a Russian-Jewish community. *Avalon* reveals the impact of assimilation on individual identity across three generations by adopting the perspective of the American grandchild, who tells

the story of his Jewish grandfather who immigrated to the United States in 1914. Similarly, Theresa Connelly explored her Polish roots in her 1998 film *Polish Wedding*, which centers on a working-class Polish-American family. Hungarian-American screenwriter Joe Eszterhas also contributed to this ethnically conscious moment with his semi-autobiographical film, *Telling Lies in America*, released in 1997, which chronicles the rites of passage of a Hungarian-born teenager as he is trying to become an American both legally and socially. Despite their attempts to recover the ethnic distinctiveness that had been erased through the process of “becoming white,” these films often resort to assimilation plots that ultimately reinforce the myth of self-made individualism. In contrast to the New Hollywood self-representations of Italian-Americans or the celebration of Greek-American culture in Nia Vardalos’ franchise *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002–2023), the narratives produced by these Eastern European filmmakers tend to illustrate the desire for conformity and normativity sought by stereotyped groups.

- 24 This is also true for films featuring first-generation immigrants from the Cold War era. In *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984), Robin Williams plays a Russian saxophonist named Vladimir Ivanov, who defects to the United States during a New York City tour with the circus troop he performs with. The film was written and directed by Paul Mazursky, a second-generation Jewish Ukrainian-American director who was inspired by his Ukrainian grandfather’s story of immigration to the US²⁷ when writing the script. *Moscow on the Hudson* also features a multi-ethnic cast, including Soviet émigré actors: Elya Baskin plays Anatoly, Vladimir’s friend and circus colleague, who declares his intention to defect but lacks the courage to do so, while Saveliy Kramarov and Oleg Rudnik portray two KGB agents who secretly admire American capitalism.
- 25 Upon his arrival in the United States, Vladimir’s immigrant status places him in a multicultural environment in New York, where he is flanked by an Italian girlfriend, Lucia Lombardo (Maria Conchita Alonso), a Cuban lawyer, Orlando Ramirez (Alejandro Rey), and a Black friend, Lionel Witherspoon (Cleavant Derricks), who temporarily hosts him in his family’s home. The film also foregrounds Vladimir’s integration in the Russian-speaking community of Brighton Beach, which provides him with emotional and economic support, as well as opportunities to reconnect with his Russian roots. However, despite this ethnic sensibility, the film’s treatment of whiteness is rather ambivalent.
- 26 The movie marks Vladimir’s marginal position by drawing several parallels between the Russian immigrant’s status in the United States and the African-American experience. From Lionel’s declaration that he is himself “a refugee from Alabama,” (45:46) to the dubious comparison of slavery to compulsory work in the USSR (48:33), a final turn of events has Lionel replacing Vladimir at his former job as a taxi driver as Vladimir climbs the social ladder. As Lionel’s parents, grandfather and sister become a sort of surrogate family for Vladimir, the film subtly alludes to the economic difficulties and job discrimination experienced by Lionel’s father, despite his college education. Moreover, Vladimir’s appreciation of African-American jazz adds a layer of complexity to his journey towards whiteness. However, towards the end of the film, the question of race loses momentum and Vladimir’s social mobility takes center stage. Thus, the potentially disruptive elements conferred by the film’s treatment of ethnic difference are counteracted by elements that subtly reinforce white norms. Giving prominence to the white male experience, the film ultimately posits it as

representative of the immigrant experience in 1980s United States. The emphasis on Vladimir Ivanov's upward, even if tortuous, journey from immigrant to American actually works to erase the specific experiences of African Americans and non-white immigrants. Ultimately, the ambivalence expressed in *Moscow on the Hudson* is specific to white immigrant assimilation narratives: it questions the American dream and its promise of freedom and unbound opportunity while simultaneously celebrating it. Similarly to the films of Barry Levinson, Theresa Connelly, or Joe Eszterhas, *Moscow on the Hudson* is ultimately a celebration of American culture rather than of ethnic particularity.

- 27 At the other end of the spectrum, James Gray's cinema foregrounds the illusory nature of the American dream by drawing on the Eastern European-Jewish immigrant experience. A grandson of Ukrainian-Jewish immigrants,²⁸ Gray weaves his family's memories and his own lived reality into his films. In *Little Odessa* (1994), his directorial debut, he confronted the American myth of immigrant ascension with the bleak destiny of Joshua Shapira, a hitman working for the Russian mafia of Brighton Beach,²⁹ whose attempt to reconnect with his estranged family ends in the tragic death of his loved ones. *The Immigrant* (2013) goes back to 1921 to tell the story of Ewa Cybulski (Marion Cotillard), a young Polish immigrant whose hopes are shattered upon arrival at Ellis Island. Wrongly accused of being of "low morals" after an assault she endured during the voyage, Ewa faces deportation, while her sister Magda (Angela Sarafyan) is quarantined on suspicion of tuberculosis. In her struggle to reunite with Magda, Ewa falls prey to Bruno Weiss (Joaquin Phoenix), a Jewish-American con man who deceives her into joining his Lower East Side brothel. Unlike the immigrants of the silent film era, redeemed through assimilation, Ewa's journey is paved with disillusionment, sacrifice and moral compromises. Yet she shines through her resilience and capacity for forgiveness, emerging as one of the few Eastern European female characters granted such depth on American screens.
- 28 With *Armageddon Time* (2022), Gray turns to his childhood as a Jewish-American boy in 1980 Queens. Paul Graff (Banks Repeta), Gray's alter-ego, is a sixth-grader with a passion for drawing, who bonds with Johnny Davis (Jaylin Webb), a Black classmate, over their shared interest in the Apollo mission and their playful defiance of authority. At this formative age, both boys begin to envision their future, but their trajectories quickly diverge because of enduring race and class hierarchies. Paul, who is torn between his ambitions of becoming an artist and his parents' more conventional expectations, nonetheless enjoys his family's support and encouragement. With financial backing from his grandparents, he joins Forest Manor, a private school sponsored by Donald Trump's father, in a bid to get "a real seat at the table" (1:42:47). On the other hand, Johnny, who is in the custody of his ailing grandmother, commutes to his newly-integrated public school and has already repeated a grade. When he shares his dream of becoming a NASA astronaut, he gets a harsh reality check from two Black youths overhearing him on the subway: "NASA? They ain't gonna let your Black ass in even through the back door" (32:06). Later, when the two are caught stealing a computer from Paul's new school, Johnny is considered guilty by default and ends up taking the blame for both of them, whereas Paul benefits from a racially biased police force and his family's protection. While Gray alludes to the Graffs' relative privilege as working-class Jews whose experience of assimilation was shaped by anti-Semitism, he is equally adamant about exposing their complicity in benefitting from and sustaining white privilege. Caught between his grandfather's ethical imperative to "be a mensch"

(1:13:25) towards those less fortunate and his parents' readiness to sacrifice their liberal ideals for personal advantage, Paul embodies the paradox of a complex, ambiguous form of whiteness, whereby the oppressed can also be complicit in oppression. In the film's closing scene, Paul walks away during a speech delivered by Fred Trump at his private school, quietly rejecting its meritocratic ideals. This act of resistance reflects Gray's critical examination of class and race privilege throughout his films, an engagement that sets him apart from other directors of his generation exploring their Eastern European roots.

Post-socialist immigrants: questioning whiteness?

- 29 Following the collapse of Soviet communism in 1991, new arrivals from the former Eastern bloc complicated the picture of immigrant assimilation in the United States. While sharing a number of similarities with early immigrants from Eastern Europe, these new post-socialist immigrants enjoyed a generally higher socioeconomic status and higher levels of education.³⁰ Also, unlike their predecessors, they faced less or even no discrimination and were typically categorized as part of the white racial group. Whiteness, a racial position of power and privilege that earlier immigrants aspired to obtain, seemed to be automatically granted to these newcomers upon their arrival in the United States.³¹
- 30 However, on American screens, post-socialist immigrants have been represented as non-conforming white Others. Immigrant men from the Eastern periphery of Europe have been newly othered as terrorists,³² mob bosses,³³ and assassins³⁴ whose crimes are no longer politically or ideologically motivated, but seem to stem from the cultural differences imputed to their origins. At the same time, Eastern European women have been portrayed as prostitutes, mail-order brides, and victims of patriarchal societies back home,³⁵ revealing new structural inequalities between the former socialist countries and Western democracies.
- 31 While these forms of othering could be attributed to national stereotypes, their ranging across a diversity of countries, cultures, and languages indicates that their application extends beyond national borders. They also suggest that the whiteness granted to post-socialist immigrants is more fragmented and unstable than it initially appears. Especially after the Cold War, Western representations of immigrants from the former communist countries relied on an Orientalist discourse that had its source in the symbolic division between East and West within Europe. Building on Edward Said's *Orientalism*,³⁶ scholars such as Larry Wolff³⁷ and Maria Todorova³⁸ have shown how Western discourses have constructed Eastern Europe as a semi-peripheral, semi-Oriental part of Europe. The post-socialist processes of European and transatlantic integration inscribed the Eastern European countries in a progressivist paradigm that cast them as "reformable and eventually subject to European assimilation yet always with an ineradicable sense of difference."³⁹ This discourse found fertile ground in the United States, where the Cold War rhetoric had already transformed Russia and its allies into the ultimate Other of Western democracy and capitalism.
- 32 In this context, filmmakers from post-socialist and post-Soviet countries have a crucial role to play in addressing the phenomenon of migration from post-socialist Europe to the United States and in proposing a critical discourse on Western imaginaries.

Russian-American director Kirill Mikhanovsky portrayed the experience of post-socialist immigrants in the US in his semi-autobiographical film *Give Me Liberty*, released in 2019. Set in Milwaukee, the film depicts the intermingling of Black, Russian-American, and disabled communities, revealing their “mutual illuminations,”⁴⁰ as well as their internal complexities and heterogeneity. With a diverse and international cast of professional and amateur actors, including Russian actors Maxim Stoyanov and Darya Ekamasova, and local talents like Russian-American Chris Galust, the film creates a sense of authenticity.

- 33 *Give Me Liberty* complicates the traditional portrayal of Russian immigrants in American films by casting them as visibly and socially white yet culturally marked as Other. Similarly to *Moscow on the Hudson*, the film draws parallels between Vic (Chris Galust), a Russian-American medical driver, and Tracy (Lauren Spencer), a wheelchair bound Black woman, and their respective families. However, instead of focusing on the white protagonist's social mobility, the Russian filmmaker chooses to converge the two plots in a final confrontation (1:34:40) between protesters and police forces following the deadly shooting of a 23-year-old African-American man.⁴¹ By foregrounding the Black Lives Matter movement and the fight for racial justice, the film gestures towards a criticism of the American dream, thus questioning the promise of liberty in a nation that has historically discriminated against Black Americans. In contrast to earlier portrayals, immigrant characters do not serve here to revitalize the American dream and do not aim to perform whiteness, revealing instead a complex, negotiated identity of Eastern Europeans in the United States. The association with blackness is not, in this case, exploited to emphasize a higher moral ground for white characters, but serves instead to highlight the minority position occupied by the post-socialist immigrants. *Give Me Liberty* exemplifies how interrogating the ideology of whiteness, which has traditionally shaped the narrative of immigrant integration in the US, can provide a distinctive voice for filmmakers of Eastern European descent in an era marked by the gradual disappearance of ethnicity.

Conclusion

- 34 American cinema has repeatedly found in the Eastern European ethnic or immigrant the right mix of familiarity and otherness that can at the same time represent a threat and inspire narratives of redeemability. Early film fiction constructed Eastern Europeanness as off-white, yet reformable, and used narratives of becoming white to reinforce the ideal of normative whiteness. The prevalence of assimilationism during the classical Hollywood era discouraged engagement with ethnic elements and foregrounded the new immigrants' adherence to whiteness against all-white backgrounds. As Eastern European characters increasingly became tokens of the white working-class in mainstream cinema, filmmaking stemming from ethnic and immigrant communities provided a subjective perspective on the experience of immigration that challenged old tropes of redeemability and unencumbered assimilation.
- 35 These representations shed light on the fluidity and contingency of whiteness as a category and have implications for understanding whiteness as performative and subject to change, a discursive construct or a “public fiction”⁴² (with very solid consequences) that maintains its power through its reproduction in media and popular

culture. Analyzing film representations of Eastern Europeans through these analytical lenses may shed light on the fluidity and contingency of whiteness, and thus contribute to the project of critical whiteness studies that seeks to dislodge it from its unnamed position of dominance.⁴³

- 36 In some recent films, associations between Eastern European and African-American communities are used to reclaim a minority position that is all the more highlighted by the unique othering of new post-socialist immigrants in mainstream media. Taken together, the scattered and subtle voices of openly ethnic filmmakers and actors have not had a lasting impact in American cinema. Yet, through their engagement with questions of whiteness and assimilation, they illustrate in new ways the changing ethnic and racial landscape in US society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration to the Secretary of Labor: Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1926. Washington: G.P.O, 1926.

Bakhtin, M. M. "The Problem of Speech Genres." In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, University of Texas Press. Austin, 1986.

Baldwin, James. "On Being 'White'... And Other Lies." In *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, edited by David R. Roediger, 177–80. New York: Knopf, 2010.

Bernardi, Daniel, Murray Pomerance, and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, eds. *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema.* Contemporary Approaches to Film and Media Series. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013.

Brewer, Mary F. *Staging Whiteness.* Wesleyan University Press, 2005.

Brodkin, Karen B. "How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America." In *Race and Racialization: Essential Readings.*, edited by Tania Das Gupta, Carl E. James, Chris Andersen, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, and Roger C. A. Maaka. Canadian Scholars' Press, 2018.

Dyer, Richard. *White.* New York: Routledge, 2017.

Farber, Stephen. "A Night in Hollywood, a Day in Ukraine." *The New York Times*, December 31, 2006, sec. Arts. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/31/movies/a-night-in-hollywood-a-day-in-ukraine.html>.

Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema.* SUNY Press, 2012.

Gans, Herbert J. "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America*." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 1979): 1–20. doi: 10.1080/01419870.1979.9993248.

Golab, Caroline. "Stellaaaaa.....!!! The Slavic Stereotype in American Film." In *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*, edited by Randall M. Miller, 135–55. Englewood, NJ: Jerome S. Ozer, 1980.

- Golden, Daniel Sembroff. "The Fate of La Famiglia: Italian Images in American Film." *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*. Englewood, NJ: Jerome S Ozer, 1980, 73–97.
- Hansen, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Kleinman, Sharon S., and Daniel G. McDonald. "Silent Film and the Socialization of American Immigrants: Lessons from an Old New Medium." *The Journal of American Culture* 23, no. 3 (September 2000): 79–87. doi: 10.1111/j.1537-4726.2000.2303_79.x.
- Michalikova, Nina. *New Eastern European Immigrants in the United States*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017. doi: 10.1057/978-1-137-57037-6.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Tandem Library, 1993.
- Napierkowski, Thomas J. "Does Anyone Know My Name? A History of Polish American Literature," *Polish American Studies* 62, no. 2 (2005).
- Nolan, Kay, and Julie Bosman. "Milwaukee Officer Is Acquitted in Killing of Sylville Smith." *The New York Times*, June 21, 2017, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/us/milwaukee-police-shooting-trial-protest.html>.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. Third edition. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.
- Orleck, Annelise. "Soviet Jews: The City's Newest Immigrants Transform New York Jewish Life." In *New Immigrants in New York*, edited by Nancy Foner, 111–40. Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. *The History of White People*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- Park, Yoosun, and Michael Reisch. "To 'Elevate, Humanize, Christianize, Americanize': Social Work, White Supremacy, and the Americanization Movement, 1880–1930." *Social Service Review* 96, no. 4 (December 2022): 779–835. doi: 10.1086/722095.
- Quart, Leonard. "The Deer Hunter: The Superman in Vietnam." *Dittmar and Michaud*, 1990, 159–68.
- Roediger, David R. *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History*. Verso, 1994.
- Roediger, David R. *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.
- Ross, Edward Alsworth. *The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People*. Century Company, 1914.
- Sadowski-Smith, Claudia. *The New Immigrant Whiteness: Race, Neoliberalism, and Post-Soviet Migration to the United States*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Schulman, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*. Simon and Schuster, 2001.
- Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.

- Stam, Robert. "Bakhtin, Polyphony, and Ethnic/Racial Representation." *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, 1991, 251–76.
- Tlostanova, Madina. *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-Existence*. Springer International Publishing, 2017.
- Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*. Updated Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Wolff, Larry. *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Woll, Allen L., and Arthur Miller. *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Television: Historical Essays and Bibliography*. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987.
- Wtulich, Josephine. *American Xenophobia and the Slav Immigrant: A Living Legacy of Mind and Spirit*. Boulder: East European Monographs, 1994.

APPENDIXES

Filmography

- Abadie, Alfred C., director. *Emigrants Landing at Ellis Island*. Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903.
- Abadie, Alfred C., director. *Move On*. Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903.
- Arrival of Immigrants, Ellis Island*. American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1906.
- Cabanne, Christy, director. *Sold for Marriage*. Fine Arts Film Company, 1916.
- Cimino, Michael, director. *The Deer Hunter*. EMI Films, Universal Pictures, 1979.
- Connelly, Theresa, director. *Polish Wedding*. Addis Wechsler Pictures, Lakeshore Entertainment, 1998.
- Curtiz, Michael, director. *Black Fury*. First National Pictures, 1935.
- Ferland, Guy, director. *Telling Lies in America*. Banner Entertainment, Ben Myron Productions, Kuzui Enterprises., 1997.
- Gray, James, director. *Armageddon Time*. RT Features, MadRiver Pictures, Keep Your Head, 2022.
- Gray, James, director. *Little Odessa*. Fine Line Features, Live Entertainment, New Line Cinema, 1995.
- Gray, James, director. *The Immigrant*. Worldview Entertainment, Keep Your Head, Kingsgate Films, 2014.
- Gregory, Carl, director. *An American in the Making*. Thanhouser Film Corporation, 1913.
- Guy-Blaché, Alice, director. *Making an American Citizen*. Solax Film Company, 1912.
- Kazan, Elia, director. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Charles K. Feldman Group, Warner Bros., 1951.
- Levinson, Barry, director. *Avalon*. TriStar Pictures, Baltimore Pictures, 1990.
- Mayo, Archie, director. *Black Legion*. Warner Bros., 1937.

Mazursky, Paul, director. *Moscow on the Hudson*. Columbia Pictures, Bavaria Film, Delphi Premier Productions, 1984.

Mikhanovsky, Kirill, director. *Give Me Liberty*. Give Me Liberty, Flux Capacitor Studios, Give Me Liberty Mfg., 2019.

Porter, Edwin S. *New York City "Ghetto" Fish Market*. Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903.

Rapper, Irving, director. *Anna Lucasta*. Security Pictures, 1949.

Schrader, Paul, director. *Blue Collar*. Crime, Drama. TAT Communications Company, 1978.

Vidor, King, director. *An American Romance*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1945.

Vidor, King, director. *The Wedding Night*. The Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1935.

NOTES

1. James Baldwin, "On Being 'White'... And Other Lies," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Knopf, 2010), 178.

2. Representing 32% of the total immigration between 1899 and 1926, the category of Central and Eastern European immigrants included the following ethnicities and nationalities: Hebrew (10%), Polish (8%), Hungarian (2.7%), Croatian and Slovenian (2.7%), Ruthenian (1.5%), Lithuanian (1.5%), Russian, Slovak, Bohemian and Moravian (Czech), Bulgarian, Serbian, Montenegrin, Romanian, Dalmatian, Bosnian, and Herzegovinian. Data collected from the *Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration to the Secretary of Labor: Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1926* (Washington: G.P.O, 1926), 182–83.

3. For the purpose of this article, the terms "whiteness" and "race" denote socially-constructed categories that structure access to power and privilege within the historical and socio-political context of the USA. Whiteness has historically constituted itself as a dominant norm, defined against cultural representations of blackness and non-white identities: Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Third edition (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

4. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Tandem Library, 1993), 47–48.

5. During the silent era, cinema has proved a powerful medium for socializing and "Americanizing" the new immigrant populations, who constituted a significant part of nickelodeon audiences: Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 68; Sharon S. Kleinman and Daniel G. McDonald, "Silent Film and the Socialization of American Immigrants: Lessons from an Old New Medium," *The Journal of American Culture* 23, no. 3 (September 2000): 83.

6. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), chap. "Nickel Madness"; Daniel Bernardi, Murray Pomerance, and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, eds., *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema*. Contemporary Approaches to Film and Media Series (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013).

7. David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (Verso, 1994), 189.

8. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema* (SUNY Press, 2012), 54.
9. For instance, Edward Ross, a reputable sociologist at the University of Wisconsin, wrote in 1914 that “Slavs reveal the propensities of a rude, undeveloped people of undisciplined primitive passions.” Edward Alsworth Ross, *The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People* (Century Company, 1914), 129.
10. Yoosun Park and Michael Reisch, “To ‘Elevate, Humanize, Christianize, Americanize’: Social Work, White Supremacy, and the Americanization Movement, 1880–1930,” *Social Service Review* 96, no. 4 (December 2022): 790, doi: 10.1086/722095.
11. The Act set quotas for immigration based on the foreign-born population of the 1890 census, which favored earlier Northern European immigrants and discriminated against Southern and Eastern European immigrants.
12. Caroline Golab, “Stellaaaaa.....!!! The Slavic Stereotype in American Film,” in *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*, ed. Randall M. Miller (Englewood, NJ: Jerome S. Ozer, 1980), 138.
13. David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), chap. “Guineas, Greasers, and Hunkies”.
14. Josephine Wtulich, *American Xenophobia and the Slav Immigrant: A Living Legacy of Mind and Spirit* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1994), 14–16.
15. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*.
16. Thomas J. Napierkowski, “Does Anyone Know My Name? A History of Polish American Literature,” *Polish American Studies* 62, no. 2 (2005): 25.
17. Mary F. Brewer, *Staging Whiteness* (Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 95.
18. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 383.
19. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.
20. Karen B. Brodtkin, “How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America,” in *Race and Racialization: Essential Readings.*, ed. Tania Das Gupta et al. (Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2018), 579.
21. Daniel Sembroff Golden, “The Fate of La Famiglia: Italian Images in American Film,” *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*. Englewood, NJ: Jerome S Ozer, 1980, 73.
22. Allen L. Woll and Arthur Miller, *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Television: Historical Essays and Bibliography* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), 210.
23. Leonard Quart, “The Deer Hunter: The Superman in Vietnam,” *Dittmar and Michaud*, 1990, 166.
24. Herbert J. Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America*,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 1979): 1–20, doi: 10.1080/01419870.1979.9993248.
25. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 74.
26. Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Simon and Schuster, 2001), 83.
27. Stephen Farber, “A Night in Hollywood, a Day in Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/31/movies/a-night-in-hollywood-a-day-in-ukraine.html>.
28. Gray’s grandparents from both sides emigrated from eastern Galicia, a historical region that is now divided between Poland and Ukraine.
29. A historically Jewish neighborhood, Brighton Beach came to be known as “Little Odessa” following an important influx of Soviet Jewish refugees in the 1970s, the majority of whom were Ukrainian. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian-speaking enclave became

associated with the Russian mafia: Annelise Orleck, "Soviet Jews: The City's Newest Immigrants Transform New York Jewish Life," in *New Immigrants in New York*, ed. Nancy Foner (Columbia University Press, 2001), 111.

30. Nina Michalikova, *New Eastern European Immigrants in the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017), 32, doi: 10.1057/978-1-137-57037-6.

31. Claudia Sadowski-Smith, *The New Immigrant Whiteness: Race, Neoliberalism, and Post-Soviet Migration to the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 6.

32. For instance, the pro-communist terrorist leader Ivan Korshunov (Gary Oldman) in *Air Force One* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1997), the dangerous Russian oligarch Ivan Tretiak (Rade Šerbedžija) in *The Saint* (Phillip Noyce, 1997), the main antagonist in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke), and the crime lord Oleg Malankov (Sam Spruell) in *Taken 3* (Olivier Megaton, 2014).

33. Andrei Lugov (Gregory Hlady) in the comedy *Spinning Boris* (Roger Spottiswoode, 2003), Boris Volkov (Pasha Lychnikoff) in *Siberia* (Matthew Ross, 2018), or Viggo Tarasov (Michael Nyqvist) in the first installment of *John Wick* (Chad Stahelski, 2014).

34. For example, the Ukrainian Mashkov (Olek Krupa) in *The Italian Job* (F. Gary Gray, 2003), the Russian Boris "The Blade" Yurinov in *Snatch* (Guy Ritchie, 2000), the Czech Emil Slovak (Karel Roden) in *15 Minutes* (John Herzfeld, 2001), or the terrible Nikolai Itchenko (Marton Csokas) in *The Equalizer* (Antoine Fuqua, 2014).

35. See, for example, the roles of Nadia (Nicole Kidman) in *Birthday Girl* (Jez Butterworth, 2001), Laura (Dina Korzun), the "trophy wife" in *Forty Shades of Blue* (Ira Sachs, 2005) and Nina (Oksana Orlan), the Russian mail-order bride in the horror film *The Russian Bride* (Michael S. Ojeda, 2019). In the comedy *St. Vincent* (Theodore Melfi, 2014), Naomi Watts plays a Russian escort, Daka Paramova.

36. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

37. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).

38. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Updated Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

39. Madina Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-Existence* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 3.

40. M. M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, University of Texas Press (Austin, 1986) quoted in Robert Stam, "Bakhtin, Polyphony, and Ethnic/Racial Representation," *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, 1991, 269.

41. Kay Nolan and Julie Bosman, "Milwaukee Officer Is Acquitted in Killing of Sylville Smith," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2017, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/us/milwaukee-police-shooting-trial-protest.html>.

42. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 11.

43. Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

ABSTRACTS

Historically, the representations of immigrants and ethnic minorities from Eastern Europe in American cinema have been shaped by perspectives external to their own communities. From the

“hunkies” of the first half of the 20th century to the working-class heroes of the Vietnam War and the political immigrants of the (post-)Cold War era, the film industry has recorded the gradual integration of Eastern European immigrants into “white” American society. As far as self-representation is concerned, distinctive voices stemming from Eastern European communities have generally been associated with the white ethnic revival cycle of films, marked by a nostalgic return to ethnic identities in an era of “symbolic ethnicity.” However, a new generation of filmmakers from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics could bring about a renewed perspective, as demonstrated by James Gray, of Jewish-Russian descent, and Kirill Mikhanovsky, who immigrated from Russia in the 1990s. This article suggests that Eastern European self-representations may contribute to current understandings of assimilation and whiteness in American cinema in subtle, yet powerful ways.

INDEX

Keywords: Eastern Europeans, immigration, whiteness, ethnicity, self-representation

AUTHOR

FLAVIA CIONTU

 IDREF : <https://idref.fr/290536928>

Flavia Ciontu is a doctoral researcher at the University of Paris 8. She holds a Master’s degree in American Studies from the University of Bucharest and is currently completing her PhD thesis titled *Figures of Otherness: Representations of Eastern Europeans and Russians in American Cinema and Television 1990–2020*, under the supervision of Professor Anne Crémieux. Her work adopts a transdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from cultural studies, film studies, intersectionality, and critical whiteness studies. It examines how nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual identities intersect in the representation and reception of Eastern European and Russian characters in contemporary American film and television.