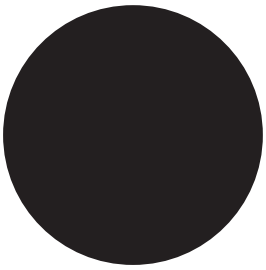

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Monika Borys

Polish *Bayer*. Images of Disco Polo in the 1990s

Translated by Jan Szelągiewicz

The Masses are Downtown

> Essentially, we should have called this show "tolerance." The word itself, however, is reserved for higher purposes. We simply tolerate the tastes of our audience and we do not seek to argue with them. This is our job and the job of the audience is to attend shows like ours, which we heartily encourage them to.

The passage above is a quote from backstage at the First Gala of Popular and Street Music on February 29, 1992, by Krzysztof Jaślar, the director of the event. Held at the Congress Hall in the Palace of Culture and Science, the Gala may be viewed as the culmination of the first chapter in the story of disco polo[1]. This chapter had witnessed disco polo's ascent from village discos and informal markets to the biggest concert halls of the Polish capital. I would even go so far as to claim that it was one of the most important cultural events of the 1990s. Culture was released from the yoke of central planning and the previously dominant social structure, and this resulted in the commercialization and increased visibility of disco polo, a genre whose roots can be found in the music of the interwar period.[2] The acknowledgement and approval of low culture and mass tastes (even if the acknowledgement was ironic, campy or, to put it more precisely, a marketing strategy toying with kitsch), previously mostly sequestered in the more rural areas of the country, coupled with the extension of the free market into the public sphere anticipated future quarrels over "Polish tastes" in a society undergoing democratic transformation. Disco polo also revealed a post-Communist incarnation of the chronic culture wars which have marked Polish history, this time around pitching intellectuals against disco polo fans. With this background in mind, analysis of the imagery produced by this particular field of culture as well as of the performative

strategies of disco polo artists will facilitate a closer examination of broader aesthetic and social transformations that took place in the 1990s.

Finale of the First Gala of Popular and Street Music, Congress Hall, Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, 1992

Jarosław Kukulski served as the musical director for the Gala, financial backing was provided by Sławomir Skręta, the owner of Blue Star - the first disco polo-oriented music label. Janusz Weiss, whose popularity was to soar just a year later as he became the host of a popular game show called *Miliard w rozumie* [*A Billion Dollar Mind*], was the event's MC. Coverage of the Gala was provided by Polish Television camera crews and broadcast by TVP 1, the main state-owned TV channel in Poland. Later it was released on VHS; vendors sold mixtapes featuring songs performed that night. Performances included Atlantis, Crazy Boys, Chorus, Irys, Fanatic, Jacek Skubikowski, the band Dystans (with Renata Dąbkowska still on vocals - shortly after the Gala she left to pursue a career in mainstream pop), and kids lip-syncing to Andrzej Cierniewski's *W gorącym słońcu Casablanki* [*In the Warm Sun of Casablanca*]. The concert closed with Top One's rendition of their hit song *Ciao Italia*, a final reminder of the genre's cosmopolitan roots and the legacy of *italo disco* which inspired its Polish counterpart.

The repertoire of the concert was an excellent reflection of the condition of the genre in the early 90s - on one hand clearly marked with Western disco influences, evident primarily in the work of Top One. On the other hand, the music was rich in local context and familiar, folksy forms, both constitutive elements of the genre's aesthetic. The band Chorus performed their rather festive declarations of love entitled *Angelina* and *Cyganeczka Zosia* [*Zosia the Little Gypsy*]; the frontman of Irys wore a gold and red kontusz (a split-sleeved overcoat worn by Polish nobles) and crooned about white swans; the Crazy Boys performed their maudlin ballad *Dla mamy blues* [*Blues For Ma*], Fanatic presented their sentimental *Rozstanie* [*Breaking Up*] while the Dystans *chanteuse* sang the praises of the American Dream in *Kalifornia* ("where there is no rain, bananas pour down from the sky, people have hearts of gold, and the rivers run with honey"). Naturally, the concert in the Congress Hall would not be complete without two classics of the disco polo scene: *Biały miś* [*White Teddy Bear*] and - originally intended to be a pastiche of the genre - *Mydełko Fa*,[3] performed using playback tapes.

Before 1992, mass audiences had bought disco polo tapes from tarpaulin stalls, set out on the pavement, or from the so-called "jaws" – mobile stalls resembling open jaws when open for business - that lined the bazaars below the Palace of Culture and Science. and these fans had gone out to country dance parties in fire stations and whooped it up in small town dance halls. Now they arrived in the very heart of the capital's entertainment industry. The meaning that the venue had for both the Gala and the history of the genre itself could be gleaned from the festive set designs that Bronisław Modrzejewski (erstwhile set designer of the another cult venue, the Hybrydy, and originator of Warsaw's Bal Gałganiarzy, a masquerade ball for students of the Academy of Fine Arts) designed for the event. At centre-stage stood an illuminated mock-up of the Palace of Culture made from paper, a large cardboard crescent moon and sun hidden behind clouds hanging on both its sides, and a deer with magnificent antlers below it. The set design changed as the Gala went on: additional props appeared, including a map of Poland that accompanied the performance of *W gorącym słońcu Casablanki* (during which Janusz Weiss kept repeating, somewhat sardonically, a sing-song incantation: "Casablanca is Poland, Poland is Casablanca") or a blown-up replica of the 20 000 złoty bill with the likeness of Maria Skłodowska-Curie and suspended over the heads of the band Irys as they performed their hit song *Twoja piękna twarz* [*Your Beautiful Face*]. The kitschy, fête-like scenography deflated the overbearing, monumental character of the Congress Hall, while symbols and ornaments employed by the creative staff, like the Palace of Culture and old banknotes, were to become recurring motifs in early disco polo music videos.

In February 1992, the Congress Hall became a lens which focused all the social and aesthetic mechanisms that characterized and determined the future condition of the genre. Mass enthusiasm for disco polo was growing and the marketing mechanisms developed in response, there were attempts at establishing the identity of the music driven by the dialectics of tradition and modernity; there was kitsch that was attractive to some, and too much for others; there was the failed pastiche revealing the impossibility of maintaining one's distance from the phenomenon and finally the commentary of the *intelligentsia*, both critical and supportive, overshadowing it all.

The Gala is also a perverse image, one that differs greatly from the prevailing way in which the 'lower classes' were depicted in the early 1990s. The "Polish

countryside" which we tend to consider a victim of transformation, the same Poland we think of as passive and "obstructive," experiences with the Gala a therapeutic carnival, a feast of non-committal entertainment in the midst of a rather long period of austerity. Notions of the backward countryside were informed primarily by the concept of *Homo Sovieticus* - a term coined and promoted by free-market liberals, thereby labelling some individuals as resistant to transformation due to their "Soviet mentality."[4] On the one hand, this vision rightly points out the problems of economic exclusion, but on the other hand it mistakenly views them apart from their social relationships. Teresa Bogucka tread a similar path in her writings about televised images of the profane that expand an array of representations and narratives "normalizing" post-transformation society.[5] As Bogucka sees it, by giving a voice to social fears and discontent, television after 1989 became a channel fueling the terror of "the simpleton," rather than being an instrument of democracy. This paternalistic interpretation claims that "populist," socially-engaged TV shows aimed at the 'lower classes' (the author writes mostly about "peoples" and "masses," farmers and blue-collar workers who took to the streets in protest in the 90s) like *Sprawa dla reportera* [*Case for a Reporter*] and *Interpelacje* [*Interpellations*], or documentaries like Ewa Borzęcka's *Arizona* (1997), these programs make social exclusion hyper-visible, rather than hiding it. They are "unholy" images as they strike at the sacrum of the public sphere which is supposed to be ruled by competition and individualism. As such, they are deemed by Bogucka as unworthy of consumption – their purported "obscenity" is an affront to the neoliberal public sphere.

Album cover, Korona, 1994

That's why we can claim that the imagery accompanying disco polo in the 90s went against the widely accepted portrayal of *Homo Sovieticus* as apathetic losers of the transformation period. In the history of disco polo, the Polish countryside seems to be a beast of a wholly different nature: it experiences a nearly meteoric rise, especially in financial terms. In smaller towns, an entire infrastructure was built to serve the disco polo industry. Marcin Kącki described an entire network of discos in the Podlasie region, often established illegally in buildings of former collective farms and empty barns which, intentionally, did not appear to be

all that successful at first sight: "From the outside? Keep out. From the inside? Nobody's leaving."[6] Who, then, is the disco polo artist if not the first Polish self-made man?

The Gala was the first ever event dedicated to disco polo to achieve such a high degree of "visibility" in the public sphere and to be recorded by public television. It is hard to agree, therefore, with the assertion that images of disco polo were absent from the public sphere; their reach, however, was limited. They appeared sporadically on public television - for example, in 1995 in campaign advertising for Waldemar Pawlak and Aleksander Kwaśniewski and in 1996 during the New Year's Eve broadcast. Their primary channel of distribution, however, was the private TV station Polsat.[7] This channel broadcast the first ever TV show devoted to disco polo: *Disco Relax* was on the air from December 1994 to 2002 every Sunday morning. It was created by Tomasz Samborski, a musician who was to go on to become a disco polo producer. Samborski hosted Disco Relax with Małgorzata Werner. The show featured interviews with artists and a presentation of the latest releases, but the biggest attraction by far were the weekly charts. Both *Disco Relax* and *Disco Polo Live*, another Polsat show launched two years later, were incredible incentives for disco polo acts to produce music videos.

Album cover, Tropical, 1992

Although the genre was explored in many publications,[8] the visual aspect of disco polo was never of any significant interest to researchers. One reason for this may be the social stigma and shame associated with that particular area of Polish culture – viewing the entire the genre as kitsch. Another reason may be the belief that the music video is derivative of the musical and lyrical aspects of the song and, thus, less important. Meanwhile, the images of disco polo - to a no lesser degree than the music itself - are an instrument of prosecuting novel identity games for Poles. Their emergence turned out to be crucial for the genre's survival on the market, whereas the analysis of mechanisms behind their production and reception allows us to understand the class aspect of the public sphere as it existed in the 1990s.

Disco polo music videos from the 1990s do not share either a single narrative or a set of similar ideas. A single episode of *Disco Relax*[9] is enough to see that the

collection of these images is utterly hybrid in nature, although surely limited to some extent. The show will feature completely amateur attempts edited with the same Betacam cameras that their operators would later use to shoot footage at weddings, as well as fully polished videos created by film and TV production professionals who would often partner with disco polo stars. The aesthetics of the genre were, above all, inclusive: they allowed amateurish experiments using very primitive computer graphics and efforts at chroma key compositing some of the videos resembled short feature films rather than just brief clips set to music, but the overwhelming majority of the videos consisted of footage captured at live shows.

Ornament or Bayer

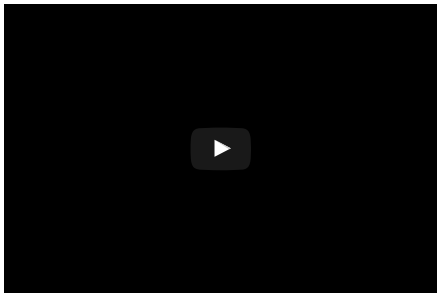
Let's start with fantasies closely linked with Polish realities even though they invoke imagery that could mostly be considered foreign. The most frequently used backdrop for all sorts of confessions, dilemmas, and trysts that disco polo artists sang about were "warm-weather countries". These countries were sometimes invoked in music videos by means of postcards or photographs from holiday brochures; quite often, however, the bands managed to capture footage for their music videos in the same resorts that were popular with Poles back then (e.g. *Greckie noce* [*Greek Nights*] by Akropolis, *Na Miami* [*Towards Miami*] by As, *Psotny wiatr* [*Tricky Wind*] by Akcent, *Złota plaża* [*Golden Beach*] by Milano, and *Wracaj do mojego świata* [*Come Back to My World*]bySkaner). The ever growing aspirations of the provinces reached far beyond Warsaw - the objective was to skilfully operate on the basis of provincial identity and materialize fantasies not only of the West, but of the remotest reaches of the globe. This is why multiple bands had not only English-sounding names, but names that most Poles would associate with warmer climes including Milano, tropical countries, the Bahamas, and 'exotic places'. It was then that the palm tree became a staple of our indigenous field of imagination, losing some of its exotic character in the process. It appeared on parking lots of "Chłopskie Jadło" inns ["Rustic Eatery," a chain of restaurants serving traditional Polish cuisine], in the gardens of "Malibu" hotels (right next to the obligatory leprechauns), Tomasz Samborski and Małgorzata Werner hosted *Disco Relax* with palm fronds chroma keyed into the background behind them, while Nina Terentiew's celebrity-studded talk show was called *Bezludna wyspa* [*Desert Island*]. As with photographic wallpaper, Polish "tropicalisms" were a permanent element of the disco polo aesthetic. Photos of lead singers amateurishly pasted into pictures of the

seaside with golden beaches ringed by palm trees – these were often featured on the covers of albums that went into mass distribution (bands like Bahamas, Korony, and Tropical all had album covers like that). In the music video for the Big Dance song *Bananowy sen* [*Banana Dream*, 1997], the grey-tinted mundane reality depicted on black-and-white photographs becomes "a colourful world of coconuts and dates." In this fantasy, a hotel bowling alley and a swimming pool overstuffed with potted plants played the role of the exotic resort, and the perceptible lack of sophistication was neutralized with bits of footage from personal holiday videos.

These visuals realized a utopia – a remote, imaginary and mythologized reality that turned into a mirage luring audiences yearning for an immediate change in their own impoverished landscapes. Exotic mirages functioned in disco polo as signifiers of "worldliness," proof of dreams becoming reality before the very eyes of Poles, but they never spurred confrontation with what is alien or other. They performed a role similar to the landscape seen from the resort hotel windows which, though signifying the allure of otherness, is essentially divorced from the context of the surroundings that we're taking in.

Exotic elements were also an important part of the act for Magdalena Pańkowska, one of the greatest stars of the disco polo scene, also known as Shazza (the pseudonym was inspired by the name of an Egyptian goddess). Her songs were accompanied by music videos with unprecedented production elements, featuring narratives that thematically often went beyond the lyrical contents of the songs (which primarily revolved around simple love stories). Her videos employed a much broader range of means of expression than the amateur productions released around that time. One of the most striking examples of disco polo culture referencing history or current political events was the music video for Shazza's 1995 hit *Miłość i zdrada* [*Love and Betrayal*], whose narrative revolves around currency denominations. Although the poetics of the lyrics, authored by Tomasz Samborski, are not that different from all the other banal and uncomplicated songs about emotional exaltation and romantic disappointments ("be my suffering, be my heart's memory, like love and betrayal, like finished business,") the somewhat surreal music video infuses it with an unexpected historical surfeit – a short summary of the 1995 monetary reform. In the video, the singer dances with actors dressed up as the characters whose faces adorned the banknotes that were being pulled from circulation including Mikołaj Kopernik, Fryderyk Chopin, Maria

Skłodowska-Curie, Stanisław Moniuszko, Władysław Reymont, Stanisław Wyspiański, and Ludwik Waryński, whom she eventually abandons for the majestic King Władysław Jagiełło - the face of the newly minted 100 złoty bill. The video can be considered a symbolic attempt (even though it goes way beyond any acceptable levels of poignancy and ridiculousness) at a reckoning with the old system embodied in the clip by sinister shoeless figures marching out of the tax authority offices holding briefcases filled with money. The ostensibly apolitical narrative about love and betrayal is suddenly intertwined with a frequently satirical story about the coercive transformation establishing a new social and political order, portrayed in the context of a classic clash of good and evil.



The music videos for Magdalena Pańkowska were written and directed by Antoni Kopff-a musician, lyricist (who wrote for Olga Lipińska's variety show, for Andrzej Zaucha, and Anna Jantar), musical and television producer. In 1995, Kopff shot the music video for Shazza's *Egipskie noce* [*Egyptian Nights*], a story about a romantic affair between a temple priestess and Osiris himself. The video features interiors arranged to resemble an Egyptian temple, the realm of the master of the netherworlds guarded by half-naked servants holding burning torches. The film set also included a TV that showed the likenesses of other Egyptian deities on a loop. The rendezvous of the priestess and the god is a play of sexuality and power. By revealing the half-naked body of Osiris, the erotic "suppresses" male power and authority. However, despite her confusion and disorientation ("don't know where I'm coming from, don't know who I am"), Shazza's character does not relinquish any of her own power of priestess even after surrendering herself to the sovereign ("I'm already yours").

The transformations of a world in the throes of globalization were reflected in the aesthetic of disco polo. The essence of the yearning for the West (but also for the East as a permanent object of western, orientalising fantasies about, among others, sexual freedom) lay not only in effective imitation-a desire to conceal or negate one's own identity-but in clothing the Polish form in a costume; an ornament, a bayer [the Polish verb "bajerować" can be translated roughly as "to smooth-talk someone"– ed. note], so to speak (to follow the poetics of disco polo) which is supposed to enchant its own provincial nature without disturbing the very

core of local, native values. The term *bayer* also provides a fitting description of the performative strategy of a disco polo artist – it encompasses both imitation (substituting "y" for "j" is supposed to enthrall Polish reality – "bayer full" has a worldlier air than its crude Polish counterpart) and dissimulation, as well as certain matrimonial contexts and selling goods on the bazaar (running scams). In this case, the term would describe a way to impress someone, vain posturing. Engaging "in bayer", therefore, involves both seduction as well as the display of one's own perfection; it is overstated, conceited, and employs gadgetry; it's not supposed to lead to success but is supposed to flaunt the ostensible fruit of success. Even if, originally, the bayer is brought about by some sort of personal deficiency, that fact can never be revealed.

Music video for Shazza's song *Egipskie noce* [Egyptian Nights], directed by Antoni Kopff, 1995

The sources of allusions to exotic lands can be traced back to the Western colonial imaginaryon one hand, and the introduction of the free market on the other, with the latter implying unrestricted travel and the imperative of catching up with the rest of the world. However, political and economic transformations weren't the only impulses to inspire these references. Dreams of *pueblos*, Hawaii, and Cuba were very popular in the Communist period in Poland, and could be found if not elsewhere in the work of Tercet Egzotyczny [The Exotic Trio] and Violetta Villas. Back then these fantasies were a reaction to the grim reality of the People's Republic of Poland, a testament to an imagination unbowed (by poverty), and an expression of exuberant ardor. In *Hawaikum. W poszukiwaniu istoty piękna* [*Hawaikum. In Search of the Essence of Beauty*] Dariusz Czaja writes about the power and timeless symbolism of these songs from the 1960s: "The tropical location – never sad, always ecstatically happy – conjured up in these works were manufactured out of reusable prefabricated materials."[10] Disco polo artists followed in a similar vein, transplanting their trite love stories into exotic locales. We can even say that these images of warmer countries, although braced by nostalgic fantasies (yearning for that which we associate with freedom) were supposed to visualize the practices of the emerging Polish middle class for whom Greece, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt were quickly becoming aspirational travel destinations. They're not images of a world destined for oblivion, but rather postcards from a coveted future. To those who could not afford to travel to these

exotic destinations, disco polo artists provided highly therapeutic visuals.

Polo-therapy

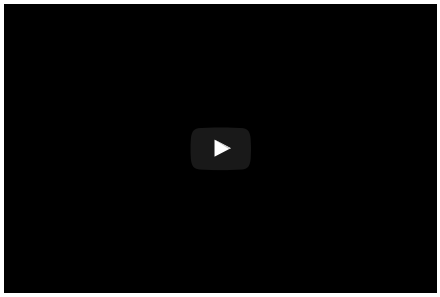
In 1996, a terrible row broke out in the *Tygodnik Powszechny* over the state of Polish culture in the 1990s. The dispute was brought on by Tadeusz Sobolewski whose essay "Pusta plaża (Nowy wspaniały świat disco polo)" ["The Empty Beach (The Brave New World of Disco Polo)"] railed against the inexorable machinery of popular culture of which disco polo was supposed to be the worst symptom. Not without a noticeable trace of nostalgia, the film critic juxtaposed this "supermarket culture" with the artistic output of the People's Republic of Poland – Sobolewski claimed that the poetry and movies produced in Poland under Communist rule were driven by a deep-seated desire for freedom (and instilled that drive in society), and thus fulfilled the Romantic need for utopia. In Sobolewski's interpretation, the cinema of the 1970s – movies by Kieślowski, Wajda, Kawalerowicz, and Zannussi – were unique vehicles imbued with the power to transport the viewer into a "genuinely real" world, the world of harmony. As a symbol of modernity, disco polo evoked among critics a terrible longing for the People's Republic. Following Svetlana Boym's interpretation, they are nostalgic not for a specific place, but rather for a specific period.[11] According to Sobolewski, the art of bygone years was a device to manufacture utopias necessary for survival. In the light of this vision, disco polo becomes nothing more than a synonym for subjugation and is misinterpreted as the direct opposite of dreams:

When utopia becomes in demand (as no republican order can truly survive without it), we are thereby precluded from reaching it. It becomes impossible to produce images that would correspond to dreams. We lack reflection, a mirror for our internal experiences. And disco polo lurks in every nook and cranny, ready to assume the position vacated by art.[12]

Sobolewski's opinion of disco polo was part of a broader discussion that started in the early 1990s which was supposed to definitively establish the position of intellectuals in the new democratic society.[13] Contrary to those who claimed that it was time for the intelligentsia to either fade away or transform into the middle class, Sobolewski tried very hard to bolster and isolate its identity, placing himself in opposition to what he considered base and kitsch. In line with the traditional definition of kitsch, here disco polo is also considered *non-art* – those who do not

accept it are "living on reservations making up something akin to the zone in *Stalker*,"[14] isolating themselves (or being isolated?) like the writers living on the islands that Miłosz wrote about in the early 1990s. Tomasz Zarycki claimed that such a forceful response from intellectuals to the emergence of disco polo, going as far as limiting the presence of the genre in the public sphere, stemmed from the overlong reign of the "intellectual doxa," that is the hegemonic cultural imaginarium of the Polish intelligentsia naturalized within the collective imagination of society, which shaped the aesthetic sphere and determined what is and what isn't the norm.[15]

Sobolewski fails to notice, however, that the relationship between the values created by disco polo and the realities of post-Communist systemic transformation is very similar to the one between Kieślowski's films, for example, and the realities of the People's Republic of Poland. His analysis offers no diagnosis of the origins of the crisis of values and aesthetic chaos, so emblematic of that period, a diagnosis that would take into consideration the widespread social inequalities that dictated the position of individuals within the social hierarchy including their access to culture. Regardless how difficult it may seem to accept the values and cultural practices offered by disco polo, the genre is not, *pace* Sobolewski, just an empty vessel devoid of meaning or just a background soundtrack to the social and political changes that swept the country. It is rather both a result of and a reaction to the economic and cultural transformations or "polo-therapy,"[16] to use the term coined by Piotr Bratkowski, offering a sort of language that reinforces social cohesion. This narrative incites no pushback against sweeping capitalist changes (also because the genre itself is a product of the transformation). It eagerly takes advantage of newly established market privileges, fantasizes about unrestricted consumption, but – under the guise of this new, imitative form – assumes a very protectionist stance towards traditional values with love, country, and family highest in the hierarchy.



It is no coincidence, therefore, that a Bayer Full song (which was described as having the potential to become a new national anthem[17]) can be accompanied by an array of images arranged to resemble an abridged history of the country – replete with names of great Poles, portrayals of great suffering, emigration and

returning to the motherland. In the music video for their hit song *Wszyscy Polacy to jedna rodzina* [*All Poles Are One Big Family*], footage of crowds holding hands and swaying to the rhythm of the song is interspersed with clips of other Polish "multitudes" in the throes of patriotic or religious fervour (people listening to the pope, walking in pilgrimage, gathered on a stadium for a game, or being dispersed by the police), images of body-builders flexing their huge muscles and scenes featuring Bolesław Bierut, Władysław Gomułka, Edward Gierek, Pope John Paul II, and the 1989 Round Table Talks. The compilation is concluded with images of a ship full of migrants setting sail, an aircraft taking off and picturesque footage of America. Although the amateurish composition comprises pictures with uncertain status (it's difficult to establish where some of the portrayed events took place), it produces a standard pop vision of history, crammed with heroism and martyrdom, culminating in the ultimate reconnection of brothers and sisters scattered across the globe ("if you had to leave Poland, we'll recognize one another easily even after all these years," goes the Bayer Full song).

This seems to be a good place to bring up the very interesting analysis of Anna Kowalczyk in which she claims that, although obviously inspired by Western music, the genre has its origins in street music of the 1920s and the music of rural amateur musicians performing at weddings and christening parties during the early years of the Communist era in Poland (a genre very different from what was back then officially considered folk music).[18] The nostalgic, motherland-worshipping music produced by Polish bands in the United States (including Polskie Orły [Polish Eagles], Mały Władzio [Little Władzio, Władzio being a diminutive of Władysław], Biało-Czerwoni [The White and Reds], Bobby Vinton), shipped to Poland from overseas in the form of flexi discs and circulated outside of official distribution channels, was also a huge influence on the sound of the genre. The band Top One drew inspiration from the *oeuvre* of Białe Orły to record its first album entitled *Biały miś* [*White Teddy Bear*], clearly influenced by the sounds of italo disco. After 1989, however, disco polo bands achieved considerable popularity among émigré audiences and started touring abroad to play cities with the biggest concentrations of Polish immigrants.

Bayer Full employed essential attributes of "Polish-ness" in other music videos as well. These attributes primarily accompany songs about community – one good example is the video for *Polski duch* [*Polish Spirit*] ("he's still drinking moonshine, still

Music video for the song *This is not the USA* by Boys, directed by Marek Sierocki, 1993. The singers are sitting on a sculpture located in front of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw

drinking that cognac,") featuring the band and a handful of dancers wearing traditional Goral attire. In later parts of the video, the party moves into the cabin where amid luxurious (for a Goral cabin) interiors, men in white shirts are sitting at tables heavy with food and drink, the fireplace roaring in the background, and feasting together with the band's singer. Close-ups of blazing flames, glasses filled to the brim ("pour it, pour it, just don't overdo it"), and Świerzyński crooning about alcohol being the essence of life ("spirits are our lifeblood") are interspersed with footage of men dancing with shepherd's axes around a huge bonfire. To awaken and capture the spirit of Polish knighthood for the music videos for *Hej, Sokoły* [*Hey, Falcons*] and *Wiatr miłości* [*The Winds of Love*], members of Bayer Full employed costumes imitating real Uhlan uniforms. In the video for *Wiatr miłości*, band members transform into Polish cavalrymen: in the woods, they find a girl who lost her bearings collecting firewood and then re-enact scenes from the everyday life of Polish nobles–they fight with sabres inside a castle, play chess, dance the minuet, and feast to their heart's content.

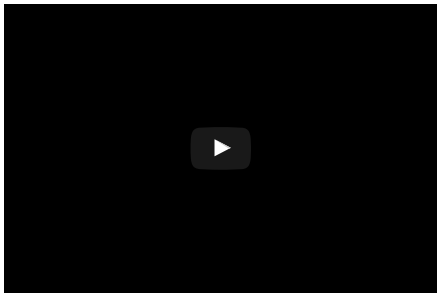
When considered an outburst of Polish mass culture, the emergence of disco polo seemed to confirm the diagnosis put forward by Maria Janion in 1992 – it was supposed to be a symptom heralding the demise of the Romantic paradigm.[19] In their writings, Tadeusz Sobolewski and Piotr Bratkowski's seemed to agree with Janion,[20] both considering the absence of a defiant streak and the conciliatory tone to be typical post-Romantic qualities of the disco polo aesthetic. Both failed to notice, however, that disco polo (especially in the 1990s) often reinforced the idea of a national community. Its language and visual aesthetic are a far cry from the Tyrtean pathos and heroic devotion to the motherland (self-sacrifice in the name of country is replaced here with devotion to a lover), but they can be considered a derivative of the "Polish form" of a somewhat provincial variety, making extensive use of the "broad range of Romantic attributes."[21] They do not invalidate history, but rather bring tradition up to date with a more pop-cultural form. Their emergence in the public sphere was contingent upon the liberation of culture from central planning and the vision of voiceless public, the latter an essential part of the ethos of the intelligentsia.[22]

Music video for the song *What Will You Give Me?* by Mig, 2000. The singers are standing on a rooftop in Białystok

Leszek Koczanowicz pointed out the presence of a strain of post-transformation patriotism in disco polo - and even some symptoms of nationalism - in his essay *Postkomunizm i muzyka pop: zniszczenie czy odbudowa pamięci w disco polo* [*Post-Communism and Pop Music: Obliteration or Reconstruction of Memory in Disco Polo*]. Tracing political threads in "native popular music," Koczanowicz noticed that as an ideology, disco polo is an amalgamation of values, often contradictory ones, making up a very interesting web of connections. According to him, the disco polo rhetoric augmented the nationalist and nobility-oriented imaginarium, wherein all Poles are a "vehicle" of Old Polish traditions and have ancestry in the landed gentry of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Disco polo established a specific narrative in which, according to Koczanowicz, "Poles - although European, whether they like it or not - mentally belong to the East due to their Slavic nature, while Poland itself stands in opposition to the West and all that can be considered Western."[23] Koczanowicz's audacious hypothesis encourages us to consider disco polo one of the paths along which the Romantic paradigm could have been continued. It elevates its own peripheral identity by highlighting its fundamentally Polish traits. The genre's relationship with the West, however, is not as straightforward as Koczanowicz would have it. In the carefully constructed imaginarium, America, even if it doesn't assume a central position, functions as a filter through which the genre gazes back at itself. The identity of the Pole plays out in the space between what is native, familiar and what is worldly. Piotr Bratkowski provided one of the most interesting perspectives on that particular mechanism, calling it "the globalization of local flavor": "within the framework of the philosophy of disco polo, familiarity does not stand in any direct opposition to the strangeness of that which lies beyond our borders, the two values are engaged in a game which is supposed to serve as a sort of psychotherapy for the listeners."[24] The familiarity described therein is coded in this particular game by the triad of home-family-motherland, whereas that which is Western is ceaselessly confronted with Polish traditions (and not individual regional traditions).

The dialectics between Polish-ness and worldliness are on full display in the 1993 music video for Boys' hit song *To nie USA* [*This Is Not the USA*], directed by Marek

Sierocki. The song deals with the possibility of emigration to the US, where "you have lots of relatives" and where "you'll live like a king." However, the clever lyrical subject remains torn as he's convinced that his prospects are just good in Poland: "it's easier to live in this country, you have to hustle." The chorus of the song ("Hey, hey, hey, it's not the USA, here you'll learn how to live! Hey, hey, hey, this is my country, here you'll find the paradise you dreamed of") may be somewhat confusing – Is this irony, a rhetorical device largely absent from disco polo? Or is it a sincere appreciation of the hardships you must suffer through to make it in Poland, a peculiar litany of sufferings to be endured as the transformation marches on? The visualization of this dilemma is also ambiguous. The juxtaposition of images from New York City and Warsaw reinforces the imperative of living up to the ideal of the American metropolis, however the "monumental" character of the Polish capital is supposed to facilitate the accommodation of Poles to new post-transformation, capitalist reality – which didn't look nearly as rosy in the rest of the country as it did in Warsaw. Footage of NYC skyscrapers, yellow cabs, and the Statue of Liberty is intercut with images of Sigismund's Column, Warsaw's Old Town, the Chopin Statue, and the Palace of Culture and Science. We can even say that in the video the Palace of Culture becomes not only a symbol of metropolitan character, but more than that is a reference point for the provincials, harnessed into this new game of aspirations and ambitions. Snappily and identically dressed in loose-fitting red suits, the singers of the band *Boys*,[25] hailing from the villages around Ełk, are singing and embracing Socialist realist statues of the discus thrower and the woman with a chisel, located at the feet of the Palace of Culture. On one hand, they weaken (through flashy juxtapositions of the visual character of the two cities) and on the other they augment (through caricature that reveals their incomparability) the peripheral element of their identity. The music video for *To nie USA* can be considered a prototype for future disco polo imagery, manifesting overwhelming pride in the modernization sweeping the country.

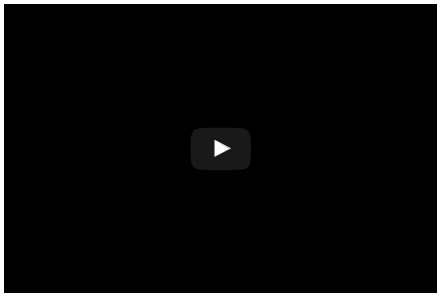


The immensely popular, oft-parodied music video for the 2000 hit single *Co Ty mi dasz* [*What Will You Give Me?*] released by the band Mig, employs similar poetics. The singers croon their song while standing on the roof of the Hotel Gołębiewski in Białystok, or on a newly opened overpass, on a two-lane road, in an underground garage

– in each case they invoke objects-symbols of urban development and modernity. Using a very theatrical gesture, they master the space of the periphery undergoing modernization, although their arrogance and swagger is undercut by their ill-fitting clothes and desperate pleas for the attention of their loved one. The male posing triumphantly with his arms outstretched, a staple of the disco polo aesthetic and a recurring motif in many a music video, is supposed to be an expression of pride and bolster the "tough" masculine image of the artists singing about love and passion. Colorful, amateurish computer-generated animations that appear throughout the video infantilize its entire message on one hand; on the other hand they display mastery of someone's (newly) acquired digital image manipulation skills.

Treating disco polo as "the style of the future" may thus seem at least a little paradoxical – and that's the way it was marketed over the course of the 1995 presidential election campaign, during which both Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the candidate of the post-Communist Democratic Left Alliance, and Waldemar Pawlak of the Polish People's Party collaborated with disco polo bands on campaign ads. They were following the current trends but they also may have noticed the unifying potential of disco polo, a new and persuasive language that could bring voters together. In the case of Waldemar Pawlak, his use of Bayer Full's *Prezydent* [*The President*] was a nod towards the traditional electorate of his party, that is the rural communities and farmers who back then were the most loyal fans of disco polo. The ad, distributed on VHS tapes at campaign stops,[26] tapped into traditional, family values that Pawlak held dear. Footage of the campaign anthem performed live on stage was preceded by a compilation of photographs from the candidate's family albums and a speech in which he declares that "you can try to build a better life with either the West or the East, but most of all you have to build it hand in hand with your own nation," before going on to emphasize his own rural roots. The ad also included a scene from *Sami swoi* (*Our Folks*, directed by Sylwester Chęciński, 1967) – jokingly described as footage from the "Pawlak family archives – in which Leonia Pawlak tries to convince her family that sometimes the law has to be taken into one's own hands for justice to be served, and to push her point across she hands her son a grenade.

In the campaign of Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the winner of the 1995 election, disco polo was supposed to be both a medium for and a harbinger of a new style –



"Choose the future, choose the style," crooned the singer of Top One in *Ole! Olek*.[27] The disco polo aesthetic had the potential to not only serve as a time travel vehicle, but as a tool to sever all remaining ties with the Communist past. A costume for Mazowiecki's "thick line." (Mazowiecki used this phrase to mean a new democratic beginning, forgiveness, letting communist bygones be bygones.) The style of Kwaśniewski's campaign anthem was supposed to combine popular music (or music considered the most folksy in the 1990s) with modernity, openness and even multiculturalism. This image was further bolstered by Top One's collaboration with Daniel Osafo Oware, a Ghana-born musician - the man Kwaśniewski's dancing on stage with in the campaign ad.[28] Paradoxically, the aesthetic whose roots reach back to an era when street music was considered of little to no importance, as it didn't fit the official government-sanctioned vision for Polish culture and folk music, became the primary vehicle for a "new style" which was supposed to help society forget its unwanted history.

"Polish Society Is Disco Polo"

When watched today, the material qualities of early disco polo videos - pixilation, amateurish digital graphics, the visible graininess of the image - provoke the viewer to assume a nostalgic perspective which appreciates the post-modern aesthetic of the glitch, which celebrates failure and the resulting communication noise, and enjoys camp exaggeration, the latter being mostly superficial because it fails to go beyond any patriarchal heteronormativity. But what our trained eyes may today interpret as a visual fault - Does it have some non-normative potential? - was once a proud expression of perfection achievable within the constraints of that era, an attempt to reinforce identity rather than to escape its restrictive structure.

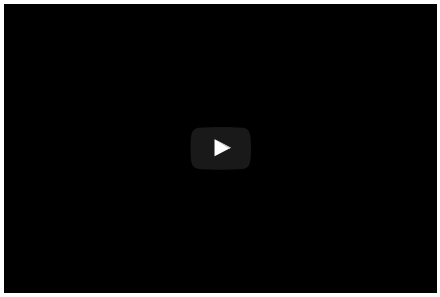
The issue at stake isn't just the disruption of hierarchies and immediate axiology changes. Such a perspective would, for example, blind us to the fact that disco polo, in the course of expressing the "independence" it reclaimed after the period of silence imposed by the Communist government, delivers something akin to a new (grand) national narrative although served in a form that would befit a village fête mixed with a carnival of capitalism. Scholars investigating disco polo and pop culture itself should be aware of the consequences that social inequalities have on

epistemology. The objective, therefore, should not be merely to bestow recognition and acclaim on an ostracized and stigmatized aesthetic (this approach still functions within the vicious circle of Poland's fascination and revulsion with peasantry and peasant culture). The objective should be to acquire a broader view of this area of culture and regard it as a universal field that has absorbed the tensions of the era, and treat it as a research subject equal to other culturally important images and texts, to investigate and understand the social and aesthetic mechanisms determining its position in our highly hierarchical public sphere.

Quoted by Mariusz Szczygieł, Małgorzata Potocka once stated that "Polish society is disco polo."[29] The hyperbole may amuse some and irritate others, but its grammatical incorrectness points us towards a certain conceptual potential concealed within "discopoloness." It effectively replaces terms like "cringeworthy" or "kitsch," both of which are often arbitrarily used as transparent, normative designations by commentators who are unaware of the relational character of each individual judgement of taste. The images of disco polo force us to discuss popular tastes and ask questions like: "Who assigns meanings and why?", "Who deciphers them?", "What is the relationship of power between individual vehicles of taste?" Disco polo should be perceived as a historical phenomenon, host to everything that had been marginalized in the public sphere before 1989. It involves images and cultural practices whose visibility was determined by social hierarchies and divisions stimulated by these images. In contrast to kitsch - defined as image idealized to the extreme - the image of the disco polo society, from today's perspective, would be something imperfect though in the 1990s it fulfilled the needs and performed the role of perfection. An image lined with nostalgia for that which is associated with liberty and freedom (sexual freedom in particular, though strictly heterosexual freedom), but in the light of the "end of history" serving as an expression of pride in the capitalist "here and now."

Such an interpretation of the concept would place it in the broader field of social and cultural narratives dealing with transformation that pertained to the 'lower classes' and their place in the community. On one hand, as I already mentioned, the countryside was portrayed as apathetic, passive, entitled, and unfit for capitalist "normality." On the other hand, that which was provincial in mid-transformation Poland was expressed in the post-modern idea of "little homelands," present primarily in literature. In her study *"Zmierzch paradygmatu" - i co dalej?*, which

should be read as a supplement to Maria Janion's aforementioned diagnosis, Teresa Walas wrote that the idea of little homelands is a sort of "safe patriotism" and as such is an update of the Romantic formation of culture in the "expanding repetition with change" variant.[30] It was made possible by the de-centricity spanning both post-modernism and Romanticism - which "bestows recognition on the provincial, the local flavour, and deep roots of rural dwellers."[31] Disco polo could be considered one version of this, but - in contrast to the little homelands - though it comes from the province and is an expression of the provincial spirit, it would much rather transcend its own situation to become closer to the "big homeland." Additionally, contrary to claims about the countryside not being ready for new, capitalist consumption patterns, disco polo clearly demonstrates its willingness to consume: it presents itself as the antithesis of the *Homo Sovieticus* habitus and, although the genre is widely considered a desecration of what the intelligentsia considers art, that label no longer applies to it within the new neoliberal order.



The disco polo aesthetic actively shaped new self-identification strategies of Polish people in the 1990s. Disco polo images usually juxtaposed burdensome provinciality with a constructed "monumentality" (usually urban) and confronted it with the "grandeur" of the West. At the same time, although mired in attempts to imitate Western attitudes and invoke images of the West, the self-assuredness of the disco polo artist was built primarily on taking pride in his or her Polish roots. This identity play is best evidenced in the music video for Medical's 1996 single *My Polacy* [*We Poles*]. In this song, disco polo becomes a hallmark of Polish (megalomaniacal) identity ("Blacks play jazz, everyone plays rock, while we Poles just love disco polo.") The music video features picturesque images of Rome, Vienna, and Paris, followed by footage of the three singers confidently strolling through Warsaw's Old Town. Warsaw itself is portrayed as a city at least as magnificent as other European metropoli (the attempt to capture the splendor falls flat, however, as the video was shot in the winter). The capital is supposed to be the proud heart of the country, while disco polo is poised to assume the mantle of the genre of the new era - it outshines rock (with its encouragement of dissent and the punks of the Jarocin Festival), it unites all Poles and its power reaches beyond time itself:[32] "if Elbow-high [a King of Poland from the 13th and 14th century – ed. note] were alive today,

he'd sing disco polo too," croons the Medical front man.

This is also where another meaning of the eponymous *bayer* is revealed. One meaning, as I already explained, pertains to the seduction of either a lover or an audience. On the other hand, however, 'bayer' can also be used to describe a way in which Polish identity was constructed after the introduction of a free market economy. Although it is not devoid of certain imitation mechanisms, contrary to images and narratives that were to construct the identity of the new middle class,[33] the bayer was never an aspirational mechanism but was rather a patriotic, proud expression of self-satisfaction. Under such an interpretation, a man engaged in 'bayer' does not seduce the object of his affections. Above all, he seduces himself.

Footnotes

1 The adjective "street" was replaced with the term "disco polo" somewhere around 1993, the latter supposedly coined by Sławomir Skręta, the owner of Blue Star – the first music label focused exclusively on disco polo releases.

2 See: Anna Kowalczyk, "Krótka historia disco polo," ["A Short History of Disco Polo"] *Wiedza i Życie*, September 2010, accessed January 4, 2016, http://archiwum.wiz.pl/1997/97093200.asp.

3 Recorded in 1991, the song was inspired by the TV commercial of Fa bar soap and later released on tape featuring songs performed by the actor Marek Kondrat and singer Marlena Drozdowska (frequent collaborator of the Pod Egidą comedy troupe). The music was written by Andrzej Korzyński (a film composer, author of the score for Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble*, originator of the Franek Kimono character), whereas the lyrics, parodying the style of street music filled with ironic observations and comments on the political and social situation in Poland in the early 90s, were written by director and screenwriter Marek Koterski. Although originally intended as a parody of the genre, *Mydełko Fa* became a genuine classic of the disco polo canon.

4 See: Józef Tischner, *Etyka Solidarności i* Homo sovieticus [*The Ethics of Solidarity and* Homo Sovieticus] (Krakow: Znak, 1992); Piotr Sztompka, *Trauma*

wielkiej zmiany. Społeczne koszta transformacji [*The Trauma of Change. Social Costs of Transformation*] (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2000).

5 Teresa Bogucka, *Triumfujące profanum. Telewizja po przełomie 1989* [*The Triumph of the Profane. Television After 1989*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2002).

6 Marcin Kącki, *Białystok. Biała siła, czarna pamięć* [*Białystok. White Power, Black Memory*] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015), 144.

7 Cassette tape inserts (depicting mostly the artists themselves) reproduced at a mass scale and richly illustrated niche zines for fans of the genre published in the 1990s, including titles like *Super Disco po Polsku*, *Disco Polo*, and *Disco Hit*, were perhaps the greatest influence, aside from music videos, on the overall aesthetic of disco polo. cf. Zofia Woźniak, "Fenomen disco polo i jego miejsce w polskiej kulturze lat dziewięćdziesiątych," ["The phenomenon of disco polo and its place in Polish culture of the 1990s"] *Etnografia Polska* 1–2 (1998): 192.

8 See: essential texts retracing the history of disco polo as musical genre and a Polish cultural phenomenon of the 90s: Kowalczyk, "Krótka historia," Woźniak, "Fenomen disco polo," Filar, "Fenomen muzyki disco polo," ["The phenomenon of disco polo music"] Olga Wachcińska, "Disco polo kontynuacją folkloru? Rozwój muzyki chodnikowej i jej charakterystyka w kontekście rodzimej twórczości ludowej," ["Is disco polo an extension of folklore? The evolution of street music and its characteristics in the context of local folk music"] *Warmińsko-Mazurski Kwartalnik Naukowy. Nauki Społeczne* 3 (2013): 87–102.

9 Old episodes of *Disco Relax* and *Disco Polo Live* are very popular on YouTube and Polo TV. Commercial radio stations, like the Białystok-based Radio Jard, Vox FM, and Radio Eska, contributed to the rise of the disco polo in the 1990s and its current popularity by keeping the genre's biggest hits in heavy rotation.

10 Dariusz Czaja, "Piękny Hawaj. Egzotyka i pieśń" ["Beautiful Hawaii. The Exotic and Songwriting"] in *Hawaikum. W poszukiwaniu istoty piękna* [*Hawaikum. In Search of the Essence of Beauty*], ed. M. Kozień, M. Miskowiec, A. Pankiewicz (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015), 69.

11 See: Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

12 Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Pusta plaża," [Empty Beach], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 31 (1996): 5.

13 See: articles collected in *Spór o Polskę 1989-99. Wybór tekstów prasowych* [*The Argument over Poland. A Selection of Press Publications*], ed. P. Śpiewak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2000); here, particularly the chapter *Spór o inteligencję* [*The Argument Over Intelligentsia*].

14 Sobolewski, "Plaża".

15 Tomasz Zarycki, *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2014), 84–85; Tomasz Zarycki and Tomasz Warczok, "Hegemonia inteligencka: kapitał kulturowy we współczesnym polskim polu władzy – perspektywa »długiego trwania«," *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 4 (2014), 27–49.

16 Piotr Bratkowski, "Wenus i Tarzan na sylwestra," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Dec. 1, 1996, 19.

17 See: *Bara Bara*, a 1996 documentary directed by Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz and Michał Arabudzki.

18 Kowalczyk, "Krótka historia."

19 See: Maria Janion, *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś* [*Will You Know What You Have Lived Through*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SIC!, 1996).

20 Bratkowski, "Wenus."

21 Teresa Walas, "»Zmierzch paradygmatu« – i co dalej?" ["»The End of a Paradigm« –And Then What?"], in: Teresa Walas, *Zrozumieć swój czas. Kultura polska po komunizmie* [*Understanding One's Time. Polish Culture After Communism*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003), 177.

22 Ibid.

23 Leszek Koczanowicz, "Postkomunizm i muzyka pop: zniszczenie czy odbudowa pamięci w disco polo" in Leszek Koczanowicz, *Polityka czasu. Dynamika tożsamości w postkomunistycznej Polsce* [*The Politics of Time. The Dynamics of Identity in Post-Communist Poland*] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe DSW, 2009), 169.

24 Bratkowski, "Wenus," 18.

25 We should also mention that contrary to, for example, rock bands of the 1990s, disco polo artists consistently chose to unify their attire–everyone in the band was wearing the same.

26 Dominika Wielowieyska wrote about the incredible scope and audacity of the Pawlak campaign. People who came to his election rallies received bags with campaign pamphlets and other stuff, including a special issue of "»Zielony Sztandar« [»The Green Banner«] about Pawlak himself, an issue of »Strażak« [»Fireman«] magazine (which had a photo of Pawlak wearing his fireman uniform) and a VHS tape." see: Dominika Wielowieyska, "Pawlak na wideo" ["Pawlak on Video"], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Oct. 20, 1995.

27 Curiously enough, disappointed in the shape of their relationship with Kwaśniewski, the band Top One recorded a special message for fans, in which the group apologized for getting involved in the election campaign. The words "We are deeply sorry, oh Poland, for the harm we have done you. Unaware of what we were doing, we changed the course of your history. They lied to us as well and never even gave us our thirty pieces of silver" can be heard only after playing the tape backwards. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gtq_2zrs5CE, accessed April 4, 2016.

28 Collaborating with foreign musician and dancers was very popular in some disco polo circles; its main goal was to bolster the modern image of the bands. Franky, a Sudanese rapper was a member of the group Skaner and his work was featured on a couple of the band's albums. Top One collaborated with the rapper Frank Evans (MC Ghana), with whom they released an album in 1994 called *Dzieci Europy* [*The Children of Europe*] which featured Evans on the cover. In this context, we should also mention Roma musicians who also collaborated with multiple disco polo bands; the so-called "Gypsy music" is widely considered a subgenre of disco polo.

29 Mariusz Szczygieł and Wojciech Staszewski, "Usta są zawsze gorące," ["Lips Are Always Hot"] in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 6, 1995.

30 Walas, "»Zmierzch«," 208.

31 Ibid.

32 The current popularity of the genre is a testament to its supposed "timelessness." It seems, however, that it may be directly tied to the rise of nationalist attitudes in both Poland and Europe. In 2011, Polo TV, a television channel dedicated solely to disco polo, reactivated *Disco Polo Live*, and *Disco Relax* came back on the air a year later. In 2014, Polsat, a private TV broadcaster, launched Disco Polo Music, a separate channel for disco polo and outdoor feast music. The genre's availability on YouTube also directly contributed to the rise in its popularity over the past few years. For additional information about the popularity of Polo TV, see: Michał Kurdupski, "Polo TV liderem wśród kanałów muzycznych," [Polo TV Takes the Lead Among Music Channels"], *Wirtualnemedia.pl*, accessed January 4, 2016,www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/polo-tv-liderem-wsrod-kanalow-muzycznych-stars-tv-o-307-proc-do-gory/.

33 See: Magda Szcześniak, *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* [*Norms of Visibility. Identity in Times of Transformation*] (Warszawa: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2016).