

Łukasz Biskupski

The Appropriation of Prestige

Asta Nielsen's Star Persona in the Polish Territories of Russia before World War I

The concept of national cinema is one of the most problematic concepts in Film Studies. In light of this view, Andrew Higson famously called for the adoption of a broad perspective which took account not only of the films produced in a particular nation state or those considered vehicles of pre-circulating discourses about a specific nation, but also the range of films exhibited and viewed therein.¹⁾ More recently, the concept of national cinema has been criticized for being 'limiting', with many scholars instead advocating transnational perspectives.²⁾ The concept of national cinema is especially problematic as an analytical category when applied to the cinemas of colonized lands such as Poland before 1914.³⁾ Because the silent cinema of this period was perhaps a more thoroughly international phenomenon than the talkies which followed, and because of Poland's lack of sovereignty, it is difficult to pinpoint the meaning of 'national' in this case, either in terms of territory or the film industry.⁴⁾ By contrast, transnational perspectives open up new spaces in which to consider such matters. Accordingly, this essay adopts just such a perspective so as bet-

1) This paper presents the research conducted within the project 'Popular Culture and Early Cinema in the Polish Lands under Russian Rule 1890–1914' funded by the Polish National Program for the Development of Humanities (Ministry of Science and Higher Education) in the years 2013–2015. I also received financial support from the Foundation for Polish Science (START Scholarship).

Andrew Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema', in Alan Williams (ed.) *Film and Nationalism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 52–67.

2) Andrew Higson, 'The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema' in Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (eds), *Cinema and Nation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 57–68.; Will Higbee and Lim Song Hwee, 'Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies', *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2010), pp. 7–21.

3) In the years before the First World War, the Polish territories were internal colonies of Russia, Germany, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Congress Poland — the traditional name for the region — had no real autonomy within the Russian Empire but was fully integrated into its administrative, legal, and economic system.

4) Often the imperial perspective of the hegemon comes to bear, which is another important aspect of the post-colonial dimension of early cinema study. A telling example is the case of Władysław Starewicz (aka Ladislav Starevich, Ladislav Starewich), who is presented as a Russian, Polish or French filmmaker, depending on which language-version of Wikipedia one reads.

ter to assess the dynamics of the film industry across the Polish territories of Russia immediately before World War I, specifically in relation to the circulation of the actress Asta Nielsen.

Considered the first internationally acclaimed female film star, Nielsen came to symbolize the emergence of a now-familiar business model of cinema based on marketable on-screen talent, feature films, and exclusive distribution rights. The circulation of her 1910 debut *The Abyss* (1910)⁵⁾ is accepted to have revolutionized film distribution through the development of the regional distribution rights model known as Monopolfilm, and by showing the commercial potential of longer running times.⁶⁾ The steady release of Nielsen's subsequent work also contributed to the institutionalization of the star system, whereas the marketing model developed in relation to her films established organizational principles which would undergird the film industry for the remainder of the twentieth century.

The international production of scholarship on the distribution, exhibition, and reception of early cinema, coupled with both the web-accelerated connectivity of scholars and the development of digital humanities tools, has also opened up new ways to investigate the international circulation and popularity of Nielsen's films. Numerous case studies exploring this topic were recently collected in *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making, 1910–1914*.⁷⁾ This volume is complemented by the Importing Asta Nielsen Database,⁸⁾ which brings together primary sources from across the globe, including articles and advertisements printed in trade and popular publications. Taken as a whole, such work offers us a range of insights into what is a truly transnational research program; a project to which this essay hopes to contribute.

Accordingly, in what follows, I show how the Warsaw-based Sfinks Company capitalized on Nielsen's screen persona to establish itself on a local market dominated by France's Pathé and the Russian Khanzhonkov. I focus on the success of *The Abyss* and on a business practice of Sfinks which I call the 'appropriation of prestige', wherein a party seeks to tap into the symbolic capital of another. Sfinks associated itself with the prestige Nielsen had accumulated from her first film, *The Abyss*, and attempted to replicate this success with the Pola Negri vehicle *The Slave of Passions* (1914).⁹⁾ In so doing, this essay contributes to the understanding of historical flows of both films and symbolic capital across different peripheral territories; for, as Arjun Appadurai has argued, such situations or localities represent negotiations between internationally circulating forms — 'They are not subordinate instances of the global, but in fact the main evidence of its reality'.¹⁰⁾ Given film was one of the first truly international cultural industries, it is imperative we consider its transnational dimensions. In this respect, it is my hope that this essay might shed new light on the international circulation of Asta Nielsen, and, by extension, help us better to understand

5) The original title of the film is *Afgrunden*. Its Polish title is *Otchłań* and its Russian title *Бездна*.

6) Martin Loiperdinger, 'Afgrunden in Germany: Monopolfilm, Cinemagoing and the Emergence of the Film Star Asta Nielsen, 1910–11,' in Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers (eds), *Cinema Audiences and Modernity: an Introduction* (Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), pp. 42–53.

7) Martin Loiperdinger, Uli Jung (eds), *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making, 1910–1914* (New Barnett: John Libbey, 2013).

8) Importing Asta Nielsen Database, <<http://importing-asta-nielsen.deutsches-filminstitut.de/>>.

9) The original title is *Niewolnica Zmysłów* and the Russian title *Раба страстей, раба порока*.

10) Arjun Appadurai, 'How Histories Make Geographies,' *Transcultural Studies*, no. 1 (2010), p. 12.

how symbolic capital circulated the Central and Eastern European cinematic sphere in the era of early cinema cosmopolitanism.

Transnational approach

A transnational perspective focused on transfers of symbolic capital differs from that pertaining to national history. Many studies of early Polish cinema apply a broad national perspective, wherein Congress Poland is linked to the Polish lands belonging to Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Such work also seeks to identify the cultural values in the films it examines.¹¹⁾ By contrast, I would like to propose a more nuanced approach to studying early Polish cinema in its various colonial contexts. The localities of the postcolonial regions are subject to negotiations significantly more complex than those pertaining to more historically persistent cultural and political entities such as France or the United States. One way of empowering the perspective of the marginal is, I believe, to both acknowledge the reality of subordination and go beyond it, rather than simply producing counter narratives of originality and distinctiveness. Paradoxes and contradictions should not be negated but instead exposed. Repressing the fact that Poland was subordinate to three imperialistic countries, and that it was mapping the borders of imagined Polish territories, blinds us to power relations and to translations of symbolic and economic capital. This being said, although such issues demand critical attention, they can only be addressed in part here: in relation to the economic dimensions of early cinema.

Only by suspending the nation-centered vision of historiography and, instead, employing transnational perspectives to examine flows might we paint a more detailed picture of the past. Therefore, rather than defining a geographic object of study by national borders, I focus on a supranational space determined by the business operations of the film industrial agents under examination. I approach the region of Congress Poland as both a Russian colony and a node in the global film market, one that enables us to enrich our understandings of the development of early cinema as a market-driven phenomenon. With respect to its film industry, Congress Poland was a Russian regional sub-market, a distinct cultural region, and the westernmost territory of the Tsarist Russian Empire. As with many other regions, in Congress Poland, cinema was established as a distinct entertainment industry after exhibition venues opened in 1907. A new entertainment business emerged as such venues flourished in larger cities including Warsaw, the informal capital of the region boasting some 800,000 inhabitants. Regional distributors, theater chains, and production companies soon emerged as vertical and horizontal integration, alongside partnerships with Russian and other overseas companies, led to the maturation of what

11) This perspective emphasizes the imagined community of the Polish nation — and therefore the joint analysis of all the regions which later constituted Poland as an independent country — over the states to which they belonged. This is often paired with what Higson calls the ‘criticism-led approach to national cinema’, which is to say those films heralded as national treasures by influential taste-makers. Such a position leads to debatable assessments of early domestic production as component of high culture Cf. Małgorzata Hendrykowska, *Śladami tamtych cieni: film w kulturze polskiej przełomu stuleci 1895–1914* (Poznań: Oficyna Wydawnicza Book Service, 1993).

started life as essentially a cottage industry.¹²⁾ The transnational dimensions of this process come to the fore when we consider the flow of Nielsen's symbolic capital and the ways local parties used it.

Sfinks and *THE ABYSS*

Founded in February 1909 by a group of engineers, attorneys, and doctors under the management of Aleksander Hertz¹³⁾, Sfinks occupied a dominant position on the regional market until the late 1930s. Hertz, a former bank clerk of Jewish origin, had been expelled from Poland for engaging in Socialist political activities. Upon his return, he focused on the emerging cinematographic market.¹⁴⁾ As well as owning a theater in the center of Warsaw, Sfinks represented several western European companies on this market, thereby benefiting from the industry's transition to renting prints. His company boasted its own laboratory and provided full equipment and installation services to theaters run on electricity.¹⁵⁾ Hertz also travelled to Copenhagen to secure several Danish films including *The White Slave* (1910) and crucially *The Abyss*.¹⁶⁾

There are grounds to suggest that Sfinks' early development was founded on the commercial success of these Danish imports, especially that of *The Abyss*. As Lauri Piipsa has pointed out:

The inevitable conclusion of this rather strange evidence is that [*The Abyss*] came to Russia through Poland and was a joint venture between the Polish company Sfinks and the Russian Globus. Most probably Sfinks, which in 1911 was actually just a film theater in Warsaw, bought the exclusive rights, but was unable to handle the distribution in a vast country like Russia alone and therefore sought a Russian associate with the necessary networks and connections.¹⁷⁾

My archival research certainly supports Piipsa's claims, as the distribution of *The Abyss* actually started in the Polish territories; however, it needs stressing that, given Sfinks' Polish territories were a part of Russia, both this company and the Moscow-based Globus were doing business in the same country.¹⁸⁾ What is more, at this time, Sfinks was anything

12) See Władysław Jewsiewicki, *Polska Kinematografia W Okresie Filmu Niemego, 1895–1929/1930* (Łódź: Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 1966); Władysław Banaszkiewicz, Witczak Witold, *Historia filmu polskiego*. Vol. I. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1966).

13) *Nowa Gazeta*, 27 November 1912.

14) See Mariusz Guzek, *Co wspólnego z wojną ma kinematograf?: kultura filmowa na ziemiach polskich w latach 1914–1918* (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2014), pp. 345–346; *Kronika. Nowy kinematograf*, *Kurier Warszawski*, 26 February 1909.

15) *Sine-Fono*, no. 23 (1910), p. 38.

16) Kazmierz Augustowski, 'Aleksander Hertz jako działacz niepodległościowy', *Wiadomości Filmowe*, no. 11 (1938), pp. 1–2.

17) Lauri Piipsa, 'Asta Nielsen and the Russian Film Trade', in Loiperdinger et al. (eds.), *Importing Asta Nielsen*, p. 247.

18) Warsaw-based companies like Sfinks tend somewhat problematically to be considered separate from the

but a mere theater owner, even though it was still a fairly minor player on the market. Indeed, *The Abyss* premiered in Warsaw on 30 November 1910 before unspooling in Łódź four days later. It was only after these screenings – the middle of December to be precise — that Sfinks took out an ad in the Moscow trade paper *Sine-Fono* announcing: ‘for an enormous price we have exclusively acquired from Scandinavia the Russian rights to *The Abyss*.’¹⁹⁾ In the next issue of the paper, a review presented the film as a joint venture between Globus and Sfinks.²⁰⁾ Within half a year, the two had merged to form Globus-Sfinks, with the Russian trade press suggesting this partnership enabled Sfinks to operate on a national level, something its limited size had hitherto prevented:

Globus’ giant organization in Russia, combined with Sfinks’ far-reaching and well-informed network of agents abroad and its good relationship with all of the [international] companies, [will] give both companies the possibility to acquire the best the European and American cinema market has to offer.²¹⁾

This merger proved short-lived however, with the two companies parting ways in December 1911. At this time, the Moscow Congress of producers, exchange offices, and cinemas had also struck agreements regulating the entire Russian market.²²⁾ In light of these developments, Sfinks limited itself to regional operations in Congress Poland. The company dominated this regional market having integrated vertically, and by partnering with companies from Russia and other countries.²³⁾

The Abyss: success on the market of Congress Poland

Sfinks likely generated considerable income from its exclusive distribution of *The Abyss* in Russia based on the film’s apparent appeal to moviegoers in this market. Moreover, as a consequence of its commercial achievements, Nielsen’s screen persona accumulated a significant amount of symbolic capital. A paucity of box office data from the period complicates efforts to approximate the extent of this success. John Sedgwick’s POPSTAT method is one of the tools for this purpose.²⁴⁾ Sedgwick’s method is based on the amount of time a given film is booked into theaters, and its box office potential based on both the number of seats in auditoria screening a film and the price of tickets. By contrast, Annemone Ligensa used data from the Siegen Cinema Databases to investigate the per-

Russian film industry, as if to suggest Polish and Russian cinema were wholly distinct entities during the investigated period.

19 *Sine-Fono*, no. 5 (1910), p. 38.

20) Sfinks-Globus: Bezdna, *Sine-Fono*, no. 6 (1910), p. 27.

21) Globus-Sfinks, *Sine-Fono*, no. 19 (1911), p. 10.

22) For details on this agreement see *Poslednieye slovo*, *Vestnik kinematografii*, no. 23 (1911), p. 10–12.

23) From 1911, the year *The Abyss* was initially released, Sfinks started to produce fiction films, some of which gained national distribution through third parties. The Two-reeler *Przesady* (1912) was purchased by Khanzhonkov and the three-reeler *Historia jakich wiele* (1912) by Pathé.

24) John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), pp. 70–73.

formance of Nielsen productions in Germany.²⁵⁾ In the case investigated here, such approaches cannot be used; due to a paucity of data it is difficult to quantitatively assess the popularity of a film and develop a precise index or even to compare a large set of data. Under these circumstances, the impact and influence of *The Abyss* is derived from indicative data relating to the film's release in one major city: Łódź. The second city of Congress Poland, in early 1911, Łódź was an important industrial center boasting 450,000 inhabitants and twelve theaters.²⁶⁾ Situated mainly in affluent areas and opening in 1908, the city's most prominent exhibition sites were the purpose built Bio-Express and the Odeon.

Initially marketed as an 'agitation film', a genre about human trafficking dramatizing 'the social status of a woman and her fall', Nielsen's performance in *The Abyss* would lead the picture to transcend its generic underpinnings and be seen as marking the advent of a new type of film. The imported Danish-made agitation entry *The White Slave* became the first feature length presentation released on this market when it opened in Łódź in October 1910. The public appeal of *The White Slave* is indicated by its playing at the Odeon for a week from 4 to 11 October, when theaters typically changed their bookings twice a week,²⁷⁾ and by the fact that this theater's management then opened the film at the less prestigious Belle Vue.²⁸⁾ One of the most important factors driving the success of *The White Slave* was a shrewd marketing campaign which addressed a large public through the combination of social-engagement and sensation. Presented as having been produced with the assistance of the London Society for the Protection of Women, marketing materials positioned this film as addressing a major social problem; as a 'page from the history of human trafficking', as one advertisement read.²⁹⁾

Opened soon after, *The Abyss* represented an attempt to capitalize on public interest in *The White Slave*. A subtitle reading 'The History of the Fall of a Woman' clearly associated *The Abyss* with its predecessor. The new film was similarly promoted as an 'agitation film' which supplied salacious content under the guise of education. At the beginning of December, the newspaper *Rozwój* announced in an exceptionally lengthy, albeit evidently commissioned, notice:

The Abyss: The Danish Society for the Preservation of Morals, in an attempt to promote its ideals, has decided to present those events in the cinema which lead to the humiliation and abuse of a woman's dignity. One of these pictures will be shown from next Tuesday at the Odeon theater. The show, consisting of three parts, depicts the fall of a young, intelligent girl under the influence of debauchery. The picture,

25) Annemone Ligensa, 'Asta Nielsen in Germany: A Reception-Oriented Approach' in Loiperdinger et al. (eds.), *Importing Asta Nielsen*, pp. 343–366.

26) See Łukasz Biskupski, *Miasto atrakcji. Narodziny kultury masowej na przełomie XIX i XX wieku — kino w systemie rozrywkowym Łodzi* (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013).

27) On this occasion, a programming innovation was introduced. In order to present a new feature, daily screenings were divided into two programs. In the afternoon, the regular short film program was presented to general audiences, and from 8pm only adults were admitted to view *The White Slave* (on 9 October, an initial viewing took place at 2:30 pm, and 7pm the following week). This step simultaneously solved two problems: the unusual length of the film and its controversial content.

28) *Rozwój*, 14 October 1910.

29) *Rozwój*, 14 February 1911.

with performances from splendid stage actors, is highly impressive. The Odeon theater purchased the license for this picture for a large amount of money, and the film cannot be screened at any other cinema in Łódź.³⁰⁾

Rozwój informed readers that *The Abyss* was distributed via the Monopolfilm model. The film's lead Asta Nielsen and its director Urban Gad — unknown to the local public at this time — were evidently seen to evince little marketability, with neither mentioned in the aforementioned notice or in ads promoting the film. Rather, as had been the case with marketing campaigns for imported French films d'art, links to legitimate theater were emphasized by spotlighting the presence in the film of stage actors. However, perhaps the most striking angle related to the legitimization of the film through its purported social impart, a claim supported by citing the involvement of the morally authoritative Danish Society for the Preservation of Morals. Advertisements would also highlight the film's international appeal, with the Odeon inviting audiences to attend 'a world-famous picture'.³¹⁾ However, it is likely that, rather than such claims to moral worthiness, Nielsen's raunchy gaucho dance actually attracted a majority of moviegoers. At least 64 adults-only screenings were held, amounting to a potential 22,400 ticket sales based on a 350-seat auditorium. As a response to such demand, *The Abyss* returned to the Odeon for ten days on 14 February 1911, with one evening screening imbued with a measure of prestige derived from a musical accompaniment of a concert trio.³²⁾ Nielsen's 'gaucho dance' could therefore have been viewed by a total of 35,000 Łódź residents in late 1910 and early 1911.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which Nielsen's popularity continued in the wake of *The Abyss*. Both Denise J. Youngblood and Piipsa argue that no star matched Nielsen's popularity in Russia across the next four years.³³⁾ However, it is impossible to confirm whether or not this popularity extended to Congress Poland, as no audience surveys or statistics on photograph sales are available, and of those articles on film printed at this time, few focused on stars — never mind Nielsen. If anything, the available data suggests Nielsen was a steady draw, whose appeal nonetheless paled in comparison to that of multi-reel spectacles.

In Łódź, *The Abyss* was shown from 7 December for 14 days, and for two weeks in February. Of the nineteen other films starring Nielsen screened in Łódź before the outbreak of war, none played for more than the standard half-week programming slots of Wednesday thru Friday or Saturday thru Tuesday.³⁴⁾ Indeed, where twelve of these were allocated premium weekend slots when attendance was expected to be at its peak, few managed to replicate the success of *The Abyss*. By contrast, in 1913, *Quo Vadis* (1913) was screened simultaneously at two theaters from 12 to 31 of May, *Last Days of Pompeii* from

30) *Rozwój*, 3 December 1910.

31) *Rozwój*, 7 December 1910.

32) Also framing the picture as an agitation film linked this film to *White Slave*. Sfinks released *The Abyss* at its own theater in Warsaw from 30 November to 20 December for what Andrzej Dębski estimated to be at least 85 screenings; after this it played at the Moulin Rouge. See A. Dębski, 'Afgrunden in Warsaw and Asta Nielsen's popularity in Polish territories', in Loiperdinger et al. (eds.): *Importing Asta Nielsen*, p. 79–83.

33) Denise Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror. Moviemaking in Russia 1908–1918* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), p. 51–53; Piipsa, *Ibidem*, p. 253.

34) For press coverage see Importing Asta Nielsen Database.

1 to 11 of September, and *Germinal* (1913) from 11 to 17 of October. Then, in 1914, *Antony and Cleopatra* (1913) ran simultaneously at two theaters from 26 January to 1 February, before moving to another location for a five-day engagement.³⁵⁾ Thus, although the commercial achievements of *The Abyss* might have established an exportable generic model, they did not guarantee similar levels of success for its leading lady, even though her name generated the confidence of Łódź's most powerful exhibitors and drew sizable audiences: in short, Nielsen was now a star.

Sfinks strikes back: the Polish/Russian Asta Nielsen

Apart from the commercial success of her films, Nielsen's popularity is noteworthy because of the way the symbolic capital of her screen persona was appropriated for locally produced films. This practice can be seen in Sfinks' efforts to package the actress Pola Negri in *The Slave of Passions*. In my view, this film was meant to resemble *The Abyss* and therefore to repeat its success. Although the film is currently unavailable, it is possible to discuss its marketing.

Nielsen was seen as culturally legitimate because of her associations with both the theater generally and specific stars of the stage such as Eleonora Duse. However, because of their sensational content, Nielsen's films were deemed lowbrow. The press commonly attributed to her an exceptional on-screen presence believed to draw audiences to theaters. The nature of this charisma was defined by the Polish trade paper *Nowiny Sezonu*. Based on an interview she gave in Austria, the piece described Nielsen as 'not beautiful in a conventional sense, her face features are not harmonious, but she attracts with the charm of mystery, a constant volatility of expression. Her hands are distinctive: slender, soft and nervous.'³⁶⁾ Nielsen's power was thus seen not to derive from her embodying contemporaneous conceptions of idealized female beauty but instead from an alluring sense of the enigmatic.

Reproducing Nielsen's success as a star was seen to hinge on a performer somehow harnessing a similar mysteriousness. This was indeed the case with Olga Preobrazhenskaia, a star of the hit Russian drama *Keys to Happiness* (1913), who had sought to ape Nielsen's style.³⁷⁾ Sfinks also attempted just such an approach with Pola Negri in her debut film *The Slave of Passions*. The young Negri must have appeared a supremely viable candidate for the Nielsen treatment, having had already achieved success on the Warsaw stage. In early 1913, she appeared at the city's Teatr Nowości in a pantomime entitled *Sumurun*, which had recently enjoyed a triumphant run in Berlin.³⁸⁾ Set in then fashionable Arabia, the piece featured Negri as an itinerant dancer looking to infiltrate a harem, much to the chagrin of a hunchbacked clown from her troupe who has fallen in love with her. The following response evinces the charisma central to Negri's stage persona, which was also attributed to Nielsen:

35) Based on advertisements from *Rozwój*.

36) 'Duse kinematografu', *Nowiny Sezonu*, no. 9 (1913), p. 2.

37) Denise Youngblood, *Ibidem*, p. 51; Piipsa, *Ibidem*, p. 254.

38) Ryszard Ordyński, 'Sumurun', *Wiadomości Literackie*, no. 38 (1937), p. 3.

the first appearance of the dancer in the window of the fairground stall induced a murmur [...] among the audience. After a moment when she descended to the dance floor, I felt that she attracted all the attention. Mysterious overhead blue lighting along with a feverish spotlight created a fascinating effect. All the beams of light were centered on the shiny brown skin of the actress.³⁹⁾

Similarly, a Warsaw newspaper reported:

the artist's figure, in an oriental dress which revealed the line of her waist, had so much expression in gesture and movement that it constructed an aesthetic form of unusual harmony and charm. Her dark complexion and dark hair contributed even more to the overall great impression.⁴⁰⁾

Negri's next stage hit was *The Impersonation of Afra* (*Wcielenie Afry*), a farce about Egyptologists believing an actress to be the personification of the goddess Afra,⁴¹⁾ which concluded with a 'Serpentine dance' and an 'Egyptian tango'. The success of this play ensured that by the beginning of 1914 Negri was already a leading light of the Warsaw theater scene, in large part due to her dancing skills and aura of mystery and eroticism.

Sfinks and Negri teamed up in the first half of 1914 on *The Slave of Passions*,⁴²⁾ her film debut, which recalled the plot of *The Abyss*, as the names of its five acts suggest.⁴³⁾ Negri played the beautiful, penniless dancer whose special numbers 'Salome dance' and 'Apache dance' are hugely popular. It would have shown the Negri character leaving her fiancé to start a romance with an admirer who introduces her to a hedonistic party lifestyle, giving rise to standout sequences in which she performs a dance, before her jilted lover returns to stab her as she performs on the stage.⁴⁴⁾ With *The Slave of Passions*, casting, content, marketing were carefully coordinated to tap into the popularity of Nielsen and the local commercial success of *Sumurun*. In *The Abyss*, a modest girl performs a passionate 'Gauchó' dance for an excited crowd before killing her lover. Accordingly, the film centers on a girl of modest means straying from a righteous path, features a knife murder, and concludes with an exuberant dance scene. Moreover, advertisements for *Sumurun* and *The Slave of Passions* both showed Negri sporting similar oriental costumes. It has also been suggested that Negri based her acting style on Nielsen's. As the actress Halina Bruczówna, who appeared alongside Negri in subsequent Sfinks films, points out:

[a]n actress's work was based predominantly on the most perfect model at the time
— Asta Nielsen. She was an oracle in every respect. First of all we copied her make-

39) Ibidem.

40) Quoted after: Władysław Banaszkiewicz, 'Pola Negri: początki kariery i legendy', *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1960), p. 46.

41) Idem, p. 47.

42) Idem, p. 51.

43) 'Life behind the Scenes', 'On the slippery road', 'Insane whim', 'The Slave of passions' and 'Death on stage' which appears to be a variant on plot of *The Abyss*. *Gazeta Łódzka*, 7 December 1915, p. 4.

44) 'Niewolnica zmysłów', FilmPolski.pl, Internetowa baza filmu polskiego, <www.filmpolski.pl/> [accessed 10 September 2014].

up style: large, black, strongly painted eyes, pale, very pale face and lips, big, red, swollen. The acting style was crammed with superfluous gesticulation, which, according to our orientation then should replace the dynamics of the spoken word.⁴⁵⁾

Finally, *The Slave of Passions* marketing positioned Negri in relation to Nielsen.⁴⁶⁾ For example, Łódź's Casino Theater promoted this film as a 'drama in five acts starring the Polish Asta Nielsen'.⁴⁷⁾ Underscoring the links between the two women was a cabaret song performed in Warsaw at the time, boasting the following lyrics:

Pola Negri — Asta from Poland,
Buffalo Bill...
She is a star in our homeland
Buffalo Bill ...
Visitors do not end
Buffalo Bill
In a long line they stand
Buffalo Bill ...⁴⁸⁾

The large audience *The Slave of Passions* drew may well have been a result of the limited number of imported films on the market during wartime; however, for whatever reason, it did prove attractive to moviegoers, leading to extended engagements.⁴⁹⁾

The cosmopolitan content of *The Slave of Passions* facilitated its appeal in different territories, with only a minor change of promotional taglines enabling the film to be pitched to the pan-Russian market. This film was distributed under the even more sensational title of *The Slave of Passion*, *The Slave of Vice* by M. I. Bistrickij and later Pathé Frères.⁵⁰⁾ A two-page advertisement in *Sine-Fono* announced 'the greatest hit of the season is ready'. This Russian trade paper described the film as a 'powerful drama, full of heavy emotions with the rising star of cinema', repeating the name of the performer three times, save its

45) Halina Bruczówna, 'Jak to illo tempore bywało...', *Kino*, no. 6 (1936), p. 12.

46) Additionally, on the Polish market, the film was promoted as the entry in the 'Polish Golden Series', in reference to the *Golden Series* produced by Thiemann and Reinhardt, a volume of multiple-reel feature films based on classic or popular fiction (such as *Keys to Happiness*).

47) *Kurier Warszawski*, 24 December 1914, p. 1.

48) Stanisław Jerzy Kozłowski, *Piosenki śpiewane przez autora w 'Mirażu'* (Warszawa: F. Hoesick, 1917). Original: Pola Negri — Polska Asta, Bufalo Bill... Gwiazdą jest naszego miasta Bufalo Bill... Od gości się u niej roi, Bufalo Bill... Aż ogonek do niej stoi, Bufalo Bill..

49) The 'extraordinary popularity of pictures from the Pola Negri series convinced the manager of the Casino theater extend the booking of the magnificent *The Slave of Passions*'. Niewolnica zmysłów, *Gazeta Łódzka*, no. 327 (9 December 1915), p. 2.

50) The first advertisement for the film was signed by the M. I. Bistrickij company, before its rights were transferred to Pathé. Cf. 'Chronika', *Sine-Fono*, no. 4-5 (1914), p. 37.



Figure 1: Russian trade paper advertisement for *The Slave of Passion*. Source: *Kine-zhurnal*, no. 1–2 (1915)

significance be lost. *Sine-Fono* also emphasized that Pola Negri performed the Apache and Salome dances.⁵¹⁾ Another trade paper *Kine-Zhurnal* described *The Slave of Passions* as 'The greatest Russian hit', stressing it starred the 'Russian Asta Nielsen' (see Figure 1).

The popularity of its first Negri vehicle encouraged Sfinks to initiate a series of films featuring the star under the banner *The Mysteries of Warsaw*,⁵²⁾ the first entry into which was another sensational melodrama, *Żona*, which premiered in Warsaw on 5 October 1915.⁵³⁾ Although the Russian Creo Company secured the rights to the series for its national market, the outbreak of war led to a severing of contact between Russia and Poland. With Sfinks cut off from the Russian market, the branding of Negri as the 'Russian Asta Nielsen' was over before it could really gather momentum. Negri herself moved to Germany to work on *Pola Negri — Serie* (1917–1918) for Saturn-

Film AG, before moving to the production company Projektions-Aktiengesellschaft Union to start her international career and become a 'vamp' star of both Hollywood and the German cinema of the 1920s.⁵⁴⁾ Sfinks would continue its operation in the independent state of Poland, maintaining its position as the nation's preeminent film production company until World War II.

Łukasz Biskupski is a research associate at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities SWPS in Warsaw, Poland. His work focuses on the history of film culture in Poland, and he is the author of a 2013 Polish-language monograph on film exhibition in Łódź before 1914 entitled *Miasto atrakcji*.

Films cited:

The Abyss (*Afgrunden*; Urban Gad, 1910), *Antony and Cleopatra* (*Marcantonio e Cleopatra*; Enrico Guazzoni, 1913), *Keys to Happiness* (*Klyuchi schastya*; Vladimir Gardin, Yakov Protazanov, 1913), *Last Days of Pompeii* (*Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeii*; Mario Caserini, Eleuterio Rodolfi, 1913), *Quo Vadis* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1913), *The Slave of Passions* (*Niewolnica Zmysłów*; Jan Pawłowski, 1914), *Sumurun* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1920), *The White Slave* (*Den hvide Slavehandel*; August Blom, 1910).

51) The existence of a range of promotional materials including posters, postcards, leaflets, and reviews is also emphasized. *Sine-Fono*, no. 3 (1914), p. 76–77.

52) For a detailed overview of the history of subsequent films see Mariusz Guzek, *Ibidem*, p. 365–392.

53) *Nowa Gazeta*, 5 October 1915, p. 1.

54) In 1920, Negri returned to the role of the Dancer in Ernst Lubitsch's *Sumurun* (1920).

SUMMARY

The Appropriation of Prestige.*Asta Nielsen's Star Persona in the Polish Territories of Russia before World War I***Łukasz Biskupski**

The article demonstrates how the Warsaw-based Sfinks Company capitalized on Asta Nielsen's screen persona to establish itself on the local market. I focus on the success of *The Abyss* and on a business practice of Sfinks which I call the 'appropriation of prestige', wherein a party seeks to tap into symbolic capital accumulated by another party, through association with that party. Sfinks associated itself with the prestige Nielsen had accumulated from her first film, *The Abyss*, and attempted to replicate this success with the Pola Negri vehicle *The Slave of Passions* (1914). In so doing, this essay contributes to the understanding of historical flows of both films and symbolic capital across different peripheral territories.