HYPERALLERGIC

FILM

A Polish Filmmaker Explores Trans Identity Through Abstraction

Wojciech Puś's *Endless* is loosely based on the life of a trans woman, but it is not about a journey from point A to point B.

Alpesh Kantilal Patel | August 17, 2017

Still from *Endless* by Wojciech Puś (all images courtesy of the artist)

Per the gracious invitation of artist Wojciech Puś, I had the opportunity to be on location in various parts of Poland during the summer of 2016 with the close-knit cast and crew of the experimental feature film *Endless*, which he wrote and directed. A work in progress, the film can be described as non-narrative, exploring trans themes with hints of the psychological thriller genre. Puś's eclectic points of reference include the 1962 film *Last Year at Marienbad* (directed by Alain Resnais), Lana Del Rey's music, and Beatriz Preciado's 2013 book *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*.

To provide some brief context, I was in Poland in fall 2015 and summer 2016 on a Fulbright grant to explore artworks examining LGBTQ subject matter. In 2014, having visited several cities in Poland as part of a study-abroad trip I had organized for my MFA and BFA art students at Florida International University in Miami, I believed that Poland was on the verge of becoming a hotbed of creativity for artists working on LGBTQ themes. In hindsight, I jumped the gun. LGBTQ subject matter has long been taboo to discuss, even within the progressive art scene. I do not mean to imply the Polish art world is homophobic, but certainly there was caution

(understandably so, in some cases) on the part of some people I met about divulging information about artists in connection to this sensitive issue in a country where more than 90% of the population is Catholic.

Still from *Endless* by Wojciech Puś

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That Puś's film is being produced at all is surprising, given that the official funding bodies of Poland have not embraced it. According to the artist, the lack of interest in LGBTQ subject matter is a longstanding issue, not something that can be solely traced to the new nationalistic anti-refugee government, which is opposed to LGBTQ rights, too. Indeed, the country's Minister of Justice, in his comments regarding the plethora of rainbow flags visible in the streets during the recent protests of the Polish government's restructuring of the courts, equated homosexuality with anti-patriotism.

Yet Puś' film is *not* about LGBTQ visibility or rights. It's closer in spirit to how performance studies scholar José Esteban Munõz describes queerness as distinct from the pursuit of rights in his seminal book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). He writes, "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality." The stills of a surreal scene filmed at a colonnaded space in Warsaw's Palace of Culture resonate with Munõz's statement. Puś mobilizes cool blue lighting: it is icy and melancholic, yet it suffuses the entire space, enveloping the subjects. In this way, they begin to blur with their surroundings, and the possibility emerges of moving away from the *now* and *here* toward the *then* and *there* (invoked in the title of Munõz's book). Indeed, the hottest part of a flame is blue. In its queerness, Puś's visual style is generous and porous.

-ENDLESS-

Endless is loosely based on the life of a trans woman who grew up in Łódź. Puś, though, is not interested in showing the subject's journey from a man to a woman, or from point A to point B. To do so would be to traffic in the fiction of the stability of identity — neither A nor B is fixed, after all. Instead, he approaches trans identity through the aesthetic mode of queer abstraction, a term borrowed from art historian David Getsy's writings that means, on the most basic level, using abstraction rather than figuration to explore LGBTQ experiences.

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Not that figuration is eschewed altogether. For instance, in one scene a character looks into a mirror, which begins to vibrate in synch with the bass of the haunting music of Lana Del Rey. In the background, another figure appears, wearing a strapless emerald green dress. The former closes their eyes and begins to sway to the music; soon, the latter walks behind them and begins to mimic their movements. (I am using the pronoun "they" because in this film the characters are not easily coded as male or female.) As the mirror vibrates, the commingling bodies appear to blur into one. Now and again the mirror is still, and this effectively snaps the figures back into distinct bodies. What the viewer witnesses is not straightforward (pun intended), and it is this productive ambiguity in which Puś revels.

There is a blurring not only of subject and subject, but subject and object, too. Figure and landscape often metaphorically merge into a seamless whole. In one scene, the scantily clad characters described above use selfie sticks to take photos of themselves near a natural pool nestled in the mountains. The hypersexuality and mysteriousness of both characters is echoed by the wild, lush flora and the overall surreal quality of the setting. In this way, the characters become entangled with the landscape.

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Given that Puś's project exceeds the fixed category "gay," I would not contextualize it within the history of art by primarily gay men in Poland that is beginning to be unearthed by scholars like art historian Paweł Leszkowicz. Puś's work is also different than that of his Warsaw-based contemporary peer Karol Radziszewski, an artist who often deals more explicitly with gay male lives. It makes more sense to consider Puś's work in a broader international context, outside of the art world. There are certainly connections with David Lynch, as art critic Cathy Drake points out in reference to Puś performance in Warsaw. Puś himself intimated as much when he described aspects of his film to me via text: "Even if you try to hold on to one character it dissolves into something you can follow only with your intellect or intuition."

I would also position his work within the genealogy of "new queer cinema." There are certainly affinities between Puś's work and that of Derek Jarman, in particular, his gender-bending *Caravaggio* (1986) and his abstract *Blue* (1993). Puś's presentation of a fraught or false utopia coupled with a strong use of color is reminiscent of Todd Haynes's *Safe* (1995). Finally, the sexy and violent world of Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (1992) comes to mind, as well. These are all provisional connections, of course, given the movie is still in production. It is slated to be finished by the end of 2018.

Still from *Endless* by Wojciech Puś

More work by Puś can be viewed at the Museum

Still from *Endless* by Wojciech Puś; photo by Kuba Ceran

Still from *Endless* by Wojciech Puś

of Modern Art in Warsaw.

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