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REVIEW

On the Ethics of the "Polish Kitsch Project"

Mariusz Pujszo's *Polish Kitsch Project* (*Polisz Kicz Projekt*, 2003)

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How do you make a film with (1) no money, (2) no screenplay, and (3) no directorial skills? These are three principal questions Mariusz Pujszo sets out to answer in his trashy 2003 debut feature *Polish Kitsch Project*, a "film within a film" in which Pujszo, playing himself, uses drastic measures to realize his dream of becoming a filmmaker. Except that Pujszo has said in interviews that he never conceived of himself as a director. And that he did use both money (if not very much) and a screenplay (if a poor one) to make the film. This tension, in itself unproblematic, anticipates the difficulty one faces when trying to articulate all the things that *are* in fact wrong with *Polish Kitsch Project*: Pujszo hides behind a veil of self-critical ambiguousness that is as misleading as the mockumentary genre which he uses to achieve it. Incidentally, he made a bad film, which, more seriously, is full of category mistakes that point to a twisted logic and an ethical deficiency that are impossible to counterbalance.

Meanwhile, answering the three questions quoted above requires little elaboration, though they are the fundament of Pujszo's narrative (hence, we're now speaking about the reality *within* the film). (1) You finance your film by using "alternative" (and hence unreliable) methods. (2) You improvise. (3) You steal ideas left and right, applying a formula which reflects Poles' taste and will thus guarantee success (supposedly 62% erotic, 15% horror etc.). Of course, both the style and the narrative of *Polish Kitsch Project* mirror these problems addressed within the film. As the story unfolds, the perfunctory techniques of the director cause various problems: his actors start rebelling, the story becomes ludicrous and inconsistent, and overall Pujszo is utterly overwhelmed by the challenges he's facing. Still, the characters in *Polish Kitsch Project*, including Pujszo himself, don't shy away from criticizing cinematic conventions as well as each other's work, making them into arrogant and hypocritical

caricatures of the cinematic elite.

Indeed, Pujszo's laugh-it-all-off default setting seems to conceal his true motives. To what degree does he commit to his criticism of Polish cinema? Does he really think that sex and action are all that a film needs to be succesful? Luckily, as is known in both linguistics and the philosophy of language, in real life, speech acts are typically veridicial, or else language would fail to fulfill its communicative purpose. Thus, even comedians and performance artists embrace the relaxing straightforwardness of ordinary speech, hence revealing their "real self", if with variyng degrees of frequency (a "revelation" that reminds me of the alienating moment of finally hearing an actor's voice whose lines I've only heard dubbed). Pujszo's unmasked self can be spotted in both interviews and during gala evenings, when self-abnegation is inverted and turns into relativist arrogance: in *Przy Piwie*, an informal interview series by Polish internet platform wp.pl, Pujszo – clearly bugged by his critical interviewer – says that "it doesn't matter *why* people liked it [*Polish Kitsch Project*]," only to go on to stress how the film was distributed abroad and lauded by US critics. By succeeding to "cause a furor with only 200 000 Zloty" (roughly 47 000 Euros), he not only claims to have achieved something that is unprecedented, but likewise something that state-funded films in Poland don't need to worry about.[1] He thereby reveals that he really wanted to have it both ways: be meaningful in meeting economic demands and making an impact, *and* make a trash film that cannot be criticized as being bad precisely because it admits to being a trash film (analogously, Pujszo claims to be "thankful" for having been called the worst director of all time because he's "not a director" at all[2]).

This form of category mistake can be found throughout *Polish Kitsch Project*, as the characters blithely celebrate the lack of a screenplay while taunting fellow filmmakers for trying to adopt the American way of storytelling. On the one hand, the film voices its dissatisfaction with the way things are in Polish film, on the other, Pujszo attempts to withdraw his project from any form of accountability by embracing its special status of "anti"-film. Whether that is possible is arguable at best, especially given that he retroactively does ascribe aesthetic ambitions to *Polish Kitsch*. Interestingly, Pujszo, editor-in-chief of the Polish men's magazine *Gentleman*, even pokes fun at his obsession with selling sex. In the story, his project is mainly financed by the scantily clothed, female protagonists themselves: to be able to participate in the film and thus fulfill their dream of becoming a film star, they must co-finance the budget. In return, the gullible women, who are solely selected for their appearance – or "talent", as Pujszo puts it in the film -, are shown naked from head to toes (though these particular body parts play a minor role) in scenes involving chases, sauna sessions, showering and sex… His critique of the exploitation of (beautiful) women *within* the film can thus be reapplied to the final product itself: with much of its surprisingly lengthy running time (70 min) dedicated to mindless erotic and quasi-erotic scenes (as a reviewer on IMDb warns, "the

bulk of the movie consists of women running around"), Pujszo falls nothing short of sexploitation.

This is not to say that there is something wrong with performative criticism – satire and parody are perfectly justifiable ways of vocalizing dissent. But to think that any particular form of art could somehow elude aesthetic and ethical categories is utterly misguided. Pujszo seems to think that parodying the very acts he is performing grants him a blank check to perform those actions without the least bit of liability, e.g. criticize other filmmakers while refusing criticism of his film, or complain about unoriginality while making a horrific film and a near-identical sequel (*Polish Kitsch Project: Counter Attack*, 2006). But Pujszo is not the only filmmaker to have misused the postmodern privilege of "consciously" making films in this way. *South Park*, the raunchy TV show by Trey Parker and Matt Stone – which, for the record, surpasses Pujszo in originality to a degree which is difficult to fathom -, is full of attacks on American culture which don't culminate in a truly convincing dissociation. A prime example of this ambiguous positioning is *South Park*'s yearly Christmas episode featuring Mr. Hankey, a talking mass of feces. Similarly to *Family Guy* or *The Simpsons*, Parker's and Stone's way of attacking American culture doesn't come by way of performative renunciation: instead of abstaining from a Christmas special altogether, they disfigure it, thus articulating their critique of the culture, but thus also contributing to it (an analogous line of reasoning applies to *South Park*'s use of melodramatic effects).

That said, there's less at stake for Parker and Stone, who may very well accept their cultural affiliation (after all, *South Park* belongs to the most-recognized American TV shows of all time). As I have stressed, Pujszo's problem is that he wants to take more out of his film than the little there is to take. Either way, it would be difficult to argue that *Polish Kitch Project* works with performative criticism. If Pujszo was only after making a point, where does the sequel fit in? Here, we find the same story retold again: sex, poor dialogues, no narrative… and artistic ambition. For all the difficulties one has with untwining Pujszo's real-life views in view of his self-critical nonchalance on screen, *Polish Kitch Project* is not very difficult to understand. It's just difficult to watch.

References

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kg2zX_l7E64 (07.02.2012) [in Polish, translation by author].

http://stopklatka.pl/-/6657401,nie-jestem-rezyserem-rozmowa-z-mariuszem-pujszo (10.11.2006) [in Polish, translation by author].