

A Conversation with Polish Film Director Wojciech Puś on His Project *Endless*

INTERVIEW BY ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL

Poland-based visual artist Wojciech Puś has been working on the project *Endless* since 2016. Comprised of a non-narrative feature film as well as planned and spontaneous performances, *Endless* explores identities-in-process and transition as a foil for the fixed way in which categories of identity typically circulate, particularly in Western European and American contexts. The entire project is inspired by the life of his friend Magdalena Wawrzynczak, who transitioned from male to female in 2013 and who lives in Łódź, Poland. I met Puś in Łódź, where he works as a professor at the National film school, in 2015 and a year later spent some time on the set of *Endless* as work on film began. This was also around the time that Poland began to become increasingly conservative in relation to gender and sexuality. In 2014 politicians created the parliamentary group “Stop Gender Ideology.” The first decision of the current President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, after he took up the post in 2015, was to veto the Gender Accordance Act, which would allow transgender people to change their legal gender without the approval of their parents (Szulc 2019). In the run-up to the most recent Parliamentary election in 2020, Law and Justice party leader Jarosław Kaczyński publicly conflated homosexuality with pedophilia (Davies 2019). Despite an increasingly hostile political climate, Puś has been able to continue work on his film. Below, we discuss *Endless*, focusing on how pornography functions as both a subject and aesthetic in the film. In February 2021, an episode of the series “Queer Landscapes”, based on *Endless*’s themes, premiered at the Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin festival in Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Alpesh Kantilal Patel (AP): The rights of LGBTQ-identified people in Poland have been increasingly compromised since The Law and Justice party took power in 2015. Could you fill us in on these recent events? Also, how has it been filming your project in this climate?

Wojciech Puś (WP): I am working with a small group of people. We have known each other for years and we trust each other. In terms of financing, the project is independent which of course means a lot of difficulties, but what’s more important, it also means total artistic freedom. I would say that political climate in Poland did not affect my production at all. This climate existed before 2015, but was very precisely hidden, so to the world my country appeared civilized and progressive, which is total fucking bullshit. Now because of the growing popular-

ity of alt-right movements, the real ugly face is more visible. I like it this way, you can see the enemy more clearly. Also, there is no nuanced discourse about LGBTQIA+ rights in Poland. Everything drowns in the discussion about partnership of white, middle-class, gay men. So, this is the real place in which we are now and probably will be for the next decade or two.

AP: Could you briefly describe *Endless*, how long you have been working on it, and how it came into being?

WP: It started in 2015, when I contacted my friend Magdalena Wawrzyńczak about working together on a short film project to be commissioned by Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. This was postponed, but we started to work together anyway on a screenplay based on Magdalena's life around the time of her sex confirmation surgery. It turned out that the screenplay for *Endless*, inspired by certain themes from the life of Magdalena, was a trembling mirror of sorts for me, through which our creative process resonated. It also acted as a venue for telling stories that were rooted in both of our own personal experiences. This is how *Endless* came about—no longer a typical feature film screened at a movie theatre, museum or gallery, but a multimedia cinematic hybrid referencing the idea of Zofia and Oskar Hansen's Open Form. Their postulate referred specifically to architecture and the visual arts, calling for the creation of works that aren't closed, but which offer the possibility of new contexts and interpretations. Such a project would be a living mass, always ready to be placed in a new set of circumstances, a new time and relationship with a changing reality. Because of this, it never loses its relevance, and the audience experiences the full complexity of the solutions that are proposed. The Open Form also argues for egalitarianism with regards to the collective nature of the artists' relationship with the audience taking part: this fully reflects the fundamental idea of *Endless*.

AP: You wrote the script as well as directed this film. Were scenes that could be read as pornographic part of your script-writing process?



All photographs and stills from *Endless* (film and live performances), courtesy of Wojciech Puś.



WP: From the very beginning, I already knew that the film will contain sexual matters in terms of how you start to think about your body in the process of transition. Some of the scenes I wrote in the script were described in a very explicit way. I really wanted the descriptions to be like that so people involved with the film would know what kind of a journey making this film would be. That is, there would be no surprises for them after jumping in. I initially gave the script to not only the actors to read, but also people in a technical department like, for example, my camera assistant and my gaffer. I've been told by many individuals (artists, producers, curators, gallerists), who have read the script, that it's absolutely impossible to get people who will be both good actors and also be so brave and honest in showing their bodies, and, you know, depicting sexual activities in front of the camera. The other thing was that I tried to approach actors and actresses in Poland, and they told me that it's impossible to find performers (especially male ones) in Poland who will be comfortable and, let's say, be adventurous in front of the camera. So, it took me 2 years to find the circle of people who would be happy to do that and, what's more important, understand and love my ideas; and were happy to bring their ideas, too! I had to find people who not only are fearless, but also would understand why we are using such and such imageries, and did not need to ask: Why do we have sex here? Why the sex needs to be so explicit?

AP: Given the difficulties you mentioned with finding actors, how did you "cast" the film? Or did you end up doing something different than traditional casting?

WP: I don't believe in the process of traditional casting—to find the right people for the right characters. It's a fake situation of proving something that maybe isn't there. For me, merging the actors' experiences into that of the characters is important, typical casting can't account

for this more complicated process of character development that I am interested in. Somehow, I would say that actors from the field of porn are often more believable, than “trained,” professional actors, and I’m not talking only about scenes which include sexual matters. With actors and artists experienced in porn, somehow the process is smoother and more truthful. They tend to discuss scenes on a level that is disconnected from the category of shame. I feel I have to work twice as much with professionals so I can dig into their “truth.”

AP: How did you find your actors in the end?

WP: The first person I approached was Szymon Czacki, an actor from the National Old Theatre in Krakow and who I had worked with before. For the standards of a “professional” actor, it’s really courageous of him that he agreed to be in this project. I think the second person I approached was Josef Ostendorf. He’s a great actor in many theatre pieces by Christoph Marthaler and Frank Castorf—both important European theatre directors. He is 65 years old and quite a big guy, but he’s not shy about using his body as a performer, actor, and artist. Josef is very daring on stage. To reveal the complicated layers of a character, he is not afraid to make the viewer uncomfortable. He has a great, philosophical approach to it. Josef then told me about his friend from Chile, Jorge Benavides, who lives also in Berlin. Jorge and I spent some time together talking. I loved his energy and wisdom and naturalness. I definitely wanted him to be in the film and I already knew which character he should portray because of his presence, his body, but also his background, in addition to being a porn actor, director and performer, he’s a sexual activist and healer. So yeah, we started some conversations, and then after I think the third one, he told me about his latest photoshoot with this beautiful, wonderful, electric young guy, Pierre Emö, and showed me his photos. I figured out that actually one year before I downloaded short porn films with Pierre, so I wrote him a message about the project and we decided to shoot one monologue, just to see if we can get along together. In the meantime, Pierre started to work more for theatre. In 2018, he performed in *Dekameron* with the Berliner Ensemble and in mainstream/arthouse productions such as Yann Gonzales’ *Knife + Heart*, nominated for Cannes International Film Festival’s *Palm d’Or*. In the beginning of the same year, we—Pierre, Jorge, Lina Bembe, Anton Tsyhulskyi, Magdalena, Szymon, and Josef, started our journey with a set of performances in Germany, France and Poland, at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

AP: How do these performances connect with the film?

WP: In the process of rehearsing the scenes from the script I developed the idea of live acts that could feel like cinematic experiences. Some of the scenes we’ve rehearsed felt right for the camera and others felt better to be experienced “live.” I thought about these events as neither theatre, nor a film, but an experience that allows the audience to be a part of the environment and the story told by actors and performers, who are using texts by Michel Leiris, Gilbert & George, Paul B.

Preciado, Anton Tsyhulskyi, Lana Del Rey, and also by me. I presented these 45 to 90-minute cinematic performances at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw: one was titled *Endless: Day as Days*, curated by Natalia Sielewicz and the other, *The Wind Connects Us*, which was a part of the *Parliament of Bodies (PoB) / The Night of Black Milk* show curated by Paul B. Preciado and Viktor Neumann. The performances were also documented on film and video and will be included in the film, as a part of a story.

AP: What is your approach to storytelling and how do you shape the characters in your film?

WP: In my film there is a story within the story within the story. That is, it is one story, really, but every time I show it from a different perspective, so it's a little bit like a multi-layered labyrinth. *Endless* brought together everything from performance and the diaristic book to the soundtrack I composed for the characters and performers. So, in a way the whole world of *Endless* manifested in different "media" co-existing together. Also, when I met Jorge Benavides and Lina Bembe, the fact that they are sex educators, porn actors and performers, immediately shaped the way how I developed the characters they play in *Endless*. This is the case with all of the people in the film that came to my project with a background and experience in art, porn, activism and education regarding sex and sex working. I was not only doing scenes for the film but also, I was doing a documentary about them: there is a blurring between what is documentary and fiction in *Endless*. If there is a main story, it is that based on the real events from the life of my friend Magdalena, who underwent a male-to-female transition in 2013. Her story is filled with meaningful characters who are loosely mirrored by the actors and performers. The result is a filtered dream about transition in every sense of the word. There is a link here to the classic film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961, dir. Alain Resnais), the characters of which seem to be in a state of in-betweenness. You cannot tell so much what their profession or "place in the society" is. They, their feelings and emotions, seem to be stuck in limbo. In the end, I mix the characters with the background of the actors' lives together to refuse the viewer a singular narrative.

AP: Does porn factor as an aesthetic or style in your films? Also, what else influenced your style?

WP: Shooting sex scenes was a really big test for me as I had never done so in the past. During the 3 years, almost 4 years, I have been working on this film, I would say that my cinematography in *Endless* is connected not only to paintings but also porn. In terms of the aesthetics of porn, I don't move the camera, so a viewer just has the possibility to put oneself in a position of a voyeur. This is something that is pretty common in porn films, especially homemade ones, where you have a fixed frame. You observe something but actually you cannot move, and we have a lot of this kind of imagery. So, it looks like a like a painting with things hap-

pening inside of it. You know, like a big panorama with people coming and going away, talking, dancing, fucking, and drinking. You have all these possibilities of thinking that something might have happened outside of the frame. I am thinking of the very specific usage of hidden camera in amateur porn films when you have it fixed, when you have it may be hidden somewhere. So, I put the viewer in a position of a voyeur. Apart from that, the composition of the bodies and the usage of light and colors in *Endless* have their roots in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, Francis Bacon, and Johann Heinrich Füssli. So, I combine the ripe and rich aesthetics of painting with something that in many ways culturally is sadly marked as low - meaning the rawness of scenes involving sex.

AP: You work a lot through abstraction which may be surprising given we are talking about pornography. Can you describe this abstraction and why it is relevant for your project? That is, your project is based on a specific origin story, but you are more invested in the notion of queerness as a shift in how we think about identity—trans or otherwise—rather than as fixed. Is that right?

WP: *Endless* is a hypertextual story of desire, loneliness and illusion that verges on the border of reality and hallucination, documenting the convulsive beauty and the uncanniness of identity in the process of transformation. The characters look upon each other and flow into one another, giving way to multiple hybrids of identity: supra(mental), supra(psychological), supra(gender), supra(racial), and (supra) sexual. So, yes, my interest is in queerness as a possibility to create bold, broad, and fluid worlds that can shift and expand fixed point of views, as nothing is what it seems. This also concerns the usage of porn and how codes of porn are read by people. I already mentioned curators, producers and gallerists, who told



me that it would be nearly impossible to find actors for this kind of film, but they were shocked by the explicit descriptions in my script. When I used words like “dick,” “tits,” “cock,” “cum,” “squirt,” and “fucking” they probably reflected on their codes of perception—what they “translate” as pornographic, based on their experiences.

AP: I remember when I visited you on set that we discussed how much landscape was a big part of your characters— that is, their bodies could not be seen as distinct from the world around them. Can you elaborate on what I provisionally termed “queer landscapes”?

WP: I loved the music of these words and I fell in love with your idea of queer landscape. Through the years I see that definitely I use the image of the body and the specific locations to create the feeling of unity between the characters and the landscape in terms that you can feel that the landscape is shaped somehow by their experiences, thoughts, sexualities. Imaginary and at the same time very real. In Germany, when we filmed in Schloss Kalkhorst, I decided to use the drone to shoot the landscape. Later in the film it will be merged with the CGI drone shots flying over bodies of Szymon and Magdalena. So, their bodies will literally become a landscape.

AP: Thanks, Wojciech, for taking some time out of your schedule to tell us more about *Endless*. It’s a fascinating project. Where can readers find out more about it as well as your other works?

WP: Thank you! There are excerpts from *Endless* as well as my other projects here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/wojciechpus>. Also, there’s some more info here on me: <https://culture.pl/en/artist/wojciech-pus>.

Endless

Cast: Szymon Czacki, Magdalena Wawrzyńczak, Josef Ostendorf, Pierre Emö, Lina Bembe, Anton Tsyhulskyi, Jorge Benavides, Pat Dudek

Director/cinematography/screenplay: Wojciech Puś

Sound design and music: Thomas Köner

Additional music: Wojciech Puś

Animation/VFX: Jerzy Tabor

Camera assistant: Tomasz Lechicki

Gaffer: Michał Bratkiewicz

References

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- Szulc, Lukasz. "How LGBT rights became a key battleground in Poland's election." *London School of Economics and Political Science Blog*, September 26, 2019. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2019/09/26/how-lgbt-rights-have-become-a-key-battle-ground-in-polands-election/>.