



The poster for Piotr Uklanski's *Summer Love*



Piotr Uklanski
The Nazis
1998



Piotr Uklanski
Untitled (Monsieur François Pinault, Président du Groupe Artemis)
2003

WESTERN PROMISES

by Ben Davis

There is a moment, about a third of the way though Piotr Uklanski's art Western *Summer Love*, when the Sheriff character (Boguslaw Linda) is guiding a posse through a ravine, in search of the wounded Stranger (Karel Roden). Pointing at an orange rock jutting conspicuously out from the craggy landscape, the Sheriff rasps to his men in thickly Polish-accented English, "You know what that means?" After a pause, he answers himself. "Absolutely nothing. But you did not know that."

This is something of a mission statement for *Summer Love*. The film, playing in the Whitney Museum's film and video galleries through Dec. 9, 2007, is stuffed full of signs and symbols that call attention to themselves as such, but are ultimately empty. And its aim is to point this out. With a Polish accent.

Clocking in at an hour-and-a-half, and starring a bevy of Eastern European stars alongside Val Kilmer (doing a decent job playing a bloated dead man), *Summer Love* is billed as the "First Polish Western." As writer and director of the film, Uklanski has basically adopted the entire rusty apparatus of Sergio Leone's '60s "Spaghetti Westerns" as a found object, injecting it with just enough irony to make its wheels spin again in a rickety new way.

Uklanski is an artist who has made good art out of so-so jokes for most of his career. He recreated the dance floor from *Saturday Night Fever* in real space, accumulated publicity images of movie stars dressed as Nazis, created a colorful print depicting the skull of art collector François Pinault, and took out an ad in *Artforum* featuring a photo of his curator girlfriend's nude bottom. His work is willfully eclectic and knowingly abrasive, at once kitsch-obsessed and art-world insiderish. It benefits from your being able to catch the references he is playing on, so that you simultaneously appreciate how his practice is steeped in the fundamentals of institutional critique, phototheory, etc., and how it wags its tongue at these very traditions.

Bigger and more ambitious than anything he has staged before, *Summer Love* nevertheless fits this formula to a T. It opens with a black screen, simulating crackling, old-style film stock, then a gunshot, and we watch Roden's Stranger -- an impression of Clint Eastwood's laconic Man with No Name to match Uklanski's Leone impersonation -- pick across the scene of a stagecoach robbery. The Stranger locates the corpse of Kilmer, and hauls it to a nearby town to collect the bounty on this Wanted Man's head. There, he is tricked out of his claim by the alcoholic Sheriff and a motley crew of cackling thugs, then shares a night of passion with a barmaid (Katarzyna Figura, playing "The Woman"), before facing down the town thugs, becoming wounded and fleeing into the desert. The Sheriff, in a perpetual booze stupor and jealous for the Woman's affections, sets off with his men to hunt him down.

At this point, *Summer Love* settles into a purposely directionless groove for the rest of its running time. The Sheriff has a falling out

Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*

with his men, and shambles back to town. The members of the posse continue to chase the Stranger, but are ineffective, ultimately wounding themselves and burying one of their own alive after he crushes his leg underneath his horse. The Stranger, sporting a gory head wound, spends the duration of the film circling back through the wilderness. Back in the town, a workman slowly erects a gallows. Kilmer lays on the ground, still dead.

In the movie's third act, an exchange between the Sheriff and the Woman unpacks somewhat their characters' personal baggage. It is the only real story we are given outside the pared-down symbolic action onscreen. This is followed shortly by a lengthy, mean-spirited rape sequence. The climax involves a purposely inert showdown between Stranger and Sheriff. The denouement has a leaden, empty feeling; the movie doesn't so much end as collapse in on itself.

In an interview in *Spike* magazine, Uklanski claims that "the violence in *Summer Love* is a graphic sign rather than graphic violence. It is a quotation." It is not clear in what sense he means this. On the one hand, all film violence is by definition a "graphic sign." On the other, despite being generally steeped in Leone's iconography, by far the most vivid and individually imagined aspects of *Summer Love* are the details of the various characters' degradations, from the Sheriff pathetically rigging a special arm sling to allow himself to carry on drinking despite his delirium tremens, to the Stranger cauterizing his head wound by stuffing it with gunpowder and setting it on fire, to the savage tooth pulling and head shaving that marks the Woman's violation.

The resulting sense of lurking directorial perversity cuts against the pseudo-Brechtian distancing effect of the film's genre-recreation, a spillover that is characteristic of Uklanski. You get the feeling that the exercise is about being able to hold up and enjoy these traumas as spectacles, free from any pesky connection to a real referent, rather than any commentary on them.

There is a certain low-voltage pleasure in the simple act of stylistic cannibalism itself, of course. Nevertheless, *Summer Love's* sadism, combined with the pointed way Uklanski undermines his audience's investment in the narrative, leaves you grasping for some kind of idea to justify the experience. For this purpose, several ready clichés are close at hand. You could say, for instance, that the artifice of *Summer Love* points out the "constructedness" of screen violence -- but the fact that movie Westerns trade in artifice is hardly in burning need of being pointed out.

Similarly, this "Polish Western" could be pitched as some kind of statement about "national identity." In a pamphlet accompanying its Whitney showing, curator Chrissie Iles writes that the Western has a history as a metaphor in Poland, and hypothesizes that a scene during *Summer Love's* final face-off when a cart explodes with clouds of colored dust references an explosion in a paint factory during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 (just as the Woman's shaved head is probably an oblique Holocaust reference).

The truth, however, is that rather than adding up to any coherent "Polish" allegory, these isolated hints serve mainly to throw into relief the hollowness and malleability of a form that has traveled very far from its roots. It is thus more a personal statement about Uklanski's own condition, as a peripatetic, global artist, splitting time between New York and Paris, than it is a statement about themes of national culture (he is quite open that his mainstream Polish audience found the film "troublesome" and basically illegible).

The key to the film, finally, comes in unlocking the reasoning behind the choice of subject matter. "I definitely wanted to start from

Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*Still from *Summer Love*

something that is so bankrupt that it is empty," Uklanski tells *Spike*. "The Western has a whole history of 'social relevance' in defining American culture. Then talking about its corruption, etc. Then the European chapter. So much in the past and nothing in the present. I saw it as a very codified melodramatic genre that is only theatre." Iles starts from the same premise: "The continued popularity of the Western across the world is not shared within the United States, where it has long been dismissed as a low form of entertainment."

But you have to wonder, for all their reflections on the globalization of culture, how often do these people get out of the house? If anything, from Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* to Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* to *Deadwood* on HBO, the Western lives on in the present as a vehicle for hefty Statements about Big Issues. One of the most important living American authors is Cormac McCarthy, whose Faulkneresque novels breathe new grit into the same mythical West that Uklanski and Iles dismiss as passé. Joel and Ethan Coen's recent adaptation of McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, in fact, has some of the same feeling of picking up on pulp archetypes as *Summer Love* -- only it proceeds in the spirit of planting the genre firmly in contemporary ground.

The inertia Uklanski ascribes to the Western is thus prescriptive, not descriptive; it represents his own emptiness, not the genre's; his own condescension towards a popular audience, not a popular audience's naiveté. If he needs to go all the way back to Leone as his source of inspiration, it is because the Italian director's European Westerns were already deracinated quotations, and he's bent on justifying a twisted ode to pulp culture as an essay on the notion of a "copy of a copy," a phrase that evokes the mellifluous theorizing of Jean Baudrillard -- or a sort of blank, Valley Girl irony-for-irony's sake, depending on where you stand.

One of the great fallacies of contemporary art is that redoubling alienation constitutes commentary on it. This conceit is socially troubling, indicating a certain paralysis of critical thinking. But it is also just plain wrong, linguistically. You can only carry irony out to three degrees: something can be cool, or it can be "cool," sarcastically, meaning the opposite. At the third degree, it becomes indeterminate, meaning neither one nor the other -- ""cool"" -- and after that, semantic inflation sets in. There are no useful fourth- and fifth-order ironies. Each is as blank as the last. Asked whether his movie should be defined as either serious or a joke, Uklanski answers, "Of course not."

This collapse of meaning is textbook Baudrillard. But, finally, consider this: Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* was published in the same year, 1968, that Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* was released. The French guru's *Simulacra and Simulation* is now 25-plus years of age -- older, in fact, than Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America*, the rape scenes of which *Summer Love* so lovingly evokes.

Did someone mention things that have a history of "social relevance" in defining culture, but have become highly coded genres and purely theatrical gestures? Now that is food for thought.

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Still from *Summer Love*



Still from *Summer Love*



Still from *Summer Love*



Still from *Summer Love*



Still from *Summer Love*



Piotr Uklanski [right] filming *Summer Love*, with Val Kilmer