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In Poland, That Is To Say Nowhere

*Ubu roi in the Czech and Polish Film Versions*¹⁾

Abstract

This article comprises an analysis and comparison of two film adaptations of the play *Ubu roi* by Alfred Jarry, made in Central Europe following the fall of communism in 1989 — one was shot in the Czech Republic (*Král Ubu*, F. A. Brabec, 1996), the other one in Poland (*Ubu Król*, Piotr Szulkin, 2003). The article explores the motivation behind these adaptations and how it is reflected in their structure and semantics. The significant reception Jarry's work had enjoyed in both cultures in previous decades appears to have been one such stimulus. Furthermore, the source had a potential for being an appropriate foundation for a metaphorical expression of current political and social problems as well as for post-modernist re-writing and variations. Finally, Jarry's play was attractive on account of its provocative nature and drastic humour, which had a potential of drawing audiences. The adaptations differ in the degree to which they stress each of these factors. F. A. Brabec transformed Jarry's play into a universal parable of warning, with a diversity of allusions referring to the state of Czech society at the time of shooting. The director pays equal attention to elaborate visual stylization of the film, while making occasional use of effects related to corporeality and sexuality, which can often be seen to be superficial and pandering. Piotr Szulkin's adaptation is a radically pessimistic reflection on the development and current situation in Poland and the entire world. The film has the form of an eccentric vision mixing elements of grotesque, dystopia, carnival as well as vaudeville. At the same time, it is designed as a complex structure based on repetition and variation.

Keywords

adaptation, re-writing, intertextuality, humour, corporeality, political and social issues

1) As Jarry himself said, the scene of *Ubu roi* is set "en Pologne, c'est-à-dire Nulle Part"; Alfred Jarry, "Conférence prononcée à la création d'«Ubu roi»" in Alfred Jarry, *Ubu roi*, ed. Henri Béhar (Paris: Larousse, 1985), 135.

Following 1989, the year of fundamental political changes that resulted in the end of communist rule in many countries, two film adaptations of the play *Ubu roi* (1896)²⁾ by Alfred Jarry were shot in Central Europe. One was made in the Czech Republic as a directing début of the renowned cinematographer F. A. (František Antonín) Brabec (*Král Ubu*, 1996),³⁾ the other came into existence later in Poland (*Ubu Król*, 2003); it was directed by Piotr Szulkin, who had gained an international reputation for his “dystopian tetralogy”.⁴⁾ Although Szulkin’s *Ubu* was not presented to audiences until the beginning of the 21st century, preparations for both projects ran more or less in parallel. Szulkin first attempted at the realization of his adaptation in the first half of the 1990s, but production difficulties caused the shooting to be postponed multiple times. As a consequence, *Ubu Król* was considered a “backward work”, which belonged, in respect to its orientation, more to the previous decade;⁵⁾ this was undoubtedly one of the reasons why the film only received a restrained reception from Polish critics and little interest from the audience.⁶⁾ Similarly, F. A. Brabec achieved only a partial success both among experts and audiences.⁷⁾ However, while F. A. Brabec continued with his career as a director after *Král Ubu* (he has since made seven more feature films), *Ubu Król* was Szulkin’s last work. Not only because of his deteriorating health, he never made another film after that, dying in 2018.⁸⁾

The fact that two Central-European film industries realized, shortly one after the other, a film based on the same (rather old and foreign-language) source gives rise to the question as to the reasons for such parallel decisions. We can allow for four possible motivations:

- (1) The tradition — the long-term reception of Alfred Jarry’s works both in the Czech and Polish cultures — acted as a stimulus.
- (2) The story of King Ubu was considered to be a suitable basis for the artistic reflection of contemporary political and social problems (the filmmakers wanted to come to terms with the past as well as the complexity and conflicts of the post-communist era).

2) In English, several titles exist, including *Ubu the King*, *King Ubu*, *Ubu Roi* and *Ubu Rex*.

3) In the Czech cultural tradition, Jarry’s play alternates between two titles. The book editions are titled *Ubu králem* (“Ubu as the King”), but numerous theatre productions — and the film adaptation — use the title *Král Ubu* (“King Ubu”).

4) The tetralogy consists of the films *Golem* (*The Golem*, 1979), *Wojna światów — następne stulecie* (*The War of the Worlds: the Next Century*, 1981), *O-bi, o-ba. Koniec cywilizacji* (*O-bi, O-ba: The End of Civilization*, 1984) and *Ga, ga. Chwała bohaterom* (*Ga, Ga: Glory to the Heroes*, 1985). See Ludmila Gruszewska-Blaim, “Dystopianising the dystopian: Piotr Szulkin’s film tetralogy,” in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 202–216; Krzysztof Loska, “The apocalyptic imagination in the films of Piotr Szulkin,” *Maska. Magazyn antropologiczno-społeczno-kulturowy*, no. 35 (2017), 11–22, accessed 22 June, 2019, <http://www.maska.psc.uj.edu.pl/numery/numery-regularne/numery-31-40/numer-xxxv#>; Sebastian Jakub Konefał, “Piotr Szulkin: katastrofy logosu i absurdu istnienia,” *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 104 (2018), 216–227.

5) Łukasz Maciejewski, “Grównem po równo,” *Kino* 38, no. 1 (2004), 50; Piotr Mirski, “Piotr Szulkin z perspektywy,” *Kino* 46, no. 10 (2012), 88.

6) Tadeusz Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego: Twórcy, filmy, konteksty* (Chorzów: Videograf II, 2009), 564.

7) Vladimír Just, “Ubu spoutaný?,” *Film a doba* 42, no. 4 (1996), 186–187; Andrej Halada, *Český film devadesátých let: Od Tankového praporu ke Koljovi* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 1997), 158–159; Jan Čulík, *Jací jsme: Česká společnost v hraném filmu devadesátých a nultých let* (Brno: Host, 2007), 531–532.

8) See Sebastian Jakub Konefał, “Piotr Szulkin (26 April 1950–3 August 2018),” *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 10, no. 1 (2019), 75–76, accessed 8 July, 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2040350X.2018.1543997>.

- (3) The play was believed to provide elbow room for creativity and a suitable basis for (post-modernist) re-writing, re-interpretation, variations as well as intertextual referencing.
- (4) It was believed that because of its provocative nature, infringing taboos both in language and behaviour, drastic humour and spectacular scenes, Jarry's play would be attractive to film audiences (and would also lend itself well to various modifications, further increasing its attractiveness).

In this text, I will focus on whether it is possible to find some evidence of the above mentioned motivations for adaptation in the Ubu films, or whether it is possible to interpret some parts of these films as the result of these motivations. Moreover, I will pay attention to the formal and semantic features of both films as well as to their mutual similarities and differences.

The common starting point: *Ubu roi* by Alfred Jarry

The first performance of *Ubu roi* in December 1896 was described as "one of the most scandalous first runs which have ever been given".⁹⁾ The role of the forerunner of Dadaism, Surrealism and Theatre of the Absurd was attributed to Jarry¹⁰⁾ mainly owing to this and other plays of the so called Ubu cycle.¹¹⁾

The radicalism of *Ubu roi*, which was originally intended for puppet theatre, is based on consistent schematizing of the plot and "emptying" of the characters. They are devoid of psychological features and reduced to their corporeality and instincts. The protagonist, Papa Ubu, "is the ultimate anti-hero. Monstrous, animalistic and foul-mouthed".¹²⁾ According to Martin Esslin's depiction, "he is mean, vulgar, and incredibly brutal."¹³⁾ Moreover, other characters are also determined in their actions by cruelty, avariciousness, stupidity and cowardice. The play shows in an exemplary manner how fight for power and power mechanisms function under such conditions: In fictitious Poland, Papa Ubu, at the insistence of Mama Ubu, has King Wenceslas and his sons assassinated. He seizes the throne and enriches himself unscrupulously. He is later defeated by the Russian tsar in a battle in Ukraine. Mama Ubu is expelled from Poland by Wenceslas's only descendant who has survived. At the end of the play, Ubu and his allies sail for France.¹⁴⁾

The emphasis on grotesque, bizarre and monstrous situations, along with the lack of theatrical "illusion of reality", triggers a distanced attitude in the audience. Thus, horrible

9) Ludvík Kundera, "Ubuovský svět Alfreda Jarryho," in *Ubu*, Alfred Jarry (Praha: KRA, 1993), 9 (all translations from Czech to English by the author).

10) "Jarry [...] must be regarded as one of the originators of the concepts on which a good deal of contemporary art, and not only in literature and the theatre, is based." Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 259.

11) *Ubu cocu* (*Ubu Cuckolded*, 1897, published 1944), *Ubu enchaîné* (*Ubu Enchained*, 1900), *Ubu sur la butte* (*Ubu on the Mound*, 1901). Theatre productions and adaptations often combine parts of various Ubu plays.

12) Brian Nelson, *The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 173.

13) Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 256.

14) A detailed reproduction of the play's action is found, *inter alia*, in Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 85–89.

actions and cynical statements are not taken “seriously” and become laughable. The parodic approach, applied conspicuously, is connected with this. *Ubu roi* (as well as other Ubu plays) refers with humour and ridicule to the conventions of classical historical drama and turns nobility into baseness.¹⁵⁾ The parodic nature of these plays also becomes evident in the use of language; it is ostentatiously heterogeneous, combining archaic and florid formulations with striking vulgarisms.

On the other hand, the characters and actions are open for adding various concretizing meanings and generalizing interpretations. As Henri Béhar notes, Ubu was perceived as a caricature of both a bourgeois and an anarchist; he was also considered a symbol of capitalism, Nazism and Stalinism.¹⁶⁾ In a similar vein, Kateřina Miholová speculates that Papa Ubu is an archetypal phenomenon that can be seen as a petit bourgeois, as a dictator and as a mythical creature.¹⁷⁾ Besides, Jarry himself described Ubu as a character that combined features of all people and was an “ignoble double” of the theatrical audience.¹⁸⁾

In general, the play *Ubu roi* (along with others in the Ubu cycle) is a dynamic whole, whose structure is based on combining heterogeneous elements; it presents unspecified characters and events, inviting various explanations of their significance. Therefore, it enables and motivates more new and new readings, modifications and adaptations.

The Czech Ubu

Jarry's *Ubu roi* was first staged by the Prague avant-garde theatre *Osvobozené divadlo* ('Liberated Theatre') in November 1928.¹⁹⁾ Its translation by the actor Jiří Voskovec was published along with other texts by Jarry in 1930.²⁰⁾ Following the Second World War, the Ubu theme was subject to creative paraphrase by the poet and playwright Josef Kainar in his plays *Ubu se vrací* ('Ubu Returns', 1947–1948) and *Ubu pokračuje* ('Ubu Lives On', ca. 1950). They were never published in their day; the former was staged by the *Nové divadlo satiry* ('New Theatre of Satire') in early 1949, with little success and a run of only six performances. *Ubu se vrací* was written as an absurd grotesque depicting fight for power and cynical demagoguery; by contrast, the latter piece, *Ubu pokračuje*, is a considerable update on the characters and action and appears to justify and celebrate the Communist takeover in February 1948.²¹⁾

By the 1960s, Jarry's works were firmly established in Czech culture. A new selection of his texts was published in 1961.²²⁾ However, it was only the staging titled *Král Ubu* at the

15) Henri Béhar, “Ubu roi 1896: Notice,” in *Ubu roi*, Alfred Jarry (Paris: Larousse, 1985), 13.

16) Ibid., 14.

17) Kateřina Miholová, *Král Ubu / Ubu the King. Jarry & Grossman & Fára* (Praha: KANT, 2007), 17–20, 137–139. The book comprises both the text in Czech (9–125) and its (shortened) English version (127–192).

18) Alfred Jarry, “Questions de théâtre,” *Ubu roi*, Alfred Jarry, 138.

19) For the Czech reception of the works by Jarry, see Kundera, “Ubuovský svět Alfreda Jarryho,” 13; Miholová, *Král Ubu / Ubu the King*, 21, 140.

20) Alfred Jarry, [*Nadsamec, Messalina, Ubu králem*] (Praha: Rudolf Škeřík, 1930).

21) See Josef Kainar, *Ubu se vrací a jiné hry* (Praha: Filip Tomáš — Akropolis, 2019), 199–334; commentary 690–695.

22) Alfred Jarry, *Ubu králem a jiné hry a prózy* (Praha: Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury a umění, 1961). As

Divadlo Na zábradlí ('Theatre on the Balustrade') in Prague, where it opened in May 1964, that was of essential importance.²³⁾ The production, created by the director Jan Grossman and the writer and screen-writer Miloš Macourek, also featured selected passages from other texts by Jarry, especially *Ubu enchaîné*.²⁴⁾ The adapted play contains various actualizing allusions to the situation and ideology of the period, but (using the passages from *Ubu enchaîné*) it concentrates primarily on the problem of proclaimed freedom of behaviour which is ordered and controlled, thus becoming a new form of violence.²⁵⁾

Grossman's production brought the Ubu theme into the awareness of a wider Czech audience; moreover, it illustrated the possibilities of adapting Jarry's work to contemporary conditions. Although the play was not allowed to be presented after the invasion of the troops of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968, it survived in the cultural memory. This memory was supported by the fact that the TV version of the performance shot in summer 1968 had been saved and was made available to the general public after the fall of communism in November 1989.

The authors of the film adaptation made in 1996, exactly one hundred years after the play premiered, could expect that the characters of Papa and Mama Ubu were not unknown to the audiences (but it was also evident that the film would be compared with the memorable staging from the 1960s). It was symptomatic that the screenplay initiated by F. A. Brabec was written by Miloš Macourek, who had co-authored the staging directed by Jan Grossman. Macourek declared that his aim was to re-write Jarry's work in such a way that it would have the chance "to speak to as large an audience as possible".²⁶⁾ Nevertheless, this aim clashed with the attitude of Brabec, a beginning director and renowned cinematographer, who considered the project to be, first and foremost, a chance to apply impressive visual stylization. Therefore, the film is characterized by evident (and sometimes disturbing) heterogeneity of its components.

The adaptation keeps the main features of the play's plot; nevertheless, it departs from Jarry's work in many ways:

The film lays emphasis on the presentation of megalomania, coarse manners, stupidity, niggardliness and the power conflicts resulting from them. In this respect, the film reaches further than the play, because it shows as a warning (in the days when there is a

for the play *Ubu roi*, the volume included its translation by Jiří Voskovec (who emigrated in 1948), revised and signed by his brother Prokop. The translation (and its variations) was analysed by K. Míhlová, Š. Belisová and O. Nádvořík. See Míhlová, *Král Ubu / Ubu the King*, 33–34, 150–151; Šárka Belisová, "La traduction tchèque d' *Ubu Roi*," in *Alfred Jarry et la culture tchèque / a česká kultura*, ed. Mariana Kunešová (Ostrava: Ostravská univerzita v Ostravě, 2008), 201–210; Ondřej Nádvořík, "Bratrský překlad neboli porovnání a stylistická analýza dvou textů *Ubu králem*," in *Král Ubu: Panděro moci*, Alfred Jarry (Ostrava: Národní divadlo moravskoslezské, 2016), 35–72.

23) K. Míhlová thoroughly analysed the production directed by Grossman and its critical reception in her "interactive reconstruction". See Míhlová, *Král Ubu / Ubu the King*.

24) Alfred Jarry, *Král Ubu*. Adapted by Miloš Macourek and Jan Grossman (Praha: Dilia, 1966).

25) Jan Grossman, "Král Ubu [1966]," in *Analýzy*, Jan Grossman (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1991), 381–382.

26) See the author's comment in the book publication of the screenplay. Miloš Macourek, "Autorská poznámka," in *Král Ubu. Filmový scénář Miloše Macourka*, Alfred Jarry (Praha: Cinema, 1996), 88. The publishing of the screenplay, enriched with photographs, at the time of the first run of the film, bears witness to the high ambitions of the project.

general conviction that democratic development after the fall of communism is irreversible) that unscrupulous striving for power still remains a serious and indestructible danger. While the defeated protagonist escapes at the end of the play, Ubu in the film liquidates mercilessly those who stand in his way (i.e. the legitimate ruler and his family) and is apparently on the rise to power again.²⁷⁾

The film includes various allusions referring to the presupposed experience and attitudes of its audience. In connection with the traumatizing recent past, it was especially the Russian component of the story that seemed suitable. For example, the Russian army is marching festively (at an accelerating and jerky pace) across the snow-covered steppes to the accompaniment of the song *Kalinka*, which evokes concerts by the Alexandrov Ensemble, the official choir of the Red Army. Grotesque scenes “with the Russian tsar, dreamily infantile and playful in a senile way”²⁸⁾ are perfectly elaborated. Moreover, special attention was paid to the motif of corruption, this time by means of the somewhat pandering cameo appearance of the singer Lou Fanánek Hagen whose (added) role of a jailer is more an interlude serving his own self-promotion.²⁹⁾ There was an obvious effort to enlarge the potential audience by casting celebrities from the music scene.³⁰⁾

Other departures from the theatrical source were supposed to attract audiences' attention by reaching beyond the sphere of common and acceptable phenomena. The emphasis on vulgarity and corporeality, which had already been part of the provocative orientation of Jarry's play, is clearly intensified in the film.³¹⁾ Ugliness and taboo bodily manifestations (belching, flatulence, urinating) are performed almost with delight. This could appear to be a liberating gesture to a certain extent, but it could also signal a preference for primitive humour. The prominent position of sexuality functions in an analogous way. Indications found in several passages of the play *Ubu sur la butte* motivated the conception of Mama Ubu as a “sexual demon” who, using her passion, liquidates (literally “turns into ashes”) not only Ubu's ally Palcontent Gyron, but also a whole regiment of the Russian army. The character of Eleutheria is borrowed from the play *Ubu enchaîné*. She is a girl who — in an added line of action without any relation to Jarry's text — does her best to solve “the problem of reproduction”, in which she finally succeeds.

Although the film is characterized by a clear development of plot and, at the same time, it concentrates on drastic effects, it is its artistic construction, visual stylization and various formal contrasts that are often at the forefront. One of them is the opposition between theatrical and filmic presentation. The film version reflects the theatrical nature of

27) The screenplay suggests the total massacre of the ruler's numerous family (Jarry, *Král Ubu. Filmový scénář Miloše Macourka*, 85–87); however, in the film one of the children symbolically survives and escapes with a dagger in his hand so that — as Brabec put it — “at least a little light of hope” remains. Macourek, “Autorská poznámka,” 88.

28) Just, “Ubu spoutaný?,” 187.

29) The director acted upon the same principle when casting the character of Mama Ubu. Lucie Bílá bears out her status at the end of the film when she plays her real role of a pop-singer.

30) See Just, “Ubu spoutaný?,” 186–187.

31) When, for example, Ubu says in the play that he will “invent a wind-driven carriage capable of transferring the entire army”, in the film he adds that the soldiers will drive it by “powerful farts” (0:06:27–0:06:37). Alfred Jarry, *The Ubu Plays*, transl. by Cyril Connelly and Simon Watson Taylor (London: Methuen, 1983), 53.

its source (this is even conventionally signalled by the curtain being raised at the beginning and dropped at the end). The scene of reckoning with the aristocracy is presented as a stage action and adequate stage equipment (a trapdoor) is used. The film also retains *teichoscopy*, a traditional theatrical technique consisting in verbal references to passing events which are not possible or suitable to show directly (the reporting of the murdering of King Wenceslas' children). On the other hand, the film makes an extensive use of the real (or cinematically treated) setting, alternating between open and closed space. Thus, one of the forms of the depicted space are boundless areas sometimes structured by a colonnade and solitary palaces. The emphasis is placed on symmetrical compositions and a perfect choreography of the characters' movements, which sometimes assume (thanks to acceleration) the form of a grotesque dance. At the opposite pole is the dark and cramped space, such as a subterranean vault and an underground sewer (where Ubu symbolically stays at the end of the film) or, in an extreme case, the inside of a grand piano in which the escaping prince hides.

The integrating element of the Czech film adaptation of *Ubu roi* is its orientation towards producing a story presented as a warning parable. At the same time, it is affected on the one hand by the tension between a tendency towards the artistic, and a clear effort to attract the widest possible audience on the other. This leads to the accumulation of spectacular and drastic scenes as well as pandering and incongruous ones. In *Král Ubu* the tendency towards "wild", free and provoking adaptations from the period shortly after 1989 — which is best exemplified by the film *V žáru královské lásky* (The Flames of Royal Love, 1990) by Jan Němec — is fading away. On the other hand, the film marks the beginning of a path towards adaptations, both attractive and trivial, of the works of classic Czech literature which were shot by F. A. Brabec later: *Kytice* (Wild Flowers, 2000), *Máj* (May, 2008).

The Polish Ubu

The Polish interest in *Ubu roi* was sparked by the fact that the play was situated in this very country, although it took place in Poland that "did not exist". The first translation was published in 1936 by the renowned translator and critic Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński.³²⁾ Since the 1950s, the play has been staged many times by Polish theatres.³³⁾ An animated feature film based on the Ubu plays was made in France by Polish graphic artist and noted author of cartoons Jan Lenica (*Ubu et la grande Gidouille*, 1979). The comic opera *Ubu Rex* by the famous composer Krzysztof Penderecki dates from 1991. Furthermore, Jarry's work has left a strong mark in Polish visual arts (e.g. the graphic designer and illustrator Jan Młodożeniec).³⁴⁾

32) See Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Król, czyli Polacy* (Wolne lektury, SA), accessed June 25, 2019, <http://wolnelektury.pl/katalog/lektura/ubu-krol>.

33) One of these productions was directed by Piotr Szulkin (French Institute, Warsaw 1986).

34) As for the reception of Jarry's works in Poland, see Aleksander Ablamowicz, "Alfred Jarry et le modernisme polonais," in *Alfred Jarry et la culture tchèque / a česká kultura*, ed. Mariana Kunešová, 241–245; Mikołaj

In his film adaptation, Piotr Szulkin approached Jarry's *Ubu roi* with the same latitude which he had applied to the novel *Der Golem* (The Golem) by Gustav Meyrink or *The War of the Worlds* by Herbert George Wells. He keeps the essential elements of the story and utilizes some passages from Boy-Żeleński's classic translation, yet he also interferes in the work considerably, transforming and updating it. Although the depiction of the imaginary country remains, it becomes a basis for the subjective reflection of the development, situation and perspectives of actual Poland; at the same time, this reflection aspires to express the general nature of social and political processes. Minor yet noticeable language changes can be seen as a clue suggesting such an approach: All real geographic names used in the play were deformed slightly (Poland became Foland, Poznań became Foznan, Lithuania became Fithuania, etc.). These changes correspond fully with Jarry's liking for puns,³⁵⁾ but they also create a distance from the film's source, which is well-known through its application of real data concerning Poland into the framework of fiction. On the other hand, this is Szulkin's way of suggesting that the depicted story should not only relate to concrete facts and phenomena, but should represent a generalizing vision as well.

The primary means of implementing the above mentioned approach is maintaining and stressing theatricality. The film by Szulkin — like that by Brabec — is based on clear-cut stylisation. Szulkin follows up on the dystopian and post-apocalyptic worlds depicted in his previous works. The principal place of action is a large complex of shabby industrial buildings including a mixture of closed and open spaces that are enlivened by adequately shabby characters. These spaces represent suitable settings for various collective performances, which are often eccentric, grotesque and spectacular (exactly in line with the tradition of dystopian films). The depicted scenes contain numerous elements reflecting real facts and events, but these are always dispersed in a heterogeneous whole. They become parts of activities evoking a rollicking event or a carnival, which precludes their unambiguous classification. This is how the era of communism in Poland, among other things, is evoked in the film. The setting sees members of the paramilitary police formations known as ZOMO, which were used for crushing opposition rallies, alongside "progressive young people" with red scarves, who show gymnastic and "cultural" performances. There are banners with inscriptions hanging on the walls which parody revolutionary slogans and give them a paradoxical and absurd nature.³⁶⁾ In addition, other generalized references to historical experience appear — appeals for the greatness of the nation and the will of the people, executions staged as a folk festival to the accompaniment of music, organized abuse of those called traitors and culprits of failures, etc. The principal characters are conceived to motivate audiences to search for parallels in reality, but again without the possibility of their unambiguous identification. Film critics noted that the character of Papa Ubu carries certain traits of the communist satrap Władysław Gomułka as well

Gliński, "Król Ubu czyli Polacy' — oczami Polaków," 2013, accessed June 25, 2019, [https:// culture.pl/pl/artykul/krol-ubu-czyli-polacy-oczami-polakow](https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/krol-ubu-czyli-polacy-oczami-polakow).

35) The word *merdre* (*pschitt* in English), which opens the play, is famous. Another example is the word *phynances*. See Jarry, *Ubu roi*, 23, 67; *The Ubu plays*, 21, 58.

36) See Janusz Wróblewski, "Grówno narodowe," *Polityka*, no. 3 (2004), 61.

as Andrzej Lepper, a trade union chief and populist politician who served as deputy of Sejm, the Polish parliament, when the film was shot.³⁷⁾

The primary aims of the Polish adaptation become evident when it is compared with the Czech version. F. A. Brabec concentrates, in his effort to produce attractiveness, also on the fate of the play's side characters, even adding some new ones (see the bizarre story of Eleutheria), while Szulkin reduces the marginal components of Jarry's work (for example, King Wenceslas' children are absent entirely). The space thus created is filled with the reflection of political and social issues based both on Polish historical experience and the complexity of the contemporary world.

The group of actors who participate in the execution of power is expanded and differentiated. Ubu enforces his criminal governance both in cooperation and conflict with the church. He also relies on his opportunistic advisor, on a man who does the "dirty work" and on a deranged intellectual and visionary who promotes an obscure project (concerning the industrial use of the "national pshitt")³⁸⁾ supposed to lead to economic growth and prosperity.

In an analogous way, the position of the people as a counterpart to those who rule them is stressed. At the beginning of the film, ordinary people are presented as a crowd of sleepers. As soon as they wake up, they worry about nothing but the lack of beer. Consequently, they are depicted as an impoverished, passive, infantile and manageable mass that willingly extols those who are in power just now and therefore is to blame for the state of the society.³⁹⁾ This is illustrated, in a concise form, by the motif of a blind girl repeatedly offering flowers to those in power. The international political context is incorporated into the film by means of caricatures of the ambassadors of important countries who, under the guise of aid, look after their own interests.

Szulkin's *Ubu Król* is provocatively pessimistic in two aspects. (1) It shows the development of society (and evidently not only Polish) as a sequence of various regimes which seize power but in fact do not differ from one another. They are all characterized by malicious intentions, incompetence and love of gain. The proclaimed democracy is presented as a means of oppression. In a grotesque concise form, this changelessness is demonstrated by the recurring vain attempts of a pub owner pleading for the consumed beer bill to be paid. (2) Just like Brabec's Czech film, *Ubu Król* comes to the conclusion that the evil embodied in Papa and Mama Ubu is indestructible. Having been defeated, they come to the centre of contemporary Warsaw looking for a suitable palace for themselves — and what they find is the huge and notorious Palace of Culture. However, Szulkin goes in fact deeper when he points out explicitly — and in correspondence with Jarry's indications — that Ubu's traits exist even in those who watch the film. In Polish people? In people as such? At the crossing outside the Palace of Culture, Papa and Mama Ubu are seen dancing and singing "We are you" (1:25:58).

37) Wiesław Kot, "Rachunek za piwo," *Newsweek Polska*, no. 3 (2004), 93.

38) *Grówno* in the translation by Boy-Żeleński. Within the framework of this project, the utterances about excrements, which have their basis in Ubu's statements, are presented in more and more monstrous forms.

39) See Katarzyna Janowska, "Witamy w kraju Ubu," *Polityka*, no. 39 (2003), 63.

One of the important features of Szulkin's adaptation is the fact that the linear development of the story is in conflict with the paradigmatic structuring of the film. This concerns both the use of the above-mentioned repeated motifs (the blind girl with flowers, the pub owner with a bill) and the articulation of the film by inserting, relatively regularly, scenes that serve as either explicit or implicit comments.

The verses recited effusively by a small girl with a skipping rope are naive and often also subversive interpretations of the depicted events. On the other hand, the series of musical, singing and dancing numbers, which bring into the film the genre features of vaudeville,⁴⁰⁾ is not easy to grasp and thus become irritating. These scenes are disruptions that trigger the Brechtian alienation effect and, at the same time, are a spectacular and ironically treated attraction. However, they are also challenging to be incorporated into the semantic structure of the film. Construction of sense is often dependent on intertextual relations and, with them, the wider cultural context. The tension between this context and the internal context of the film leads to a variety of results. For example, the validity of the songs, which are generally perceived as a praise of freedom and an expression of longing for a better world, is questioned in this way. The singing of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, which accompanies the messy battle with the Russian army, gives the impression of being notably unfitting. In other cases, the works which represent both high and popular culture can be considered not only a contrasting counterpart to the presented events, but also a proof of the fact that even culture can be misused and serve the purpose of manipulation. Nevertheless, what remains constant is the worrying vagueness of the relations and meanings which prevents from restraining clear-cut explication of these components of the film.

The Czech Ubu versus the Polish Ubu: several points of comparison

As is evident from the previous discussion, the Czech and Polish adaptations alike respond to a similar cultural context and socially-political circumstances. At the same time, the filmmakers aspired to pursue their distinctive creative conceptions. Both films show numerous parallels (e.g. allusions to contemporary problems and attitudes as well as to the historical experience of their presumed audiences, post-modernist liberty in treating various elements of the original drama and in constructing intertextual relationships, striking visual stylization, use of theatrical techniques); nevertheless, they differ frequently, especially in handling the specific components.

One aspect where marked differences exist is the representation of some of the characters. The Czech adaptation preserves the emphasis on Papa Ubu's fleshy physique — in keeping with the tradition represented by Grossman's renowned stage production. Ubu (Marián Labuda) is characterized by unbridled self-indulgence, a constant need for — and (unrestrained) consumption of — huge quantities of food; in a grotesquely hyperbolic added scene from the battleground, this feature is underlined by his willingness to engage in cannibalism (exemplifying at the same time Ubu's intoxication with his own power). The character is shaped by the contrast between his formless appearance and a surprising

40) Wróblewski, "Grówno narodowe," 61.

gracefulness of movement in some scenes as well as between his plebeian untidiness and his vulgar fondness for luxury. By contrast, Papa Ubu in the Polish film (Jan Peszek) is agile and relatively slim; nevertheless, his inconspicuous and ordinary appearance does not detract from his successful demagogic efforts. In various actions, however, the physically dominant position is occupied by Mama Ubu (Katarzyna Figura), who ostentatiously displays her mane of hair, naked parts of her body as well as her unkempt and torn clothes, stockings in particular; this is visible, among other scenes, when she brutally strips the overthrown Queen of her crown and various pieces of clothing.

Differences between the two versions are especially pronounced regarding the manner in which the Russian tsar is presented. Unlike the “Czech” tsar (Ivan Vyskočil), the tsar in the Polish adaptation (Jerzy Trela) lacks playfulness and childish whimsiness; instead, his demeanour is dominated by statuesque majesty, disdainfulness and ruthlessness (“Kill that dog. Let’s go” — 1:11:52). Furthermore, he possesses, in fact, two faces: the one is that of a monarch endowed with regal attributes such as gold and fur; on the other hand, his portraits show a striking resemblance to Joseph Stalin. The Russian element is thus not treated with an ironically detached view, becoming instead an obvious carrier of danger and threat.

Further comparisons can be made with regard to the overall approach to the representation of the world. The setting of the Czech adaptation is highly differentiated and variable, with diverse alternating spaces. It is interesting to note that these spaces are “enlivened” not only with moving persons, but also numerous animals, which are matched with certain characters or places, potentially receiving symbolic meanings. Thus, Mama Ubu is repeatedly associated with the goose, Papa Ubu with the bat, while their matrimony is symbolized by a cat that keeps them company throughout the film; adding to the bizarreness of the village house is a sheep lying on the bed; the Queen’s death is anticipated by a squeaking rat, which suddenly appears in the palace cellars, etc. By contrast, Szulkin’s film, with the exception of the closing passage, concentrates all the action into the confined environment of an industrial compound. Animals do not take any prominent role; instead, various symbolic objects receive adequate attention, such as a bust of the monarch, a parasol which used to belong to the Queen, calculators on office desks, empty bottles, a large four-poster bed, paintings and banners. In short, the world of the story is shaped through distinct approaches in each of the films.

Conclusion

The shooting of the Czech and Polish film adaptations of *Ubu roi* corroborated the undying stimulating nature of Jarry’s work and its openness to new interpretations and transpositions. It is evident that we can identify all motivations mentioned in the introduction, albeit with different accents. The adaptation by F. A. Brabec aspires to combine a general warning message, which includes contemporary references, with elaborate visual stylization, adding a variety of (sometimes pandering) effects to enhance the appeal of the film. The main problem of the film consists in its discrepancies and the unsubstantiated heterogeneity of its components (among other things, the actors noticeably differ in the way

and quality of their performances). On the other hand, the adaptation by Piotr Szulkin places major emphasis on the grotesque and eccentric nature of the film, constructing a complex structure based on repetition and variation. But first of all, Szulkin employs Jarry's play for a radically pessimistic reflection of the political and social development in Poland and in the world. However, when the film was shown, this approach was met with criticism for not corresponding with the seemingly satisfactory state of the Polish society (of that time).⁴¹⁾

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Biography

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