

ZACHĘTA

Jacek Malinowski

DWUBIEGUNOWO



3.09–16.10.16

Zachęta — National Gallery of Art

# Jacek Malinowski. Bi-polar

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The exhibition *Jacek Malinowski. Bi-polar* is the first such extensive presentation of the work of the artist in Zachęta. It presents a selection of the filmography of an artist who from 2000 has been realizing films in the style of fake documentaries. Over the course of over a decade Malinowski has developed his own, characteristic pseudo-documentary style that is an important element in his artistic 'signature'. At the same time, the exhibition illustrates an ever deepening immersion of the artist into cinema genres, which he treats as a field of experiment and of formal explorations within the scope of the film medium. The title of the exhibition in a provocative way communicates the duality present in the artistic experiments made by Malinowski exploring the borders between creation and reality, between fiction and documentary.

Emerging from Dziga Vertov's theory of the cinematic eye, which understood that the 'eye' of the camera is an objective and infallible source of the recognition of reality, the exhibition poses questions about the border between truth and fiction in the medium of film, about the influence of the form chosen by a director on the reception of his work and finally about the 'reading' of genre formulas by viewers. The starting point for this narration is the trilogy made from 2000–2008 *HalfAWoman*, which to this day — despite the rising popularity of mockumentaries in cinema since the 1990s — provokes consternation in a section of the viewers who believe in the authenticity of the story presented by Jacek Malinowski. In the further films presented, the artist continues to play with the formula of the fake documentary: in *The Celebration of Erwin Koloczek* he ironically depicts the celebrityization of contemporary culture, and in *2039* he creates a vision of the world of the future which makes joking reference to science fiction films. His last work, *Nosferatu — The Fearful Dictator*, is a film installation inspired by the classic horror films of Friedrich W. Murnau (1922) and Werner Herzog (1979) which illustrates Malinowski's original approach to remakes.

An integral part of the exhibition will be the accompanying programme that will situate Jacek Malinowski's works in a wider cinematographic context. In the frame of this **will be held at Zachęta the premiere of the artist's newest film entitled *Stain***, a film which plays with conventions of disaster movies. ●●●



*Jacek Malinowski. PółKobieta / HalfAWoman*

edited by Marta Miś

graphic design by Łukasz Paluch

Polish-English edition

pages: 120

Zachęta — Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, Warszawa 2016

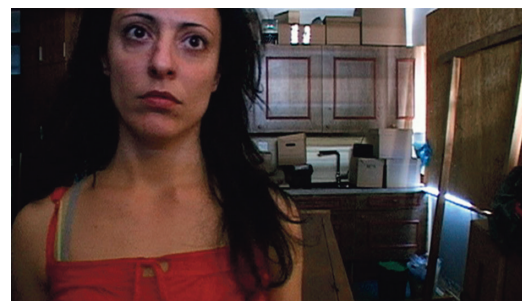
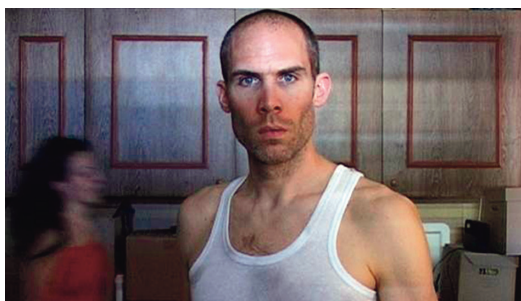
ISBN 978-83-64714-37-5

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The book *Jacek Malinowski. PółKobieta / HalfAWoman* is published in conjunction with Malinowski's exhibition and is dedicated to the film trilogy from the Zachęta collection. The bilingual publication contains an extensive illustrative part enriched with the film dialogues and two essays analyzing Malinowski's trilogy with a more academic approach (Marta Miś) and a philosophical one (Andrzej Wajs). Films by Jacek Malinowski are an interesting examples of mockumentaries — a formula rarely present in the Polish cinema.

The book inaugurates *The Zachęta Collection | video series*. ●●●



# I'm Not an Orthodox Film Buff

Jacek Malinowski talks to Marta Miś

**Do you like cinema?**

Sure I do.

**When did it begin?**

It was so long ago that I do not remember. But I'm not an orthodox film buff. Actually, I should say that I like cinema from a different point of view — as a field of art, which has its own laws, conditions, traditions and codes, and above all because it combines all other disciplines of art. You can symbiotically fit in a lot in a movie and give common meaning to seemingly contradictory components.

**But you reached towards genre cinema intuitively and by chance, because mockumentaries weren't previously known to you. You haven't been following the development of fake documentary.**

The history of my movie making is quite twisted. It began with fear of cinema, a fear of trying. Precisely because I perceived it as such a total art. One person alone is not able to make a movie, because you have to take into account a lot of technical problems in the first place, and this always seemed to me impossible to seize.

**Is it easier to deal with sculpture?**

Absolutely. In sculpture — there is just you and the object. In film you're working as a team.

**But you are quite alone in your work as filmmaker — just as visual artists. Of course there are actors, people you work with on the set, but apart from that you do a great deal by yourself: from script through stage design, camera work, editing. Are you more of a visual artist or of a filmmaker?**

No matter what: a visual artist — a sculptor. Each time, after I struggle with the matter, after completing each of the films, after the arduous production process — when I manage to overcome all obstacles during the shooting, both in the physical and symbolic space — I have a feeling I have done some really hard, even physically sculptural, work. But this feeling is changing and undergoes modifications. Years ago I wrote my first screenplay (never produced), and it all began: I was learning to write and come up with situations, scenes, solutions, I read books on the subject, I tried to enter into the framework of screenwriting and learn the rules of production. I got incredibly engaged in writing and shooting.

You create the plot, the framework for the story, and then — i.e. due to the fact that you have chosen a mockumentary formula — you leave a very large space for the people with whom you co-create the movie, that is, for the actors. Do you write the dialogues?

I do. Sometimes very accurate ones. But when we start shooting, I give my actors a lot of freedom. They read the script. I tell them what it's all about and they interpret it their own way. Although there was one exception — in the film *The Celebration of Erwin Koloczek*. Although the text was written one to one, I knew that the miners will not repeat it the way I wanted. So I came up with another method: each of the miners sat in front of the camera — I was on the other side. I would say the text, and they would repeat it exactly, word for word. Later, in a very long and complicated editing process, by rearranging words, and mixing loose sentences, I was trying to make it flow, so that the dialogue sounded believable.

**You often mention the theme of doubleness in your life, including the artist/filmmaker duality. The title of the exhibition reads: *Bi-polar* . . .**

The title indicates various types of polarisation encountered in life. The known oppositions we are accustomed to: white/black, hot/cold, beautiful/ugly, true/false, etc. I am particularly interested in what is located between the two poles and how to show it in film, or rather, how to show this ambiguity, the 'gray matter' between the extremes. Being a visual artist and filmmaker is a frame where you can really fit in a lot, although it must be flexible and not restrictive. At the moment I am at the end of the shooting phase for my new film. I would like to redefine what I've done so far — I have the need to experiment... I'm curious to see what happens because there is still a lot of work to be done . . . sculptural work.

**The exhibition presents only 'one pole' of your work — the films. It's a selection from your filmography, showing the development of your film language and style. The narrative of the exhibition begins with your first film — *HalfAWoman* . . .**

This selection shows the time elapsed between the first and the last film. *HalfAWoman* was created spontaneously. And although the production was preceded by years of reflection, experimentation and testing, by my experience with sculpture, and photography — I started thinking in terms of film only after its completion. Before *HalfAWoman* I did not realise that there is such a thing as mockumentary. Although I saw examples of quasi documentaries and mockumentaries (e.g.: *Freaks*, *The Idiots*, *Zelig*), as a visual artist I did not focus on film — I was only a spectator. It was only when I finished the film and realised that people perceive it as a documentary, I realised that there is such a category — a mockumentary, and that my film fits in there. Initially, *HalfAWoman* was supposed to be just a visual work. I was thinking about photography. As I mentioned, I was afraid of film. And here, suddenly, within a few days a film was created. I was in a state of euphoria — I finally made it! A film . . . actually a feature film, with an actress, following a script. And I began thinking about further projects within this medium.

**One can see it in this project — three films produced over nearly nine years. An important role is played by your leading actress — Joan Fitzsimmons. She helped you create this character, gave her a life and a story that has a beginning and an end.**

*The Stain*, 2016, video

We had a casting. From the very first moment, I realised that this is someone with incredible authenticity, whom the camera loves, as the saying goes; perhaps no one has inspired and mobilised me to work as much as Joan did. The fact that the project was continued and developed, proves that we found ourselves in an exceptional situation — both, debutants in a new medium. For me it was an amazing breakthrough. Previously I worked with models — in photography, sculpture and drawing. But never in such a way that I had to stage and record a situation, dialogue, emotion, time...

**And when did you decide to continue the story of half-woman?**

Frankly, immediately — from the first part — I knew that I have a very strong film. Provocative in relation to documentary as a genre, and in the context of visual arts, especially of critical art. I was hoping dialogue will follow, a reception of this work, and some discussion. But unfortunately it did not happen. I didn't want to miss the potential of the initial idea, because the topic of 'halfness' was 'my' theme and a huge metaphor for modern times. I decided that I'll try again. The second film was longer, more complex, also technically — with a larger group of actors, extras, animated scenes, outdoors, it was also provocative in my opinion. It was my film school — a training ground, where I rehearsed many difficult topics: work with several actors, crowd scenes, narrative, multithreading in terms of both story and editing, etc. After completing this film I felt at home. And then the third last part of the project was created. It was meant to be rather depressive, and contains a very bitter conclusion.

**Does it mean that you and the emotions that accompanied you are present in the *HalfAWoman* triptych?**

Yes. The ending depicts not only half-woman's disappointment, but also mine...

**To what extent Joan helped you build the character and the story?**

Her way of being in front of the camera determined the means that I could use. I knew that whatever Joan says will sound natural. She's great at improvising. For example, in the second film my favourite part is when we have a conversation about the English language and our favourite words. It was registered simply as a fragment of reality, and later became part of the film.

**At the exhibition three other works are shown. Among others, my favourite movie — *The Celebration of Erwin Koloczek* — where you use the mockumentary genre in the most brilliant way. Where did you get those miners, and the idea to work with miners? And to perversely show them in the context of celebrities?**

Ideas come... I don't know where from (laughs). But in retrospect, I see that it was a daring idea. I'm not sure at this point if I would go for something like that again. Anyway, I came up with the idea of making a film with miners. Perhaps because I have a deeply rooted belief that mining is the hardest job in the world. We who still remember the communist era, were raised in the conviction about the special status of miners as a profession strategically important for the system, with their privileges, but also kept in mind the burden of their work. Now we have to deal with the ethos of celebrities, which is something that seems to be light, easy and fun. For me this film was a process of discovering the truth, I had no idea about — it contained a contrast, bipolarity important to me. I went to Zabrze, to the Królów Luiza mine, which is now an open air mining museum. I went to the office and actually made a little roundup to find my miners/actors.

**Did they agree easily?**

When someone walked down the hall, I would stop him and propose to play a role in the film. For them it was an adventure, and all the miners I met agreed. One of them even brought his brother. I had very good contact with them. I spent a week in Zabrze, I entered the mining milieu, we met for a beer at the Religa bar. And the film came into being, although to the last moment I wasn't sure if we are going to make it. But of course I went

there with the script, which I worked on for quite a while. I think I managed to capture a different, very cinematic reality.

**Did they like the movie? Did they see the final result?**

Yes, they did. I sent them DVDs, because, unfortunately, we haven't met since. But from the phone calls I understood that the film amused them — they were happy with the result. One of the miners told me that the lead actor Tomasz Budziński now has a nickname 'Erwin'.

**Are the expressions in the film literal quotations or have they been somehow altered by you?**

I wrote down lines from several films, including some documentaries about celebrities. But I had to work on it. For example I mixed the beginning of one sentence with the end of another. I made this to give them rhythm. I had material for a much longer film, a lot of it didn't make it to the final version.

**As a filmmaker, do you enjoy the fact that you can manipulate the world depicted on the screen? In *2039* — part of the *Białystok Trilogy* — you create a science fiction story...**

When I began to write my first screenplay *Bonehead*, which I never produced, I had a moment of discovery that I can decide about everything: even about the fate of the people/characters in the film. I can create them from scratch, and then destroy. But above all, I can protect them — standing in their shoes, speaking through their mouths, showing their emotional states — and I can take the side of the case, for which they struggle or I can distance myself from it. If only on paper. The fictional thread, which is in contrast to the hypothetical truth present in a documentary, fundamentally important to my films, allows for this. I begin to construct a story and suddenly I decide that I will continue with one character, while saying good bye to another. In this way, I decide on the fate of the world... my world. As far as *2039* is concerned, frankly, it's probably my favourite movie. I worked with a large group of people: participants of film workshops at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok. I gave some guidelines, I defined the conditions, and the participants constructed their own stories. Later, I had to put them together, which would be nearly impossible without some framework, allowing to combine different stories. That's why I wrote a completely new script — kind of a second layer of film, a voice over spoken by a speech synthesiser. The artificial voice combined all the threads together. The effect had a very 'collective', group-work — and again bipolar — feeling to it...

**The cool thing about the *Białystok Trilogy* is that first you had a workshop with young people, then with adults — that's why two complementary films were produced. And in the end you made a prequel that shows the same characters as children in the late eighties — still before the political changes. It's a trilogy, but how diverse in its implementation!**

All my films are constructed from certain fragments of reality. I'm a pretty good observer and I notice various things. Later, it surfaces somehow. At some point — at the stage of scriptwriting or editing — the individual 'building blocks' form a whole.

**But reality simply inspires you. Even if you're writing a science fiction script, the most important thing is what you observe.**

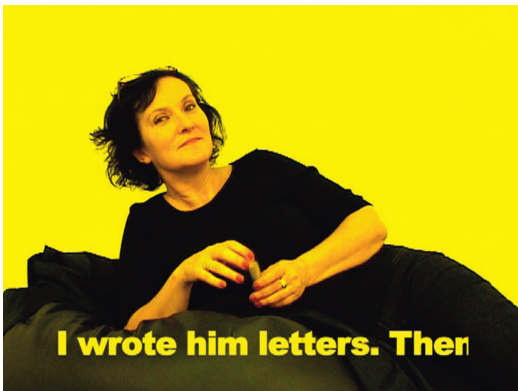
It seems to me that all my films are about the 'here and now'. Even if they are about the future or about an imagined monster they are based on what I have observed somewhere. I think it is also about capturing certain moods and emotions, to which everybody gives in. **You never wanted to produce a documentary film?**

I made one. A portrait of an artist, painter, my, unfortunately, late friend Lucyna Krakowska, where I used the existing archival material, memories of her, and an interview with her. It is a classical documentary.

**In 2011, your film *Nosferatu* — the *Fearful Dictator* was created, referring to the horror movies by Friedrich W. Murnau and Werner Herzog, and the vampire topos, deeply rooted in film. But it's not so much a remake, rather you play with the convention. And apart from the references to the image of vampire created in the 1920s and 1970s, you were inspired by the character of Adolf Eichmann...**

When I began this project, I thought of making a 'one to one' remake. But the idea collapsed quickly, because I decided that repetition does not make sense. If I'm able to get something new out of this thread, process it somehow, say something on my behalf — then it's worthwhile. Eichmann wasn't actually an inspiration, he appeared somewhere at the end, when I was looking for a solution of the story. I needed some transgression or transformation, but within certain existing reality. Hence one monster turns into another.





But it also is a figure of speech. This film talks about the dream of power. About what we think about evil. Or how we adapt to evil. And in this respect it is quite universal. Some things are rooted in the human being.

**The vampire in your movie is lonely. But every vampire is lonely — this is his figure in the horror genre. In addition, your vampire struggles with himself. He is not the aggressor. He is self-destructive.**

I wanted to show the hopelessness of the character. And its powerlessness. It's a vampire who has lost his power. Even if he attacks, his attack is always a failure. Besides the vampire figure here is very conventional. I wanted this film to have a tinge of a documentary, to say that there is no such thing as a vampire. It is our invention, our imagination sanctified by tradition. In fact, all such myths come from people. From their weaknesses or aberrations and situations that had place sometime, somewhere. It is the conceptual work: of a reporter, a witness or an artist that moves facts into a symbolic space.

**The character is played by Sean Palmer, with whom you had previously worked on the film *Marker*. Did he inspire you to create the vampire character, or have you adjusted him to the role?**

Actors are a totally separate topic. Until now, I had a lot of luck. The actors that I've finally worked with, came to me. Somehow they appeared out of the blue and we worked on a project together. I knew Sean through some friends and once accidentally I met him on the train to Łódź. I was looking for someone to play in the film *Marker* and during the two-hour trip we decided that Sean will be 'that person'. And he was really great as the alter-globalist marking his territory. Then, *Nosferatu*, was written especially for Sean, and recently he had a triple role in my latest film. Actors inspire me a lot, they kind of open me up and animate me. I try to observe them first, and then find out what they're best at. If the cooperation begins well, stems from my fascination and confidence in the actor, I know that a film will follow that I'll be OK with.

**Actors — both professional and non-professional — feel very natural in front of your camera. Even the miners repeating those artificial phrases seem very natural.**

My priority is, that the actor is not afraid. The most interesting experience was to work on the film *SSS* with my colleague who never was an actor, and in fact, experienced some big personal problems. He was very anxious when we started — which happened to fit perfectly the mood of the film. In the course of filming he felt that he was in no danger, so he slowly opened up. And at the end of the production he told me that he would willingly play in my next film.

**But in your films non-professional actors and professionals are equally involved. In the second part of *HalfAWoman* Joan**

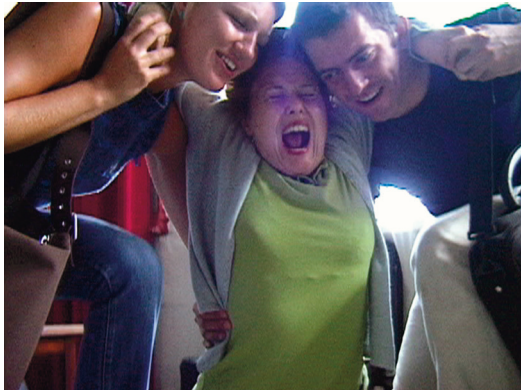
**Fitzsimmons, Olga Ziemska (both visual artist) and debutant actor Piotr Głowacki actually create a really cool team . . .**

I do not know why, perhaps it's a kind of chemistry between the actors? A film consists of so many factors that it is sometimes difficult to say in advance how to obtain the desired effect. We enter into a certain realm and either succeed or not. Actually, only once I happened to start a film where absolutely nothing worked. It was because the actors couldn't draw me so to speak. They didn't want to open up. And the film doesn't exist.

**During the exhibition, the first screening of your new film *The Stain* will take place. This time you are experimenting with disaster film . . .**

As a film buff I have noticed long ago that disaster cinema has a renaissance. In fact, most of the blockbusters are about some sort of disaster that awaits us. I wanted to relate to it. I came up with a film that will be an experiment, also a formal one. I'm not sure if it still is a mockumentary, perhaps more of a moving abstract image making use of realistic elements. I would like to edit it without a linear narrative, but to cut it a lot, so it is rather 'composed' than edited. That's why I decided to show only the beginning and the end — the key moments of a disaster. I don't want to show the core of the film, with the developing plot, action, psychology of the characters, etc. I would like to go a step back and concentrate on the visual. It will be a film built more by the image than the story. And unfortunately, I think it's quite up-to-date . . . I would like it to reflect the mood which prevails at the moment. I have a feeling that some kind of horror is growing in our lives and nobody knows how it will end. ●●●





HalfAWoman, 2000, video

HalfAWoman 2, 2005, video

HalfAWoman... Three Years Later, 2008, video





**Jacek Malinowski** (born 1964) is a visual artist, author of films, photographs, objects, installations and stage designs. He majored in Sculpture at the Warsaw Academy in Fine Arts (1992) and then studied at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University (1995–1997). He has participated in numerous exhibitions in Poland and abroad, at venues such as the Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, Muzeum Sztuki Łódź, Foksal Gallery in Warsaw, Arsenał Gallery in Białystok, CCA Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, CCA *Signes of Time* in Toruń, CCA Łaźnia in Gdańsk, Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland, Golden Thread Gallery in Belfast, The Chelsea Art Museum in New York, or Kunsthalle Wien. His works are held in the collections of the Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, Muzeum Sztuki Łódź, Arsenał Gallery and the CCA *Signes of Time*. He lives and works in Warsaw. ●●●