

# sieniawka

A FILM BY • MARCIN MALASZCZAK





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“I HAVE TRAVELED TO THE FUTURE, AND THIS IS  
WHAT I FOUND: HUMANITY AND REFLECTIONS  
OF THE PAST.”

PRODUCED BY DFFB & MENGAMUK FILMS  
WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF POLISH FILM INSTITUTE

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# sieniawka

## SYNOPSIS

SIENIAWKA is a journey into the irrational subconscious of humanity.

STEFAN attempts to make his way through a post-industrial no-man's land. An encounter with a stranger forces the line between reality and imagination to become blurred. The future and the past become intertwined. Visions of another time emerge from Stefan's mind.

The cold-blooded surgeon used to work in the dissecting room. There was a cinema where everyone would go on the weekend. A state of complete delirium caused a young man's heart to stop beating.

In drifting through memory and the imaginary, Stefan witnesses death, mental illness and the margins of humanity in a passing world that resembles our own.

All that remains are ruins - everything begins to dissolve. The concrete world no longer resembles the one that he was forced to leave. Internal chaos is mirrored by external chaos.

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## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

At the heart of the village Sieniawka lies a “hospital for the treatment of mental illness, nervous disorders and alcoholism”. It was founded in 1964 on the site of a Nazi labour camp. Today, one half of the camp is occupied by “the hospital”, the other half functions as living quarters for Polish families. The hospital served as a point of departure from which the whole film developed. As the story evolved, it grew to include the immediate surroundings and the people living, working or being treated there.

My cinematographic involvement and indeed the need to be involved with this unique place originate from the time I spent there during various phases of my life. I have a very strong, close, emotional relationship with it. My aunt worked at the hospital for forty years (twenty of which were in the position of Alternate Director), whilst my grandfather was Administrative Director for the same period of time. Due to my familiarity with the hospital and the village, I was basically given carte blanche by the current hospital director to move freely on site and on the wards. These are usually very hard to access or film due to the secure and restricted nature of this type of institution.

The word Sieniawka, although officially referring to the name of the village, is used colloquially to refer to the hospital. When someone says you will end up in Sieniawka, that person means you will eventually go insane and be put away there.

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## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This linguistic generalisation - blurring the line between the mentally ill and the sane, chaos/order or nature/civilization - inspired me to conceive and realise this film there. I wanted to explore these ambivalent topics cinematographically and in relation to a rapidly changing post-communist Polish society, and I wanted to do this by revealing and focusing on what is being left behind and marginalised, what is not being talked about and what is in all of us – the irrational subconscious of humanity. Society in itself is an institution which constantly standardises human beings.

Can ultimate freedom only come from death?

I wanted to make a film that is a journey through memory and the imaginary in a world that resembles our own, but is not necessarily ours.

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DIRECTOR • MARCIN MALASZCZAK

• BIOGRAPHY

17.05.1985 Kowary (Poland)

Born in Communist Poland, Marcin Malaszcza immigrated to West Berlin with his parents as a child.

Experiencing the relative nature of political systems and shifting between two completely different worlds and realities (East-West) have influenced his work predominantly. His films explore how human perception undergoes constant change in attempting to adapt to a changing environment. He uncovers the institutional powers of society, raising the question: to what extent can individual freedom be achieved. He studied Film Directing at the German Film and Television Academy (dffb). His first feature length film *Sieniawka* will premiere at the 63rd Berlinale (Forum) in 2013. Marcin currently lives and works in Berlin.

• FILMOGRAPHY (selection)

2013 *Sieniawka* (*Sieniawka*) • 126 mins • DCP • 1:1.85

2010 *Der Schwimmer* (*The Swimmer*) • 29 mins • Digibeta • 1:1.66

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INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR  
MARCIN MALASZCZAK

COULD YOU TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE BACKGROUND TO YOUR FILM, YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO SIENIAWKA AND WHAT LED YOU TO MAKE THIS FILM?

I started working on the film “Sieniawka” in late autumn 2009. Due to several reasons, I consider it my most personal project so far. For around 40 years, my aunt Irena Bielecka and my grandfather Piotr Malaszczał lived and worked in Sieniawka, at the “hospital for the mentally and nervously ill”. Around 1986, my parents decided to immigrate to Germany but they couldn’t take me with them. I can’t remember the exact reasons, I guess bureaucratic obstacles. The village Sieniawka is situated right at the Polish-German border. As my aunt and grandfather were living there, I guess it was a handy place to leave me until everything got sorted out.

Literally speaking, Sieniawka is the place where I saw the world for the first time. The so-called first images of my life are rooted in that place as I remember it. I think it was in the evening, I remember being trapped in a playpen in a quite obscure room surrounded by handmade woolen pictures done by the hospital’s patients. These initial images never left me although I used to visit my aunt and my grandfather quite regularly until the age of 14 or 15. After that, I didn’t go to Sieniawka for quite some time. Following my grandfather’s death and on hearing that my aunt would retire soon, I suddenly realized how

long it had been since I’d been there. So, I packed my photo camera and decided to go back. I arrived on the day my aunt was holding her farewell celebration. I managed to surprise her.

I remembered the administrative part of the hospital and its familiar atmosphere very fondly. As a child, my grandfather would take me through all the rooms, introducing me to all the employees, which were also his closest friends. My aunt told me that the hospital was being taken over by another hospital which would reduce costs and eliminate most of the staff. This process had already begun. I realized quickly that things were changing very fast and that, in a way, I had already come too late.

Somehow I always knew that I would one day return and make a film about that place which had been so important to me. I felt that it would be a kind of odyssey into myself, considering these initial images and how significant they can be for a filmmaker. I felt that the time had come to take on that project. It took me at least another two years to fully realize it. Early on, I noticed that it wouldn’t be about recreating a certain memory or emotion but rather a personal confrontation with the state of the place at this particular moment in my life. As a child, I wasn’t fully aware of the stations and the patients inhabiting them. My grandfather had died and my aunt had moved away. Now I could form my own personal relationship to the place, and the first thing to do was to enter the stations and get to know the patients. Some of them had been living there for several decades.

The first time I entered the stations I felt quite uneasy - like someone entering this world for the first time. After spending time with the patients, getting to know them personally and establishing very close relationships with them, a thought struck me all of a sudden. In many ways, the atmosphere there reminded me of the warmth and closeness I had experienced in the administrative part of the hospital where my aunt, grandfather and other employees used to live. This side was practically dead now. It felt like experiencing a conservation of time. Some of the patients could even remember me as a child. I was wondering how I didn't take notice of them, probably partly due to the protectiveness of my aunt and grandfather as well as to the nature of early childhood. If I were to compare myself to a house, entering the stations felt like entering a room that had always been a part of me but was closed until that very moment in time. Emotionally, it was a combination of feeling very close and familiar to something, but at the same time quite distant - realizing there is a part of that room which I will never be able to access. Soon after that, I began filming.

COULD YOU TALK ABOUT HOW YOU APPROACHED THE PROJECT AND YOUR PROCESS (NOT TURNING UP WITH A PARTICULAR STRUCTURE / FILM SCRIPT / STORY BOARD)?

What was very different from all my previous works is that I decided to start filming without applying a preconceived aesthetic, form, structure, concept, and take the cinematography of the film entirely into my own hands. The only thing I was aware of is that it had to be a direct account and documentation of my perception and experience

there, however it would turn out, in the end. Then, I started to make these very long takes which consist of moments where the camera is panning, tilting and others where it is completely static. When the camera moves, it always does so at the same pace. I would always decide in the very moment of filming or just before filming when it should move, into which direction and when it should be static. I would also decide each day where or what I would like to film, and what should appear in the dialogue or what kind of action should take place. Of course, this open and unrestricted approach involved a lot of improvisation and a constant exchange of ideas, stories and memories between me and the people appearing in the film. It was also challenging for me to sense when to take control and when to let things happen.

DO YOU THINK THIS APPROACH WORKED IN RELATION TO YOUR ORIGINAL GOAL OF WANTING THE PROJECT TO BE AN "ODYSSEY INTO YOURSELF", OR DID SOMETHING ELSE HAPPEN DURING THE PROCESS?

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I think it is important to differentiate between what you explore personally as a human being and what you find yourself exploring artistically and philosophically as a filmmaker. There are of course touching points and overlaps, but sometimes there can also be none. When I say 'it had to be a direct account and documentation of my perception and experience there', the emphasis really lies on the word perception. It had to be a direct account of my perception in the very moment of filming which differs from what I perceive as a human being. Although I am talking about my perception, it is actually more about what the camera, the instrument that I direct and use, sees. The



camera always captures more than the human mind can grasp. Rather than creating a personal diary I am, in the very moment of filming, confronting myself with the unthinkable - in relation to mental illness, with society as reflected in the institution and, more universally speaking: time, space and humanity. The spectator is thus also potentially confronted with these matters while viewing the film. It just means that this particular open, unpredictable way of filming brings out different kinds of aspects in relation to the subject matter. To me, these things were far more interesting than bringing my own personal story into the picture. I felt a greater need to approach everything in a more universal manner, with which I think it is also far more important to confront the spectator. This way and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, I also believe the work to be even more personal because it is dealing with collective fears and the changes in what it means to be a human being or just simply to exist.

YOU TALK A LOT ABOUT THE SENSE OF SPACE AND OF TIMELESSNESS. ALSO ONE OF YOUR BIGGEST INFLUENCES 2001:A SPACE ODYSSEY IS AN OBVIOUS PARALLEL HERE, THE ROOM IN WHICH THE MAIN PROTAGONIST ENDS UP IN, IN WHICH HE BECOMES HIMSELF AS AN OLD MAN AND THAN AS AN UN-BORN CHILD HAS A SENSE OF ALL TIME AND NO TIME. THIS DISORIENTATION OF TIME AND SPACE THAT RUNS THROUGH YOUR WORK, WHERE DO YOU THINK THIS COMES FROM-DO YOU THINK IT MIGHT BE A PERSONAL FEELING?

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I spent a lot of time with my grandmother as a child. She was and still is very Catholic. You could say she was the other person that basically raised me, aside from my mother. I grew up with all the iconography and philosophy attached to that belief. As a child, after finally ar-

riving in Germany, I had a hard time getting used to the new world. I remember these constant lights everywhere: the neon signs. They were very different from the anachronistic world of my grandparents' place and Sieniawka. As a child, I couldn't grasp how it was possible that these two worlds could actually exist on the same planet: that you could just move between the one and the other, although they seemed so extremely disconnected from one another. Through this, I realized to what extent as a human being, one is basically disconnected from everything - the fundamental loneliness of a human being, as some people call it. I felt very disconnected back then, which reminded me of how it felt to be trapped in the playpen in Sieniawka, with no orientation whatsoever - like being born without a mother, not knowing where I came from. Then, when I was about 13, I had to undergo an operation where I was given a complete anesthesia. The state I was in didn't feel like sleeping or even dreaming; it felt like someone had cut out a piece of my lifetime and these lost hours never existed. This reminded me of the state I had just come out of before realizing that I was in the playpen: a preconscious state. It dawned on me that a human life is basically surrounded by this fundamental nothingness. For the first time I realized the non-existence of God, which contradicted my Catholic upbringing. I do believe that the energy we carry with us goes somewhere after death but our consciousness comes out of this nothingness and goes back into it again. Being aware of that, it is hard to believe in the continuity of time and space or something that could be grounded, because I see my life floating on this nothingness.

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Referring to '2001: A space odyssey', I noticed after the first phase of filming that there is a certain association and maybe even formal connection. I have a deep personal relationship with this film, because it is probably the reason why I became a filmmaker. I think I saw it for the first time at my grandmother's place in Poland, at the age of 8. I remember being deeply disturbed as a child, especially by the final part and what Kubrick does there with time and space. By that stage, I had probably seen other films but here, for the first time, it occurred to me that there is something like cinematography in this world. Of course, I probably didn't even know this word back then. It was just that unsettling feeling of seeing something I hadn't seen before and which far exceeded my rational understanding. As I grew older, I learned to appreciate the film on many levels. But at its core, it still represents to me the very nature of cinematography. What it can do and what it can be. Composition. Color. Texture. Movement. Choreography. Rhythm. Pace. The musicality of moving images. Its own philosophy. 'Space Odyssey' brought cinematography into my consciousness. It shows the 'dawn' of human consciousness.

Sieniawka represents the beginning of my own consciousness.

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By Steven Williams

Sieniawka exposes the fragility of a constructed reality by suspending it and allowing something truer, more real to let itself be known. It places itself on a historical, socio-political and metaphysical fault line through which it is easy to let oneself slip.

Stefan is driven by unseen forces - a barren, polluted nature, his own sublimated drives, chance and the weight of history. We share his helplessness in the face of events - whether these events are real or imagined is unimportant. What matters is that they are experienced. Sieniawka plays with perceptions of reality. The constructed artifice and imposed narrative structure of the film's first segment form a constituent 'reality' - a post-industrial world, spiritually moribund and devoid of life, which could have resulted from any one of the 20th century's main ideologies. It provides the film's vision of 'reality'. It embodies the manifest horrors of the real world. We are deprived of a conventional narrative structure and order of events, which exposes our own anxieties about life without meaning and our helplessness before it.

Conversely, the middle section hospital scenes are shot in a documentary style, yet provide Sieniawka with its transcendent, mythical core. As Krzysztof Kieslowski observed, "When you let go of false representation and directly approach reality, you lose reality itself."

In the hospital, the patients, affected by and aware of the camera, scrutinise the viewer as much as they are scrutinised. The aesthetic composition of the film provokes an engagement between the viewer

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and the face of humanity from which they might otherwise flinch. In observing the patients' routine, we are forced to examine the quotidian existence of our own lives. We are compelled to see beyond social constructs - diagnoses, prejudice, pity - to see the humanity that lies beneath these faces. As they begin to adapt to playing roles, the patients paradoxically reveal more of their inner selves.

Sieniawka's non-linear temporality suspends not only reality, but existence. The order of events is as unimportant as their ultimate meaning. Are we experiencing the past, present or future? Does the future resemble the past? The film fashions alternate realities - worlds that exist within worlds.

Aesthetically the film brandishes elements of its Central European artistic influences, either in the particular form/style of surrealism that emerges from Catholic lands or images which seem rooted in Polish symbolism.

By contrasting the inner life of an institution with a fragmenting external world, Sieniawka raises questions of freedom, dependence and belonging. By achieving a form of selfhood, has Stefan unconsciously chosen freedom or has it been forced upon him once he is deemed again well, and subsequently returns to an insane, dissolving and fractured world.

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## FILMMAKERS

Director & Screenplay	Marcin Malaszcak
Producers	Michel Balagué, Marcin Malaszcak
Cinematography	Georg Tiller, Andreas Louis (DFFB)
Assistant Director	Marcin Malaszcak
Sound Engineering	Eric Menard, Tobias Rüther, Leo Knauth
Editing	Steven Williams
Sound Design	Stefan Stabenow, Maja Tennstedt
Color Grading	Jochen Jezussek
Production	Jorge Rodriguez Piquer
	Mengamuk Films & DFFB

with the financial support of Polish Film Institute

## CAST

Stefan Szyszka  
Stanisław Chęmiński, Ryszard Ciuruś, Tomasz Czonka, Kazimierz Duchaczek,  
Tadeusz Gubała, Robert Gajowy, Jarek Harbart, Jerzy Iwanczewski, Władysław  
Jarmulak, Ernest Kalbarczyk, Bogusława Kasprzak, Jerzy Kozak, Stanisław Kret,  
Antoni Młyńczyk, Zbigniew Skrabek, Stanisław Szatan, Wiktor Szatkowski,  
Jerzy Szłosar, Franciszek Wilk, Franciszek Zajdel, Henryk Zamajski, Leszek  
Żurawski

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