

# Declaration of Immortality – *Inspirations Derived from Creative Documentaries by Wojciech Wiszniewski*

As Mirosław Przylipiak writes in the definition of a creative documentary:

Creation may concern only the visual sphere and be manifested in the use of special effects (slow-, fast-motion, superimposed pictures, etc.) and unusual shots, and points of view; it may also concern the audio and be manifested in sound deformations, it may concern the editing where a documentary material is subject to unusual assembly and, finally, it may concern the shot setting which is substantially pre-designed.[1]

These criteria are met not only by Wojciech Wiszniewski's films, which can be considered extreme examples of creationism in documentary films, but also the latest films by Marcin Koszałka, in particular *Declaration of Immortality (Deklaracja nieśmiertelności)*. Both filmmakers tread a thin line between creating a feature and documentary film, making use of techniques reserved for fiction films and, thus, abolishing the artificial division into creation and representation.

Marcin Koszałka in his creative documentary *Declaration of Immortality* deliberately alludes to the style of Wojciech Wiszniewski. In this film, creativity is plainly seen in the style of shooting, in the very way of presenting the protagonist and also in the deeper stratum, the one concerned with ideas and meaning. Creativity in both Wiszniewski's and Koszałka's films is achieved through staging, precise composition and deliberate artificiality, which does not, however, mar the documentary character of these films by both artists. The form, inseparably tied to creation, defines equally the outputs of the makers of *ABC Book (Elementarz)* and *Declaration*. Both aspects more or less harmonize with the spirit of Witkacy. The protagonist of *Declaration*, Piotr Korczak, a "guru" of climbers including Koszałka himself, treats climbing as a kind of theatre. This is why Koszałka draws inspiration from the idea of pure form and Witkacy's creative self-portraits (*Multiple Self-portrait* and *Portrait a la Pince-nez*) while building the portrait of the character of Madman.[2] In one of the last shots of the film, Korczak is being made up, which is an extreme form of creation and a play on realistic convention. The form appears to be particularly close

[1] Entry: 'creation documentary' in: *Encyklopedia kina [Encyclopaedia of the Cinema]*, ed. T. Lubelski, Biały Kruk, Kraków 2010, p. 256.

[2] Other nicknames of Korczak include Piotr Narwaniec and Emil Kaczadze.

to Korczak – his attitude to mountains is not a ‘high-minded’ one,[3] instead, he reduces mountains to form – a rock to him is an obstacle course to be completed; he sees the climbing itself in terms of self-creation. It is with Witkacy’s intuitions that the words of Madman agree:

The main idea of the film is that climbing is an artificial reality just as all that follows from human culture. Sport is part of culture, an artefact so to speak. Part of something that we, actually, do not need in order to survive. Climbing is the same kind of activity as making, for instance, films. There is no major difference. It is a matter of convention what is considered reality and, going further, what is considered natural in this reality. What I claim is that a perfect illusion is worth more than the natural reality that is already there. By the same token, an adventure is worth more than everyday life. This is an absolutely legitimate comparison although at first glance it seems outrageous. In reality, most people do not realize that starting to climb, they take part in such an adventure – or an illusion. In addition, they get a lot of satisfaction from it, because they make a big deal out of it. Actually, this is simply an illusion. This is to say that each of us climbing creates him – or herself. Similarly, fulfilling a social role, we create ourselves.[4]

The words of Marcin Koszałka bear out the intentions of the protagonist:

This is a film about a man who creates himself. In the first place, this picture has a space for creation. Most of the scenes are created, these are not observed scenes. Only the climbing is recorded naturally, actually takes place. All other scenes are invented by me, by Piotrek for the purposes of the film. Hence, it is a creative documentary and, at the same time, it is in a measure compatible with his life, in which he reinvents himself. There are also some dramatic elements that pierce this cover which is not as much of artificiality but rather of self-creation.[5]

At one point, Koszałka also admits: “My film is a homage paid to my masters. To Dziworski and Wojciech Wiszniewski. These were two directors who put a great emphasis on form”.[6]

Witkacy, Korczak and Wiszniewski – demiurges, creators, non-conformists – are apologists of form. None other than Wojciech

[3] P. Korczak: “I simply do not approve of presenting a climber as a crystal-clear man, in contact with some better reality, which makes him even nobler. This image of the protagonist was evoked in Krzysztof Zanussi’s films, which I hated. This is not true. Climbing is done also by imperfect individuals, who have their particular goals. One of such goals is striving for climbing fame. A man completely devoid of any ambition, I guess, climbs for sheer pleasure only. While a person who climbs for fame, a result, or a digit, experiences various states. Participating in this entire process is a form of torture. This is what this film is about. There is no high-mindedness in it, none whatsoever”. See *Wąla pięknoduchom... – Szalony o „Deklaracji nieśmiertelności* [Stuff High-Minded Arty-Farties..., Madman on *Deklaracja nieśmiertel-*

*ności*] at: <<http://wspnianie.pl/2010/06/wala-piek-noduchom-szalony-o-deklaracji-niesmiertelnosci/>> [accessed: November 9th 2013]. Other quotes from Piotr ‘Madman’ Korczak come from the soundtrack of *Declaration*, unless indicated otherwise.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] The opening of *Declaration of Immortality* – an interview with Marcin Koszałka at: <<http://wspnianie.pl/2010/05/premiera-deklaracji-niesmiertelnosci-wywiad-z-marcinem-koszalka/>> [accessed: November 9th 2013].

[6] *Ja pięknych rzeczy po prostu nie widzę* [I simply do not see beautiful things] Marcin Koszałka talks to Ewa Szponar, at: <<http://film.onet.pl/wiadomosci/ja-pieknych-rzeczy-po-prostu-nie-widze/k7hbt>> [accessed: November 18th 2013].

Wiszniewski – “Nut” (an interesting similarity of nicknames) said: “form – it is me”. Form in Wiszniewski’s work plays a dominant role, although the concept of ‘pure form’ should not be identified with his assumptions, as both the content and subject matter of his work were very important for him. There is, however, a certain significant affinity between these two artists – Wiszniewski, just like Witkacy, was interested in form stripped of any connection with real-life probability. Witkacy’s concept of ‘pure form’ has several aspects in common with Wiszniewski’s work: besides a departure from mimicry (in documentaries – recorded reality), there is anti-psychologism (seen best in *Wanda Gościmińska – a spinner* [*Wanda Gościmińska – włókniarka*, 1975]) and resignation from any dramatic action (in films – cause and effect). The form in the works of the author of *ABC Book* and *Wanda Gościmińska* tends also, as in Witkacy’s output, towards metaphysics, which appears to go completely unnoticed by critics and viewers. Peculiar *tableaux vivants* in *ABC Book*, being actually a collective spiritual portrait of the Poles of the 1970s, in climactic scenes lead to a metaphysical shock thanks to a dramatic slowdown (at the moment when the children recite the *Catechism of a Young Pole*). In Wiszniewski’s masterwork, a metaphysical experience does not arise out of the awareness of the inner unity of existence, but rather from the awareness that existence *per se* is broken up by ideological indoctrination and spiritual apathy. In *ABC Book*, we experience more of a “metaphysical horror” in which the dead System replaces the Absolute. Wiszniewski stressed on many occasions that his intention was to render the metaphysics and transcendence of the State and nation.[7] Intuitively, Witkacy’s understanding of metaphysics echoes in Wiszniewski’s words:

The very essence of any art is a tension between the subject and object, an internal experience and form. In the course of the creative process, during a dialogue between an objective phenomenon and the personal experience, first of the director and then of a viewer, a number of motor tensions arise.[8]

Through form, Koszałka, too, succeeds in building a metaphysical tension in *Declaration* – the film making use of antinomies both visual – mountains and water – and mental – nature and illusion (creation) – appears to be ‘broken up’ in a way or provided through the non-obvious.

Wiszniewski’s films, based on symbols, metaphors and allegories, agree with Koszałka’s idea of cinema, who, beginning with *Existence*



*Declaration of Immortality*,  
dir. Marcin Koszałka, 2010

[7] W. Wiszniewski, “O potrzebie powrotu do pojęć podstawowych” [On the Need of Going Back to Fundamental Concepts], *Ekran* 1975, no. 34, p. 3.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 4.

(*Istnienie*, 2007), has moved towards increasingly symbolic, Baroque conceptions, employing strong contrasts meant to make the viewer feel a cognitive discomfort. Wiszniewski's films abound in symbols and allegories deriving above all from national history and mythology, which has been widely written about. Symbolic thinking is also present in *Declaration*, but in this case it refers above all to universal ideas. In the first scene of this short film, Koszałka suggests a symbolic, potential death of Korczak, either accidental or suicidal (a fall from a great height into the water),<sup>[9]</sup> which would free him from the drama of old age. The protagonist mentions it a while later. Koszałka combines two radically different substances: water and rock – transience and permanence. The symbol of water comprises also the antinomy of life and death. In turn, a man climbing rocks is a perfect metaphor of a man striving for immortality – mountains are a symbol of permanence, imperturbability and, ultimately, youth.<sup>[10]</sup>

Koszałka, shooting scenes in the Potocki Palace in Krzeszowice, makes a heavy use of visual borrowings from Wiszniewski's films: a characteristic long tracking shot with the camera moving deep inside, and the static Korczak being shown either from the back or *en face*, are clear allusions to the aesthetics of *Miner Foreman* (*Sztygar*, 1978) (scene with an order).<sup>[11]</sup> Imitating Wiszniewski's work, Koszałka monumentalizes his protagonist by shooting from a vertical perspective (shooting from below). A 'posed' Piotr Korczak reminds viewers of people in Wiszniewski's films – monumental heroes. This statuesqueness, so strongly characteristic of the portraits of Gościńska and Bugdoł, can be seen in shots showing Korczak with his profile turned to the right and also in an expressive scene shot with a camera rotating around Piotr Korczak (a technique Wiszniewski likes to use).<sup>[12]</sup> Madman, standing in the pose of a hero, with his torso naked and his hands laced together, lit from above, looks like an embodiment of the Nietzschean ideal of Superman.<sup>[13]</sup>

However, he can also resemble Roman statues, from which socialist realistic art so willingly drew inspirations later on. They are alluded to in the second scene of *Tale of the Man who Performed 552% of the Workload* (*Opowieść o człowieku, który wykonał 552% normy*, 1973) by Wojciech Wiszniewski, who indicated an analogy between a proud statue of a socialist hero and the 'living statue' of Bernard Bugdoł. The frozen poses of heroes<sup>[14]</sup> are also a visual and ideological leitmotiv

[9] The motif of a jump into water was taken visually by Koszałka from the work of his master Bogdan Dziworski *Several Stories of a Man* (*Kilka opowieści o człowieku*, 1983). Dziworski is the co-author of cinematography in *Declaration*.

[10] W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli* [*Dictionary of Symbols*], Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1991, pp. 100–101.

[11] Koszałka uses also horizontal tracking shots,

a technique characteristic of Wiszniewski's style.

[12] The artist used this technique in *Wanda Gościńska*, *Miner Foreman*, and *A Joiner*.

[13] Notice was taken of his inspirations with the films of Leni Riefenstahl. See review at: <<http://wspnianie.pl/2010/06/deklaracja-niesmiertelnosci-recenzja>> [accessed: November 9th 2013].

[14] A collective monument is formed by the family of a miner wrapped in sausages in *Miner Foreman*.

in *Miner Foreman*, Wanda Gościńska and *ABC Book*. This freezing of human figures signifies not only the exalted statuesqueness of heroes but also the ossification of human life under the communist system.

Moreover, frozen human figures betray in part an underlying 'defiant' and mutinous attitude of these 'human statues', though this concerns more the intentions of the author himself than the awareness of the people portrayed.

Korczak's mutiny consists in conscious acts of creation, a dislike for prevailing stereotypes about climbing, and in his irony – all of which is after all characteristic of Wiszniewski as well. An interesting effect is produced in *Declaration* by the clash of the visual loftiness of the 'statuesque' scene with the soundtrack, in which the protagonist speaks about his favourite form of death (suicide in Ciężka Valley). The scene reflects perfectly the myth of a hero who is beyond earthly death (dying). Earlier on, (the opening shots of the film) the protagonist confesses: "Well, it suffices to repeat loftily Caesar's<sup>[15]</sup> words that the best death is unexpected death. I feel that something will save me from this trouble in the twilight of my life. Certainly, I won't be looking out of the window, I don't know, in some nursery home". In this scene, Korczak is shot first from the side, in the pose of an antique statue, and then when he is climbing some bars – the static and harmonious are clashed with the wild – culture with nature.

In this case, the freezing of a character, his immovable pose, has a slightly different role than in Wiszniewski's films. Korczak is no 'living statue' of the past (in Wiszniewski's films – of the ossified system), but a creator fully aware of himself, who knows the force of creation and is creator and material at the same time. Such awareness was alien to both Wanda Gościńska and Bernard Bugdoł. Nevertheless, both Wiszniewski and Koszałka create the images of their characters – by no means do they faithfully render the reality in which the characters live. The director, showing a lonely protagonist in pre-arranged scenes (modelled on Wiszniewski's style) brings out non-obvious connotations – Korczak is presented as a "departing star" whose fame has faded and has been replaced by alienation and the sense of non-fulfilment. The contrast between the manner of shooting characters (making them look heroic) and the meaning of individual scenes, as in Wiszniewski's films, builds up the tension.

It is worthwhile to examine more closely the cut of the scene with the 'statuesque' Korczak. This is preceded by a picturesque view of the mountains and followed by the shot of a dilapidated, abandoned shell of a skyscraper in Kraków. This strong contrast resembles Wiszniewski's idea of striking first a lofty note and a while later destroying it with pre-



*Declaration of Immortality*,  
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[15] Korczak is a historian by education and often likes to cite personages from antiquity.

meditation.[16] In this scene, the director portrays two realities that are poles apart: that of a myth (the ideal of a beautiful death) and a mundane daily routine – Madman earns his living by performing work at heights. In the empty space of an abandoned palace, Korczak emanates heroic strength, while in the city space he loses this ‘divine force’ and is downgraded to a regular worker-climber. This fragment with the abandoned skyscraper resembles in a sense the final shot of *Wanda Gościmińska* in which workers stand on top of a structure with their backs to the camera and look at the city (the historical and political contexts of this scene are of course ignored here). As Katarzyna Mąka-Malatyńska writes: “This is how tomorrow looks. The heroes of real socialism fall into oblivion, onto the margin of public life”.[17] The colours that Koszałka permeates his images with are highly meaningful: in the scene with “Korczak’s statue” warm light dominates, while in the city scene greyness prevails. There are no doubts about how Koszałka interprets the fate of the ‘departing guru’. At one point, the protagonist himself is clearly irritated by the director’s intentions: “Because you keep making films about the same stuff, don’t you? That it is going to be only worse”.

Both Koszałka and Wiszniewski are interested in a champion,[18] leader, guru, or a hero, but only when their objects of interest are being sidetracked.[19] A slightly provocative and jocular comparison can be drawn between the work leaders in communist times, who embodied the spirit of competition, and Piotr Korczak, who drew his strength to climb from competing with Andrzej Marcisz. Madman confesses: “I simply competed with another man, specifically with Andrzej [Marcisz – UT]. Andrzej provided motivation for me to climb and what really counted was to do a route he couldn’t do, to climb where he couldn’t climb”. All three – Gościmińska, Bugdoł, a foreman – the heroes of their times, are lonely now (at least this is how Wiszniewski made them look), with their fame gone. In *Declaration*, a lonely hero, with cheers and applause heard off-screen, however without an audience, enters an ‘arena’ and goes through the motions of making handholds before an imagined climbing wall. This scene, on the one hand, points to the creative nature of climbing and the self-creation of the protagonist (in Witkacy’s spirit), on the other, it may be a prologue to the scene in which the protagonist is to face the ‘declaration of immortality’ – his opus magnum or an elaborate obstacle course,[20] which he himself

[16] Words of Mirosław Przyłipiak – a comment from *Sztuka dokumentu* devoted to Wojciech Wiszniewski.

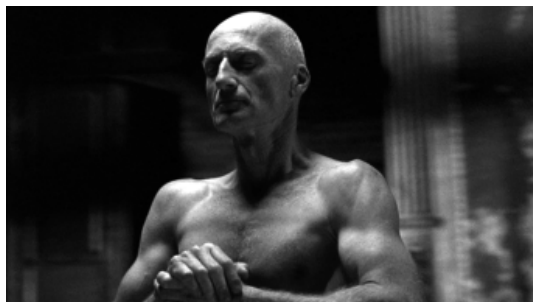
[17] K. Mąka-Malatyńska, *Wanda Gościmińska Włókniarka – demontaż filmowej nowomowy* [*Wanda Gościmińska, a Spinner – disassembly of film newspeak*], in: *Wojciech Wiszniewski*, ed. M. Hendrykowski, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2006, p. 116.

[18] In *Euro 2012* and *Lust Murder (Zabójcy z lubieżności)*, there are also ‘variations’ on the motif of being a champion.

[19] Marcin Koszałka’s comment from *Declaration*: “Only such an encounter is dramatic. A meeting of a man who could not be an outstanding climber and an outstanding climber who is not a champion anymore.” In Korczak’s professional life, a special moment was his start in the championships in Madonna di Campiglio, where Madman almost came third.

[20] Half a degree easier than the hardest route in the world.

designed but is not able to clear today. This scene has symbolic overtones – it suggests the champion's 'decline' but also the transience of fame and the loneliness of a sportsman. When studying this scene, certain analogies can be drawn to one of the scenes of *Wanda Gościmińska* in which we see an empty hall with the image of the protagonist on a poster devoted to the "People of Three Decades". Earlier, applause is heard in honour of the former work leader who attended a meeting with young people. Now, already an old woman, she is standing, her eyes fixed on a huge poster and aware that her fame is no more. Similarly to Wiszniewski, Koszałka faded out the applause to leave the lonely protagonist with his past. Korczak is standing in front of a climbing wall and goes through the motions of climbing. Later he says:



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I am not able anymore to do difficult, the most difficult, hand movements, the most difficult routes, but when I close my eyes I remember each of the most difficult ones, I remember each movement, each arrangement of fingers, hands and legs. I remember everything. I even remember the specific effort which I put into each of these movements. This is a kind of burden that I carry inside me all the time. The memory of this. I cannot let it go.

Koszałka also shoots Korczak's hands in a great close-up as Wiszniewski did (although using a wide-angle lens), portraying Wanda Gościmińska. Characteristic inexpressive (frozen) shots of Madman's face, when he is looking straight at the camera, is a technique widely used by the maker of *Miner Foreman*. If Wiszniewski 'portrayed' a frozen thought, mirroring the 'freezing' of collective awareness, Koszałka depicted the dynamic and reflexive thought of an individual. Korczak is aware of the techniques used by the filmmaker and revolts against many abuses such as a request to shave his head so that the light is scattered better. Marcin Koszałka, still whilst the film was being shot, said:

On the screen, you will see a conflict between the protagonist and director. Piotr, on the one hand, despises me because he sees all my *threads*, the way I weave the film. He sees this from inside. That I make him look older, sidetrack him in the beginning to attain a cinematographic effect. To make the film stronger. This is basically what he blames me for. But on the other hand, he respects me, because, thanks to the camera, I can offer him immortality. This is an incredible character, a truly worthy opponent in this *duel*.<sup>[21]</sup>

The director describes his confrontation with Madman, using off-screen questions in which he touches upon fundamental matters: why he decided to make this film, whether he considers himself an

[21] *Granicę wyznacza sobie sam twórca*, [*The Border is Set by the Artist Himself*] at: <<http://film.interia.pl/raport/zwierzyniec2009/wywiady/news/gran->

[ice-wyznacza-sobie-sam-tworca,1355054,3764,3](http://film.interia.pl/raport/zwierzyniec2009/wywiady/news/gran-ice-wyznacza-sobie-sam-tworca,1355054,3764,3)> [accessed: November 8th 2013].

artist, if he feels unfulfilled. Significantly, in the frame he shows only Korczak's face – Wojciech Wiszniewski used the same technique in the film about Bugdoł (what we see is only the back of the director's head) in which the protagonist answers questions about the sense of work competition.

In the sequence in which Korczak prepares handholds for a climbing wall and then mounts them, Koszałka makes a creative allusion to the poetics of *A Joiner* (Stolarz, 1976), although his frames are more static, shot from a greater distance and dominated by a dark green colour. The initial visual repetition of shots<sup>[22]</sup> (of equipment) with a dominant blue colour characteristic of Wiszniewski's 1976 film, corresponds with the author's idea, who repeats newsreel fragments. Korczak filmed in a workshop reminds the viewer of the title joiner filmed at work. Koszałka focuses on details but also the protagonist's work, permitting to draw certain analogies (Koszalka borrows but does not quote verbatim). In the scene of measuring the distance of the tracks of the 'declaration of immortality' by Korczak, Koszałka has his protagonist speak off-screen – a technique characteristic of the author's conception of *Joiner*. Characteristic of Wiszniewski's work, the selectivity of sounds, which enjoy an equally rightful status with the picture, is heard in *Declaration* too – the splashing of water, crunching of snow, clanking of bars, the sound of footsteps – are only some of the selected sounds.<sup>[23]</sup> Abstracted from the realistic audio track, the sounds underscore the film's creativity and symbolism. The combining of various documentary techniques – ones of registration, creation, actuality – both in relation to picture and sound – is characteristic of both the author of *Tale of the Man who...* and Marcin Koszałka.

While the author of *ABC Book* "disassembles" film newspeak, as Katarzyna Mąka-Malatyńska writes, Koszałka exposes the illusion of cinema, to which the final scenes of *Declaration* testify. At a certain point, the protagonist confesses: "A perfect illusion is worth as much as reality, at least, or even more, because it is the film that people will remember and not my actual biography". At the moment when Madman speaks these very words, the director exposes the "machinery" of this illusion, all the arrangements (film set lighting design, camera positioning, stills, etc.) that are necessary to create it. The guru of climbing thus becomes a "hostage of immortality", which the film guarantees him. Wiszniewski has shown both Bugdoł and Gościmińska as 'hostages of history' – the people who sacrificed their lives to the building of People's Poland. The price they paid was the loss of personal happiness and privacy. Becoming 'immortal' (as proven by statues, films, orders), they lost their human dimension; a bitter story is told by Bernard Bugdoł's wife, who says that his brother, although he worked together with her husband, has stayed an ordinary man. Although he does not have much, he lives a normal life, unlike Bernard who is enveloped in a dubious

[22] It is also characteristic of Dziworski's *Several Stories of a Man*.

[23] Selective sound effects are also heavily used by Bogdan Dziworski in his films.



nimbus of myth. Wiszniewski had this to say about the protagonist of his film:

[...] this is a tale of a human statue that due to the 'making a hero of him' came into conflict with his friends. Of a man who had been exalted and posed and who, being unable to revise his inflated image, alienated himself from his community. I attempted to suggest the same problem in *Wanda Gościmińska*.<sup>[24]</sup>



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About the private life of Gościmińska little is known, but Wiszniewski suggests in the dinner scene, which is accompanied by the rear projection of a post-war newsreel with the protagonist's voice coming from off-screen (she challenges Łódź woman-spinners to competition), that the work leader has paid for her success with alienation and the absence of family relations. Sitting frozen at a table full of food amid the chatter of diners, Wanda Gościmińska remains silent.

Significantly, neither Gościmińska nor Bugdoł would be remembered now by even a few people had Wojciech Wiszniewski not made films with them in lead roles. The awareness of immortality provided by the cinema makes the protagonist of *Declaration* sign a 'pact' with Marcin Koszałka.

Both filmmakers gained the status of iconoclasts of the social status quo. Wiszniewski paid the high price of having most of his films banned and his name excluded from the film circuit. Koszałka, in turn, raising taboo subjects, was the target of attacks for being scandalous, going beyond what is moral and for practising emotional exhibitionism. Both the author of *ABC Book* and *What a Beautiful Son I bore (Takiego pięknego syna urodziłam, 2000)* 'administered' a form of shock therapy to their contemporaries. Wiszniewski understands it in the following way: "The role of a filmmaker should be to show society what the reality actually is, rather than to ignore facts – as therapy may take place only after a proper diagnosis is made. Film may and should restore elementary sense to fundamental human and social values".<sup>[25]</sup>

Koszałka thus summarizes his attitude:

I touch certain taboo subjects, which are not particularly liked by people or by contemporary man in general, [...] I wish to spoil people's fun a bit. People would like to ride in their cars, live in villas, go on foreign trips and avoid ugly things, avoid street people, the poor, the dirty, the sick [...]. And I am possibly there to spoil their fun.<sup>[26]</sup>

[24] W. Wiszniewski, op. cit. p. 5.

[25] Ibidem, p. 3.

[26] M. Koszałka, *Sztuka ekranowana [Screened Art]*, <<http://ninateka.pl/film/sztuka-ekranowana-marcin-koszalka>> [accessed: November 11th 2013].



*Where the Sun doesn't Rush*, dir. Matej Bobrik,  
prod. Polish National Film School in Lodz, 2009