

The Radical Theology of Krzysztof Kieślowski's Decalogue

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In his classic work of Christian apologetics, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis suggests that for the sake of linguistic clarity we apply the word “Christian” only to “one who accepts the common doctrines of Christianity” and not to those who, though they may exemplify the “spirit of Christ,” do not accept or are unsure about those same doctrines. To those who accept the doctrines of Christian faith yet lead dishonest and selfish lives we must simply say that they are “bad Christians.”¹ This is sensible enough, yet increasingly problematic. We live in a world where hollow professions of faith by public figures reverberate in the media incessantly. Pundits are continually asking politicians seeking office “How important is prayer in your life?” and “How important is your faith?” Not surprisingly, the politicians most committed to making the rich richer and enacting policies detrimental to the most vulnerable in our society are the most emphatic and the most voluble in their protestations of Christian faith. And the pundits play along, taking them at their word and never mentioning the obvious fact that it is Mammon, and not the God of Christianity, that has their allegiance.

Yet it seems to me that the gospels are quite clear about what it means to be a Christian, if by Christian we mean a follower of Jesus Christ. The fine points of Christian doctrine developed over centuries, yet Jesus (or the evangelists’ depiction of Jesus in their gospels) is perfectly clear about what constitutes a righteous life in the eyes of God. Asked which commandment was the most important, Jesus replied, “YOU SHALT LOVE THE LORD THY GOD WITH ALL THY HEART, WITH ALL THY SOUL, AND WITH ALL

THY MIND. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF.”² Yet it was a “born again Christian” who presided over the most executions in our country’s history while governor of Texas, and as president launched two devastating wars against weak countries that posed no threat to the United States, while cutting taxes for the rich and gutting social programs for the poor wherever he could get away with it.

Unlike George W. Bush, Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski does not claim to be a Christian. In fact he is notoriously vague and enigmatic when questioned about his religious views. Yet any survey of his work will not fail to impress the sensitive viewer with how deep a faith, and specifically a Christian faith, is at work in many of his films, for instance his *Three Colors Trilogy* and his ten hour film *The Decalogue*. With all due respect to C.S. Lewis, to my mind Kieślowski is a Christian and George W. Bush is not, and in the following essay I hope to show why by briefly examining his 1988 masterpiece *The Decalogue*.

The Decalogue consists of ten individual films just under an hour in length, each based on one of the Ten Commandments. While each of the ten films can stand independently, together they form an integral whole and are meant to be seen in succession over a short time. All of them take place in and around Warsaw in the last years of Polish Communism, and most of them are set in the same dreary apartment complex, which in the earlier episodes resembles a kind of cosmic or post-apocalyptic wasteland. Kieślowski shows how the Ten Commandments are not an anachronism, but are relevant still; we see them complicated as they are given concrete reality in the messy lives of Kieślowski’s characters. Yet beyond each individual commandment stands Christ’s greater commandment to love one another, the only way, ultimately, to fulfill the law of God. Most of the emphasis is on the second part of Jesus’ admonition quoted above, for while “God” as an abstract noun might be difficult for some people to love, the noun “neighbor” is perfectly intelligible to all. And in case there is any confusion, Jesus makes his meaning unambiguously clear in the Gospel of Luke;³ our neighbor is every single human being, even our enemies (how radical this commandment is becomes strikingly apparent when we realize that in a twenty-first century context the two characters in the parable of the Good Samaritan might be a Palestinian and an Israeli). Therefore most, but not all, of the emphasis in *The Decalogue* is on loving your neighbor, which is only another way of loving God. As the great Christian theologian Karl Barth puts it: “The decision lies in our answer to the question — Do we, in the unknowable *neighbor*, apprehend and love the Unknown God? Do we, in the complete Otherness of *the other*— in whom the whole riddle of existence is summed up in such a manner as to require

its solution in an action on our part — hear the voice of the One?”⁴ In fact it might be said that Kieślowski is a Christian existentialist, for his emphasis is on how his characters answer the question posed by Barth, the critical choices they make at every moment as free human beings.

That said, *Decalogue One* is about our fundamental relation to God himself. As well it might be since it is based on the first Commandment (in the Roman Catholic version of the Decalogue): “I *am* the LORD thy God ... thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.” *Decalogue One* involves three central characters: an atheist father, his ten year old son, and the father’s sister and boy’s aunt, a devout Catholic. As mentioned, the *Decalogue* films can stand independently, as each film introduces a new set of characters and a new story line; nonetheless there is a thematic progression to the series (moving from judgment to reconciliation) and there is one character who appears in all but the last of the *Decalogue* films. He usually appears at significant moments, never speaks, and is only on screen for a few seconds; yet he is vitally important to Kieślowski’s overall metaphysical vision. The character clearly represents an aspect of divinity incarnated, or *Shekhinah* — a visible manifestation of divine presence (for convenience I will usually refer to this character as “the angel”). The first character we see in *Decalogue One*, and thus in *The Decalogue*, is this nameless figure sitting pensively before a fire by a frozen lake. (This lake is of central significance: symbolically, thematically, and to the plot itself.) Alone by the shore of the frozen lake and huddled before a fire, he invokes homelessness, profound separation, and thus I am reminded, among other things, of Jesus’ identification with the sick, the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the stranger — the “least of these” in Matthew 25.

Decalogue One opens with a long slow God’s-eye panning of the surface of the frozen lake, the camera finally coming to a stop on this mysterious figure. It is a cold, grey, ominous day. All the while the haunting otherworldly flute music of Zbigniew Preisner is heard. The scene then shifts to a woman walking at night, crying; she stops before a television in a store window staring at a pre-recorded scene of children running. The camera freezes on the happy face of a boy in the center of the group of children, Pavel, who will come to be the center of the story which is about to unfold. Then back to the man by the lake, wiping away a tear. This prologue, which is subsequent to the action we are about to see, comes to an end as the camera sweeps up a tall apartment building (we only seen the texture of the grey granite at first and do not know what we are seeing); we hear the flutter of birds’ wings, and finally one pigeon is on a window ledge with the boy staring in wonder. The contrast between the mysterious frozen lake and the television screen sets up

the thematic tension. Later the aunt will tell her nephew that at a young age the boy's father came to believe that everything could be measured. God, associated with the deep mystery at the center of the universe and symbolized here by the frozen lake, has been forgotten.

The heart of this first episode is Pavel, a precocious child who early in the film encounters a stray neighborhood dog lying dead on the cold ground. He is disturbed and asks his father to explain death to him. The father feebly remarks that death occurs when the heart stops pumping blood to the brain. Unsatisfied the child then asks about the soul; the father remarks that there is no such thing as a soul; it is simply a fabrication meant to console. His aunt does a better job answering his questions, demonstrating the answer to the most difficult question of all. When Pavel asks about God she hugs the boy, telling him that God is where love is. It is the choices we make and the actions which ensue from them — especially actions directed empathically toward other persons — that are most important to Kieslowski, and which demonstrate our commitment to God and to his creation.

The father is a Professor of Linguistics whose god is scientific measurement. He seems to believe in the infallibility of computers and in a class lecture even ascribes the possibility of choice, selection, even “aesthetic preference” to a properly programmed computer. In this first film the computer is an idol that, for the father at least (and for our technocratic political, intellectual, and business classes) has usurped the place of God. The professor, whose name is Krzysztof, had told his students that for him a computer can almost have its own personality, and in this film computers are strangely anthropomorphized, inevitably bringing to mind Hal from Kubrick's *2001*. When Pavel wants to go skating his father tells him to ask the computer; he tells his son to find out the ground temperature of the three previous days and then see what the computer's response is regarding whether the ice will be strong enough to hold someone of his son's weight. The computer assures him that the ice will be safe to skate on; the ice breaks and Pavel is drowned.

When the distraught father returns home from the lake after the death of his child he walks slowly towards the computer, mysteriously on and glowing from its place in the room, its screen reading in English: “I am ready.” He leaves, as if in recoil, going to a large cathedral under construction, conspicuous throughout this first film. Candles envelope a large picture of Virgin and Child; in anger he overturns the altar and wax falls like tears from the eye of the Virgin. He puts his hand into the basin of holy water, finds a sphere of ice and applies it to his feverish forehead. The camera lingers on this for a moment before cutting to a close up of his beautiful son running in slow motion on a television screen; the camera freezes, starts, freezes again, and the first part of *Decalogue* comes to a close. This is a powerful opening into

this investigation of the relevance of the commandments in our contemporary world, and a number of themes and clues have been given to us.

First, in *Decalogue Eight* one of the central characters says that “no ideal, nothing, is more important than the life of a child.” In *Decalogue Five* a young girl of twelve is killed through the carelessness of others. And in *Decalogue One*, as we just saw, one of the last images before the final image of the young boy’s face, so full of the future he won’t have, is the prescient Mother of the incarnate God weeping for her own child’s cruel death at the hands of institutional power as well as for the grieving father and his own lost child. Children represent New Life; they are the most vulnerable; and they are the most dependent on the responsible care of adults. There is something especially sacred about children: they are creative, open, trusting, and full of wonder. If it is true that to enter heaven we must become like little children, then it must be one of the gravest of sins to be the cause of a child’s harm. *Decalogue Seven* revolves around the commandment “Thou shalt not steal,” and opens with the off screen diegetic sound of a child screaming: haunting, plaintive, unidentifiable at first, the screaming continues for four full minutes before the camera finally settles on a child having a nightmare. In desperation a middle-aged woman shakes the child violently, saying as she wakes, “Are you dreaming of the wolves again? I’ve told you there are no wolves.” But we soon understand that there are wolves indeed, as little Ania is caught in the middle of a tense struggle for her possession. Born to a sixteen year old mother, Majka, she has been raised by her grandmother, Eva. Now, six years later, Majka wants the child back. But Eva has legal possession of Ania and Majka is forced to kidnap her own child. We see how Kieślowski and his co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz masterfully complicate the commandments: who is the thief here? Did the grandmother steal the child from her biological mother or does Majka steal the child from Eva, the child’s primary caregiver for the first six years of her life?

While it is perhaps not clear who is committing the theft, it is clear that the child is the real loser here, as both women are possessive rather than loving. In that sense they are both thieves, stealing the child’s future. As the grandmother finally stops Ania’s crying the camera lingers on Ania’s haunted face — it is a stunning picture: we see in the child’s dilated eyes and catatonic stare a ruined life, a lost soul, a doomed future. Kieślowski’s brilliant work with actors and his many fascinating close-ups of his actors’ faces has to be seen to be appreciated, but it is a wonder to me how he managed to capture such a haunted look in this little girl’s face. Despite the selfishness of both the women, our sympathy should extend to the biological mother Majka as well as to the child. For Majka was a child once too; and it is clear that her own mother does not love her, blaming Majka’s birth for her own subsequent



Model Valentine Dusot (Irene Jacob) is photographed for a chewing gum ad campaign in Kieslowski *Three Colors: Red* (1994, MKZ Productions). The camera's eye is like the audience's, voyeuristically enjoying Dusot's beauty. Voyeurism is a recurring theme in Kieslowski's films. In *Red*, a misanthropic judge eavesdrops on the phone calls of his neighbors to confirm to himself that humanity is doomed, while in *Decalogue*, a jealous husband spies on his adulterous wife. Kieslowski draws a distinction between those who stand in judgment of others, ogle them, and try to possess them, while he urges us to be more God-like and to look upon our neighbors with mercy and forgiveness — to respect their autonomy and privacy and to love them despite their flaws.

incapacity to have more children. While the credits show that the actor Artur Barcis who plays the angel appears in this film just as he does in all the previous ones, I am unable to discern his presence even after repeated viewings. The possessiveness of the two women, their stealing of the little girl's future, seems to banish divinity from the environment. As Lloyd Baugh puts it in an essay whose thesis is similar to my own, "Where there is no love ... divine Providence, the power of Grace, represented by this mysterious figure is unable to function."⁵

While the theme of children and the need to care for them is central to *The Decalogue*, it is possible to extend this view metaphorically. We are all children to God, and he never falters in his watching over us. We are frequently tempted to judge negatively, but only because we are unable to watch

incessantly and therefore to really know our brothers and sisters. We feel sympathy for Majka, but only because Kieślowski has revealed enough of her circumstances to awaken our compassion. We feel less sympathy for Eva, but that is, perhaps, because we know less about her. Many of the characters in *The Decalogue* invite a similar negative response at first, until Kieślowski reveals more of their situation. In this way Kieślowski has involved us concretely in one of the themes of the film (we might call it positive voyeurism). As we watch the film we come slowly to understand the characters, and thus like God — the ultimate watcher and knower — come to love and care for them, and this love covers over a multitude of sins.⁶

Another theme found in *Decalogue One*, which recurs throughout the series, is the journey which leads to the moment of choice, and the choice itself, the choice of faith. It is always somewhat risky to read into an author's characters evidence of the author's own private life, but *Decalogue* is a deeply personal film and it is impossible not to conjecture on the nature of Kieślowski's own faith as represented by certain characters, especially as Kieślowski himself has said, "I turn the camera on myself in all my films."⁷ The name of the father in *Decalogue One* is Krzysztof, the actual name of both Kieślowski and his writing partner Krzysztof Piesiewicz. As the first film of the series, this character's movement away from "idol worship" and toward acknowledgement of the divine is telling. Krzysztof is a man of science, an intellectual; he is completely at home in the secular world, yet as his sister says to Pavel, "we should not rule God out for him entirely." He is a good father, a very sympathetic character, and he seems to possess at least some doubt about the infallibility of his god, as he checks the ice himself even after the computer assures him that it will be safe to skate on. It is significant that the cathedral seen in the film is under construction, a work in progress; and Krzysztof's entering the site of worship and applying holy water to his forehead tells us that the construction of this holy site will continue in his own life. One of the most stunning images in the whole film is a long lingering shot of a huge magnificent cross which covers one of the walls of the cathedral; Kieślowski holds the shot for a long time, signifying the mystery of the sacrifice that brings Life, even as the sacrifice of his own son will bring Krzysztof to spiritual life.

In *Decalogue Two* another man of science, this time a doctor, is asked if he believes in God. He says that he has a God, "but there's only enough of him for me." When asked, then, if this is a private God, he responds that it is. In *Decalogue Eight* a professor of philosophy says that she tries to help her students "discover themselves," to find the good that exists in every human being. When asked who evaluates, she answers, "He who is in all of us." But "I never found God" in any of your books, her questioner remarks. The pro-

fessor — whose name Zofia means wisdom — responds that she does not use the word God or go to church, yet nonetheless she “knows.” A choice must be made, she says, whether to leave God behind or to accept him — even if one never uses the word God or worships in any orthodox or customary way, that existential choice will make a profound difference in the life of the one who chooses and in the lives of those he or she comes into significant contact with. The alternative to choosing God is choosing emptiness, which she utters with profound distaste, even horror. All of these characters are intellectuals, and the latter two believe without belonging to any church or submitting to any sort of dogma. These characters’ actions give evidence of the choice they have made. The doctor is confronted early on with a hostile woman who needs his help; years ago she ran over his dog, and before it is clear that he is going to help her she says that she wishes she had run over him instead. Yet he helps her. Zofia is devoted, in a sense, to a kind of missionary work; she works to bring her students to a sense of The Good in an otherwise bleak and meaningless world. While in a Nazi prison waiting to be executed, the great Lutheran Minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of a “religionless Christianity.” Disgusted with the hypocrisy and ineffectuality of organized religion he came to feel that Christ might best be served outside the church; and that is the kind of Christianity Kieślowski reveals in his characters.

Kieślowski is not concerned with a vague and general kind of faith that exists on the periphery of his characters’ consciousness. He is concerned with moral choices of profound life changing significance. We have already discussed the doctor in *Decalogue Two*, but more needs to be said about him. Like Krzysztof in the preceding episode this man has suffered a profound loss, losing his family in a World War II bombing raid. In a sense Kieślowski is showing us what the fruits of Krzysztof’s choice might be as he moves on with his life after the loss of his child. This doctor is usually seen caring for his plants, his bird or his patients. It is clear what kind of choice he made after his catastrophe; he chose life, and service to his private God, not emptiness and despair. In contrast, the other central character, Dorota, is destructive: we know she ran over his dog two years ago; we see her in her pain attempt to destroy a plant; she smokes incessantly, inadvertently and symbolically setting a pack of matches ablaze as she ashes her cigarette in the matchbox; and she slides a glass of hot coffee across the table just to watch it break on the floor. She is a type of Kieślowski character we will see again, just as we will see another destructive character, Jacek in *Decalogue Five*, slowly bump a rock off a bridge and onto the windshield of a coming car. But Kieślowski is sympathetic with his more destructive characters, recognizing this propensity as both a cause and a consequence of their suffering.

Dorota loves her husband very much; she loves him for the “tranquility

and support” he provides, but she is a very passionate woman and loves another man as well, a lover who fulfills her sexually in a way that her husband does not. Her husband is dying; she is pregnant with her lover’s child and we learn that this is her only chance to have a baby; but if her husband manages to recover she needs to abort the child. She demands that the doctor tell her if her husband will live or die. To save the child he tells her that her husband will die. She makes him swear, which he can not do truthfully but does anyway. The commandment this episode explores is, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” This is another example of Kieślowski complicating the commandments; the doctor swears that her husband will die even though there is a slight chance he may recover; but he does this to save the child, which as we saw earlier is central to the theme of *The Decalogue*. The crucial scene takes place in her husband’s hospital room. The angel, this time a caregiver in the hospital, is present in the room and focused on the intensity of contact of wife to dying husband; with profound emotion she tells her unconscious husband that she loves him, and we know that she has chosen him and will not go away with her lover, although he is waiting for her. She fails to show up for her abortion, her husband miraculously recovers and tells the doctor that he and his wife are going to have a baby. “Do you know what that means?” he asks the doctor. The doctor says that he does, and the film ends. We have moved from judgment and the death of a child in *Decalogue One*, to new life — both the child growing in Dorota’s womb and her husband’s resurrection — in *Decalogue Two*. This theme continues throughout *The Decalogue*, for instance just before Jacek’s execution in *Five* we learn that Piotr and his wife have just had a child.

The choice of honoring marital commitment, and of an enduring love with a partner that is much deeper than erotic attachment, is also the theme of *Decalogue Nine*, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife.” The husband learns that he is impotent with no chance of recovery; his wife says she does not care, that she loves him and that they will manage. Even so, she has been having an affair — purely physical, with apparently little or no emotional content — and does not tell her husband about it. He discovers the affair, and is actually caught spying on his wife as she tells her lover she cannot continue to see him. (The theme of voyeurism, as we have seen, recurs frequently, and is, indeed, implicit throughout as we are caught up ourselves in the act of voyeurism, continually watching the characters.) A week earlier he had spied on them as well, but that time had seen them making love. After a very emotional scene she convinces him not to leave her. He agrees and they decide to adopt a child (always a sign of new life and possibility in *The Decalogue*). Through a complication in the plot he has reason to believe his wife is seeing her lover again, although she is not. He leaves her a suicide note and drives

his bicycle off a broken bridge, the angel riding behind him and then looking on compassionately as he lies on the rocky ground, unconscious. He learns from the nurse in the hospital that his wife is home, she has returned prematurely from her trip; he has the nurse dial his number and place the receiver so he can talk; after hesitating, his distraught wife answers the phone, hearing his voice she says only, "God, you are there." He replies in the words of God in the Pentateuch, "I am." With these words of multiple meaning, *Decalogue Nine* ends.

Kieślowski has said that the commandment that each film is supposed to be about "is really not important,"⁸ that some episodes could apply to more than one of the commandments. *Decalogue Nine*, for instance, could easily have been the subject of *Decalogue Six*, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," as could have *Decalogue Three*. And, indeed, this really attests to my thesis that what unites the series is not so much the Old Testament Decalogue as the New Testament commandment to love, which the gospels aver is the fulfillment of "the law and the prophets."⁹ *Decalogue Three* also seems to have its provenance in a gospel story, specifically Jesus' healing on the Sabbath Day, and where — to counter the Pharisees' accusation — he asks, "Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath day, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?"¹⁰ It is Christmas Eve and Eva, abandoned by her husband three years earlier after she had been caught in adultery, is desperate and intends to commit suicide if she remains alone throughout the long night. She concocts a ruse to entice her former lover away from his family. Although not entirely a disinterested act of love, as he used to love Eva and perhaps to some degree still does, it is nonetheless clear that the happily married Janusz would much prefer to spend the holiday at home with his wife and family. Eva is reminiscent of Dorota in her propensity for destruction, and most of the evening consists of the two driving, often recklessly, around the cold barren streets of Warsaw. Janusz's spirit of love and giving is also symbolized by the Santa Claus suit and beard he wears in the opening scene when we first see him coming into the apartment building as Krzysztof from *Decalogue One* is going out; and is manifested not only in the time he gives to the suffering Eva, but also in the way he confronts a cruel guard in the drab "alcoholics' cell" where the two go searching for Eva's, so she says, missing husband. This scene also foreshadows the harrowing scene in the state execution facility in *Decalogue Five*. We see the incarcerated men naked, cruelly being sprayed with cold water by a sadistic guard, when Janusz with righteous indignation comes to their aid. He manages to stay with Eva until 7:00 and so she is able to go on. Instead of being home with his family celebrating this holiest of Sabbaths, he has done good and saved a life.

Decalogue Six, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," would actually seem

to apply less to the commandment than *Two* or *Nine*, as neither of the two central characters is married. This is a powerful piece of storytelling, and indeed it is one of two sections that Kieślowski expanded and released as separate films, this one titled, *A Short Film about Love*. A nineteen-year-old boy named Tomek spends his evenings spying on his neighbor Magda, a promiscuous young artist who lives alone and frequently entertains men in her apartment. Although Tomek used to watch her having sex, he has since stopped; he continues to watch her obsessively with a telescope, but no longer when she is sexually engaged (and, therefore, he has ceased masturbating while he watches as well). As he watched Magda he grew to love her (just as we have grown to love Kieślowski's characters in our own act of watching) and he has suppressed or sublimated the sexual aspect of his love. Tomek's obsession goes beyond just watching; he manages to get a job delivering milk to her apartment early in the morning before he goes to his job at the post office; and he has been putting counterfeit notices in her mailbox so that she will come into the office where he works. When Magda discovers what he is up to she is at first angry, but soon she is more intrigued than upset. Magda confronts him one morning when he is delivering the milk, and Tomek confesses that he does not want to go to bed with her; in fact he wants nothing from her at all. But he does, after a few moments, muster up the courage to ask her to go for ice cream. After she says yes we see him, in a high angle shot from the window, practically dancing as he runs along swerving exuberantly with his milk cart. At this point he crosses the path of the angel. After their date they arrive back at Magda's apartment, Magda telling him there is no such thing as love. She seduces him and he ejaculates almost immediately after she guides his hands up her thighs: "You see," she says, "that's all there is to love; now go to the bathroom and clean yourself off." After this humiliation Tomek storms out (we see him again from the same high angle shot as before), crosses paths with the angel, again, and once home slits his wrists.

Although the young woman's name is Magda in this version, when it was released as a separate film, expanded by about twenty-five minutes, the character is named Maria Magdalena. This simple name change impels the viewer to see the film as an allegory. If Magda is Mary Magdalene then Tomek must be Jesus Christ, which would explain the "non-sexual" and selfless nature of his love for her. In fact, Baugh believes that Tomek's act of volitional bloodletting should be understood as a sacrifice for Magda just as Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross for the real Mary Magdalene and for all humanity.¹¹ And indeed, Magda is transformed by the act. The Greek word for "repent" is *metanoeo*, a transformation of the mind, and this is what happens to Magda. The film at this point shifts from Tomek's obsession for Magda to Magda's obsession with Tomek. There are no scenes of Tomek in the hospital and we

do not see him again until the very end of the film when Magda returns yet again to the post office to see if he has returned to work. He has returned, and when he tells her that he has got over his habit of peeping on her a look of great disappointment comes over Magda's face, and the movie ends.

It should be noted that there is a third important character in this film, Tomek's landlady, a maternal older woman who resents Magda's intrusion into her surrogate child's life and continually proves unhelpful when Magda seeks information about Tomek after his suicide attempt. There is a subtle Oedipal tension between the lodger and the older woman, which resonates with the theme of *Decalogue Four*. Yet it is unconscious and innocent, and the larger thematic point of the older woman in this film is the maternal love she offers the orphan Tomek; she is the spiritual mother of Tomek — and hence in this triangle can be likened to the other Mary in Jesus' life — and provides much needed love to him. Thus the vital importance of loving and nurturing children is implicit in this film as it is in so many of the other *Decalogue* films as well.

The other part of *The Decalogue* that Kieślowski expanded into its own feature film, *A Short Film about Killing*, is *Decalogue Five*, based on the commandment "Thou shalt not kill." While most of *The Decalogue* films revolve around two central characters, this one dramatizes the eventually intersecting lives of three disparate characters, each equally essential to plot and theme: a taxi driver, an alienated young man, and a recent graduate of law school. The story focuses on the young man's gratuitous and brutal murder of the taxi driver and his own equally brutal institutionalized murder by the state. Unlike more conventional filmmaking Kieślowski skips over the apprehension and trial of the killer, moving right from the murder to the murderer's sentencing and execution.

As in the gospels, and in many of the other *Decalogue* films, our sympathy is directed to the troubled young sinner Jacek. We find out toward the end of the film that his favorite sister was run over by a tractor and killed by his friend after the two had been drinking. He has been wandering aimlessly around Warsaw ever since. He is intensely alone, confused, and alienated, and Kieślowski and the actor Miroslaw Baka capture this beautifully in a myriad of ways. His confused psyche is signaled when he asks if it is possible to tell from a photograph if someone is alive or not. While in a café Jacek sees two young girls watching him from the other side of the window; with his spoon he flicks some of his coffee at the window and the girls laugh with pleasure before walking away. This is the only moment in the entire film where we see Jacek smile; but the smile quickly fades as the girls recede, immediately replaced by an expression of the most profound estrangement. Jacek is always seen alone, internally framed or shot separately when he is with

someone, and in this scene he is of course divided from the two young girls by the window.

Except for his horrifying murder, which Kieślowski does not mitigate in any way (at almost seven minutes it is supposedly “the longest murder scene in the history of cinema”¹²) the taxi driver is an unsympathetic character. He is selfish and unkind, even sadistic. When a young couple (Dorota and her husband from *Decalogue Two*) anxious to get out of the cold, approach him for a ride he tells them he is busy cleaning his car. While they are waiting he ogles an attractive young woman (girl, really) and then offers her a ride; she refuses and he leaves alone, abandoning the young couple who had been waiting. Later he throws the pearls of his wife’s domestic love and care, half a sandwich she had made for him, to a stray dog, and we are put in mind of the aphorism from the Gospel of Matthew, “Do not give dogs what is sacred, do not throw your pearls to pigs, If you do they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.”¹³ Of course, he is torn to pieces, in a sense, as we will see shortly — and in fact the other half of the sandwich is eaten by Jacek after he commits the murder. Chance or fate plays a large roll in the cinema of Kieślowski, and here it must be acknowledged that had the taxi driver extended the simple courtesy of giving the young couple a ride he would not have been killed; the rest of his day would have followed a different pattern and he almost certainly would never have encountered Jacek. In another scene a man is helping an unsteady and certainly inebriated man to the taxi so that he can get home, and just before they get to the car the taxi driver drives off, much to the Good Samaritan’s consternation. We also see him gleefully terrify a group of dogs with his horn as they pass before his car. There is always some degree of mystery in the question of why things happen the way they do, but in the metaphysics of this film it seems the taxi driver has fallen under the divine judgment of an angry God. One thing is certain — his selfishness and lack of kindness in some mysterious way leads him to his death.

The third lead character, a lawyer named Piotr, demonstrates charity and active love throughout. After he is unable to prevent the state from exacting its revenge on Jacek, and the prisoner is led away by guards after sentencing, he calls out to the doomed boy from a window, demonstrating compassion and a sense of common humanity by the simple act of calling the boy’s name; later Jacek tells him that the gesture moved him to tears. Such actions, Kieślowski seems to suggest, may have the power to prevent such tragedies from happening in the first place; and in fact Kieślowski has acknowledged that one of his motives for making *Decalogue Five* and *A Short Film about Killing* was to express his sense of Poland as a “world where people don’t have any pity for each other, a world where they hate each other, a world

where they not only don't help but get in each other's way. A world where they repel each other. A world of people living alone."¹⁴ Piotr exemplifies *caritas*, the predominant characteristic of the Jewish rabbi from Nazareth, and the only available means of healing a broken world.

The last part of the film takes place in the prison before the execution, ending with the execution itself. Jacek asks to see Piotr, who comes to him in his cell. He tells the lawyer the sad story of his sister's death, asking him to retrieve and bring to his mother a picture of his sister that he left with a photographer to have enlarged. When the guard asks a second time if the lawyer is done yet, Piotr angrily asserts that he will never say he is done. At the chief's instruction the guard terminates their conversation, calling his men to bring out the prisoner. This scene and the execution itself are profoundly disturbing. Eight guards brusquely manhandle Jacek as they lead him out of his cell; and in a bizarre scene of just a few seconds duration one of the technicians of death draws the rope down with a demonic intensity. While Jacek has a last cigarette the chief seems bored, perhaps impatient to get back to the coffee we saw him enjoying in a previous scene. In a sense this institutional murder is more inhumane than Jacek's, even if the state can assert at least a putative reason for its killing while Jacek's was a desperate act with no apparent motive. Kieślowski indicts a society that remains indifferent to human suffering, and an institution that punishes those who have already suffered more than anyone ever should.

Decalogue Five is an exploration of evil. The area around the apartment complex looks even more like a wasteland than it had in previous episodes; Kieślowski's cinematographer for *Five*, Slawomir Idziak, used pale green filters to create a sickly color tone; there is little vegetation seen, and none at all in the muddy hell where the taxi driver throws his food to the dog. We do not know why the taxi driver is cruel; we only see his callous attitude and his sadistic sense of humor as he drives around the bleak city. Jacek as well wanders around Warsaw indifferent to the cruelty he sees (he walks indifferently away as two boys beat someone in an alley) while adding himself to the harsh cityscape with his own cruel behavior (he pushes a young man he thinks is eying him with prurient intent into a urinal). Yet the object we most associate with the taxi driver is a devil's head that hangs from his rear view mirror, the camera slowly zooming in to close range at one point as the demonic icon dangles ominously. The object we associate with Jacek, besides the rope he uses as a murder weapon, is the picture of his sister that he carries around with him. Just before he is taken off to die, he wonders if things might have been different had his sister lived. He is able to love, at least one person, even if she is no longer there for him; and it is this love, and the love shown to him by Piotr, that redeems him.

I had said that the execution is the final scene, but there is one final shot, a sort of coda. In a beautiful meadow by a forest, perhaps where Jacek's sister was killed, we see a bright intensely shining otherworldly light in the distance; the camera holds on it for a number of seconds before slowly panning to Piotr, vehemently decrying over and over, "I abhor it! I abhor it!" And with this mysterious light, and this expression of revolt, *Decalogue Five* ends.

The Decalogue is a dark film, anatomizing a broken world and its broken, suffering occupants with steadfast honesty. Yet it is a film that is unrelenting in its search for transcendence. *Decalogue Five* is surely one of the darkest in a series of dark films, yet the final image we are left with clearly intimates that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."¹⁵ In every episode we get glimpses of this spiritual light, somehow inextinguishable. The doctor in *Two*, having lived through the most destructive war in human history and losing everything he most loved, somehow manages to emerge from his cocoon-like existence, helping and nurturing life where he can. The theme of *Two* is resurrection, most saliently epitomized in the miraculous recovery of the husband, but also in a bee that struggles successfully to emerge from a syrupy glass and a plant that will not die, emerging slowly to an upright position after Dorota attempts to smother it.

The philosophy professor Zophia in *Eight* also lived through the war, and for forty years has felt responsible for the probable death of a Jewish child that she was unable to take in. (She had been tipped off, falsely, that one of her associates was a spy.) Her husband died shortly after the war and her own son has no interest in her anymore, yet she refuses to relinquish her sense of an ultimate scale of values in the world, evident in the profound sense of responsibility she has for her students and the great care with which she manages her own life. *Eight* beautifully shows the reconciliation and growing friendship of Zophia and Elzbieta, the child she could not save, now a grown woman living in America. But Kieślowski never evades the pain and ambiguity of life. In the last ten minutes of the film he introduces another character, the associate mentioned above, who has been unable to similarly recover from the trauma of the war years. The commandment this film explores is "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor," and this man, we learn, had been falsely accused of being a Gestapo spy and sent to prison after the war, even as he risked his life to save others as an active member of the Underground. Elzbieta wants to thank him for risking his life to save her, but he is unable to even talk about it. As she finally gives up and leaves, we see him watching her and Zophia through the window as they talk outside, demonstrating their affection through physical contact (a motif in this episode) and a warm attentiveness to one another. Perhaps even to witness such strength and evident spiritual growth (again, the watching and knowing theme) is

enough to turn someone in a more hopeful direction. Earlier Zophia had told Elzbieta of her theistic philosophy, and later that same night she had seen Elzbieta (whom she had invited to stay the night with her) praying in her son's bedroom. Film scholar Joseph Kickasola has said that Kieślowski is always searching for "ultimate reality amid the bewildering uncertainties of postmodernity,"¹⁶ and without ever evading life's difficulties or acquiescing to the spiritual nostrums so commonplace in our world, he finds glimmers of transcendence and ultimate reality in the faith, hope, and love of his struggling, conscientious characters.

The Decalogue opens in the cold gray of a bitter winter and moves steadily toward spring, reinforcing the theme of resurrection. *Eight* opens with a close-up of two hands clasped and moving along together on a beautiful spring day, an adult and a child, and the whole episode takes place in a similar setting; for the first time we see foliage and a lake that is not frozen, the wasteland by some miraculous power utterly transformed. Likewise the final two episodes take place in the temperate months, and are also about reconciliation. *Ten*, the last of the series, is the only episode that is clearly a comedy. Two brothers, Artur and Jerzy—the former the lead singer of a punk rock band called City Death and the latter a respectable suburban family man—have not seen each other for two years, and are reunited after the death of their father. The film opens with the bourgeois Jerzy attending one of his bohemian brother's concerts to tell him of their father's passing. As Artur performs during the credit sequence and Jerzy moves closer to the stage trying to get his attention, we hear the words to the City Death song diegetically: "Kill, kill, kill / Screw who you will / Lust and crave / Pervert and deprave / Everyday of the week / Everyday of the week / On Sunday hit mother / Hit father, hit brother / Hit sister, the weakest / And steal from the meekest / 'Cos everything is yours / Yeah, everything's yours." It seems to me these lyrics and this opening sequence provide a number of tactical purposes: It sets the tone for this final episode as comic, and provides an ironic context to a film about the Ten Commandments; but it also demonstrates that the postmodern era has totally subverted the ethos of the Ten Commandments; we live in an era where self-indulgence and personal lawlessness are actually encouraged, usually in the interests of a consumer based society, which invites speculation on another irony: self-indulgence is encouraged under the stamp of personal liberation while actually enforcing the new status quo of material culture and strengthening the power base of capitalist society's new ruling class. I write this from the perspective of a citizen of the capitalist US, but it should be noted that Kieślowski and his co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz wrote their script with the anticipation that it would play to an extra-national audience, and they deliberately muted anything that would single it out as a film specifically about

Poland; and it also worth pointing out that Poland was on the verge of moving to a capitalist society itself when this film was made (and in episode *Four* our eye is continually directed to a huge poster advertising Winston cigarettes on the bedroom wall of the film's teenage heroine Anka). The opening sequence to *Ten*, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods," could not be more fitting.

The episode centers on the brothers discovering that their father, whom they were both estranged from, had in his possession a stamp collection worth millions of zloty. (Incidentally, we see the father briefly in episode *Eight*, when he stops by Zophia's apartment to show her a rare pair of stamps.) In fact, we learn that it was his obsession with stamps—his own covetousness—that destroyed his family. Even as the brothers muse on the question of why some people are so concerned with acquiring things, they are unwittingly overcome with covetousness themselves. Before learning of the collection's value Jerzy had given a couple of the stamps to his son, who had then traded them. The humor of the piece is generated by the lengths the brothers will go to get the stamps back, as well as their desire to add another valuable stamp to the collection. In other words, rather than be satisfied with inheriting a valuable collection it merely makes them covetous for more, which is, of course, the nature of greed: the more one gets the more one wants. They add additional security to the apartment and go on a mad chase for the lost series of stamps, while the hilarious culmination of all this has Jerzy agreeing to undergo the removal of a kidney, which he will then trade for a stamp they are desperate to acquire. While the operation is being performed their father's apartment is robbed and they are both, for all their pains, left with nothing at all. After the operation and the discovery of the theft each brother begins to suspect the other. Both brothers are obviously ashamed of their suspicion, and the scene in a cafe where Jerzy confesses his suspicion to a detective is a tour de force of comic acting by Jerzy Stuhr, the actor playing Jerzy; shot close-up, and with a multitude of conflicting emotions registering on his face, Jerzy's shame is palpable. This scene is followed by Artur confessing his identical suspicion to the same detective. Finally they confess their shameful action to one another, and the film ends with laughter and reconciliation.

The Decalogue is a monumental artistic achievement. While each short film is a little masterpiece in itself and may be watched alone, they are held together as a unified work of art by the apartment complex where these characters live, by the brief reappearances its denizens make in later episodes, as well as by the regular appearance of the angel, and the thematic structuring around the Ten Commandments. Kickasola is surely right in viewing the apartment complex as a "universal microcosm," and seeing the fleeting appearances of characters from previous episodes as a reminder of the mar-

velous unknown stories that are encapsulated in the human beings we see all around us.¹⁷ Filmed shortly after the cessation of Martial Law and shortly before the Solidarity Movement and a Polish Pope by the name of John Paul II helped bring an end to communism, the film resonates more powerfully for leaving the specific political realities of late 1980s Poland out of the picture. And while *The Decalogue* works on multiple levels, it is impossible to deny the profoundly Christian resonances throughout. Each individual film contributes in some way to an affirmation of the greater commandment that is necessary for the fulfillment of them all. And this is one reason the film has so much to say to us today, when it sometimes seems that dark forces—and this need not imply anything more sinister than the concentrated power of organized greed—have co-opted Christianity and turned it into its opposite. For it is hard to believe that Christianity—the religion of such aphoristic masterpieces as, “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”¹⁸—is, with a straight face, claimed as the religion of so many millionaires and billionaires, as well as those who would like to join their ranks; millionaires and billionaires, incidentally, who turn their faces way away from and, therefore, refuse to see and know the suffering many.

Kieślowski's theology is radical, as I announce in the title to this essay, not because he is himself in any way a theological radical, but rather because it resembles in every way the theology of Jesus, which is there for all to read in the gospels. The command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” especially when extended to our enemies, is the most radical exhortation ever to issue from the lips of a prophet, and is antithetical in every way to the so-called “Christianity” of the many power brokers and their deluded subjects who are waging an all-out war against the poor and vulnerable that Jesus came to save. If what Jesus is recorded to have said in Matthew 25:31–46 is true, some of those same power brokers—modern day Pharaohs, enslaving their brothers and sisters—may have a very unwelcome surprise waiting for them after their departure from this world.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952) 9–10.
2. Matthew 22:37–40. See also Luke 10:26–28. I am quoting from the King James Version, which unless otherwise noted I will use throughout. The capitals are in the original.
3. Luke 10:29–37.
4. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 494. The emphases are Barth's.
5. Lloyd Baugh, “*The Decalogue* Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski: The Essentially Christian World-View of an Atheist,” 5. This essay is from a keynote lecture that Baugh delivered in 2006 at a seminar in Barcelona entitled “Ten Years Without Kieślowski, Ten Hours with Kieślowski,” and can be found online at http://www.signis.net/IMG/pdf/Kieślowski_Lloyd_Baugh_en.pdf.

6. "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sin" (1 Peter 4:8, New International Version).
7. Annette Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski* (New York: Miramax Books, 1999) 44.
8. Quoted in Insdorf 71.
9. Matthew 22:40.
10. sMark 3:4.
11. Baugh 9.
12. In 1993, anyway, according to "an expert on horror films." *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, ed. Danusia Stok (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) 162.
13. Matthew 7:6, New International Version.
14. *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* 160.
15. John 1:5, English Standard Version.
16. Joseph G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski: The Liminal Image* (New York: Continuum, 2004) xii.
17. Kickasola 238.
18. Matthew 19:24, New International Version.

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