

Chapter 4

Krzysztof Kieslowski's Eurovideo

Interviewer: “If you were to turn the camera on yourself, what would you say? The first words of your story.”

Kieslowski: “I turn the camera on myself in all my films. Not all the time, perhaps, but often. But I do it in a way so nobody can see it. And although I want you...” *corrects*

himself: “...us to be successful in our work, I won't reveal it.” Krzysztof Wierzbicki.

Krzysztof Kieslowski: I'm So-So. (Documentary) 1995.

Amid all the luminary achievements of the late 20th century Eastern European media culture, ranging from Jan Svankmajer's animation classics to Heiner Müller's fire-breathing plays, and from Stanislaw Lem's cybernetic fables to Andrei Tarkovsky's sweeping historical epics, nothing quite prepares the unsuspecting viewer for the intricate subtlety, dazzling ironies and unobtrusive genius of Krzysztof Kieslowski. To be sure, Polish artists and intellectuals have a centuries-old history of saying one thing in order to do another, and think still a third, for all the usual colonial (and, starting with the debt crisis of the 1970s, neocolonial) reasons. Yet if Kieslowski's mature works seem too dark, too austere, too allegorically Polish to ever be reconciled with the cellphone speculations and high-tech consumerisms of the European Union, this is only because they are also too exactly European to ever be shoehorned into the categories of

national cinema. Shuttling between the antipodes of the Eastern bloc propaganda film and the Hollywood blockbuster like diplomatic telegrams between Cold War embassies, his greatest works fluidly recombine Western-style production techniques and visual framing with Eastern-style scripting and narrative exposition, thereby creating some of the first genuinely multinational aesthetic documents of the European Union.

Kieslowski also sheds a revealing light on Eastern Europe's unexpected twist on the classic postcolonial dilemma of nation-state formation. Unlike the EC countries, which had thirty years to prepare for the EU, the Eastern bloc countries experienced the equivalent of decades of social ferment (wild street protests, democratization, economic crisis, neoliberalization, dire austerity and impoverishment, and finally resistance to neoliberalism and the creation of social democratic institutions) in a matter of a few years. Put another way, the enabling feature of Polish neo-nationalism was EU multinationalism, which is why it is the least surprising thing in the world to discover that (1) the post-Communist Left parties of Eastern Europe are often the most strident partisans of the European Union, and (2) so many of these parties were immediately voted into power, in spite of the horrific legacy of Stalinism, Brezhnevism and its local variants.

Historically speaking, one can argue that the formal economic switchover of trading links, export markets, and managerial models away from the Soviet Union and towards the EU during 1989-92 was simply the last act of a much broader redirection in the global flow of symbolic, scientific and cultural capital, i.e. the turn away from the USSR and the US and towards the EU and East Asia. By the early 1980s, the resistance to the one-party state had spread from the intellectuals, students and a few class-

conscious workers to a wide variety of grassroots organizations and civic institutions; by the middle of the decade, the authorities did not even bother to jam radio and TV broadcasts from the West or to control imports of VCRs and videocassettes.¹ As a popular saying goes, the Berlin Wall didn't fall, it was *pushed*.

Conversely, the malaise, despair and gloom in the 1990s which followed in the wake of the Velvet Revolutions were more than just the inevitable hangover of a massive social transformation. The wave of bankruptcies, capital flight, factory closures and Depression-era levels of unemployment which ravaged the post-Communist countries was bad enough. But what hit below the belt was the realization that this economic crisis was the flip side of a no less brutal and far-reaching cultural devaluation: the abrupt cancellation of decades of accumulated social, intellectual and aesthetic capital by Eastern European artists, intellectuals and ordinary citizens, who quickly discovered that the unfettered rule of the market could be every bit as cruel and destructive as the unfettered rule of cadre elites. As a famous Russian joke goes, five years of capitalism really did achieve a miracle: they made fifty years of Communism look good.

In this decidedly unpromising situation, Kieslowski displayed remarkable powers of continuity, by making one extraordinary film after another under the auspices of Swiss and French media firms. Eastern European cinema has a long and exemplary tradition of outwitting the harsh necessities of censorship, cultural subalternity vis-à-vis Hollywood, and arbitrary state power, by means of glorious sound-tracks, magnificent scripts, and inventive visual puzzles or conundrums. Yet in the late 1980s Kieslowski would go even further, integrating all these things into a powerful aesthetics of Eurovideo capable of pulling the multimedia rug from under the Hollywood blockbuster. The result was the

ten-part TV series *The Decalogue* (1988), unquestionably one of the three greatest television productions of the 20th century along with McGoohan's *The Prisoner* and Anno's *Evangelion*. Not content to stop there, Kieslowski would continue to revise and refine his visual palette in *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), before scaling the breath-taking summit of the Three Colors trilogy (*Blue* in 1993, *White* in 1993, and *Red* in 1994). Despite officially retiring, Kieslowski continued to sketch plans for another filmic trilogy until his death in 1996. One of his scripts, cowritten with his longtime associate Krzysztof Piesiewicz, was later turned into a film by Tom Tykwer, director of the hugely entertaining *Run, Lola, Run*.

Why did Kieslowski succeed where so many others fell by the wayside? And how did a relatively obscure Polish director at the margins of the EU innovate so many of the basic categories of European video well in advance of the much more heavily capitalized French, Italian and Spanish competition? Part of the answer lies in the institutional peculiarities of Eastern European film, and the unique window of historical opportunity which opened up between the moment of the auteurs of the 1950s and 1960s – the specifically national cinemas of Bergman, Truffaut, and Fellini – and the late-developing consumer cultures of the Eastern bloc. One of the major contradictions of the state-autarkic regimes in their late or Brezhnevite phase was that they invested heavily in training, science and education, but could not effectively utilize the human capital thereby created. Heiner Müller zeroed in on this contradiction by noting ascerbically that the main economic activity of the Eastern regimes was always the production of state enemies (in other words, the system produced vast numbers of literate, well-educated

workers who could not fail to notice the yawning gap between the ideal of a people's democracy and the despotism of the one-party state).

As it turns out, Kieslowski was unwitting beneficiary of two aspects of state autarkic development. First, he attended the legendary Lodz school of cinema, a hothouse center of underground innovation which recruited, trained and launched a host of brilliant film directors in the 1960s, in much the same way that the Beijing Film Academy incubated the Fifth Generation filmmakers of China during 1978-82. The Lodz students were provided practically unlimited access to screenings of all the great modernist film classics, even those forbidden to the general public, something tremendously important in the era before VCRs and satellite TV. Secondly, the Polish system of decentralized film studios run by media professionals rather than Party hacks meant that quite daring and experimental films could be produced and shown to other filmmakers and film students, though not necessarily screened in theaters or distributed to the public.

Starting out as a maker of quirky documentaries, Kieslowski gradually worked his way up to television productions and feature films. He was also a key albeit understated participant of what Janusz Kijowski christened the "cinema of moral anxiety" (the Polish term has the connotation of a collective sense of unrest, rather than purely psychological or private angst) prevalent in Polish film from 1974 to 1980. Probably the greatest discovery of this movement was that the most efficient way of subverting the censorship boards of the one-party state was to make films realer (and more socialist!) than the compulsory doctrine of socialist realism itself. The result was a series of gritty, reality-based films such as Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* (1976) and *Man of Iron* (1980), which employed a range of semi-documentary and New Wave techniques to narrate the

rise of the Solidarity movement. These films proved enormously popular with audiences, and there's no doubt *Man of Marble* catalyzed the resistance to the Gierek regime of the 1970s in much the same way that Costa-Gavras' magnificent *Z* crystallized the opposition to the brutal Greek military junta of the late 1960s. In the end, when Solidarity trade union activists began to turn cinematic protests into the real thing, the one-party state cracked down. Martial law was declared, strikes were crushed, dissidents and union leaders were arrested en masse, and for a brief period political chaos and economic shortages meant that almost all media workers (including Kieslowski) were out of a job.

Though the situation gradually normalized in the months following the imposition of martial law, the deep psychological scars left by the experience saturate Kieslowski's first major work, *Blind Chance*, which was in many ways the final epitaph on the "cinema of moral anxiety". Made in 1981 but not officially released until 1987, the film sketches out three alternate futures of an ordinary youth named Witek: in the first version of events, he catches a train, runs into an honest, decent Communist Party veteran who fought against Stalinism, and ends up joining the Party in a bid to change the system from within. In the second, he misses the same train, meets a Gandhiesque pro-democracy activist and ends up joining Solidarity. In the third, he misses the train but avoids politics altogether, settling down to pursue a career and raise a family. The conclusion shows this last protagonist, now happily married, aboard a jet plane on a routine tourist flight to the West; to our shock, the plane explodes in mid-air, killing everyone on board.

On one level, this would appear to be a fairly straightforward variant of the existential thriller, wherein the greatest sin of all is not so much choosing the wrong side but not having the courage to take sides in the first place (with the LOT jetliner as the

postmodern reprise of the doomed Patna in Conrad's *Lord Jim*). This cannot explain, however, the curious shot technique of the disaster, which combines an ultra-close shot of the protagonist in the doomed plane and a long-distance zoom, which shows the plane slowly going down in flames. This is clearly a lateral reappropriation of that leading 1970s mass-cultural phenomenon, the big-budget disaster film. Nor does the existential explanation mesh with the sheer narrative density of the script, which employs an astonishing range of vividly-drawn minor characters, each with a particular role to play in motivating the story (we even run into them again and again in the various endings, in varying circumstances).

This suggests Kieslowski had already started to push beyond the narrative limits of the existentialist film, the political thriller, and the documentary cinema alike, something confirmed by his next major work, *No End*. The story is deceptively simple: a progressive lawyer, Antek, charged with defending a worker active in the Solidarity movement, has a heart attack and dies, leaving behind a wife (Urszula) and child. His ghost "haunts" his wife, who becomes more and more distraught, and eventually commits suicide. Despite its flaws, this 1984 film represents a watershed in Kieslowski's oeuvre, for three main reasons. First off, he met scriptwriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz and composer Zbigniew Preisler while shooting the film. Both would become key creative partners or counterplayers, to borrow Erik Erikson's suggestive term, in all of Kieslowski's subsequent works. Secondly, his screenplays shift dramatically away from male protagonists and the generally voyeuristic tropes associated with such (most obvious in the film-making protagonist of his 1979 *Camera Buff*), and towards powerful, complex female characters, who exert a degree of control over the politics of the image. Thirdly,

his editing techniques begin to absorb, via some strange historical osmosis, the multinational forms pioneered by the Hong Kong and horror films of the 1970s. The result is a streamlining and compression of his shot selection, and a corresponding emphasis on extracting the maximum intensities of color and sound out of otherwise routine scenes. Though Kieslowski was quite critical of the result, insisting that the parts did not quite add up to a whole,² the response from the audience was remarkable. As he later told Danusia Stok:

“*No End* wasn’t shown for half a year. Then, when it was, it was terribly received in Poland. I’ve never had such unpleasantness over any other film as I had over this one. It was received terribly by the authorities; it was received terribly by the opposition [Solidarity], and it was received terribly by the Church. Meaning, by the three powers that be in Poland. We really got a thrashing over it. Only one element didn’t give us a thrashing, and that was the audience... never in my life have I received as many letters or phone calls about a film from people I didn’t know as I did after *No End*. And all of them, in fact – I didn’t get a single bad letter or call – said that I’d spoken the truth about martial law.”³

Kieslowski’s uncanny admixture of courtroom drama, psychological thriller, ghost story and gothic romance had struck a sensitive nerve indeed. In fairness to the critics, there was nothing directly comparable to *No End* in the Eastern European cinema of the day. Jan Svankmajer’s animated classics come close, of course, but at that point the field of

animation was still regarded as a marginal genre unworthy of serious critical attention on either side of the Berlin Wall. Possibly the closest Western European analogue to *No End* was J.J. Beineix's 1981 *Diva*, which drew upon the French New Wave, the Cold War blockbuster and the punk film (thanks to the show-stealing Dominique Pinon) to create the breakthrough postmodern European film. But where Beineix's crackerjack thriller had instant access to stylish scenery, hypersaturated visuals, and the latest cultural commodities, Kieslowski had no such easy recourse in the context of Eastern Europe's underdeveloped consumer and media culture. In the harsh austerity of 1980s Poland, the *Diva* would be just another hard currency émigré, while in France, the character of Urszula would be just another bored housewife. Kieslowski's ingenious response was to transform this narrative impossibility into a kind of thematic material in its own right, something most apparent in the startling narrative erasure of the deceased lawyer. At the beginning of the film, Antek functions as the existential observer or testifying witness, very much in the mold of the external voice-over of the private eye in film noir, or the internal monologue of the existential thriller. But midway through the story, precisely where we might expect a series of flashbacks to illuminate Antek's heroic past, Kieslowski scandalously edits him out of the story and shifts the focus almost exclusively onto Urszula.

This was a shocking provocation, on two levels. First, Kieslowski deliberately cast Jerzy Radziwilowicz as the deceased lawyer. Polish audiences would immediately recognize him as the morally exemplary hero of Andrzej Wajda's legendary *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, films which rely heavily on flashbacks and retrospectives to create heroic parables of the Solidarity movement. The effect is to criticize the 1970s

protest film on its own grounds, by zeroing in on the key weakness of the genre: its patriarchal gender politics (Wajda's films basically reduce the women to mere helpmeets of heroic males). Even the best-intentioned counter-icon to the Party orthodoxy remained all too orthodox and iconic. The second shock was presenting the audience with a complex, sexually emancipated and economically independent female character. Urszula, as it turns out, is a translator, i.e. a self-employed culture-worker with limited access to foreign languages, culture and hard currency. Not only does she own and drive a car, something of a prestige object in mid-1980s Poland, she even has the gumption to seek out some sort of psychological therapy for her grief from a hypnotist – yet another scandal in a culture which condemned any mention of mental illness, stress or psychotherapy as Western decadence. Even her stylized “suicide” (it's not quite that, for reasons we'll explore a bit later) doesn't follow the usual rules of melodrama: one would expect tearful scenes, cars being driven off cliffs, people jumping into rivers and so forth. Instead, she methodically packs the child off to the grandmother, dresses in black, seals off the room and tapes her mouth shut while gas fills the room. Nor do we see the happy couple finally united in death, in the manner of the bittersweet conclusion of Kusturica's dazzling tragi-comedy, *Underground*: their blurred forms walk away from us through a translucent window, without even holding hands.

The fundamental narrative scandal of *No End*, then, and the reason that audiences loved it while critics hated it, was that it portrayed the tragedy of a Western European protagonist trapped inside an Eastern European story line. For Polish audiences, the effect was roughly comparable to watching *Jules and Jim* crash headlong into the plot machinery of *Man of Marble*. What stamps the film as a transitional work, on the other

hand, is the fact that Kieslowski did not have the narrative means to move beyond this point. The suicide sequence, for example, is simply too obviously allegorical of the plight of Polish filmmakers and other culture-workers who were forced by the state censors to “play dead” in their own studios, publishing houses and theaters, much as Urszula seals herself off in her own private space. Put another way, *No End* lacks a visual vocabulary capable of fully utilizing the multinational contradictions of its script. This is most apparent in the central visual leitmotif of the film, namely close shots of the ghostly or fleeting touch of hands. Annette Insdorf’s comprehensive filmography of Kieslowski’s work has this to say on the subject:

“Hands are central to *No End*, beginning with the ghost’s abstracted fingers: this image introduces hands that have no agency – an impotence like that of Urszula’s fingers in close-up playing frustratedly with her stockinged toes until the hose tears. The shadow of Antek’s hand passes over his son’s sleeping body and then touches gently the back of the boy’s neck.

The delicately understated expression of Urszula’s loss is first expressed in a close-up of her hands: she automatically makes two glasses of coffee, suddenly stops, and throws one out. The same glass shape returns in the session with the hypnotist: she sees Antek moving his finger on the rim of the empty glass, making a hypnotic sound of his own. She subsequently holds a glass of coffee in her kitchen: in close-up we watch the glass slip slowly down and finally crash on the floor.

Hands that are unable to touch or hold inform Kieslowski’s larger theme: *No End* takes to its ultimate limit the notion of man’s inability to do anything. We feel that Antek

is not made for these times. On the other hand, the concrete presence of this ghost conveys the director's metaphysical belief in how the dead continue inside the living..."⁴

After a promising beginning, the analysis stops exactly where it should start. Hands communicate, above all, the aesthetic register of *tactility*, something which Insdorf hurriedly seals off in the vacuum chamber of a suspiciously non-tactile and patriarchal metaphysics (the hand, in short, as the symbolic currency of the body, a.k.a. the phallus). This glosses over the deeply subversive connotations of tactility in Eastern European media culture.⁵ By the mid-1980s, public images of hands had lost whatever remaining connotations of honest manual labor they still had at the time of the Prague Spring, and were identified almost exclusively with the mailed fist of the one-party state; this is why one of the first and most joyful acts of the Velvet Revolutions was the demolition of the single most obvious corporeal register of the one-party state, namely the neo-Stalinist statues littering public squares. In retrospect, the demolition process had begun decades earlier, as Eastern bloc artists refunctioned, outflanked and undermined the military-phallic symbols of the state, everywhere from the ferocious corporealities of Heiner Mueller's plays to the restless tactilities of Jan Svankmajer's animation classics.

A careful re-reading shows that *No End* deploys a sophisticated double strategy, wherein the hands of political authority (both the hands of the state, and the hands of the official opposition) are explicitly devalued, in favor of new types of corporeality and tactility. Antek's hands at the beginning of the movie are completely upstaged by Urszula's near the end; similarly, the glasses, books and steering-wheels which Urszula's

hands invest with meaning gradually accede to bodies – the body of a British stranger, whose hands remind her of Antek’s; her own body, in the intriguing masturbation scene, where she *imagines* Antek’s hands on her body, only to accidentally awaken her son, who is apparently going through his Oedipal phase; and, finally, that most interesting new body of all, the bundles of American dollars which reappear at crucial junctures throughout the film. This is a double-edged satire of the Polish Government’s position that its critics were whores of Western capitalism, as well as a rebuff of the moral pretensions of the extreme pro-market wing of Solidarity, who later became the shock troops of Eastern Europe’s disastrous experiment in neoliberalism. This suggests, in turn, that the white tape across her mouth at the end of the film is more than just the reflexive signifier of artists forbidden to speak or films forbidden to touch on real subjects; it strongly hints that Urszula’s Western subjectivity has *also* been rendered voiceless, for reasons which Kieslowski cannot yet define or specify. This is supported by the visual contrast of the white tape against Urszula’s stark black clothing, which eerily echoes one of the central tropes of Patrick McGoochan’s *The Prisoner*: the sequence where Rover, the giant white weather balloon, literally englobes and silences the black-clad No. 6. Though there’s no record that Kieslowski ever saw McGoochan’s work, there are good historical reasons to think that each might have arrived at the same aesthetic solution independent of one another: both were fiercely committed artists, one from semi-peripheral Ireland and the other from semi-peripheral Poland; both were pushing beyond the narrative boundaries of their respective genres (the spy thriller and Solidarity epic, respectively); and both were located at the right time and right place to document the moment when

their respective societies were about to boil over (for McGoohan, the radical surge of 1968; for Kieslowski, the radical surge of 1989).

The Decalogue

It is somehow utterly characteristic of Kieslowski that, faced with the patent impossibility of making an apolitical film in an intensely politicized environment, and the no less impossible task of producing a political film in a climate of virulent repression, he pulled off the double-jointed miracle otherwise known as *The Decalogue*. This ten-part TV series, each episode an hour long, was commissioned by Polish television in 1987 and aired in 1988, on the very eve of the Velvet Revolutions. Though each episode is loosely based on one of the Ten Commandments, the series has more to do with the digital gospel of the nascent European Union than anything in the Church canon. In fact, *Decalogue* marks a genuine aesthetic revolution, the point at which Kieslowski dynamited the prison-house of national cinema and seized hold of the video tropes of the Information Age. The crucial innovation here was the introduction of an entirely new character-trope, namely the border-crossing double or Euro-doppelganger. Curiously, the Euro-doppelganger does not come to us prepackaged in any recognizably mass-cultural form, e.g. the detective fictions and Freudian binaries of the late 19th century, the paranoid narratives of the Cold War spy thriller or Bond blockbuster, or even the dialectics of the gaze documented by the postwar existencialisms and film noir. This is because Kieslowski's doppelgangers are always *outside* of the immediate action; like the dream-sent emissaries of other worlds in Stanislaw Lem's science-fiction parables (or, for that

matter, the dream-technologies of the vanished Krell in *Forbidden Planet*), they incarnate the objective limit-point or outer horizon of the media culture and its interpretive machinery.

This aesthetic of interpretation stands in striking contrast to the closest Hollywood equivalent to Kieslowski, namely the expatriate Eastern European filmmakers of the 1970s. One thinks of the conclusion of Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), for example, wherein the Chief symbolically cancels out McMurphy's "false double", i.e. the lobotomized shell of the latter, before carrying out the prison breakout which McMurphy could only (sacrificially) anticipate; or the film noir of Polish émigré Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), where an unspeakable, incestuous doubling haunts the prototypical Los Angeles land-speculation like one of Henry James' sexually-charged ghosts. Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) provides an intriguing intermediate case, wherein the multiple clones of Khari (the deceased wife) are both the psychological manifestations of Kelvin's individual wish-fulfillments, as well as direct "broadcasts" from the semi-sentient Solaris ocean, i.e. projections of a clearly Soviet unconscious (though Tarkovsky did not emigrate to Europe until the early 1980s, his notorious conflicts with the Soviet censors and film establishment meant that he was very much an exile-in-waiting).

One of the most intriguing analogues of the Euro-doppelgänger is the theme of the twin brothers or doubled brothers-in-arms relayed by John Woo's resplendent Hong Kong blockbuster trilogy (the brothers of *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), the cop and hitman of *The Killer* (1989), and the supercop and undercover agent of *Hard-boiled* (1992)). Woo's greatest achievement was the synthesis of video forms out of the kinetic energies of the US action blockbuster, the sound-track of the 1980s music video, and the editing

techniques of the Hong Kong martial arts films, respectively. In effect, Hong Kong turned its economic subalternity vis-à-vis Japan and the US, and its political subalternity vis-à-vis mainland China and Great Britain, into a double-barreled opportunity, by means of a compensatory speculation in the realm of cultural capital. Hong Kong's vibrant and commercially successful film biz was simply the latest in a long line of successful export industries, ranging from footwear and textiles to consumer electronics.

Polish cinema in the era of autarkic accumulation did not, of course, have an indigenous export-platform industrialism at its fingertips. Kieslowski's ingenious response was to reappropriate *someone else's* export-platform industrialism: namely, that of East Germany (in the form of the dialogue and scriptwriting innovations of Heiner Mueller's Eurotheater) as well as the mediatic capital of West Germany (in the form of crucial financial and production support provided by Freie Sender Berlin). Put another way, where Woo transformed a range of Chinese, American and Japanese materials into the transnational Pacific Rim thriller, Kieslowski refunctioned an equally broad range of European mediatic materials into the space of Eurovideo.

This is already an issue in the opening sequence of "Decalogue 1", which moves from a long shot of an iced-over pond, to a close-up of the Euro-doppelganger (played here by Artur Barcis) seated by a fire, paced by Preisler's austere, haunting musical score. Barcis' gaunt countenance will reappear at crucial moments throughout the rest of the series, with the important exception of "Decalogue 7" and "Decalogue 10", two episodes where the role of the doppelganger undergoes a profound mutation (a mutation which, as one might expect of a director of Kieslowski's caliber, is by no means accidental). In "Decalogue 1", Barcis stares into the camera like some telecommunicatory

Barnabas (the youthful messenger in Kafka's *The Castle*); the next shot is that of Aunt Irena, staring in shock through a storefront window at a news video on TV, cycling through slow-motion stills of Pawel running with his classmates. The final shot is that of a cobbled, Svankmajeresque surface, suggesting pebbles on a frozen beach; the camera tilts back and we realize it's merely the cement facing of a tenement block, while pigeons fly into the sky overhead (pigeons, it should be noted, are another favorite John Woo trope). This striking conjunction of a doppelganger who watches the watchers, and a series of video surfaces mediated by glass windows and TV screens, is part and parcel of an extraordinary polarization of visual material. In a nutshell, Kieslowski counterpoints intricate, detailed close-ups against a range of brilliantly framed long shots, while avoiding, excising or masking mid-range or panoramic shots. We almost never see the full extent of hallways, roads, or vistas, and where these do exist, they are condensed by low-level lighting, artful frames, and other camera techniques. During the auto accident scene of *No End*, for example, the medium-range shot of the victim being pulled from the wrecked car is visually unremarkable; here, by contrast, the scene of the body being pulled from the frozen pond is an electrifying long-distance shot, set against the flashing lights of the rescue squad, and the close shots of the horrified faces of the onlooking crowd (the body of the accident victim in "Decalogue 3", framed by the gleaming corridors of the casualty ward and the white sheets of the examining table, is another example of the same technique). The result is a drastic compression of cinematic forms, and the corresponding emergence of video surfaces.

Two of the most significant of these surfaces are the translucent "green screens" of Krzysztof's two home computers, and the rough, shaggy fur of the stray dog which

Pawel, Kryzstof's precocious young son, discovers frozen to death in the snow and ice outside his apartment. Whereas the algebraic equations and messages on the green screens are clearly meant to evoke the home computer aesthetic and high-tech rationalism of the 1980s, the characters' faces and bodies are almost always framed by sweaters, coats and other clothing (the doppelganger, for example, is practically encased in a thick, fur-lined parka; Aunt Irena always wears some sort of headgear; while Pawel's shirts and sweaters are usually the only object in our field of vision which is bright and colorful). At the breakfast table, Pawel asks his father about the meaning of death, resulting in the following exchange:

Pawel: "So what's left?"

Kryzstof: "What a person has achieved, the memory of that person. The memory's important. The memory that someone moved in a certain way, or that they were kind. You remember their face, their smile, that a tooth was missing... It's too early, what do you expect of me so early in the morning?" *Close shot of milk swirling in morning tea or coffee.*

Pawel: "The milk's sour."

Kryzstof: *nodding*: "It's sour." *Pause.*

Pawel: "'For the peace of her soul'. You didn't mention a soul."

Kryzstof: "It's a form of words of farewell. There is no soul."

Pawel: "Auntie says there is."

Kryzstof: "Some find it easier to live thinking that."

Pawel: "And you?"

Krzysztof: “Me? Frankly, I don’t know. Why? What’s happened?”

Pawel: “Nothing... only...” *Pauses, grows more and more upset:* “I was so happy when I got the right answer... and the pigeon came for the crumbs, too.” *Fighting back tears:* “But then I saw the dead dog, and I thought: so what? What’s it matter if I worked out when Miss Piggy would catch Kermit?”

Krzysztof: “Which dog?”

Pawel: *calming down:* “The one with yellow eyes. The one who scavenged around the trash cans, you know?” *Reflects for a moment.* “Perhaps he’s better off now, huh?”

This is extraordinary scriptwriting, on a par with anything celebrated in the auteur canon or enshrined in the annals of Hollywood. Using the simplest of sentences, Kieslowski constructs a web of extraordinarily subtle and complex ideas, which are never redundant or extraneous to the storyline, but which are never allowed to degenerate into abstract moralizing or tendentious metaphysics, either. To some degree this was due to the presence of co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz, whose prior vocation as a lawyer gave him a keen sense of the politics and aesthetics of testimony; one could also point to television’s brevity as a medium, as well as the accelerated shooting-schedule of TV series, which forced Kieslowski to reduce the elements of narrative exposition to their absolute minimum, by condensing a given shot selection, visual motif or dialogue into the smallest configurable space.

One of the great examples of this is the single most prominent visual signifier of “Decalogue 1”, ice, ranging from the frozen pond to the frozen bottle of milk, and from the frozen dog to the harmless ice on which the schoolchildren are playing. At the end of

the episode, this subtle motif takes on a heartrending emotional resonance: the distraught father, who has just knocked over a row of votive candles in the darkened church, wipes his fevered brow with a small, circular piece of ice fished out of the cistern in the frosty church. Meanwhile the overturned candles drip hot wax onto a religious icon, painting ironic “tears” on the icon’s cheeks. Still another is the theme of intelligent computers or cyborgs, ranging from the wired appliances of the apartment which Pawel shows off to his aunt, to Kryzstof’s university lecture on the possibility of programming intelligence into a computer.⁶ In the context of the fatal accident on the pond, this might be taken to be a straightforward denunciation of the hubris of technocrats; Kieslowski, however, is not really interested in playing rationalism off against theology (he even shows the father testing the ice himself during the night, to make sure it’s safe). Rather, he’s interested in the aesthetics of *play*: Pawel plays with the pigeons, asks questions about the frozen dog, helps his father play a round of speed chess at a tournament, solves equations which involve Miss Piggy and Kermit, and even provides an apt comment when the computers malfunction and turn themselves on (the cursor says, “Ready”, and when his father turns them off, Pawel asks innocently, “But what if it really wanted something?”).

Nor is religion really the issue in the scene where Pawel visits Aunt Irena and asks what faith is. Not only is this the one moment where she takes off her hat, giving us a sense of rare intimacy, we also glimpse three open windows in the background – an unusual medium-range shot of an adjoining apartment house, subtly mirroring the three photographs of the Pope laid out on the table. Both signifiers turn out to be empty spaces rather than positive signifiers:

Pawel: *referring to the pictures of the Pope*: “Do you think he understands the meaning of life?”

Irena: “I think so.”

Pawel: “Dad told me that we are living in order to make life easier for those who will come after us. But it doesn’t always work out.”

Irena: “Not always, your father’s right. It’s just, if you can do something for others, to help, to be there, even if it’s only a little thing, you know you are needed, and life becomes brighter somehow. There are big and small things. Today you liked the dumplings, so that made me happy. One is alive and it is a present. A gift.”

Pawel: “Dad’s your brother, isn’t he?”

Irena: “You know he is.” *Significant pause. She rests her head on her arm.* “You’d like to know why we are so different, your father and I.” *Pawel nods.*

Irena: “We were brought up in a Catholic family. Your father noticed, even earlier than you, that many things could be measured. Later, he concluded that measurement could be applied to everything. Perhaps he doesn’t always believe it, but he wouldn’t admit it. Your dad’s way of life may seem more reasonable, but it doesn’t rule out God. Even for your dad. Understand?”

Pawel: *with refreshing honesty*: “Not really.”

Irena: “God is very simple if you have faith.”

Pawel: “Do you believe in God?”

Irena: “Yes.”

Pawel: *unimpressed*: “So who is he?”

Irena: *She embraces him.* “What do you feel now?”

Pawel: *murmuring*: “I love you.”

Irena: “Exactly. That’s where he is.”

Given that Pawel asked his father about the meaning of death, and his aunt about the meaning of life, this suggests that the real issue is the paradox of mortality: the fact that what is alive is meaningful only in relation to what is dead, while death, in turn, has meaning only to the living. Indeed, the entire episode is full of living beings which perish, as well as dead things, e.g. computers and cartoon characters, which spring unexpectedly to life.

What this explanation omits, of course, is the doppelganger, who seems to occupy a vantage-point somehow beyond life and death alike; a position associated not with the objective fact of mortality per se, but with the subjective experience of bearing witness to such, that is to say temporality. This comes very close to Adorno’s notion of transience, or the self-reflection of subjects grasping their own inner historicity.⁷ This may help to explain the significance of the moment when Irena asks about Pawel’s mother, who is apparently somewhere abroad, and who sent him a letter detailing what she is doing each and every hour. All of the main characters are marked by quite specific pairs of visual motifs and temporal registers: Kryzstof is associated with the green computer screen (global space) and with foreign languages (global time); Irena, with windows (urban space) and the photographs of the Pope (urban time); and the absent mother with foreign travel or exile (overseas space) and a daily schedule (work time). Pawel himself is most strongly associated with the mediatic space of the news report (this is also hinted at

during his father's university lecture, where he peers through what is either a videocamera or slide projector) and the fatal ice-skates (play time).

This suggests that the real tragedy of the story is the annulment or betrayal of the utopian promise of mediatic space and leisure time. The first hint of this is the eerie sight of blue ink welling up, sudden and irresistible as blood, through the white sheets of paper on which Kryzstof is penciling in calculations and jottings; when the latter washes off the ink in the porcelain sink, he suddenly stares at his own reflection in the mirror, overcome by a strange foreboding. As he begins the search for his son, the camera angles grow more and more feverish and hectic, employing increasingly sophisticated editing and contrast techniques. For instance, when he visits a female friend who was supposed to give Pawel English lessons, the teacher, who was ill with the flu and had sent Pawel away, invites Kryzstof inside, ironically mistaking his nervous tension for an evidently welcome romantic overture; he then bends from left to right across our field of vision, fooling us into thinking he's entering the room. At the last second we realize he was simply reaching to pull the door shut: it moves right to left, a visual effect which is exactly like having a door unexpectedly shut in our face.

Such editing techniques are matched by the simultaneous compression of the close-up shot and the slim, spare sound-track. Previously fully-lit faces are suddenly darkened, cast in shadow, or framed by jagged slivers of intense backlighting: thus when Kryzstof is walking around the grounds of the apartment complex, the camera shifts to a low-angle shot, looking upwards at Kryzstof from close to the ground – that is to say, from the missing Pawel's point of view. Acoustically, we hear Kryzstof radio for his son on a hobbyist walkie-talkie, against the raucous chop of a helicopter in the distance; the

only response is random static and the voices of the rescue squad. The result is an aesthetics of splintering, the direct negation of the “crisis mode” sequences in countless police and rescue melodramas, where handheld shots, disorienting camera movement, and extremely intense lighting and sound-effects are supposed to signify a state of emergency.

What prevents this splintering effect from becoming all too capricious (as in the case of Godard’s uneven *Weekend*, a film best described as a Monty Python sketch in search of a comedy writer), or deadeningly objective (as in the stereotypical flashbacks of the soap opera or police drama) is Kieslowski’s rigorous sense of visual symmetry. This is most apparent in the use of extended visual citations or reflexive samples, which cite or quote previously-seen material in new ways. Thus an earlier scene, where a little girl knocks on the door shortly after the incident of the spilled ink and asks for Pawel, forms the crucial background to a much later scene, where a girl by the pond tells Kryzstof that Jacek (one of Pawel’s friends who had just been whisked away by his family) knows what happened to his son. Similarly, when Kryzstof chases after the family, a quick series of tense, off-kilter handheld shots shows them exiting our field of vision at the pond, at the elevator, and later at the hallway of their flat, generating a kind of horizontal vertigo which perfectly offsets the vertically-oriented shots of the father we saw previously. In this hallway scene, where Jacek cries out that he and Pawel were playing on the ice together, Jacek’s face is framed horizontally by his mother and vertically by the door, while the sound-track is polarized between the mother’s hysterical screams and Kryzstof’s stunned silence. Finally she finally tears him away, literally and figuratively plunging Pawel’s father (and viewers) into darkness.

If “Decalogue 1” had ended here, it would be all too easy to slap a moral or allegorical coda onto the story, i.e. to feel outraged at the shocking selfishness of Jacek’s parents, who are so relieved that their own son survived that they simply turn their backs on Kryzstof. Kieslowski quickly nullifies this interpretation, however, by manufacturing two specific visual tropes which abolish the lingering vestiges of the rescue melodrama and the soap opera alike. The first is the uniquely Kieslowskian reinvention of the video frame pioneered by the Hong Kong films of the 1970s, namely the slow-motion, semi-circular pan, wherein we watch a close shot of someone who is watching (or being watched by) someone else, their face slowly rotating left or right. This is the scene where Kryzstof is seated in the apartment, still in shock, when he suddenly becomes aware of the computer staring blindly right back at him, his face highlighted by the eerie green backlight of the computer screen.⁸ The second is Kieslowski’s version of the horror film cut, namely the video freeze-frames of Pawel and his schoolmates cycling across the TV screen. Instead of the full image we see at the very beginning of “Decalogue 1”, we glimpse only partial, abstracted close-ups of such: or what amounts to a video aesthetic created out of the extended reprocessing of telejournalistic images.

These two tropes, which we’ll provisionally term the video pan and the video still, will form the narrative antipodes or axial termini around which the rest of the series will organize its aesthetic content. The price paid for this advance is, of course, the definitive abolition of the existential film and its associated mediations (e.g. film noir, the adventure-thriller, the private eye, etc.), and it is surely no accident that “Decalogue 1” is the only episode where the Euro-doppelganger stares at the audience for lengthy periods of time, an all too existential gesture which Kieslowski quietly drops from later episodes.

As a result, the doppelganger “falls into history”, as it were, thereby losing its status as an objective witness or alien observer, but gaining the subjective power to intervene directly in the storyline. This subjective turn is matched by an equally far-reaching objective transformation, wherein the ionized subcomponents of the existential thriller, the detective drama and the TV melodrama all begin to fluoresce with a genuinely multinational content.

In “Decalogue 2”, for example, this multinational content emerges out of a dense network of framed bodies and corporeal signifiers, ranging from scenic posters of mountain-climbers to the black-and-white photograph of the Consultant’s vanished family, and from the disembodied voices on telephones and answering-machines to the recorded materials of stereo-systems and radios. Even the bodies of the patients in the hospital ward have their counterpart in the Consultant’s carefully-tended cacti, pet birds and bubbling aquarium. Traces of visual and aural bodies circulate unceasingly throughout the entire episode, everywhere from the deceased animal a worker finds at the beginning of the story, to the ironic introduction of the two main characters (Dorota, played to perfection by the inimitable Krystyna Janda, introduces herself: “I live above. Do you remember me?” and the Consultant responds, “Yes. You ran over my dog two years ago.” Later, when he refuses to yield any information about her critically ill husband, she snaps, “Pity I didn’t run over *you*.”).

But whereas Aunt Irena in “Decalogue 1” was associated with medium shots of windows and store-fronts, Dorota is associated with two explicit symbols of global consumerism: a state-of-the-art Japanese stereo system, and the West German Beetle she drives. Meanwhile Andrzej, Dorota’s critically ill husband, is associated not with visual

registers per se but with acoustic and tactile ones: thus the ruby depths of the jellied preserves Dorota leaves at Andrzej's bedside, for example, or Andrzej's fevered hallucinations of slow, dripping leaks across rusted surfaces and peeling paint. This may have something to do with the fact that Dorota is a musician, a self-possessed, Western-oriented young professional who has no time for self-pity or recriminations; during a later meeting with the Consultant, she presses him by saying, "The Americans [i.e. American doctors] tell their patients."

What Dorota wants from the Consultant, however, is not really information about her husband, but a strange kind of absolution – not for the past, but for the future. She is pregnant thanks to another man, and doesn't want to keep the child if her husband is going to live; the Consultant will convince her, for reasons of his own, that he is doomed. At one point she asks:

Dorota: "Do you believe in God?"

Doctor: "I have a God; there's only enough of him for me."

Dorota: "A private God? Then ask him for absolution."

This is not a theological or metaphysical motif, but a quite material and European one, something hinted at by the black-and-white photograph he turned away from our field of vision at the beginning of Dorota's visit. After she leaves, he reverses it, revealing a woman and two young children, whose identity will remain a mystery for some time.

Retroactive suspense is the central leitmotif of “Decalogue 2”. The dead animal at the beginning of the story, for example, is not revealed to be a rabbit until late in the story; the Consultant’s fragmentary family history to his housekeeper, Barbara, is left unfinished until the end of the episode, and so forth. Conversely, the key visual symbols of the episode are never static or fixed, but constantly acquire fresh layers of meaning: thus the wall-posters first hint at some sort of exotic mountainscape, with connotations of foreign exile, but later turn out to symbolize Dorota’s husband, who is a mountain-climber; the leaves of the houseplant Dorota rips apart in a moment of anguish return later as a medicinal tincture for her husband; while the cup of tea or coffee she tips onto the floor (Kieslowski employs a magnificent, slow-motion shot of the cup shattering into a million pieces) turns out to herald not, as we expect, the definitive rupture with her husband, but the break with her lover.

This complexity extends to the role of “Decalogue 2”’s doppelganger, represented here as a medical intern or orderly, who is present at two key moments: first, a scene where the Consultant works up Andrzej’s medical tests in the laboratory and asks a colleague for his opinion (the latter hesitates, and says the disease is clearly progressing). The second is the moment where Dorota tells her unconscious husband she loves him; the doppelganger watches in the background, through a glass door. All this would seem to be innocent enough, were it not for two additional events, which cast quite a different light on the characters involved. First, we learn that the Consultant’s mysterious photo is a shot of his wife and children, killed instantly during a WW II bombing raid. His motivation – restitution for the past – at last becomes clear. But her motive is not at all obvious: even after the scene by her husband’s bedside, she barges in on the Consultant, demanding a

definitive diagnosis of whether Andrzej will live or die. This suggests the doppelganger's presence registered her *ambivalence* towards her husband, rather than any one-dimensional register of guilt or affection. If this is so, then why is the Consultant visited by the doppelganger as well? What on Earth could he possibly feel ambivalent about?

The answer is hinted at by the long, slow pan from Dorota at her window to a long-distance zoom on the Consultant in his apartment, backlit by the most peculiar red light; this is followed by a fast pan onto Andrzej, who is reawakening into the land of the living. The first thing he sees is a fly struggling heroically to free itself from the sticky trap of the fruit preserves; our initial disgust at this unsanitary intruder fades as we gradually realize this tiny creature wants to live as badly as we do (eventually it flies off under its own power, just like Andrzej). The themes of animal bodies and human corporeality merge into a shining amalgam of collective compassion, the direct negation of the personal tragedy or private catastrophe. The logical and irresistible conclusion is that the Consultant *knew* that the lab results were ambiguous at best; it's quite possible he even reversed the order of the slides, in order to keep the truth of Andrzej's recovery to himself.

This artful ambiguity is also, however, what stamps this episode as an essentially transitional work, that is to say, a skillful reappropriation of the conventional hospital melodrama rather than anything fundamentally new. One of the main reasons here is the underdevelopment of Dorota's character, who is clearly meant to be the professionalized, late 1980s version of Urszula. Unfortunately, we learn almost nothing of her professional career or workplace aspirations, and as a result, Janda's superb performance cannot quite paper over the scission between Dorota's evident self-possession and tenacity and her

indecision about her pregnancy. As a result, the Consultant takes on the role of theological or existential arbiter, between the dictates of conscience versus those of convenience. The depth and richness of Kieslowski's subsequent female characters, on the other hand, is based on their capacity to be their *own* arbiters, that is to say emotionally complex, self-sufficient professionals, whose dilemmas, crises and struggles for self-definition will form a microcosm of the birth-pangs of the European Union.

This European turn is broadly hinted at by the audacious opening sequence of "Decalogue 3", where two new visual registers make their first appearance: the shimmering, crystalline nightscape of a downtown Warsaw not yet overwhelmed with commercial logos and neon signs, and close shots of Ewa in her car, watching holiday partygoers through the windshield. Whereas the former is tinted a harsh, wintry blue, the latter is backlit with gorgeously diffuse low-level reds, reflected and refracted every which way, and seconded by Ewa's signature red scarf. The other main character of the episode, Janusz (Ewa's former lover, who returned to his wife and family), is dressed as Santa Claus, and it is no accident that the camera zooms in on his luxurious false beard, neatly adding the third visual and tactile register of a cottony or snowy white. Surprisingly, this register is *not* associated with the family or domestic sphere, but rather social spaces of circulation, e.g. the hospital, the drunk tank, the train station, mass transit systems, and even Janusz' taxi. As if to hammer the point home, when Janusz turns to say Merry Christmas to a neighbor, the latter turns out to be Kryzstof, the father from "Decalogue 1" – if not quite the ghost of Christmas past, then surely the avatar of a cancelled-out or negated family sphere.

The other significant narrative space which is cancelled out quite early in “Decalogue 3” is that of the Church. The Christmas Mass scene, in particular, is a secular miracle of shot composition straight out of the John Woo playbook: Kieslowski employs glowing chandeliers and the ominous vertical shadows of pillars to frame a video pan around Janusz, who realizes that Ewa is somewhere in the audience, watching him. Nothing in Woo’s films, however, quite compares to the moment where Ewa phones Janusz and gets him to meet her outside; Janusz’ wife, unaware of who is calling, is framed from the back and side, while Janusz himself is completely silhouetted by the bright light behind him (appropriately, he tells her a “white lie”, to the effect that someone reported that their car is being stolen). Once outside, he suddenly glimpses Ewa’s tantalizing reflection in the glass door, lighting up a cigarette. Where Woo excels in rapid shot editing and the dynamic compression of space, thereby anticipating the visual revolution of the 1990s 3D videogame, Kieslowski specializes in framing and the dynamic expansion of space, thus foreshadowing the aesthetics of streaming video.

No streaming video, however, could do justice to the plot, which revolves around Ewa’s claim that her husband, Edward, has disappeared, and her subsequent attempts to inveigle Janusz into something which is not quite an affair, but very far from a friendship, either. Whereas the storyline in “Decalogue 1” moved inexorably towards tragedy, and “Decalogue 2” towards redemption, D3 keeps us perched at the edge of our seats with the spectacle of characters playing games within games, for stakes somehow beyond both these categories. When the two characters visit a local hospital, for example, they confront a bloodied, shockingly graphic corpse, and Ewa’s aghast response causes Janusz

to instinctively throw his arms around her. As it turns out, the body wasn't her husband at all, and when he begins to pull back, she lashes out:

Ewa: "I wish it *was* him. Or you. How often I've pictured your faces crushed by truck wheels. Once I dreamed about you. Your neck was broken. Your tongue lolled out. I looked at you and laughed. I wonder who this one hurt, who is going to rejoice." *Janusz slowly turns away.*

This shocking ambivalence, perched midway between a raging fury and a consuming guilt, is just the opening gambit of a full-scale struggle of wills between the two which rages throughout the night. Later he counterattacks by deliberately speeding past a police car, setting off a chase sequence through wintry roads and an underground tunnel; Kieslowski splices in an impressive close-up of a flashing police siren, pulsing blue on the right and red on left (even the cars, by the way, follow the tripartite color scheme of the episode: the police car is blue, Janusz' taxi is white, while Ewa's car is red). Ewa uses her quick wits to prevent them from being arrested, claiming, plausibly enough, that the car had been stolen but they just found it on the embankment. After the police depart, he ups the ante further by engaging in a terrifying game of chicken. He accelerates straight at an oncoming streetcar, avoiding a collision at the last possible second; a brief shot shows the streetcar driver to be none other than Artur Barcis' mysterious doppelganger.

Not only does Ewa pass the test, never once wavering or breaking down, but she will respond in kind, by mobilizing the interior of her apartment precisely where Janusz

mobilized his car. After phoning the hospital with a bogus report of her husband collapsing on a nearby streetcorner, she mysteriously hangs up the latter's coat and hat in a prominent location, and even puts a razor blade and an extra toothbrush in the bathroom. During the following dialogue, she is filmed against a darkened background, while Janusz is beautifully framed by the red, blue and violet refractions of Christmas lights in upper right background:

Janusz: "I didn't make that phone call three years ago, honestly. It was important to me. You were important. The truth is that I loved you and I was willing to..." *hesitates*: "...change everything. When we were getting dressed, he stood with his back turned. You never once looked at me. I took your hand. You snatched it back. Then he said that when we were dressed you could choose whether to stay or to leave with him. You followed him without a word."

Ewa: "Yes, that's how it was." *He nods*. "But Edward made one more condition. I could follow him, provided we two never met again."

Janusz: "Mmh, you said you didn't intend us to meet again, and I agreed."

Ewa: "Give me your hand. Unloved... misunderstood... you are right. My fault. But you fell on your feet. You're as you were, aren't you?" *With increasing hostility*: "You strove to make things work again. You are kind, caring..." *He grits his teeth, forcibly pulls his hand away*. "Take your hand, it stinks of gasoline."

The next sequence is Kieslowski at his finest: rather than allowing the emotional energy to dissipate, the tension is heightened when Janusz gets up and opens a door, giving us the impression he's leaving, when in fact he's just entering the bathroom to *wash his hands* (whether of her, of this night, or of life itself is unclear). Once in the bathroom, he sees the razor and begins to remove the blade, and we suspect the worst; instead of the spilling of blood, however, we see the spilling of Ewa's tears (she cries out, not entirely truthfully, "Did you ever think what happened after we left the hotel? How I feel when there's a romance film on TV and he stares at *me* instead of watching the screen? I've not slept with him once, not once."). Fortunately the blade is dull, but the eerie close-up of the metal surface sliding against Janusz' skin is enough to make the flesh crawl. This gesture will be mirrored somewhat later in an equally excruciating moment, where Ewa closes the bathroom door and similarly drags the harmless blade across her wrist. This undertone of mutual self-destruction brackets the scene where they kiss Orthodox style (once on either cheek) as a gesture of amity. Just as their lips start to touch for a third and obviously romantic kiss, the doorbell rings: their rescuers are the neighborhood children, out singing carols.

Quite another ritual of self-destruction is on display when the pair search the drunk tank, where the attendant, an anti-Semitic thug with a shaven head, hears Edward's last name (Garus) and sneers at Ewa, "A Jew". The authoritarian connotation is heightened when he proceeds to hose down the drunks in a metal cage, sprawled naked and half-conscious on the tiled floor (reminiscent not just of Auschwitz, but also the Communist Government's tactic of deploying water-hoses against demonstrators). Through close shots of the wire mesh of the cage, a framing device which anticipates

many of the scenes of “Decalogue 4”, we see one inmate clinging desperately to the branches of a Christmas tree under the icy stream; finally Janusz loses his temper and wrests the hose away from the attendant. The Christmas tree returns with a vengeance in the next sequence, where they accelerate down the road and Ewa suddenly seizes the steering wheel; they screech to a halt, knocking the gorgeously-lit Christmas tree on the embankment over onto the roof of the car, splaying red lights every which way – undoubtedly the capstone metaphor of the episode.

Kieslowski has one more surprise in store for us, however. The concluding sequence opens in a deserted, early morning train station; we see a single Christmas tree twinkling gaily amidst a sea of cheerless concrete, watch an automatic camera tracking nonexistent passersby, and glimpse the serried banks of security TV monitors through the window of the station office, two canny references to the video still. Suddenly Kieslowski interpolates a wildly careering shot of a skateboarder thundering in front of us: off hops the rider, a cheerful young woman straight out of a 1980s music video, who just happens to be the station attendant on duty (“If I don’t move around, I fall asleep,” she explains guilelessly). Ewa hands her a black-and-white photograph of Edward, and although the young woman doesn’t recognize him as a passenger, Janusz immediately notices something odd: the woman in Edward’s photo isn’t Ewa. At last, Ewa finally reveals the truth: Edward has lived in Krakow for three years with a new wife. She was play-acting all along, only not for a passing whim, but for her very life:

Ewa: “I told a pack of lies tonight.”

Janusz: “Why?”

Ewa: "I'm not sure. Do you know the game, if a man comes around the corner, it means luck, but a woman means bad luck?"

Janusz: "I know it."

Ewa: "I played it today. I thought that if I could get through the night with you until seven in the morning..."

Janusz : "What?"

Ewa: "Then everything will be fine."

Janusz: "And if you failed?" *She drops a tiny white pill from her hand on the ground.*

Ewa: "I thought of everything. I live alone. It's difficult to be alone on a night like this. People..."

Janusz: "...People shut themselves in, draw the curtains."

Ewa: "When I was driving to church, I saw a boy. He'd escaped from the hospital in his pajamas..." *Brief, partially obscured long-range shot of train station; we glimpse two guards on patrol and an unidentifiable figure dressed in white. It is unclear if they are chasing the figure.* "They caught him."

Her final words bury the hatchet, in more ways than one: "I know it wasn't you who made that telephone call." This is not merely the fitting conclusion of the episode, the ultimate gesture of abnegation in a plot-line teeming with abnegations, this is also, astonishing as it sounds, Kieslowski's severance notice to the one-party state. It should be remembered that Janusz is a taxi-driver, the sort of independent entrepreneur or professional only grudgingly tolerated (and often crudely repressed) by the cadre-state.

Ewa is not, however, a symbol of state authority in her own right, a role assumed by the incidental characters, who directly incarnate the logic of their respective social spaces (the police are properly credential-conscious, the warden is properly brutal, the train attendant is properly mobile, etc.). Half unwilling participant, half self-conscious provocateur, Ewa occupies a position adjacent to but somehow beyond the reach of the state and the family sphere alike: the shadowy space, in short, of the non-Governmental or independent mass media. Instead of recycling a Dickensian Christmas fable or indulging in an anti-Government screed, Kieslowki cleverly transforms every single index of political repression under the one-party state – tapped phones, surveillance cameras, spies at Church meetings, police sweeps, and secret denunciations – into the mediatic spaces of the hospital, the taxi-service, the telecommunications network and the train station.

The politics of mediatization are also the crucial issue in “Decalogue 4”, only not in the sense of adults regressing to the state of adolescents or a threatened family sphere, but rather the storm and stress of adolescents growing into adulthood. The opening of D4 hints at this nicely, by contrasting the faces of the two main characters – Anka and her father, Michal – through half-drawn blinds. The former, shrouded in darkness and framed in gorgeous backlighting, gazes wistfully through one set of blinds at the latter, who is partly obscured behind another set of blinds, his face fully lit by warm, rounded yellows. In fact, “Decalogue 4” marks an important breakthrough for Kieslowski, the point at which the visual forms innovated by “Decalogue 1” and “Decalogue 3” blossom into their content, namely the politics of a nascent Euroconsumerism. Our first clue is the

strange letter Anka finds underneath her father's passport, inscribed: "To be opened after my death."

Where medicalized and biological bodies circulated throughout "Decalogue 2", and spaces of traffic and circulation were the issue in "Decalogue 3", envelopes (external packaging) and scripts (internal logos or symbols) are the modus of exchange in "Decalogue 4". In addition to being a receptacle of meaning, the envelope is also a powerful visual trope in its own right. This is acknowledged by a gorgeously framed interior shot preceding the moment when Anka's boyfriend phones her. Two open doors and various furnishings are arranged in the background, forming an intricate latticework of multiple, intersecting rectangular frames, subtly counterpointing Michal (leaning forwards on the couch) against Anka (stretching sensuously against the blue and white paint of the bathroom) in the background. This is a powerful anticipation of the streaming aesthetic of the late 1990s, where boxes of multiple media stream messages on a single page, thereby collapsing several layers of information into a single screen. This suggests that, in a curious kind of way, Anka's image corresponds to the absent space of consumer technology (the imported stereo, TV, VCR, or computer) we'd otherwise expect to be displayed in the room.

This is confirmed by the next sequence at the airport, which is also the very first time we see an explicit shot of a corporate logo or graphic icon in the entire series – in this case, the bright red LOT symbol of Poland's national air carrier. Kieslowski zeroes in on the whole question of *viewing*: Anka later visits a matronly eye-doctor, saying she couldn't see the airliner taking off in the distance! The ophthalmologist is, if not quite Kieslowski's own personal doppelganger, undoubtedly one of the quirkiest and most

enjoyable bit characters in a series overflowing with superb bit characters; after quizzing Anka about theater school entrance exams (apparently her own son is trying to enter the school), the eye-doctor points out the letters “f-a-t-h-e-r” on the eye-chart. Anka immediately recognizes the English word; the eye-doctor tartly notes: “I check intelligence at the same time.”

The second explicit reference to logos and icons occurs in the scene where Anka finds the letter and sits down at a desk, pondering whether to open it or not, framed by a giant white globe-lamp. These two motifs – the offwhite trapezoids of script-bearing letters and envelopes, and luminous, light-bearing bubbles – are the direct descendants of a similar scene in “Decalogue 1”, namely the moment where Pawel dialed the meteorological bureau. Two lamps framed Pawel, one glowing white above, and the other forming a bright sliver on the left, the whole forming an unwitting rebus of that other great meteorological symbol, *The Prisoner*’s carnivorous weather balloon. This is not to say Kieslowski consciously quoted from McGoohan’s work (as a rule, Kieslowski shies away from all such quotations) but underlines the fact that both worked with the same mass-cultural material. This is nothing less than the streamlined consumer goods and bubble-shapes of the 1960s consumer culture, an aesthetic still widely prevalent in 1980s Poland, and one which will reappear at key moments for the rest of series.

The consumer culture is also an issue in Preisner’s haunting sound-track, most notably during the scene where Anka tries to open the letter in a wintry park by an icy river. In the background, Barcis’ doppelganger materializes on a small boat, vigorously paddling across the rapid current. Just as Anka is about to cut open the letter, she freezes, realizing he is watching: he is ashore and carrying the boat on his back, the craft forming

a trapezoidal white shape behind him. Just as his urgent glance is echoed in Anka's look of guilt, so too is the shape of the boat echoed by the much smaller trapezoid of the envelope in her hand. The theme music to the entire scene is orchestrated with a piano, violin and horns, yielding a curiously hollow, piercing sound which focuses on a single, sparse tone, moves a half step down, and then returns to the original tone, before moving up one full step and then another. What prevents this from being the sort of standard I–III chord transition typical of mainstream North American pop music is the bass line, which subtly outlines the interval of a fifth behind the melody: what seems to be a I–III transition is an eerie, unsettling minor third – major fifth transition.

The result is a set of major tones which rattle around inside of a minor transition like a skeleton in the closet. As it turns out, this has the most striking resonance with the work of quite another European cultural producer of the 1980s: Ireland's U2. U2's greatest achievement was to transform the acoustic materials of the 1980s – electronic beeps, whines, chirps and whistles – into an autonomous musical content. This was accomplished by the extended repetition of a single, jagged chord-structure, shorn of the overproduced bass-effects, strings or horns which cluttered mainstream 1970s and 1980s rock music. The result was an extraordinary sonic polarization, capable of generating a maximum of coloratura with an absolute minimum of melodic materials. This perfectly complemented the admixture of Irish and gospel registers of Bono's lead vocals, the direct antecedent of the lyrical MCs of the late 1980s, who were called upon to intermediate between the heavy bass line and high-pitched samples and scratches of hip hop music.

“Decalogue 4”’s state-of-the-art sound-track is matched by state-of-the-art scriptwriting, which deftly weaves an extraordinary array of subsidiary cultural forms into the narrative fabric. The eye-doctor episode is merely one of these; one could also point to the family friend who recurrently shows up to procure various unlikely items (sketches, hair tonic, etc.); the cameo appearance of the Consultant from “Decalogue 2” during a tense elevator sequence; or, indeed, the theatrical-romantic subtext of Anka’s boyfriend, a fellow student at her drama school. During one class, for example, she has trouble focusing on the lines of a romantic drama, despite (or, more likely, precisely because of) the fact that her partner in the scene is her boyfriend; symptomatically, she steps into her role only when the professor, an older man, unexpectedly takes over the boyfriend’s role. The same narrative complexity is evident in “Decalogue 4”’s set design, wherein the airport, the apartment cellar, the elevator, Anka’s bedroom, and even the apartment block’s walkway are all transformed into profoundly theatrical or performative spaces, brimming with video tropes.

The very first of these tropes appears shortly after Anka discovers the faded black-and-white photograph of her mother, when she sits down at her desk in order to write something on her mother’s paper and envelopes. She is exquisitely framed by a McGoohanesque bubble-lamp on her left, and the horizontal red and white stripes of an American flag tacked brazenly to the wall behind her – the scandalous conjunction of a neo-national surface with a multinational consumerism. Later, we *hear* a video trope, namely the whine of jet aircraft, in the scene when Anka confronts her father at the airport and recites what we’ve been led to believe is her mother’s letter:

Anka: *reciting in a provocative tone*: “My darling daughter... I don’t know how you will look when you read this.” *Whine of jet increases along with emotional tension*. “You must be grown up and Michal no longer alive. You’re tiny now. I’ve seen you only once. They don’t bring you to me because I am about to die. I have something important to tell you. Michal is not your father.” *Whine of jet begins to decrease*. “It is not important who your father is. A silly moment and much suffering. I am sure Michal will love you as his own and you will be happy with him. I try to imagine you in the future, reading this letter. Your hair is dark, isn’t it? Your hands are slender, your neck is soft. I’d like so much to... [signed] Mother.” *He slaps her, once*.

What provokes him is not so much the actual content of the letter as the sexualized swagger (beret slung back, head inclined, every inch the Western European fashion model) she adopts during her recitation. All this, of course, is just the opening gambit of an intriguing game of mirror-performances or reciprocal self-identifications, that is to say, Anka’s self-identification with someone who is not quite her father, and Michal’s identification with someone who is not quite his daughter. This is highlighted by the conversation in the cellar, where Michal shows Anka her mother’s envelopes, letters and a black-and-white photograph showing her mother and three men (one of whom is her real father). Kieslowski employs a combination of extreme close-ups and masterful low-level lighting here, framing the two characters between two candles in the foreground and the grille of a wire mesh in the background. Anka’s face, still in her signature beret and red scarf, is directly open to the camera, with a light shining in from the far left; Michal,

on the other hand, is partially hidden by an occluding mesh. This is a direct reprise of the title sequence of “Decalogue 4”, only with the key qualification that Anka is clearly asking *herself* questions, using Michal as a kind of proxy or psychological counterplayer:

Anka: “When did you realize?”

Michal: “I never knew for sure, but I always suspected.”

Anka: “You deceived me.”

Michal: “It never seemed to matter. You were always my daughter.”

Anka: “But you should have told me.”

Michal: “I planned to give you the letter when you were ten. At ten it turned out that you were too small. So I planned to give it to you at fifteen. At fifteen it turned out that you were too big. So I put it into the envelope.”

Anka: “As simple as that.”

Michal: “I thought that nothing would change between us.” *She stares at him.*

Anka: “A lie...”

Michal: “...is a lie.”

Anka: “Look: two candles. This one is mine, this one is yours. Whose goes out first has the right to ask a question. Agreed?”

Michal: “Agreed.”

She loses the bet, but of course it doesn’t matter; he is silent, knowing full well that there are questions she has to ask anyway, even if it means framing them as *his* questions! She

guessed, of course, that he deliberately left the letter from her mother out in the open, wanting her to open it herself. At one point she asks him if he ever read it; mildly, he says no, saying simply, it was addressed to *you*. This nonplusses her, and she grabs his hand during following sequence:

Anka: “At school they keep telling us to think: why say that? What hidden meaning? Aren’t you interested in the hidden meaning?” *He tries to retrieve his hand, she hangs on.* “It’s that for some years I sense the contents of the letter. When I first went to bed with a man, I somehow felt unfaithful. It was you. I am constantly searching for someone. Yet when I’m touched, I think of your hands. Close to a man, I’m not with him at all –” *He presses his hand against her mouth to quiet her.* “How should I address you now?”

Michal: “I don’t know.”

He knows perfectly well he’ll always be her father, of course, but he also realizes that this is not something he can simply tell her; she’s reached that stage of early adulthood where she has to come to such realizations herself. This moment also marks the birth of an entirely new video trope, displayed during the transition scene where Anka casts herself on her bed in tears. She is framed by the familiar giant white globe-lamp in the foreground to the right, while a small globe-lamp is on the drawer to the left; in addition to the significant presence of a telephone and a stereo system, there is also a mobile hanging from the ceiling (a motif which will return in D6). Behind her bed is a German-

language poster for Winston Salem, a vista of snow-capped mountains and heroic explorers, which reads, “Grosser Geschmack eines freien Landes” (literally, “the great taste of a free country”, with the connotation of wild or untamed country). This is an amazing triple pun, at once the ingenious quotation of the mountain-climbing posters of “Decalogue 2”, the coldest slap in the face of the one-party state imaginable (even the palpably false advertising of the West is somehow truer than the state propaganda of the East), as well as an authentic symbol of those prosperous Central European export-economies against which the Eastern European countries defined themselves.

The turning-point is reached when Michal sits down to read the letter, a subtle hint telling her that he’s been listening to her, after all. At that point one family secret pours out after another – the fact that he apparently fled from her, three years ago, after he caught her in bed with a boyfriend; the fact that she was pregnant and had an abortion but never dared to tell him, etc. Finally, she asks the question she really wanted to ask all along, the moment where she confronts him (that is, herself) with her own desire-to-be-desired, her own autonomy as an adult woman: “I’m not your daughter and I’m grown up now... Do you want to?” In a wonderfully sweet moment, he recuses himself from the witness stand, as it were, quietly consoling her:

Anka: “I want you to answer one more question.”

Michal: “Only one.”

Anka: “Why did you want me to read the letter?”

Michal: “Because I wished for the impossible.”

Anka: “You didn’t know that it was impossible?”

Michal: “No... That’s why I hit you today, for the first time in my life. Because you opened the letter, because I wanted you to, because of mother, because she told you something she didn’t tell me. Because I love you and you are not my daughter. Because everything could have been different. Because the past will never return.”

Anka: “Because of the times you caressed my back when I cried... Candy King... Gingerbread Page.” *Together they hum tune to Marzipan Princess.*

The children’s song reconciles the irreconcilable, by preserving the memory of the childhood happiness which is irrevocably lost in the passage to adulthood, while at the same time acknowledging that only adults can properly appreciate the happiness and joy of others.

Nothing quite prepares viewers for the shock, however, of the concluding sequence, where Anka wakes up and finally accepts her new role as an adult. This is the first time her bedroom is visible in full daylight, enabling us to see that the heroic explorer-figure in the scenic poster is paddling a kayak (shades of the doppelganger!). Significantly, the giant lamp-globe on left is no longer radiating the deathly white so strongly reminiscent of Rover, but gleams with a beatific, wholesome blue – an unmistakable reference to planet Earth and a utopian aesthetics of globalization. With this in mind, she glimpses Michal from an open window and runs after him, finally admitting that she never actually opened the letter – she simply copied her mother’s handwriting, writing (and of course reciting) what she imagined her mother *would* have said. Right on

cue, the doppelganger walks by, still carrying the same upended boat; Anka stares at him, goggle-eyed, her shock hardly less than ours.

Wisely, they decide to let the past be the past, by burning the letter together. It vanishes quickly, leaving only a fluttering remainder which Anka unfolds and reads: “My darling daughter... I would like to tell you something very important. Michal... Michal isn’t... It’s burnt.” During this final bit of dialogue, Kieslowski unexpectedly deploys a video pan which focuses on the objects in Anka’s bedroom: we see a close shot of the face of the kayaker on the wall-poster, then the red covers and pillows, forming a striking contrast to the wall, then a fluffy teddy bear (a utopian tactility, also a significant symbol in “Decalogue 7”), and next the white globe-lamp on the table. This last is shot in an extreme close-up which practically blots out our field of vision, Rover-style; finally, the camera pans onto the black-and-white photo of her mother and her boyfriends, sandwiched between the lamp-globe on the right and the red telephone on the left (a blue table lies underneath, completing the obligatory tricolore). Just as the German poster sublated the red stripes of the American flag into red-lettered script, here the faded snapshot, nestled securely between the symbols of a vibrant telecommunications network and a homogenizing multinational consumerism, hints at a new and specifically political genealogy: the European Union has many fathers, indeed!

Footnotes to Chapter 4

1. “According to Radio Free Europe, which had some direct experience of interference, television seems never to have been jammed, even when Western signals were quite widely available. In Hungary, where 30 percent of the population is able to receive terrestrial Austrian and Yugoslav signals, there had never been any attempt to prevent reception... In the case of video, there were no political moves to control the import either of Western technology or programmes, although the customs service operated tariffs that had the effect of rationing such items through price rises. Nevertheless, in 1984, according to official sources, between 500,000 and 600,000 people out of a population of around 10 million had access to video recorders, although some estimates were for a much lower figure of around 120,000 adults with recorders in their own homes...

Video recorders do not appear ever to have been illegal in Poland. The restriction on their ownership was largely economic. To buy them required a large sum of scarce convertible currency. Apart from authorised outlets, they were often acquired as in investment by Poles travelling abroad, who then resold them inside the country at a profit...” Colin Sparks. *Communism, Capitalism, and the Mass Media*. Sage Publications: London, 1998 (60-61).

2. “The initial idea was for a film which takes place in a courtroom. About the lawyer who’s dead, and about the woman he leave behind who realizes that she loved him more than she thought when he was alive. I didn’t know anything more about the film. The

film is terribly diffuse, of course, since it is three films in one, as it were. And you can see that – the stitching’s not very subtle. The film doesn’t fuse together to form a whole. A part of it, the discursive part, is about a young worker. A part of it is about the widow’s life (the widow is played by Grazyna Szapolowska). Then there’s the most metaphysical part, that is, the signs which emanate from the man who’s not there any more, towards all that he’s left behind. And these three films don’t really want to come together. Of course, they do mix all the time, threads and thoughts constantly interweave, but I don’t think we managed to bring it together.” Danusia Stok. *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*. Faber & Faber: London, 1993 (131). That is, Kieslowski consciously tried to compensate for the incompatibility of the ghost thriller, the existential thriller and the documentary drama by means of editing techniques. Some of these work surprisingly well, as with the brief montage of the interior of Urszula’s car, when the engine stalls; others fall flat, most notably the glaring and unmotivated jumpcut in the midst of the bedroom scene with the British stranger.

3. Danusia Stok. *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*. Faber & Faber: London, 1993 (136-137).

4. Annette Insdorf. *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski*. Miramax Books: New York, 1999 (65-66).

5. Kieslowski himself gives us this broad hint: “A great deal in life depends on who smacked your hand at breakfast when you were a child. That is, on who your father was, who your grandmother was, who your great-grandfather was, and your background in

general. It's very important. And the person who slapped you at breakfast for being naughty when you were four, later put that first book on your bedside table or gave it to you for Christmas. And those books formed us – at least, they did me. They taught me something, made me sensitive to something. The books I read, particularly as a child or a boy, made me what I am.” Stok:5

6. In his lecture to the university seminar, Kryzstof concludes by saying: “This device, which seems to differentiate between zero and one, has not only a kind of intelligence, it *selects*. That makes it capable of choice, perhaps even an act of will. In my opinion, a properly programmed computer may have its own aesthetic preferences, a personality...” Kieslowski even flags this cyborg narrative with an appropriate moment of post-structuralism: previously Kryzstof had explained to the class that language operates via flexible Saussurean relays of meaning, rather than fixed definitions. His example is a complex chain of associations which gradually resolves into the term “under-Judament”, a word which doesn't exist but which, he reminds the class, everyone immediately understands – an unmistakable dig in the direction of the censors and secret police.

7. “The moment however, in which history and nature become commensurable, is that of transience; this is the central cognition of Benjamin's *Origin of the German Tragedy-Play*. Nature hovered before the Baroque poets, so they say, ‘as eternal transience, in which alone the Saturnine glance of that generation recognized history.’ Not only of theirs; natural history was ever in the canon of historical-philosophical interpretation: ‘Where history wandered into the scenery of the tragedy-play, it did so as script. On the

countenance of Nature stood 'History' as the signification of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of Nature-History, which was introduced to the stage through the tragedy-play, is truly contemporary as a ruin.' [*Origin of the German Tragedy-Play*, pg. 199] That is the transmutation of metaphysics into history. It secularizes metaphysics into the secular category pure and simple, that of decline. Philosophy points to that signification, the always new Menetekel, in that which is smallest, the fragments struck loose by decline and which bear objective meanings." (My translation). Theodor Adorno. *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973 (353).

8. Note that there is a precisely analogous moment in John Woo's *The Killer*, when the camera does a slow semi-circular pan around the police officer, played by Danny Lee, during a scene where the latter recognizes the hitman's girlfriend from the cover of a compact disc and a photograph. The closest analogy of the semi-circular pan in the musical field was the electronically-boostered bass pulse of early 1990s hip hop, which DJs converted from an objective marker of the rhythm into an independent voice in its own right: most typically in the breaks between lyrical passages, where the bass line would pulse up or down the space of a half-note, accompanied only by a drum brush or musical scratch. Whereas the blues bass line symbolized railroad technology and the R & B bass referenced an automotive mobility, the hip hop bass pulse signified the aerospace sublime, the thunder of jet planes, rockets and other heavy transport equipment. Among other interesting similarities, both Kieslowski and Woo regularly feature all manner of jet planes, airports and other aerospace signifiers in their work.