

## Chapter 5

### Velvet Television

We have already seen how the first four episodes of *The Decalogue* bridge the divide between Eastern European and Western European cinematic forms, by integrating the dissident thriller, the Solidarity drama, the hospital soap opera, and even the holiday romance film into a genuinely pan-European mediatic space. During the next six episodes of the series, Kieslowski will wire this space with an extraordinary array of visual, aural and scripting mediations, thereby raising *The Decalogue* to the level of one of the greatest video productions of the 20th century. Where McGoochan refunctioned the Cold War allegories of the 1960s, and where the Hong Kong and horror films reappropriated the progressive internationalisms and neo-nationalisms of the 1970s, Kieslowski will reconvert the multinationalisms of the late 1980s and early 1990s (i.e. global neoliberalism and its local resistances) into the materials of Eurovideo. It is somehow fitting that the first moment of this process, namely the finely-balanced crime thriller and courtroom drama of “Decalogue 5”, should cast a sidelong glance back at *No End* and the moral verities of the Solidarity era, in the form of the interior monologue of Piotr Balicki, an aspiring young lawyer preparing for his final examination:

Piotr: *thinking to himself*: “The law should not imitate nature, the law should improve nature. People invented the law to govern their relationships. The law determined who we

are and how we live. We either observe it, or break it. People are free; their freedom is limited only by the freedom of others. Punishment means revenge, in particular when it aims to harm, but it does not prevent crime. For whom does the law avenge? In the name of the innocent? Do the innocent make the rules?"

Doorman: *aloud*: "Piotr Balicki. Go in, please..."

The references to the doorman, the Law and juridical procedure are just the first of several pointed references to Kafka's elliptical, Expressionistic parables, ranging from the mention of Castle Square to gloomy, washed-out shots of downtown Warsaw, shot through heavy green filters which expunge almost all of the color from our field of vision. Intriguingly, the only objects which manage to stand out in the claustrophobic murk are red articles of clothing, worn by the artist at the town square, the young girl he is drawing, and an attractive young delivery-woman at a vegetable kiosk, who is eyed lustfully by a taxi-driver. In fact, images of young women play a key role in defining the spatial boundaries of the story, everywhere from the little girl at the square to the cashier at the movie theater, and from the two girls at the streetcorner café to the clerk at the photography shop. The ultimate referent for all these images is, of course, the mysterious black-and-white photo carried around by Jacek, the anti-hero of the story, which he asks the clerk to have enlarged (as if to hammer the point home, when the photography clerk sees his metal baton and coiled rope, she asks innocently if he happens to be a picture-hanger – a truly grisly multimedia pun, given what happens later in the episode).

What prevents “Decalogue 5” from becoming just another death row thriller or crime drama, on the other hand, is the finely-tuned symmetry between the visual registers of the courtroom drama and those of the horror film, as if Kafka’s juridical labyrinths were retrofitted with snapshots of Dostoyevsky’s lower depths. In particular, Piotr’s ascent into the ranks of the legal profession turns out to be the flip side of the downwards spiral of Jacek, a psychotic youth who commits a series of random acts of mayhem, culminating in the brutal murder of a cab driver (Piotr is Jacek’s public defender during the subsequent trial). By carefully avoiding courtroom speeches, lengthy monologues, or the scopophilic registers of the Hitchcock thriller, Kieslowki highlights the fundamental equivalence of two killings: the meticulously planned butchering of the taxi-driver, and the no less horrifying extermination of Jacek by the criminal justice system. The result is somewhere between the horror film and the detective narrative, such that the absolute or unrestricted subjectivity of the murderer, which transforms everyone else into a dead object, turns out to be the flip side of the murderous absolutism of the state, which reduces everyone to administered (i.e. undead) subjects.

“Decalogue 5” does however make one significant nod in the direction of the detective narrative, in the form of the documentary shots of the taxi-driver on his daily rounds. One of the first shots of the cabbie shows him washing down his car, a provocative moment in an episode overflowing with impure surfaces of all kinds, ranging from dirt-encrusted windows to grimy cafés, and from swampy fields to dank prison-cells. Like the sacrificial victim trotted out in the prologue of every whodunit, the cabbie seems at first to be a somewhat unsympathetic character, whose tendency to harass, capriciously abandon or otherwise disrespect his customers earns him first our mild

reproach, and later (once we learn of his grim fate) a strange kind of sympathy. It's striking that the closest analogue of the cabbie in the auteur canon, namely the Fool in Fellini's *La Strada*, deploys the symbolic categories of Kleist's marionette-theater in order to denounce the overbearing Americanism of Zampano. But instead of hauling out the tried-and-true toolkit of theatrical modernism, Kieslowski unexpectedly launches a lightning guerilla raid on the archives of American postmodernism.

What makes D5's murder scene so excruciating, even for contemporary viewers jaded by the latest video techniques, is its canny inversion of the visual categories of the 1970s horror film. Leatherface, Freddy Krueger, Jason, and Michael all wore masks or bore mask-like visages, in what amounts to the mass mediatic update of the executioner's hood, while the faces of their screaming or panic-stricken victims were shot in extreme, disjointed close-ups. In D5, however, it is the victims who are draped in hoods (first the cabbie, and later Jacek, blindfolded in the execution chamber), while Jacek's face is highlighted by a series of extreme close-ups – none more powerful than the moment when a land-surveyor stops the unwitting cabbie and his future killer on the highway, another incisive Kafka reference. The surveyor turns out to be Artur Barcis' Euro-doppelganger, who stares piercingly at Jacek while shaking his head, ever so slightly, as if conscious of what the youth is planning to do. Jacek, in the back seat, can't bear to meet his gaze directly, and tries to shrink out of sight in the half-darkness of the cab; in the background we hear the anxious, high-pitched electronic whine of an automotive turn signal.

This is more than simply the ironical anticipation of the wrong turn we know, on some level, Jacek is about to take; in fact the entire murder scene is explicitly framed by

the compartmentalized space of the high-tech or postmodern automobile. When the cabbie is slowly strangulated, the car seat is highlighted behind him; when he flails desperately at the car horn, Jacek attacks him from the side with the baton; and the final blow with the stone, which silences the cabbie forever, is linked to the destruction of the car radio, which Jacek tears out in a fit of sudden fury (it is playing a seemingly harmless children's song).<sup>2</sup> What seems to be missing from this brief glimpse of a high technology charged with a ferocious corporeal violence is, of course, a properly postmodern identity politics. With typical subtlety, Kieslowski has already provided us with an essential clue, in the form of an earlier scene in a public pissoir, where a young man dressed in upscale Western clothing, fashionable outdoor vest and expensive shoes smiles unexpectedly at Jacek. The latter lashes out, knocking the stranger down in a scene strongly suggestive of an episode of gay-bashing. This puts a decidedly gender-bending spin on Jacek's final revelation that his treasured photograph is a shot of his deceased sister, not to mention his otherwise inexplicable request to be buried in his mother's grave-plot.<sup>3</sup>

This suggests, in turn, that the signifying machinery of the murder sequence is somehow related to the juridical machinery of the execution sequence, only not in the sense of Kafka's notorious *Penal Colony* (i.e. bodies directly savaged by Fascist or colonial violence). The contradiction hinges on the antinomy of capital punishment first identified by Benjamin, who noted that the carrying-out of the death penalty might be moral, but never its justification, something which has an especially painful and bitter resonance for Eastern European countries who suffered through the successive scourges of Fascism, Stalinism, Brezhnevism and latest of all neoliberalism. As an old saying goes, someone who kills one person is a murderer; someone who kills ten people is a

psychopath; someone who kills one hundred people is unimaginably evil; but someone who kills a million people is either a general or an IMF banker. That Jacek killed a fellow human being is horrifying enough, but the executioners compound the interest on the original crime, as it were, by what amounts to an act of war. Not the least of “Decalogue 5”’s achievements is its unshakable commitment to non-violence, which neither scapegoats those who break the law nor demonizes those who enforce it, but simply asks us to think through what the law at its most utopian and redemptive – namely, the moment when it becomes justice – might truly be:

Piotr: “Now it’s all over, I would like to ask you... would an older, famous lawyer have made any difference to the case?”

Judge: “None at all.”

Piotr: “My speech... perhaps if I had put things differently...”

Judge: “Your speech was the best against capital punishment I’ve heard in years. The verdict was inevitable. You were faultless, either as a lawyer or as a human being. Difficult circumstances, but I’m glad I’ve met you.” *Piotr is silent, then thanks him and turns to leave, but the Judge adds:* “One could, perhaps, wish for a better judge in this case, because I am responsible for what will happen. Does that comfort you?”

Piotr: “No. Perhaps it doesn’t really matter... but on that day, when he wound the cord around his hand... I was there.”

Judge: “Where?”

Piotr: “In the same café, a year ago, after passing my examination. I might have done something.”

Judge: “You are too sensitive for this profession.”

Piotr: “Too late now.”

Judge: “Now you are a year older.”

A year older and, presumably, a year wiser. To simply contravene the law would be as barbaric as forsaking the concept of justice altogether; even the methodical, painstaking division of labor by which the execution is carried out contains within itself a respect for abstract procedures which may someday blossom into a respect for living human beings.

It is somehow fitting that “Decalogue 5” concludes by canceling out the death row melodrama on its own aesthetic grounds. In a scene reminiscent of Heiner Müller’s *Germania Death in Berlin* (a play best described as a bullet train through the Stygian depths of German prehistory) the execution chamber accelerates from utter silence to absolute pandemonium in mere seconds: Jacek cries out horribly, the guards surging around him like the lynch mob they indeed have become, while the assistant ratchets up the noose in a frenzy. After the trapdoor falls, there is a truly spine-tingling reverse shot from underneath the floorboards, where we see Jacek’s lifeless feet, framed by the open trapdoor, swinging gently in front of the upturned face of the assistant (the latter’s head is twisted at an excruciating angle, reminiscent of some woodblock carving of a medieval executioner). Instead of salving our conscience with a hackneyed moral coda or indulging in melodramatic platitudes involving the victim’s family or Jacek’s relatives, Kieslowki unexpectedly cuts to a pastoral scene in the countryside. Piotr is seated in his car, his head framed by a rolled-down car window and lush tree branches; shaking with anger and

grief, he recites over and over again, “I abhor it! I abhor it!” with properly Conradian fervor. Meanwhile a mysterious object (we are never shown quite what) shines brightly from a distant field, which could be anything from the glint of a high-tech factory in a greenfield site, to the inextinguishable beacon of a more humane future, depending on your taste in allegory.

Kieslowski’s protest did not go in vain. In one of the most heartening examples of life imitating art, one of the very first acts of the post-Communist governments was to revoke the power of the state to kill. By the year 2000, almost every European country had either formally abolished or ceased practicing the death penalty, a dire contrast to the judicial barbarism sweeping over the United States.<sup>4</sup>

### Decalogue 6

It is a familiar scene in any semi-peripheral country in the world economy: a customer wants to cash a (most likely foreign) money-order at the post office. In D6, the however, the country is Poland on the eve of the Velvet Revolutions; the postal clerk is a 19-year-old young man named Tomek; the customer is an attractive woman, Maria, who is the object of Tomek’s secret affection; and the director is Krzysztof Kieslowski, who has something other than a semi-peripheral aesthetics in mind. Following in the footsteps of Ousmane Sembène’s post-colonial classic, *The Money-Order*, which denounced the economics of neocolonialism and Third World debt bondage, “Decalogue 6” mobilizes the neonational form of the money-order on behalf of a genuinely multinational content: this is the subtle interplay between Magda’s reflection in the teller window, and Tomek’s

eyes, which gaze at her through the circular teller-window (she is framed, in turn, by an outside window behind her). The scene is cut short by an ominous crash of glass on a darkened floor, denoting both Tomek's illegal entrance through a window into some sort of storage space, as well as marking a decisive turn in the visual logic of the entire series. In Kieslowski's previous works, broken glass or smashed crockery alluded to impending catastrophes or fateful decisions; here, the glass shards twinkle alluringly, refracting blue backlight like piles of uncut gems, something seconded by the sight of Tomek skulking about like a jewel thief. It is not the imported Western luxury good or some other symbolic wealth-fetish which is the issue here, however, but rather the stealthy emergence of a new kind of visual content: the video color-spectrum. Whereas the initial episodes of *The Decalogue* restricted their respective visual palettes to just a few basic colors (e.g. the green, white and yellow overtones of the first episode; the alternating blue, white and red hues of the second; or the almost complete absence of color in the third), "Decalogue 6" will exult in a veritable riot of color from beginning to end.

This dramatic expansion of chromatic content, running the full gamut from vibrant greens and blues to pulsating reds and yellows, will be matched by a no less striking expansion of shot techniques, which reconfigure the video pan and the video still into the building-blocks of a nascent windowing aesthetics. Significantly, while the video pan will retain most of its original features, most notably in the glorious full circular pan midway through the story (the moment when Maria finally agrees to meet with Tomek), the video still undergoes a far more radical mutation. This is most evident in the subtle interplay between the long-distance shots of Maria's apartment and the close shots of Tomek's hiding-place, which powerfully transform the zoom shots perfected by

Hitchcock's *Rear Window* in two ways. First, nothing about Maria's numerous love affairs or Tomek's infatuation is hidden from the viewer: there is no secret, dismembered corporeality, jaw-dropping clue, or any other variation on a cinematic scopophilia. Second, the modernist trope of sheer kinetic energy or acceleration through space is displaced by the trope of movement through visual fields of information: thus each successive shot of Maria's apartment is slightly closer than the previous one, and reveals new layers of visual details, each of which is tied to the storyline. Put more concretely still, an aesthetic of multiple levels of viewing or simultaneous, overlapping windows, each of which is meant to access and be accessible to all the others, takes the place of Hitchcock's cinematic voyeurism (the policing or existentializing gaze, searching for clues or hidden meanings). What is at issue here is one of the most overlooked aspects of video culture, namely the transformation of intermittent visual surfaces such as movies, photographs and TV sets into digitally-computed surfaces, which are viewed at close range by viewers for extended periods of time, both in the workplace and at home. Such surfaces feature a genuinely multinational aesthetics of texturing, determined objectively by the state of graphics and display technology, available screen resolution and other hardware, and subjectively by the graphical codes, animation programming, and icons indigenous to the specific matrix of visual technology in question.

Both themes are prominently displayed in an early sequence, where we see that Maria's apartment is divided into a kitchen space on the left, and a bedroom on the right, separated by a curious hanging screen or textile fabric imprinted with some sort of neo-Expressionist design. Meanwhile her bed is flanked by two mysterious objects: a silvery, refractive lamp-globe on the left, and a curious pattern of dots on the right, suggesting a

crude digital pattern printed on transparent plastic. Hidden away in his secret niche, Tomek trains the beam of his flashlight across several dormant computer screens, random electronic equipment, a microscope, and finally a magazine cover showing the planet Earth, before he finds the telescope he was looking for all along. These two spaces of mediatic consumption and production, respectively, are linked by an explicitly global technology: that of the telephone. Indeed, their first contact ends with a shot of him framed by the telescope, while she is framed by what we now see is a transparent globe on the left, which refracts a subtle microcosm of the bedroom onto our field of vision (a motif which will reappear in Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique*). We have already seen how the demolition of a crystal ball plays a crucial role during the mind-bending finale of *The Prisoner*; here, Kieslowski seals the reference by a brief shot of Tomek's landlady, who is watching a variety show on TV.

The action shifts at this point to a variety of explicitly commercial spaces, beginning with a grocery, where Tomek is framed by rows and rows of reflective and refractive glass surfaces of all kinds, a replication of images mirrored by his decision to become a milk deliverer (glass bottles of milk are one of *Decalogue's* most prolific symbols). It is at this point that he begins to intervene in her life on a variety of levels, everywhere from secretly intercepting her mail to calling in a bogus report of a dangerous leak to the gas utility, in order to interrupt her during a lovemaking session with one of her boyfriends. The first time he knocks on her door in his guise as the milkman, his silhouette is framed by a set of bright red translucent window-blocks in the background, creating a visually arresting block of color which is offset by a thin band of color reflected from her door: the gendered inversion, as it were, of the zoom shot of Maria and

her microcosmic lamp-globe. At one point, sensing an opportunity, Tomek plants another bogus money-order in her mailbox. Still suspecting nothing, she demands to see the manager, who rudely brushes aside her questions, tears up the note and goes so far as to accuse her of being a swindler – another wonderful citation of the money-order narrative. When Maria storms off, Tomek at last summons up the courage to confront her directly:

Maria: *walking furiously*: “What do you want?”

Tomek: *keeping pace*: “I want to tell you there was no money.”

Maria: “What about the notices?”

Tomek: “I sent them.”

Maria: “Why?”

Tomek: “I wanted to see you.”

Maria: “You wanted to see me?” *She continues walking. He stops, wrestles with himself, finally shouts*: “You were crying yesterday.”

Maria: *stopping*: “How do you know?”

Tomek: “I peeped on you. I saw you through the window.”

Maria: *roughly pushing him*: “Get lost, busybody... “ *He slouches off, devastated*.

The next time he spies on her, we are at last able to discern the mysterious object to Maria’s right: it is not a sheet of plastic, but rather a children’s mobile decorated with flat, multicolored discs. The mobile is not only a significant symbol of a mass mediatic subjectivity in several episodes of *The Prisoner* (especially *Once Upon a Time*), it also

plays a key role in Anka's room in "Decalogue 4". This leads to a genuine breakthrough, where she looks out her window and raises her phone in a gesture telling *him* to call *her*. When he does so, she promptly double-crosses him, revealing his identity to one of her boyfriends. When the latter goes outside and begins making a scene in front of the entire apartment block, Tomek has no choice but to appear, whereupon he is pummeled to the ground. Not content with this victory, the next morning she surprises him on his milk run, opening her door suddenly to bowl him over. Refusing to talk, he walks over to the painted glass window, which suffuses the scene with sensuous red light. Suddenly intrigued, she asks:

Maria: "Why are you peeping at me?"

Tomek: "Because I love you. I love you, it's true."

Maria: *baffled*: "And what do you want?"

Toiiiiek: *mildly*: "I don't know."

Maria: "Do you want to kiss me?"

Tomek: "No."

Maria: "Perhaps you want to make love to me?"

Tomek: "No."

Maria: "So what do you want?"

Tomek: "Nothing."

Maria: "Nothing?"

Tomek: "Nothing." *He turns to go. Stops, thinks, and then asks her out to a café. We learn later she has agreed; the next shot is an exquisite circular pan of him trolling his*

*milk-truck behind him, framed by the bright green colors of spring; he almost runs into Artur Barcis' doppelganger, who stands dressed all in white, with a large white satchel and a brown luggage case.*

Here the privatized registers of the voyeur and the existential gaze suddenly give way to semi-public performances, played out everywhere from the, green sward of the apartment block to the hallway, and from grocery shops and cafés to the line in front of the post office; to paraphrase Judith Butler, a video performativity upstages its cinematic predecessor. What intrigues Maria is not anything Tomek says, but his positively Beckettian silence (he even wears black clothing, as if in mourning). This silence is the flip side of an undreamt-of abyss of aesthetic speculation, something nicely underlined by Slavoj Žižek's comment that Maria is really the desiring subject who lacks an object (her response to Tomek's statement, "I love you," is: "There's no such thing"), whereas Tomek serves as a kind of objective currency of desire, caught up in the throes of a catastrophic devaluation.<sup>5</sup> This allegorical reading of D6 as the clash between a feminized desire-to-consume (read: Western European consumerism) and a masculinized desire-to-speculate (read: post-autarkic Visegrad Europe) is fairly convincing in regards to the first two-thirds of the episode, but runs into acute difficulties towards the conclusion.

The reason is that Kieslowski, with typical subtlety and discretion, moves beyond neo-nationalism as a narrative form. This first becomes apparent during the café scene, where we learn in rapid succession that (1) Tomek is an orphan (i.e. is not connected with

the traditional family sphere); (2) his friend, the original peeping Tom, is with a UN force in Syria (neatly cancelling out any link to Cold War geopolitics), and (3) his hobby is studying Bulgarian, English, and Portuguese (thereby bracketing the Iberian and Eastern European peripheries of the future Eurostate). She responds with her own memory of a thin boy she once favored, who left for Austria and Australia; blushing, Tomek hands over the letters he collected. This ritual exchange of geopolitical coordinates is sealed by the moment when she takes his hand and symbolically dangles a wooden carving (a curious cross between a teardrop and a child's spinning top) on his palm.

This is followed by one of the most original seduction sequences ever filmed: first, Tomek's landlady discovers the telescope, symbolically assuming Tomek's role as voyeur. Next, Maria takes Tomek back to her apartment, caresses him, and gradually induces him to masturbate her; unable to bear the strain, he ejaculates prematurely, whereupon she remarks brutally, "That's all there is to love. Wash in the bathroom, there's a towel." Here at last the mediatic machinery Kieslowski has patiently been constructing comes to life with a jolt: Tomek unexpectedly jumps to his feet and rushes outside, only to bump into Barcis' doppelganger, who is still standing in the apartment courtyard in precisely the same pose and carrying the same luggage as before. Not only is the joyous video pan which accompanied their first meeting extinguished here by an icily objective long-distance shot, but Tomek's own position as voyeur will be literally and figuratively annihilated when he subsequently locks himself into his bathroom and slashes his wrists.

One of the major symbolic compensations for this catastrophe is the emergence of Maria as a viewer (rather than a viewed object) in her own right. This was already hinted

at during the seduction scene, when she is framed against a series of lush, glowing surfaces. Later, she gestures prominently with the phone, indicating he should call her, and even writes an impromptu message, “I’m sorry, please come back” on the back of one of her paintings or prints, holding it up against the window. With typical subtlety, Kieslowski leavens this otherwise heart-breaking moment with just the right touch of black comedy: one of Maria’s lovers, the same one who beat up Tomek, suddenly rings at the door at the worst possible moment. Naturally she refuses to see him, but not before Kieslowski sneaks in a terrific fishbowl shot of the lover through the peephole, the unmistakable negation of the microcosmic lamp-globe in Maria’s room.

In fact, this will be the first of a whole series of inversions, wherein subjects become objects and objects become subjects, and where the voyeuristic energies formerly attached to the realm of the private sphere are transferred onto an externalized public space. Thus when Maria goes to talk to Tomek’s landlady, the latter treats her with a kind of noncompliant courtesy, yielding almost no information aside from Tomek’s name, as if Maria were some state agent or snooping official. Somewhat later, when Maria opens her door, hoping to see Tomek on his milk rounds, the delivery-person turns out to be the landlady, filling in for her lodger and as tight-lipped as ever. Tomek’s absence at the post office is highlighted by a noteworthy shot of Maria standing next to her mailbox, framed by a few prominent red dots painted on the windowpane behind her: the sorrowful echo of the glorious torrent of red hues which provided the backdrop to their hallway conversations. This formal symmetry extends even to the phone call which announces his return: he is not really contacting her (he does not speak), but merely acknowledging her calls. She ends up speaking for both of them: “I’ve looked for you everywhere. I’ve

looked for you in several hospitals, to tell you... you were right. Do you hear me? You were right. I don't know what to say to you, I don't know how." Once again, Kieslowski provides just the right comic note to offset the unbearable grimness of the scene: one of her lovers suddenly calls seconds later, and for a moment she suspects a prank (it turns out the silent caller really was Tomek, whereupon she hangs up abruptly on the boyfriend).

The real symbolic compensation for Tomek's absence, however, is not so much Maria's own voyeurism, but that quite different visual register relayed by the gorgeous scenes of her peering out her own window with opera glasses, backlit in sensuous blues and whites: she is no longer the subject who is watching someone else, but a subject who is *scanning*, television-style, for someone or something worth watching in the first place. This is confirmed by the final scene at the post office, which is a precise inversion of the very first shot of "Decalogue 6": not only does the circular slot of the teller window frame *her* eyes instead of his, but a prominent white bandage around his wrist replaces the white paper-slip of the money-order. After he says, simply, "I'm not peeping on you anymore," she stares at him with a curiously abstract, ambivalent expression, best described as a kind of distant nearness, with the most uncanny resemblance to the gaze of the doppelganger.

This is not the erasure of desire, but its transfiguration into something new and mysterious: a desire somehow linked to consumerism, but not yet mediated by the stupendous flood of televisual surfaces and video tropes characteristic of Kieslowski's *Trois Couleurs*. In retrospect, it is Tomek's competitor, the telltale boyfriend, who finally gives the game away. The latter's role is clearly an allegory of the commercial

interruption, e.g. the knock of the door-to-door salesperson, the ring of the telemarketer, the annoying TV ad, etc. This suggests that the final shot is meant to negate two registers at once: the visual register of the glass window, and the tactility of the rounded, plastic bubbles of the 1960s consumer culture. Both are henceforth integrated into the new social space of *customer service*, a.k.a. the service-sector of the multinational workplace.

### Decalogue 7 and 8

We have already noted Kieslowski's penchant for arranging his material in formal pairs, everywhere from the character-trope of the doppelganger to the appositions of window-reflections and refractions, and there is a sense in which "Decalogue 7" and "Decalogue 8", in some ways the most provincial episodes of the *Decalogue*, are best understood as two parallel attempts at defining a single problem: the passage of the national past into a multinational future. Both episodes turn the codes of a specifically generational politics against what Jameson famously termed an allegorical Third World nationalism, but which amounts in the Polish context to the autarkic cadre-state, as well as the official opposition movements ranged against such. Thus in "Decalogue 7", the first postwar generation (Majka's mother, a school-teacher, and her father, a skilled craft-worker who makes musical instruments) battles the disaffected generation of the 1960s (Majka, who dreams of emigrating to Canada, as well as Wojtek, her former lover, who has chosen to stay in Poland in a kind of internal exile), with the fate of the postmodern generation (Majka's daughter Anya) hanging in the balance. In "Decalogue 8", Elzbieta, a Polish Jew who escaped from Nazi-occupied Warsaw as a young girl and grew up in

the US, returns to Poland in the 1980s to confront her own past as well as the ambiguous role of Zofia, a university professor who is also a non-typical human rights activist.

The first notable shot of “Decalogue 7” is a semi-circular pan of Majka at the office window, her head framed by the back of the clerk’s head to the left, with tell-tale Eurocard, Visa and Mastercard logos imprinted on the office-glass. This striking reference to the multinational credit-market is later counterpointed by a close shot of Anya, reminiscent of the close shots of Danny Lloyd in Kubrick’s *The Shining*. Like Danny, Anya has recurrent nightmares which foreshadow real events to come; Kieslowski shies away from the ghost story, however, in favor of the all too human trauma of parental jealousy (the grandmother, Ewa, rudely shoves Majka aside to comfort the child and pours scorn on her ability to be a mother). Later, when Majka decides to run away with Anya, Kieslowski will make one other explicit reference to *The Shining*, during the scene where she rolls a ball down the carpet to distract a theater concierge (in Kubrick’s film, a ghost does this to entice Danny into Room 312). Inside the theater, a group of children are participating in an children’s theatrical, and Majka chooses an opportune moment to grab Anya from the stage flies and carry her off – a clever inversion of classic folktales which tell of witches abducting innocent children, as well as a subtle nod in the direction of Eastern Europe’s thriving theater culture. Where Danny exhibits an uncanny grasp of the ghostly traces of mediatic images, Anya displays an equivalent affinity to all sorts of tactilities, ranging from the gestures of physical affection so apparent between her and her mother and grandmother, and so painfully absent between everyone else, to the abstract patterns Anya traces with her fingers in the window of the tramcar, and even to the way her hand clings desperately to Wojtek’s hand

when she falls asleep. It is therefore fitting that Majka and Wojtek should rehash their painful past amidst a room filled with teddy-bears, the mute reminders of a vanished childhood tactility and human warmth :

*They watch Anya fall asleep on the teddy bears.*

Majka: “Do you still think of me?” *She unconsciously reaches for him.*

Wojtek: “No.” *Just as unconsciously, he pulls away.* “I suffered a lot for it, but not any more.” *Sits down.* “Do they know?”

Majka: “No.” *She smiles.* “I took her from the theater. Mother almost fell down the steps.”

Wojtek: “Why speak like that about her?”

Majka: “You should be pleased.” *Becomes serious.* “For some time now... I think I hate her.”

Wojtek: “As always: with you it’s either, or – no half-measures.”

Majka: “No, and I’ve taken Anya and I’m not giving her back. I’ve thought about it for three or four years. I’m no longer the sweet little girl who fell in love with her young teacher because he didn’t talk like the others.” *He flinches.*

Wojtek: “You’ve still plenty ahead. You haven’t stolen, you haven’t killed.”

Majka: *bitterly:* “Can you steal something that’s yours?”

Majka’s apparent heartlessness turns out to be the product of quite heartless circumstances: we learn that her mother was the headmistress of the school which

employed Wojtek as a teacher, when Majka became pregnant at the age of 16. The scandal was hushed up at the price of a double (and suspiciously gendered) sacrifice – he gave up a promising writing career, and she gave up her motherhood. It is here, where we initially expect an impassioned confession or a melodramatic shouting-match to break out, that Kieslowski discreetly interposes two variants of the video-still: Majka’s passport and the birth certificate which proves she is Anya’s mother. This motif will be completed somewhat later, when Wojtek flees from Majka and Anya’s mute grasp in another video pan, this one framed by the white and yellow sheets hanging out on the clothes-line to dry. At the same time, the explosive conflict we have been expecting is displaced elsewhere, onto the crackling telephone dialogue between Ewa and Majka and, more ominously, between Majka and Anya. When the latter wakes up, she sleepily mutters one of the great lines of “Decalogue 7”: “You’ve both stolen yourselves from me,” and stubbornly refuses to call Majka “mother”, despite the latter’s cajoling. When Wojtek goes out, allegedly to procure a van (but really to inform Majka’s parents), she instinctively flees with the child, who clutches a teddy-bear for dear life. Somewhat later, Wojtek will find the same teddy-bear, discarded on a riverbank; symbolically, he begins to wade into the river, framed by the modernized superstructure of a modern steel-and-masonry bridge and the overgrown banks and wooden pilings of the river.

Both motifs – an abandoned childhood tactility, and a surcharged aesthetics of framing – culminate in the scene at the train station. Here Kieslowski rewrites the three individual futures of *Blind Chance* into three generations of identity-politics: the first (Ewa) remains within the orbit of the nation-state, the second (Majka) flees to the West, while the third (Anya) oscillates unhappily somewhere in between. Significantly, this is also the first

moment that Kieslowski undercuts the gender identity of the heretofore male doppelganger. This is the matronly station attendant, who we later glimpse reading Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and who knows just what to ask Majka:

Attendant: "A guy? Are you running away from a guy?"

Majka: *despairingly*: "Everything."

Attendant: "Come inside, it's warm, you can sleep."

This is an extraordinary evocation of a new kind of postmodern solidarity, the moment where a Second Wave feminism emerges in the Europeriphery and begins to fight against the entrenched forms of symbolic and physical violence perpetrated against women. Though the attendant is ultimately unsuccessful in her attempt to hide Majka from her parents, it's significant that Kieslowski already had the insight to gender-bend the figure of the doppelganger, neatly anticipating the powerful female protagonists of his later films. The episode concludes with Majka's solitary escape onto the moving train, as Ewa gathers Anya up in her arms. This is commemorated by a heartrending *double* video pan, one focused on Majka's face, sliding into obscurity behind the train window; and the other focused on Ewa and Anya, sliding past Majka's point of view. At the last second, Anya wriggles free from Ewa's arms and runs, too late, towards the disappearing train, the expression of astonishment on her young face already freezing into the stigmata of trauma, with Preisner's spare, sorrowful score echoing in the background.

If the fundamental issue of “Decalogue 7” is the universal experience of exile, then “Decalogue 8” offers the logical corollary to this theme: the possibility, however fleeting or fragmentary, of a multinational solidarity between fellow exiles. We first run into Elzbieta as the American translator of Zofia’s works, who is a guest of honor at the latter’s university seminar. During a classroom discussion of ethics, Zofia realizes she’s gotten more than she bargained for when Elzbieta unexpectedly starts reciting an actual event from her very own life-history: when she was a 6-year-old Jewish girl in Warsaw in 1943, she was denied refuge from the Nazis by members of the Polish underground, for reasons she never found out (Zofia was, it seems, one of those members). Just when the tension seems unbearable, Kieslowski provides his usual note of comic relief: a mentally disturbed person stumbles into the classroom, bobbing and weaving, until an African student yells, “Go out!” in English, until the visitor is ushered away. This reference to a multinational student body and mass homelessness is not accidental: when Elzbieta continues with her story, the camera pans onto Barcis’ doppelganger, present here as a student in the audience. To our surprise, when Zofia finally confronts Elzbieta after the class, she is the furthest thing from reproachful:

Zofia: *amazed*: “It’s you. You’re alive. I’ve wondered all my life. Whenever I see someone toying with a gold chain, I wonder... Lord... You are alive.”

Elzbieta: “I was hidden by other people, relatives of the man who brought me to you. I lived with them for about two years. They’re with me in America now... well, he is dead.”

Zofia: *calmly*: “And you travelled so far to watch my face when you told the story.”

Elzbieta: “I intended to talk to you when you were in America. I tried to write several times. I planned to come. But for your words about the child... I would never...”

Zofia: “Yes, I understand.”

Elizabeta: “There is a theory that a rescuer has one character, those rescued have another character.”

Zofia: “Yes, such characteristics may exist.”

Elzbieta: “You have them.”

Zofia: “Me?”

Elzbieta: “Your activities, even after me, are well known. Thanks to you, several people of my world are still alive. It’s interesting that a student easily spotted the false note in that apparently Catholic reasoning.”

Zofia: “There’s an ashtray over there.”

Elzbieta: “You don’t smoke.”

Zofia: *a twinkle in her eyes*: “But I observe.”

This seemingly ordinary dialogue trespasses against two sacrosanct Polish national myths, simultaneously. In the first place, Pilsudki’s Poland was virulently anti-Semitic, and the Resistance did almost nothing to save the Jewish community from extermination, something which is still a sore point in Poland to this day; but as Elzbieta points out, Zofia saved *several* Jews from death, suggesting she was not the average partisan. The other great neo-national myth punctured here is that of the Solidarity priest or religious activist: rather than a dogmatic believer, Zofia is the intriguing prototype of the Žižekian

activist, with one foot in the university system and the other in a postmodern identity-politics.

This is confirmed by Zofia's offer to have dinner with her, which turns out to be a ploy to drive Elzbieta to the meeting-place she remembered from so long ago, a place the latter is both horrified by and yet very much drawn to. After a curiously childlike game of hide-and-go-seek in the shadowy courtyard, they catch up with each other and Elzbieta recalls:

Elzbieta: "A terrible place. I went to my old flat. When my custodian, my father's friend, didn't know what to do next, it was here I decided I'd never be so afraid again."

Zofia: "Why didn't you come here for forty years? Didn't you want to see this place?"

Elzbieta: "No. It's humiliating."

Zofia: "Accepting help?"

Elzbieta: "Yeah. People don't like witnesses of their humiliation, even bricks and mortar. We research, analyze, describe, but can we resolve unfairness? Why do some rescue others, why others can only be rescued? Do you know?"

Zofia: "No."

Zofia knows quite well that Elzbieta's real question is not why some individuals were saved, but why some people manage to stand up and fight against injustice in the first place; but like any good teacher, she also knows that this is not the right time to bring the issue up. Later, at Zofia's apartment (exquisitely framed with household objects hanging

on the walls to the right, and a luminous yellow lamp with a curved white spindle in the center, like a half-opened eye – the conscience-stricken version of our old friend, the bubble-lamp), she will gently turn these questions back onto Elzbieta herself, by revealing that shortly before her arrival in 1943, her partisan group received a tip that the visit was a set-up by the Gestapo. The information later proved to be false, but at the time they sent the young Elzbieta Loranc away, a decision she continued to fret about for decades. “You’re right,” says Zofia gravely, “there’s nothing more important than the life of a child,” both forestalling the immediate response, which is that no one could possibly blame her for doing what she did, given that multiple lives were at stake, while also acknowledging that every single human life is irreplaceable. Kieslowski punctuates this Benjaminic insight, that there can be no truly good moral choices amidst the bad totality, with a close shot of her hand clasping Elzbieta’s, the moving echo of the opening shot of *D8* (a child’s hand held in an adult’s).

Put another way, Zofia’s ethical calling is based neither on juridical abstractions nor moralizing reproaches, however honorable these might be in other circumstances, but rather on the pragmatic task of defending human dignity on this earth, through a kind of committed or Sartrean teaching of the value of human life.<sup>6</sup> This respect for human life cannot be separated from a respect for the cultural documents by which human beings endow themselves with dignity and subjectivity: thus Elzbieta’s gold chain, Zofia’s own never-quite-settled painting, the double-jointed gymnast Zofia runs into in the park (a subject who is his own puzzle-picture, as it were), or the special collection of a stamp-collecting neighbor (the father of the brothers in “Decalogue 10”) who briefly stops by.

As Zofia explains to Elzbieta: “He shows me his stamps the way people show photographs of their grandchildren, or children.”

It is somehow fitting that a narrative which centers on the impossibility of ever really stitching together the past with the present should conclude with Elzbieta’s visit to the tailor who saved her, but who is no longer willing or able to talk about the past. Kieslowski sets up the scene with a long shot of a darkened traffic tunnel which opens up to a glorious panorama of the city, an expanse which feels like pure freedom after an eternity of close, constricting shots. Ironically, the tailor himself, squirreled away in his shop, absolutely refuses to say anything about the past, saying only he’d be very happy to make Elzbieta a dress, showing her some fashion-plates of blond models from a rather old set of German-language magazines. Even here, Kieslowski manages to work a small miracle: when she offers to send him some up-to-date magazines, he somehow finds it within himself not to decline, clearly the only gesture of acknowledgement he is capable of making. “What a strange country!” murmurs Elzbieta to Zofia somewhat later, at last beginning to appreciate the miracle of the smallest of all things, the miracle of everyday solidarity.

### Decalogue 9

If “Decalogue 7” and “Decalogue 8” are the swan-songs of neo-national gender ideologies and historical mythologies, respectively, then the last two episodes of *The Decalogue* sound the clarion call of the multinationalisms of the future. One of the most striking aspects of “Decalogue 9” is the sheer panache, confidence and stylistic

sophistication by which the materials of the romance melodrama, the espionage thriller, and the Hollywood blockbuster are pressed into the service of a Velvet gender revolution. The storyline is simple: Roman, a well-paid surgeon who has been repeatedly unfaithful to his wife, Hanka, has just been informed by a clinician that he is incurably impotent. One of the first scenes is an extreme close shot of their well-appointed apartment, framed by a desk in the extreme foreground, an empty glass to the left and a telephone on the right (the rewriting of the lamp-globe and mobile of Maria's apartment into signifiers of extended visual and acoustic reproduction, respectively). The camera swivels in a kind of reverse video pan, tracking Hanka across the apartment, keeping the glass and phone in our view at all times. This is followed by a scene where Roman almost crashes his luxury car; screeching to a halt, he punches at the dashboard in rage and despair, while Barcis' doppelganger pedals slowly by on a bicycle hitched to a cart (the bicycle will become an important symbol later on).

These initial references to video forms and a trans-European transportation network culminate in a gorgeous outdoor sequence, wherein Roman paces in the pouring rain against the backdrops of misted windows, blue lighting, and Preisner's haunting soundtrack, his symbolic placelessness highlighted by the airport stickers festooning his luggage, until Hanka's ghostly reflection suddenly wells up in the window. After persuading him to come in from the rain, they ascend in the elevator, in a static shot which intersperses moments of stark blue lighting with moments of complete darkness, rather like a slow-motion strobe effect, a technique which will reappear at key moments of Kieslowki's later classic, *Blue*. The couple's subsequent bedroom talk is similarly highlighted by means of a series of extreme close-ups, probably the closest in the entire

series, framed by his hand nestled against her shoulder. This sudden compression of the visual field is conjoined to an explicit inversion of the traditional patriarchal gender roles: when Roman tells Hanka that she probably should find a lover to satisfy herself, she demures and says she loves him anyway, the scene ends with a wonderfully tender shot of her masturbating herself against him. The freely-given caress displaces the cadre-state phallus, in a moment of grace which testifies to Kieslowski's extraordinary ability to reconcile the most intimate (not to mention potentially vulgar and obscene) materialities of the body with the deepest kind of compassion and collective spirituality.

The next day this spirituality is put to the test, when Roman notices a suspicious stranger walking nearby his car: this is none other than Mariusz, Hanka's lover, who is studying physics at a local university. Driving into the city center, Roman will later stop to assist a stranded motorist at a traffic concourse, consisting of two mysterious rows of rounded concrete pillars outfitted with smooth white domes, vaguely reminiscent of twin squadrons of flying saucers: this is a set of bubble-tropes straight out of the lexicon of *The Prisoner*, pointing to an intriguing politicization of the space of the automobile. Back at his job as a surgeon, he talks to an attractive young girl brimming with Lolita-esque vitality, who is trying to decide whether or not to have an operation to strengthen her heart, something necessary if she is to pursue a singing career (this girl, by the way, is the direct model for the title character in Kieslowski's 1991 *Double Life of Veronique*). After informing him she sings Bach, Mahler, and Van den Budenmayer (Zbigniew Preisner's own playful pseudonym), she says: "Mother wants me to have everything, but all I want is..." (here she pinches her fingers in the symbol for a thimbleful): "*that* much." This is followed by a shot of her walking sexily down the hospital corridor, the palpable irony

being, of course, that Roman still eyes women as voyeuristically he always did, but is physically incapable of seducing anyone.

The appearance of the girl marks, in fact, a crucial turning-point in Kieslowski's work, wherein the trope of the dematerialized or free-floating Euroconsumerism first glimpsed in "Decalogue 6" begins to generate its own specialized cultural mediations. The very first of these is undoubtedly the Walkman the girl listens to in the hallway; Roman himself will provide another, in the form of the record of Van den Budenmayer he plays in order to find out what exactly his patient was talking about. The austere, high-pitched tonality of Preisner's score neatly complements the blanked-out, glassy surface of Roman's watch during this scene, hinting at the stoppage of time itself, until his wife opens the door behind him, thereby setting the jealousy plot in motion again. This machinery of cultural reproduction, which will be echoed in the close shots of a key-making machine (Roman duplicates his wife's keys, in order to spy on her), then becomes a full-fledged machinery of dissemination, when we see Roman soldering a wire into the innards of a telephone and then listening in on the line with an earplug. This is more than just the rewriting of the Cold War trope of political surveillance and high-tech spy agencies into a kind of acoustic voyeurism, on the order of the (literally and figuratively) wired conclusion of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*. Rather, by foregrounding this scene with an intermediary shot of the desk-bound glass and phone, those icons of visual and telecommunicatory transparency, respectively, Kieslowski pole-vaults over the entire corpus of the Cold War media culture at a single bound, reinventing the state-of-the-art 1980s hacker drama innovated by *Wargames* and *Neuromancer* in an Eastern European turn.

This is confirmed during a later conversation Roman has with the girl, when the aesthetic space of the Walkman turns out to be associated with a performative content: while she sings a couple bars of Van den Budenmayer, the camera lingers on her intriguing hand-gesture, which traces out the notes only to fall gently to her knees. This striking moment of a free-floating, utopian tactility somehow emancipated from the narrowly privatized registers of the voyeur and the medical ones of the hospital drama alike is then linked to two new visual signifiers: the external scenes through the car window, where we glimpse modern glass office towers and other structures, and the internal shot of the glove compartment, which reveals one of Mariusz' physics notebooks, conclusive evidence of Hanka's affair. The antipodes of objective market competition and subjective sexual competition – what might be termed the twin poles of professional envy and private jealousy, respectively – will merge again in a radiant shot of Hanka sleeping on the bed; Roman's gaze pans slowly across her, taking in a book next to her, sporting a neo-Expressionistic design stamped with a flaring red logo of some sort, before zeroing in on a bag with an English-language commercial logo, which he quickly rifles through to get a critical phone number.

What interests Kieslowski, then, is not so much the specific objects of Euroconsumerism (the VCRs, camcorders, stereo equipment, upscale fashion clothing and luxury cars already filtering through the upper echelons of Polish society during the late 1980s) but the informatic content of such. Rather than simply quoting the latest high-tech commodities or citing the latest video shot techniques with no regard for their relevance to the storyline, Kieslowski constructs a complex, interlocking web of framing and mirroring techniques, opacities and transparencies, color-spectrums and lighting

schemes, designed to reappropriate the materials of a largely Western media culture, rather than being themselves expropriated by such. Thus the scenes where Roman bicycles furiously across roadways and embankments, the sun glaring down between two highway overpasses as he splashes into a shallow river, negate the mountain-bike commercial and the sports event of the racing marathon alike. Hanka, who works as an airport ticket agent for KLM, is framed first by an enormous calendar spread on the wall behind her, and later by a detailed model of a jet airplane stamped with the KLM logo in the foreground (the spaces of mass tourism and air travel, respectively). At the same time, it becomes apparent that Hanka is losing interest in her affair, growing increasingly despondent over her deception; after one tryst with Mariusz, she leans her head wearily against the car horn, which beeps monotonously, the car lights flashing. Later that night, Roman and Hanka have the following conversation, brimming with unspoken double entendres and framed by a full-length body mirror on the right side of the screen and a doorway on the left:

Roman: “I can’t sleep. Tell me, you were very good at physics. How does it go? When a body is immersed in a liquid, its loss in weight... I forget how it goes.”

Hanka: *not quite understanding the dig at her lover*: “Its apparent loss in weight is equal to the weight of liquid displaced. Something like that.”

Roman: “Like that. *Extended silence, his brow furrows.*

Hanka: “You had a bad day?” *Starts caressing him.*

Roman: *in a clipped tone*: “Yes.”

Hanka: “Surgery? You lost a patient?”

Roman: *even more clipped*: “Yes.” *Referring to her touch*: “Don’t do it.”

Hanka: “Who was it?”

Roman: *angrily*: “Don’t touch me.”

Though we are never told directly, we suspect the patient was the aspiring young singer. The next scene offers another wondrous close-up, this one centered on the telephone in the foreground, while a cartoon plays across a TV set in the background; Hanka is using the TV as camouflage while she telephones Mariusz to arrange a meeting (unbeknownst to her, Roman is listening in on his wiretap, and decides to spy on them from a closet). This meeting is shot entirely from Roman’s point of view in the closet, using a narrow vertical field shepherded by leaves of darkness to the left and right. As it turns out, Hanka simply wanted to tell Mariusz the affair is over; after silencing his protests and ushering him out, she realizes someone is in the closet (the camera backpedals beautifully from her suddenly-alert gaze, just as we would if *we* were caught spying on someone). Enraged, hurt, and humiliated, she screams at Roman to come out, not realizing that he is experiencing something much worse: after years of betraying her, he is finally learning what it’s like to be betrayed. We never actually see the door between them open, but as he slumps to floor, holding his head in hands, Kieslowski intervenes with his characteristic providential touch: the doorbell rings. Mariusz is back, this time with an offer to marry Hanka; she closes the door on him, but not before we feel a moment of sneaking sympathy for Mariusz, who is at least honest about his feelings. Roman has in

the meantime fled from the closet; after searching wildly through the apartment she finds him collapsed over a sink:

Hanka: *takes him in her arms.* “Hold me tight. Hold me.”

Roman: “I can’t.” *He really can’t; his limbs are powerless.*

Hanka: *embraces him more tightly:* “Hold me. Please.” *In tears:* “You won’t leave me just because I jumped into bed. I know you, but I didn’t think... I didn’t realize you’d be so hurt.”

Roman: *dully:* “I’ve no right to be jealous. I can’t expect it of you.”

Hanka: “You can. And you were right about things being discussed to the limit. Now I’ll always tell the truth, so you needn’t hide behind wardrobes.”

Roman: “I made a duplicate key.”

Hanka: “We’ll never again have to... We should have had a child. We should adopt one, you were right.”

Roman: *stirs:* “We must take a break apart.”

Hanka: “While you’re gone, I’ll ask a lawyer about adoption.”

Roman: “You go away. I don’t want that physicist...” *He finally embraces her; the door closes tactfully on our point of view.*

This is followed by a set of close shots of bright plastic ski-shoes, red and white bindings, and blue boots: Hanka is going off on a skiing vacation, after which the couple will presumably be reconciled. At this point, much to our surprise and welcome relief, we see

the young girl again, who has now decided to have the operation and try her luck as a singer (“I know I’m someone else,” she says to Roman, “I want lots of people to hear me sing.”) This hopeful moment is highlighted by an outdoor shot of a little girl playing outside on the street, framed by a narrow, vertical slot through the window – the negation of the voyeurism of the closet-scene by a utopian public space.

At this point, though, contingency rears its ugly head: he sees Mariusz packing up his skis, discovers he’s headed to the same resort as his wife, and draws exactly the wrong conclusion from this. When Hanka runs into Mariusz at the resort, she brushes him aside, but quickly realizes that her husband might well suspect her of orchestrating all this. While she rushes back by bus, he writes what we later learn is a suicide note, and goes out bicycling on the highway. Peddling furiously into the blinding sun, with Preisner’s score surging in the background, Roman races past Barcis’ doppelganger (still hauling the same cart) before plunging high off a freeway overpass into what he thinks is oblivion. Here, though, someone else fatefully intervenes, a character whose most consistent feature has been its studied neutrality in all the previous episodes: it is the doppelganger who saves him, by discovering his unconscious, twitching body and rushing off to get help (to underline the point, a long-distance zoom shot of Barcis resolves onto the whirling spokes of the crashed bicycle). Though Hanka finally arrives home and reads the note, the phone serves, for once, as an instrument of salvation rather than destruction; speaking from strangely identical positions on the hospital bed and the apartment floor, framed in an immovable cast and a ski jacket, at the extremities of life and death, Roman and Hanka finally connect.

## Decalogue 10

If “Decalogue 9” heralded the birth of truly European subjects, in the form of the border-crossing EU professionals who will criss-cross the vast fabric of the Trois Couleurs, then “Decalogue 10” is its objective cognate: the birth-hour of the European marketplace, red in tooth and fiscal claw. Not only is “Decalogue 10” a prescient allegory of Maastricht monetarism, it is also the damning indictment of what Boris Kagarlitsky termed “market Stalinism” – the shotgun marketization of societies which were suddenly exposed to the gale-force winds of foreign competition, without the decades of careful preparation, EC subsidies and restructuring available to post-autarkic economies such as Portugal and Spain. Far from bringing prosperity to all, the marketplace merely transformed an irresponsible, short-sighted nomenklatura into an equally irresponsible and short-sighted euroklatura, whose main entrepreneurial skill was an uncanny ability to plunder state assets at firesale prices and funnel the proceeds into secret Swiss bank accounts.

The signal achievement of “Decalogue 10”, however, is not merely to have accurately forecast the ravages of neoliberalisms to come, but to have anticipated the cultural, political and social *resistances* to such. Two key innovations made this possible: first, the wholesale importation of a plot structure straight out of John Woo’s Hong Kong thrillers, i.e. the trope of brotherhood or some other form of domestic solidarity threatened by a society overrun by commercialism. Secondly, and no less importantly, the doppelganger will vanish completely, and its role as an objective arbiter or mediating observer will be replaced by the suave police detective. This latter is not, however, the

same thing as the ubiquitous police agencies or post-colonial juridical categories of Woo's films. This is because Woo's greatest works are essentially tragedies, which commemorate the traumatic violence of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history in the medium of the post-colonial action thriller. "Decalogue 10", on the other hand, will deftly transcribe the theme of brotherhood onto the rather different registers of the black comedy: two brothers, Artur (a free-spirited singer for a punk rock band) and Jerzy (a fastidious family man), inherit a seemingly ordinary stamp collection from their father, an event which turns their lives upside down.

Stamps, those reproducible series of images which intermediate vast networks of postal communication and written dissemination, have long been a staple of postmodern literature, everywhere from the utopian neo-nationalism of Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* to the multinational Tristero network in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. But what separates "Decalogue 10"'s stamp collection from these others is not its affiliation with a system of communication, but its strange, ghostly existence as a bearer of speculative value in its own right, a.k.a. the rebranding of its potential exchange-value into a multinational use-value. The very first scene begins with the prototypical multinational form of the music video, relayed by a rough-and-ready handheld shot of Artur singing for a punk rock band at a rock concert. Artur's performance is counterpointed by the sight of his brother, Jerzy, signaling wildly to him from the audience (the lyrics are a call to be utterly selfish, to dishonor the Church and family, punctuated by the hysterical cry, "Everything belongs to you"). The irony of the scene – Jerzy is trying to inform him about their father's death – is compounded by the band's name, City Death. This is more than just a sympathetic nod in the direction of the thriving underground musical scene of

Eastern Europe, in the mold of Slovenia's Laibach, it is also a broad hint at the convergence of the punk rock music and horror film narratives of the 1970s which will transpire later in the episode.

A very different kind of convergence is at work during the burial scene, when an orator intones, "His family, his professional life, and perhaps his emotions were sacrificed for a noble passion," cleverly omitting the object of this passion; meanwhile Artur is listening distractedly to rock music on his Walkman, until Jerzy nudges him to be quiet. State funerals in the state-autarkic societies of the Eastern bloc were of course always the first act in the subsequent scramble for political succession, and here Kieslowski takes a page out of Heiner Müller's Hamletmachine, by reappropriating the form of the funeral in order to illustrate quite another impending power-struggle. What is at issue is the arrival of the consumer culture itself:

*Artur: referring to the stamps:* "What can they be worth?"

*Jerzy:* "Stamps are expensive now. 300,000... 400,000 zlotys. Our misery, mother's wasted life... poor food, lack of money..."

*Artur: not really listening:* "Yeah, yeah..."

*Jerzy: protesting:* "I even had to bring a suit to bury him in."

*Artur: thinks for a moment:* "Where does it come from, this urge to have something? You should know, you used to like things."

*Jerzy:* "No, I use things. I like comfort. I never understood the old man." *Looks at his brother, nudges him:* "I haven't seen you for ages."

*Artur:* "Mmh. More than two years."

At this point, Artur picks out a random series of stamps (a series from 1931, showing a German Zeppelin on an arctic journey) for Jerzy to give to his son as a present: the close-up shot shows three stamps, one red, one blue, and one green – the primary colors, it should be noted, of the TV set. Their first clue that something is not quite right is the appearance of an oily, devious debt-collector, who tries to wheedle parts of the collection in exchange for cancelling their father’s debt (Jerzy wisely refuses, of course). But it is not until much later, when they actually try to sell the stamps at an exhibition, that the president of the local stamp-collectors’ club tells them the shocking truth: the collection was worth 250 million zloty, or about \$250,000 in 1988 US dollars – an unimaginable fortune in semi-peripheral Poland. As the president pages through one series after another, telling them what each can buy (a Fiat; an apartment; two diesel engines, etc.), their eyes open wider and wider, and a low, rolling kettle-drum sounds three times over, announcing the arrival of a properly Mephistophelean set of temptations, fetishisms and obsessions. It’s worth noting the great Czech animator Jan Svankmajer employs a quite similar technique in his live-action feature *Faust*, that ingenious fable of primitive accumulation in the Europeriphery set in mid-1990s Prague. Here, however, Kieslowski is mapping out the historical prelude to primitive accumulation, or a kind of grey accumulation halfway between state-autarky and multinational consumerism. “Your father, gentlemen, invested his life in this collection,” concludes the president drily, “and it would be a crime to dissipate somebody’s life, even the life of a father one hardly knew.”

The real crime, of course, is the gradual corruption of the two brothers, who begin to take on all the usual ills of commodity society: greed, selfishness, ruthlessness and violence, as the people around them turn into exchangeable objects and the objects they own become more valuable than people. Thus when Jerzy goes home, he discovers a street hustler talked his son into swapping his extremely valuable stamps for a slew of comparatively worthless stamps; outraged by the swindle, he tracks down the hustler on the grey market (to the accompaniment of another drum roll), shakes him down, and learns that the stamps were sold to a corner shop. The shopkeeper feigns ignorance, and when Jerzy threatens to call the police, the most he'll admit is that it was sold to an overseas buyer. Later, when Artur comes home from a gig, he sees the lights on in their father's apartment; suspecting the worst, he creeps upstairs to surprise the thief, while a horror film sound-track (barking dogs and an eerie, swirling, high-pitched tone) builds to a climax. But the visitor is just his brother, perched over the desk and poring through their father's diaries like some latterday Faust. Together, they begin to discover the art of the deal: their father was on the trail of a specific stamp in order to complete a full series, an "Austrian rose Mercury 1951," which was stolen at one point, bought at another point, trafficked at a third, and remains a unique series in Poland. Outside, they begin to worry about the security of the apartment, and the possibility of thieves breaking in to steal the collection. Framed by the ranks of apartment blocks behind them and another ominous drum roll on the sound-track, they begin to reflect on how quickly they've changed:

Jerzy: *in wonderment*: "I forgot that I have problems. I quite forgot."

Artur: “I feel like in the old days, too; we kids ignored adult’s problems. I have that old feeling again. We’re here, and somehow nothing else matters.”

Jerzy: *slowly*: “You forget. It’s childish.”

Artur: “But nice.” *They are silent for a moment.* “And perhaps none of it exists. If you don’t want it, it ceases to exist.”

Their corruption deepens when they cook up a scheme to get the zeppelin stamps back, by entrapping the unscrupulous shop-owner with a bogus stamp deal, using a hidden tape-recorder. The scheme seems to work, and emboldened by this victory, they install a full-fledged security system, bar the windows, and even purchase a huge black guard-dog (this last is a deft reference to the occult thrillers of the 1970s, e.g. *The Omen*). This is hardly the end of the matter, however: the shop-owner asks to meet them, saying he has an angle on the fabled Mercury rose stamp, but needs their medical records first. As it turns out, the shop-owner wants to swap the stamp for a donated kidney for his mortally ill 16-year-old daughter, and Jerzy happens to have the right blood-type for the operation. After much soul-searching, they finally accept the deal, saying to themselves that in any case they are saving someone’s life.

This extraordinary act of exchange, between an irreplaceable stamp and a no less irreplaceable human organ, is in fact the first in a series of exchanges between cultural bodies and bodies of culture. The first of these is a minor scene just before the operation, when Artur runs into a nurse at the hospital who recognizes him as the leader of the band, City Death: “May I touch you?” she breathes in awe, or what amounts to the tactile

reappropriation of the iridescent energies of the rock-star poster. Intriguingly, the entire operation cuts back and forth between scenes from the operating-room and scenes from the apartment: a shot of the surgeons washing their hands is contrasted to the image of a welding torch; surgical rubber gloves are associated with the guard-dog, who is being petted by someone familiar to it (we assume, Artur) wearing black gloves; bloodied bandages are counterpointed by a series of dazzling close-ups of various stamps, shot through a magnifying glass. It is only when Jerzy has recovered enough to walk under his own power that we learn the true meaning of these images: while the brothers were at the hospital, the apartment was robbed and the entire collection carried off! Even worse, the guard-dog clearly recognized the visitor, suggesting an inside job; though Artur is the logical suspect, the police detective who arrives on the scene quickly determines that Jerzy was the one who disconnected the alarm. In short, mutual paranoia breaks out between the two, such that both brothers end up meeting privately with the detective, to inform him of their suspicions of each other.

What is truly remarkable about this sequence, however, is Kieslowski's adamant refusal to classify any of the bodies involved in strictly national or neo-national terms. This is shocking, for two reasons. First of all, the brothers' betrayal of each other turns out to have absolutely nothing to do with the entire repressive machinery of the one-party state, with its wire-taps, secret denunciations, surveillance and censorship. The detective is no Party hack, but a smooth, urbane professional, whose strangely neutral gaze, which records everything and judges nothing, is the logical successor of Barcis' doppelganger. The detective is also identified with a cutting-edge technology, namely the mobile phone in his police car, hinting at that European-wide telecommunication network which Nokia,

Ericsson, and other innovative EU firms would create years later. This is very much the Central European equivalent of the conventional plot twist in the earliest Hong Kong action films, where the stateless, nationless hero always turns out to be an undercover Interpol agent (Bruce Lee's role in *Enter the Dragon* is a somewhat later variation on the same theme). Given that a nascent European civil society is the outer narrative limit of D10, one could argue that the fate of the brothers bespeaks a double expropriation of the Eastern European nation-state: Jerzy's donated kidney points in the direction of a high-tech, biological neocolonialism, famously anticipated by the vat-grown body-parts of Gibson's *Neuromancer*; while Artur's loss is more subtle, namely his decision to shelve his singing career and to get a full-time job at a restaurant.

Kieslowski is not about to let the market forces have the final word, however. Instead of merely documenting the carnage of neoliberalism, the concluding sequence of D10 will draw upon the prodigious energies of the entire series to launch its own electrifying counter-attack. Jerzy happens to be walking down street, when he sees some ordinary stamps displayed in a window. Fascinated, he stops at the counter and asks the clerk for a series (the clerk is Tomek, on loan from "Decalogue 6"). When he exits, we hear the same unearthly drum roll as before, only this time a sympathetic black magic is at work: he sees the oily debt-collector, walking a huge black guard-dog, the same as the one they own, talking in familiar terms with the hustler who swindled his son so long ago. On a nearby street, Artur happens to see the shop-owner walking down the street with a third black guard-dog, identical to the others. Against the backdrop of another drum-roll, the shop-owner walks right up to the debt-collector and the hustler, and friendly greetings are exchanged all around. At a stroke, the brothers can see the grey

bourgeoisie exactly for what they are: the Satanic agents of a multinational capitalism which delivers wealth to a select few while plundering, impoverishing and ravaging the vast majority of the planet.

Reconciled at last, Artur and Jerzy look over the stamps from the post office: two exact series, worth almost nothing, of course. Still, they have learned something extremely important from all this. For his part, Jerzy can now appreciate the pleasures of stamp-collecting, this time as a plebian activity accessible to all. What Artur has learned is revealed only when the credits start rolling, and we hear the same punk rock soundtrack as in the beginning. But this time Artur's lyrics have drastically changed, indeed they pulsate with an extraordinary new message:

“Darkness, lawlessness and lying all the week

You are the only hope, you are the only light in your tunnel

Because all around you is within you

Everything belongs to you!”

This is the faint but unmistakable light of a new kind of solidarity, the phosphorescent ripple in the roseate dawn of the Eurostate, serving notice of a genuinely multinational solidarity which cannot be dictated from without, but must be reconstructed from within. It will be the construction of this solidarity, that rainbow moment of grace forming an arc from May 1968 to Prague 2000, which unites the resistance to state-autarkic barbarians and the resistance to neoliberal barbarism, to which we must now turn.

## Footnotes to Chapter 5

1. The character of Mr. Halloran, the African American chef victimized by Jack Torrance in Kubrick's 1980 *The Shining*, is a much later variation on the same theme. Where Fellini, Bergman and other European auteurs mobilized the innovations of European theatrical modernism to combat a hegemonic Americanization, Kubrick locates the resistance to the freezing reification of the Overlook Hotel and the image-culture of Thatcherism in the collective traditions and solidarities of African American culture, with its unique ability to read the traces of the past (as well as anticipate the future).

2. To emphasize the point, Kieslowki splices in brief clips of a bicyclist far in the distance and a horse in a nearby field during the bloody struggle, i.e. modes of transportation; the horizon of the outdoor scenes never fails to register at least one distant smokestack or industrial building. There is a strikingly similar moment in John Woo's 1992 *Hard-Boiled*, where an automobile assembly plant is transformed into a battlefield between rival gangs and undercover police. Bullets ricochet and airborne bodies fly across, around and even *through* the half-finished shells of compact cars and exploding motorcycles, in what amounts to the symbolic ballet of export-platform industrialization.

3. This scene also makes a passing reference to one of the most stereotypical narratives of the Eastern bloc culture-industry, namely the collective farm drama, which Heiner Mueller successfully pastiched in his 1961 play, *The Settlers*. Kieslowski's somewhat grimmer version of the same moment:

Jacek: “Yes, there were three places. Mary and father are there and one place is left. Mary is there... five years now. Yes, five years ago she was run over by a tractor back home. She was still at school. She was twelve. The school year had just begun. The driver of that tractor, he was my pal. We’d been drinking vodka and wine just before it happened. After, he left and ran her over in the meadow by the forest. There was a meadow there, by the forest... I always kept thinking that... if only she could have stayed alive, things would be different. Perhaps I wouldn’t have left home, I’d have stayed. I had three brothers, but she was the only sister. I was her favorite. She was my favorite, too. Perhaps everything would have been different.”

Piotr: “Perhaps it wouldn’t have come to this?”

Jacek: “Perhaps I wouldn’t be here now.”

Officer: *interrupting them*: “The Chief and the Prosecutor ask if you’re ready.”

Piotr: *gets up*: “Tell them I’ll never say I’m ready.”

Officer: *repeats dully*: “You’ll never say you’re ready.” *Piotr sits back down.*

Jacek: “We bought the grave plot...” *Officer stares at them through keyhole, in a curiously voyeuristic pose, unwittingly giving them a few more seconds, before going off to assemble the execution squad.*

4. Murder rates and the incidence of violent crimes in the EU are, according to Interpol statistics, among the lowest on the planet; comparable figures for Eastern Europe are a bit higher, but not significantly different from those of the European semi-peripheries (e.g. countries such as Greece, Ireland and Spain). By contrast, the United States continues to

lead the industrialized world in executions, violent crime, and incarceration rates. An astonishing 3% of the US adult population is currently either locked up, on probation or otherwise supervised by the criminal justice system (this does not include ex-felons or those who have fully served their sentences).

5. Žižek provides a stirring analysis of the filmic codes which D6's video tropes adroitly redeploy, but because he lacks a theory of video adequate to its content, he ends up recycling a schematic, Deleuzian model of rhizomatic flows of desire, rather than ascending to the concrete multinational content of the aesthetic material:

“When, upon their becoming acquainted, Maria asks Tomek what he effectively wants from her, a mere kiss, or a full sexual act, his resolute answer is ‘nothing’. This ‘nothing’, of course, is the unmistakable index of true love: Tomek is not to be satisfied with any positive content or act (going to bed with him, for example) by means of which Maria could reciprocate his love. What he wants her to offer in return is the very ‘nothingness’ in her, what is ‘in her more than herself’ – not something that she possesses but precisely what she does not have, the return of love itself...

...the true enigma of the film is Tomek's change from the loving one into the object of Maria's love. So how does he succeed in substituting his position of the loving one with the position of the beloved? How does he capture Maria's desire? The answer, of course, resides in the very purity and absolute intensity of his love: he acts as the pure \$, the subject whose desire is so burning that it cannot be translated into any concrete demand – this very intensity, because of which his desire can only express itself in the guise of a refusal of any demand (‘I want nothing from you’), is what makes him

irresistible. This second metaphoric substitution is not simply symmetrical to the first one: their difference hinges on the opposition of 'to have' and 'to be'. In the first case, we are in the dimension of having (the loved one doesn't know what he has in himself that makes him worthy of the other's love, so, in order to escape this deadlock, he returns love), whereas in the second case, the loving is (becomes) the beloved object on account of the sheer intensity of his love.

What one has to reject here is the notion that Tomek's love for Maria is authentic and pure, spiritual, elevated above vulgar sensitivity, whereas Maria, disturbed by this purity, intends to humiliate him and later changes her attitude out of a feeling of guilt. It is, on the contrary, Tomek's love which is fundamentally false, a narcissistic attitude of idealization whose necessary obverse is a barely conceived lethal dimension. That is to say, *A Short Film on Love* ["Decalogue 6"] should be read against the background of slasher films, in which a man observes and harasses a woman who traumatizes him, finally attacking her with a knife: it is a kind of introverted slasher in which the man, instead of striking at the woman, deals a blow to himself." Slavoj Žižek . "There is No Sexual Relationship." *Spectator*. Vol. 16, No. 2. Spring/Summer 1996 (136-137).

The whole point of the episode, though, is that Tomek's cinematic gaze is superseded by Magda's multinational window of viewpoints. Everything Tomek says and does, right down to his suicide attempt, is precisely calculated and planned, the polar opposite of Maria's frenetic impetuosity. The real issue, of course, is the emergence of that strange new beast, equal parts speculative calculation and multinational image-consumption, otherwise known as Euroconsumerism.

6. This is explicitly spelled out in a later dialogue:

Elzbieta: “What do you teach your students? How they should live?”

Zofia: “No, not that. I try to help them discover themselves.”

Elzbieta: “Why?”

Zofia: “Because goodness exists. I think it exists in every human being. Situations release good or evil. That evening did not release the good in me.”

Elzbieta: “And who is evaluating it?”

Zofia: “He who is in all of us.”

Elzbieta: “I didn’t find God in your works.”

Zofia: “I do not go to church. I don’t use the word God. But one can know, be without doubts, without using the words, that people are free, they can choose. If they wish, they can leave God behind.”