

Following his start in documentaries in the early 1970s, Kieślowski made several features that can be described as typical representatives of the 'moral concern' cycle: filmed in the vein of documentary realism, dealing with everyday issues and displaying explicit political commitment. His debut feature *Blizna/Scar* (1976) chronicled the attempts of a small-town community to resist an unwanted industrial development and prevent a feared ecological disaster. The film foregrounded the moral drama of its protagonist, an executive who, after extensive litanies, forfeits the prospects of personal advancement for the sake of the higher common good. In its message, *The Scar* was in many respects reminiscent of the tone and the work ethic concerns of the enormously popular 1974 Soviet drama *Premiya/Bonus*.

Amator/Camera Buff (1979) was a fine psychological study of the manipulation of an individual, once again replaying leading themes of the 'moral concern' strand, such as conformity and compromise. The film, featuring director Zanussi in a cameo role, tells the story of an innocuous working-class amateur film-maker (the remarkable Jerzy Stuhr) who is at first encouraged by the management to film scenes at his place of work but soon thereafter realises that he has filmed certain scenes that are not to the management's liking. Having created an accidental record, he soon becomes a nuisance to those who would prefer the instances of mismanagement to remain undocumented. In many respects, the situation is reminiscent to the set-up of Antonioni's



Figure 25: Jerzy Stuhr as the innocuous amateur film-maker in Kieślowski's *Camera Buff* (1979).

Blowup/Blow-Up (1966) where an inadvertent photograph triggers a whole series of adverse events, yet the message here is more politicised and should be viewed as a continuation of the concern over the socio-historical dimension of documentation and witnessing as seen in Wajda's *Man of Marble*.

Przypadek/Blind Chance (1981) had an original narrative structure that revolved around three equally plausible and yet irreconcilable imaginary scenarios of the life of a single protagonist (Bogusław Linda). With emphasis on the political, the central tenet of the film was that it takes very little (such as an accident or a chance encounter) to completely alter the course of life, to become either a political dissident or a conformist Communist functionary. Beginning with the same event (running after a train that is leaving the station), each one of the three different versions of the protagonist's life led to the same ending (the protagonist dies in an airplane crash), thus questioning the existence of 'fate'. *Blind Chance* is said to have inspired some more recent and more personally focused films such as Peter Howitt's *Sliding Doors* (1998) or Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt/Run Lola Run* (1998).

Bez końca/No End (1985) dealt with trauma and mourning and depicted the depressing reality of political harassment and a corrupt judicial system. Set during the martial law period, the film's plot follows a young recently widowed woman (Grazyna Szapolowska). Her dead husband's ghost claims a durable presence in her everyday life, while she tries to go on fighting a political case the husband could not complete. It is a film about grief and coming to terms with life after loss which extended the narrative premise of the classic Brazilian adaptation of Jorge Amado's *Doña Flor e seus dois maridos/Doña Flor and Her Two Husbands* (1976) and can be seen as a predecessor of other well-known films on mourning such as *Ghost* (1990) and *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1991) as well as the more recent French *Ponette* (1996) and *Sous le sable/Under the Sand* (2000). Compared to all these deeply personal films, however, *No End* has a much stronger engagement with a difficult socio-political environment, in this case that of Poland under martial law. Kieślowski subsequently returned to the theme of mourning and loss in his *Three Colours: Blue*; remaining engaged with social concerns (in this case Europe's unification) but on a lesser scale, his focus primarily on the personal.

Around the mid-1980s, Kieślowski claimed he had begun to grow tired of being a politically committed director. The moral choices that the individual faced in the context of resisting Communism, Kieślowski explained in later interviews, were somehow too simple (see Stok 1993). He felt he was growing more interested in general existential issues that were located beyond the limiting scope of politics.

It was with *No End* that Kieślowski started to move away from concerns with the overwhelming bureaucratic routines of state socialism and chose to focus instead on aspects of destiny, transcendence and reincarnation. There were two important factors that made *No End* the film that marked the beginning of

the director's metamorphosis. This was the first film co-scripted by Krzysztof Piesiewicz who then became Kiesłowski's permanent writing collaborator (both were credited with the scripts for *Dekalog/The Decalogue*, 1988; *La double vie de Véronique/The Double Life of Veronique*, 1992; *Three Colours: Blue, White, Red*, 1993/1994/1994). It was also the first film that, alongside documentary realism and political conflict, featured a transcendental trope – the continuous presence of the dead husband's ghost in the life of the protagonist.

By the time he worked on his made-for-television series *The Decalogue* (1987–88), Kiesłowski had lived through a period of self-reflexive appraisal and had transformed himself from a film-maker preoccupied with socialist politics into one concerned with universal ethics. He had come to realise that the problems faced by people trapped in state socialism did not profoundly differ from the more general moral questions he had sensed when travelling in the West. With life opening up for people in East Central Europe, it was possible to see that in both the East and the West people could be equally trapped in the anxieties of everyday living and distressed survival. Wajda's view that people on both sides had different concerns no longer seemed to hold true for Kiesłowski. In his own words:

I'd already started to travel abroad a bit by this time, and observed a general uncertainty in the world at large. I'm not even thinking about politics here but about ordinary, everyday life. I sensed mutual indifference behind polite smiles and had the overwhelming impression that, more and more frequently, I was watching people who didn't really know why they were living. (in Stok 1993: 143)

So Kiesłowski began making films with a more universal message that reached out further than the direct social criticism of his earlier work. Stylistically his films also changed and he started paying more elaborate attention to music, colour and camera angles.

The Decalogue was the first manifestation of this transformation. Still set in a grey Warsaw housing estate,²⁶ the series dealt with issues of God's will and wrath, of right and wrong, of illness, loneliness, betrayal, rudeness, mid-life crisis, life and death. The two best known parts of *The Decalogue*, five and six, were also released in independent screen versions. The austere plot of *Dekalog 5: Krótki film o zabijaniu/A Short Film About Killing* (1988) tells the story of a troubled protagonist who plans and cold-bloodedly executes a meaningless murder of a randomly picked victim; he strangles a taxi driver. We never fully understand the exact reason for the killing, although it is suggested that it may be connected to an unrelated deep psychological trauma that the young murderer suffered. He is apprehended, tried, sentenced to death and executed. Shot with a yellowish lens that slightly distorts the perspective, and told from the point of view of the novice lawyer who is appointed to defend this clear-cut case, it is a film that

raises serious doubts about the effectiveness of capital punishment without being gratuitously lenient to the perpetrator of the gruesome crime.

A timeless treatise on the issue of capital punishment *A Short Film About Killing* delivers, together with Gianni Amelio's *Porte aperte/Open Doors* (1990), one of the strongest cinematic arguments against the death penalty. The seven-minute violent scene of the killing is juxtaposed to the equally violent scene of the lawfully sanctioned execution. Watching the details of the murder is painful but so is observing the preparations for the carefully organised execution; both are presented as everyday activities in the business of killing people and disposing of their bodies. It is not reduced to an indictment of a particular political system; the issues are universal.

Equally acclaimed at the time but of lesser importance now (particularly because some of its central motifs were recycled in the director's later work) *Dekalog 6: Krótki film o miłości/A Short Film About Love* (1988) tells of a voyeuristic loner who grows possessed with his free-spirited neighbour (Grazyna Szapolowska) and obsessively follows her life in the apartment building opposite his through a telescope. Developing motifs of such classics of 'voyeurist' cinema as Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), yet closest in spirit to Patrice Leconte's atmospheric *Monsieur Hire* (1989), the film revolves around troubled communication and a subtle power struggle; it is no wonder then that it all ends in bitter confrontation. Like *A Short Film About Killing*, this much-admired part of *The Decalogue* is, once again, a study of universal issues of alienation and the boundaries of privacy.

In the early 1990s, Kiesłowski began to make films that were financed internationally, with the backing of French producer Marin Karmitz who pulled together funding from various French sources, and distributed successfully by companies such as Artificial Eye in the UK and Miramax in the US. In these films, Kiesłowski departed even further from the documentary realism of the cinema of moral concern in his quest to explore existential and universal themes. In *The Double Life of Veronique* he explores rebirth, premonitory signs and transcendental affinities. In the films of the *Three Colours* trilogy he continued developing the themes of *The Decalogue* and focused on fearful, uncertain and lonely post-traumatic recovery (*Blue*), existential tensions of double-crossing schemes and personal revenge (*White*), and attractions ruled by providence (*Red*). While the plots of *The Double Life of Veronique* and *Three Colours: White* were still linked with concrete social processes taking place in Poland, the other films reflected the concerns of people in Europe at large. The protagonists of these films lived in a state of moral unease and not because of overwhelming social demands or externally imposed limitations on their creativity. The director emancipated himself from the dominant materialist view, so his protagonists were no longer reacting to the immediate triggers of their concrete social surroundings. Now he let them be led by the immaterial will of a superior being.²⁷



Figure 26: Krzysztof Kieślowski: his transcendental and philosophical stance influenced the direction of European cinema in the 1990s.

Unlike the typical 'moral concern' directors who continued making films that responded to immediate political events, Kieślowski went one step further and rejected politics in his own way by becoming the ultimate 'apolitical' director. Like the 'moral concern' directors, he initially subscribed to the view according to which social context defined people's subjectivity and behaviour. Now, however, he no longer wanted to see the individual as an endlessly malleable entity, mirroring society and politics.

Kieślowski had made his most daring political films at home, in the face of Polish censorship, but only gained international visibility after he started working in France, recycling motifs found in his early work and receiving wide exposure and acclaim. Looking in retrospect at the process of Kieślowski's 'emancipation,' Andrzej Wajda made an important observation that gives us a clue to understanding Kieślowski's success:

During the slow collapse of communism, when other artists and film-makers in Eastern Europe were struggling, Kieślowski was the first to look beyond the immediate horizon. [...] When we were lost and confused during martial law, he alone knew which path to follow. [...] Most of our films were in one way or another political. We were trying to relate to society and history. He chose a different way – a psychological, metaphysical way – of dealing with contemporary life. (in Macnab 2002: 6)

In further attempting to identify the winning ingredients in Kieślowski's film-making recipe, Derek Malcolm pointed to 'his ability to transcend naturalism and push inwards towards the metaphysical' (2002: 18). Back in the 1960s, Antonioni had influenced East Central European film-makers in their move to be 'apolitical'; in the 1990s Kieślowski's transcendental and philosophical stance was to greatly influence the direction of European cinema.