

Broken Phenomenology: The Silent Witness from the Decalogue Cycle of Krzysztof Kieslowski and his Philosophical Meaning

ANA OCOLEANU 

University of Craiova
E-mail: anapetras@yahoo.de

Abstract

1988, as the TV cycle ‘Decalogue’ was finished by Krzysztof Kieslowski, one of the most intriguing appearances throughout its episodes was the character of the silent witness, a young man played by Arthur Barciś. He is the first character who appears at the beginning of Decalogue I and therefore of the whole series and who returns in eight from the ten films of the cycle in very different hypostases: as nomadic camper, surveyor, nurse, bus driver, or rowboat driver, traveler on foot or by bike etc. The film critics were intrigued by this character and interpreted him in different ways, especially in key either religious or ethical. They all and Kieslowski himself agreed that the silent witness is a strange and symbolic appearance that comes out from the frames of everyday life. It is as if a curtain would break or be torn and from beyond it something foreign and strange would appear, difficult to integrate into our categories, but which is surprisingly so eloquent for us. The phenomenology, that Kieslowski describes, is broken in this manner, but, paradoxically, also consolidated by this presence, that gives it meaning and content.

Keywords: Krzysztof Kieslowski, Decalogue, phenomenology, ethics, Catholic moral theology, transcendence, otherness

1. The TV cycle ‘Decalogue’: a phenomenological description of everyday moral life

I^N 1988 KRZYSZTOF KIESLOWSKI WAS finishing filming the TV cycle *Decalogue*, one of the most profound and surprising creation in the history of film. A year later, communism collapsed in Eastern Europe. The series of the Polish film director was an invitation to reflection that has not been exhausted

even today. It was and can still be the fruitful occasion of many philosophical and theological debates and investigations.

Kieslowski's approach is part of a long casuistic tradition, specific for the Roman Catholic manner to make moral theology. Each of the ten parts of the TV cycle *Decalogue* illustrates a problematic moral case concerning one divine commandment. It seems that the Polish director tries to show how difficult is to apply the Ten Commandments to the life. The Catholic heritage (or rather: the way of thinking) is very visible in the conception of the whole filmography Kieslowski's and especially of this TV series.

At the same time, the entire TV cycle *Decalogue* offers a phenomenological perspective. Kieslowski discreetly stands in the position of the observer and describes what he sees: a soulless district of Warsaw¹, populated by captive souls of this *topos* with their lives and moral problems. In his book of interviews edited by Danusia Stok, Kieslowski insists that knowledge is describing reality as it presents itself to the observer:

If something hasn't been described, then it doesn't officially exist. So that if we start describing it, we bring it to live. (...) Only when you describe something can you start speculating about it. If something hasn't been described and a record of it doesn't exist – it doesn't matter what form the description takes: a film, a sociological study, a book, or even just a verbal account – then you can't refer to it. You have to describe the thing or situation before you can deal with it. If you understand that, then you understand that certain anomalies, and even corruption, have to be described. If you want to reform the Party, you have to say, 'It's got to be reformed because this, this and this are wrong with it'. Now, where do you get the evidence that this, this and this are wrong? From descriptions. It doesn't matter what sort. Of course, they can take the form of Party reports or Party meetings. They can take the form of discussions in the Press. But something like a statement of fact has to come into existence.²

¹ Kieslowski tells in his discussions with Danusia Stok how he chose this district from Warsaw as place of action in the TV cycle „Decalogue“. *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, edited by Danusia Stok (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1993), 146: „I believe everybody's life is worthy of scrutiny, has its secrets and dramas. People don't talk about their lives because they're embarrassed. They don't want to open old wounds, or are afraid of appearing old-fashioned and sentimental. So we wanted to begin each film in a way which suggested that the main character had been picked by camera as if at random. We thought of a huge stadium in which, from among the hundred thousand faces, we'd focus on one in particular. We also had an idea that the camera should pick somebody out from a crowded street and then follow him or her throughout the rest of the film. In the end we decided to locate the action in a large housing estate, with thousands of similar windows framed in the establishing shot. It's the most beautiful housing estate in Warsaw, which is why I chose it. The fact that characters all live on one estate brings them together. Sometimes they meet, and say: 'May I borrow a cup of sugar?'“.

² *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 55; 58.

In Kieslowski's understanding, this necessary description of the reality as basis of knowledge requires a look that is interested, but at the same time distant and uninvolved. A movie is for the Polish director not so much about justifying as about understanding the reality:

It's not a question of justifying these people. Understanding isn't necessarily associated with justification. Justifications, in this case, would imply making the film through the eyes of the other side. I don't look through the eyes of the other side in my films. I always look through my eyes. Although I did try to understand the other side, I didn't change my point of view because that would be false and insincere, and immediately obvious. But my point of view in no way precludes trying to understand the other side.³

2. Exploring the transcendence of otherness

These features of the observation, i.e. uninvolved but interested description, point a typical phenomenological approach out. In the field of filmography, they are more specific to the documentary film than to the feature movie. But they are limits of this kind of phenomenological description and Kieslowski is aware of them:

Not everything can be described. That's the documentary's great problem. It catches itself as if in its own trap. The closer it wants to get to somebody, the more that person shuts him or herself off from it. And that's perfectly natural. It can't go into a bedroom if real people are making love there. If I'm making a film about death, I can't film somebody who's dying because it's such an intimate experience that the person shouldn't be disturbed. And I noticed, when making documentaries, that the closer I wanted to get to an individual, the more the subjects which interested me shut themselves off. That's probably why I changed to features.⁴

This does not necessarily imply giving up the phenomenological approach that is specific for Kieslowski as director who comes from the field of documentary film. But the phenomenological description begins to concern another kind of reality, i.e. the intimate, inner reality and to take other, more appropriate forms to accomplish its task. Kieslowski confesses:

Basically, my characters behave much as in other films, except that in Decalogue I probably concentrated more on what's going on inside them rather what's happening on the outside.

³ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 59–60.

⁴ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 86.

Before, I often used to deal with the surrounding world, with what's happening all around, how external circumstances and events influence people, and how people eventually influence external events. Now, in my work, I've thrown aside this external world and, more and more frequently, deal with people who come home, lock the door on the inside and remain alone with themselves.⁵

Such a new paradigm leads to the experience of the limits of description's possibilities. In this context, a new problem arises: it is the question that Emmanuel Levinas asks about how we can cross the transcendence of the other's interiority.⁶ On the one hand, Kieslowski resorts to the method of the indiscrete observer. The camera enters the intimate space of the characters, it come close to their faces and bodies and follows their personal lives and experiences.

3. The Silent Witness and its religious and ethical meanings

But for the Eastern European director this mediated phenomenology of the inner life is not enough to emphasize the depth of the experiences and the gravity of the moral situations in which his characters are involved. It seems that Kieslowski wants to transcend the boundaries of the phenomenology and, implicitly, of the subjectivity. But such an approach is very difficult in our post metaphysical constellation. Because a simple return to the omniscient perspective of the metaphysician or of the dogmatist would be almost impossible in the contemporary thought and (cinematographic) art, Kieslowski resorts to a brilliant artifice, introducing a mysterious and mute character into the whole TV cycle. It is the "silent witness", who about whom a lot has been written in the specialized literature.⁷

⁵ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 146.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous. On Thinking-of-the-other*, translated from French by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 133-154.

⁷ See Veronique Campan, *Dix brèves histoires d'image. Le Décalogue de Krzysztof Kieslowski*, preface de Jean-Louis Leutrat (Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1993); Vincent Amiel, *Krzysztof Kieslowski*, textes réunis et présentés par Vincent Amiel, Jean Michel Place, (Positif, 1997); Monika Erbstein, *Untersuchungen zur Filmsprache im Werk von Krzysztof Kieslowski*, Reihe Aufsätze zu Film und Fernsehen; Bd. 58 (Alfeld: Coppi-Verlag, 1997, 2. Auflage 2000); Annette Indorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski* (New York: Hyperion, 1999); Paul Coates (ed.), *Lucid Dreams. The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski*, cinema voices series, (Flicks Books, 1999); Margarete Wach, *Krzysztof Kieslowski. Kino der moralischen Unruhe* (KIM-Verlag, 2000); Monika Maurer, *Krzysztof Kieslowski*, Harpenden (Herts: Pocket Essential, 2000); Slavoj Žižek, *Die Furcht vor echten Tränen. Krzysztof Kieslowski und die „Nahtstelle“*, aus dem Englischen von Nikolaus G. Schneider (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 2001); Joseph G. Kickasola, *The films of Krzysztof Kieslowski: the limi-*

He appears in almost all movies of the cycle, with the exception of episode VII, where he appears fleetingly, because Kieslowski experienced technical difficulties including him, and of *Decalogue X* given its dark-humor atmosphere, although Kieslowski later regretted not including him there. He confesses in this regard:

There's this guy who wanders around in all films. In don't know who he is; just a guy who comes and watches. He watches us, our lives. He's not very pleased with us. He comes, watches and walks on. He doesn't appear in number 7, because I didn't film right and had to cut him out. And he doesn't appear in film 10, since there are jokes about trading a kidney; I thought that maybe it's not worth showing a guy like that. But I was probably wrong. No doubt I should have shown him in that one, too.⁸

Actually the introduction of this character was not Kieslowski's idea, but Witek Zalewski's, the literary manager, who felt, as he read the *Decalogue* screenplays, that "there's something missing here".⁹ Starting from an anecdote about the Polish writer Wilhelm Mach, who noticed a totally secondary character in a black suit at a screening, ignored even by the film director, Kieslowski and Zalewski decided to introduce a similar, discreet but impressive character. Kieslowski concludes as follows:

...I understood what he felt was missing. He missed this guy in a black suit whom not everyone sees and who the young director didn't know had appeared in the film. But some people saw him, this guy who looks on. He doesn't have any influence on what's happening, but he is a sort of sign or warning to those whom he watches, if they notice him. And I understood, then, that that's what Witek felt missing in the films so I introduced the character whom some called "the angel" and whom the taxi-drivers when they brought him to the set called "the devil". But in the screenplays he was always described as "the young man".¹⁰

tal image (New York – London: Continuum, 2004); Marek Haltof, *The cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski, variations on destiny and chance* (Columbia University Press, 2004); Ewa Badowska and Francesca Parmeggiani (eds.), *Of Elephants&Toothaches. Ethics, Politics and Religion in Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Rajarajeshwari Ashok, "Listening to the Silent Man's Testimony: A Reading of Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue", *Caesurae: Poetics of Cultural Translation* 3, no. 1 (2018), Akademia, 27 July 2023; Valérie Maréchal, *Krzysztof Kieslowski: le Décalogue ou „l'enfer éthique"* (La-Neuville-aux-Joûtes: Jacques Flament Alternative Éditoriale, 2019) etc.

⁸ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 158.

⁹ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 158–159.

¹⁰ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 159.

Unlike the mute and sober character seen only by Wilhelm Much, Kieslowski's always silent witness attracted the interest of most film critics, philosophers and theologians, who have reflected on the filmography of the Polish director. Most of them emphasized his mysterious¹¹ specificity, linking him to the religious universe. As Anette Insdorf shows,

[w]e will never know exactly who he is, but this man is seen at least four more times in 1 and returns throughout *The Decalogue*. Like Antek's ghost *No End*, his presence can be connected to that of the angels in Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire*: they are pure "gaze", able – like a film camera (or director?) – to record human folly and suffering but unable to alter the course of the lives they witness. Kieslowski observed, "He has no influence on the action, but he leads the characters to think about what they are doing ... His intense stare engenders self-examination".¹²

If Anette Insdorf calls him 'the Angel', Christopher Garbowski uses the names 'guardian' or 'messenger, specifying that this character "seems to be a crucified Christ whose only intervention could be the prayer: 'Father forgive them; they do not know what are doing'".¹³

Like Anette Insdorf and Christopher Garbowski, Joseph G. Kickasola insists on his turn on the theological dimension of this very special character, calling him "Theophanes":

Etymologically, Theophanes means "Appearances of God" and this term has been used for various enigmatic characters in the Bible who seem to mark divine presence of some kind. I do mean to overdeify, the character or invest him with too much significance, but he does appear to be a reference point for the biblical themes embodied in the films. Likewise, bears traits of God: his secret knowledge (one perceives that he knows

¹¹ Monika Erbstein, *Untersuchungen zur Filmsprache im Werk von Krzysztof Kieslowski*, 28: "Er wird geschrieben als Engel und auch als Teufel, als Junger Mann. Die Figur ist mysteriös, trägt ein Geheimnis. Die hat eine Bedeutung, die dem Gefühl des Betrachters überlassen wird. Das Wiedererkennen dieser Person, das Auftauchen in wichtigen Situationen der Handlung trägt dramaturgisch zum Aufbau der besonderen Stimmung dieser Filme bei"; Margarete Wach, *Krzysztof Kieslowski. Kino der moralischen Unruhe*, 271: "Nach der Premiere von Dekalog brachen unter Filmkritikern Spekulationen darüber aus, ob der von der Aura eines Geheimnisses umwitterte Mann ein Engel der Vorsehung, ein Abgesandter Gottes oder Kieslowski selbst sei, worauf der Regisseur immer beteuerte, er wisse selbst nicht, wer er sei. Als Taxifahrer den Darsteller Artur Barcis zum Set brachten, sollen sie gerufen haben, daß sie den Teufel mitgebracht hätten. Seine Anwesenheit begründete Kieslowski immer damit, daß er ein Element der Rätselhaftigkeit, Unergründlichkeit; Flüchtigkeit mit einbringe".

¹² Anette Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 73.

¹³ Christopher Garbowski, "Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue: Presenting Religious Topics on Television", *The Polish Review* 37, No 3 (1992), Jstor. Web. 27 July 2023, 327–334, here: 332.

something by his iconic stare), his omnipresence in the lives of these neighbors who barely interact with each other, his apparent affection for certain characters (VI), and the consternation of conscience and judgment he excludes (IV and V). One might say he is in the *Dei oculi*, the “seeing” dimension of God’s connection with the world (...). Theophanes may not be the only dimension of the Creator-creature interface, but he serves as a strong reminder of God’s relentless, searching gaze. Indeed, throughout the Decalogue there are numerous instances where God’s eye may be inferred (e.g., the vaulted angles above the cars in III and the wide shots of the countryside during the murder in V). Theophanes completes the divine omnipresent field of view, complementing the Transcendent angle with an immanent perspective. (...) I call him Theophanes, not because he is God, but because he references Him like an icon, materially bearing His presence and eternal gaze in the broken, desolate community, and reminding us that the commandments have always been perceived (by the faithful) to have a living, transcendent dimension. Although Kieslowski and Piesiwicz simply call him ‘the young man’ in the script, the actor playing him (Artur Barciś) apparently thought of him as Christ. According to Christopher Garbowski, Kieslowski told Barciś to play him “as if you were five centimeters off the ground”. Kieslowski said of him: “He’s not very pleased with us” (...). He is the eternal witness.¹⁴

Not all commentators identified the silent witness with a Christian religious presence like an angel, ‘Theophanes’ or Christ himself. On the set, in the Kieslowski’s entourage, he was called ‘the devil’. His silence leads Slavoj Žižek to compare him to a kind of gnostic demiurge, an intermediate deity, an „evil demon”, who only limits himself to observing and not to intervening in this world.¹⁵ The mute observer reminds Veronique Campan of either “Ahasverus, the legendary Jew condemned to wander, excluded from every place and every era, because he did not want to recognize the image of the divine Jesus”¹⁶, or the Greek god “Hermes, the god of travellers, conductor of souls to hell in Greek mythology, when he appears in a costume of a nurse”¹⁷ in *Decalogue II*.

Other interpretations focused on the ethical dimension of this character. For example when the *Decalogue* was released to the public, the silent witness was identified with the eye of moral conscience.¹⁸ In the same register, before seeing in the silent witness a transcendent, angelic, demonic or even

¹⁴ Joseph G. Kickasola, *The films of Krzysztof Kieslowski: the limital image*, 163.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Die Furcht vor echten Tränen. Krzysztof Kieslowski und die „Nahtstelle“*, 145.

¹⁶ Veronique Campan, *Dix brèves histoires d’image*, 51.

¹⁷ Campan, *Dix brèves histoires*, 52.

¹⁸ Campan, *Dix brèves histoires*, 53.

divine presence, we should perhaps discover in his own daily condition of mute observers of the tumult of life.

Perhaps it is only there to remind us, by contrast, of the artificiality of the spectatorial position and gaze. Real life only allows us to be mute observers, confronted for an instant with other individuals without being able to know more about their existence, nor suspect their future, and capable only of casting a surprised or absent look at a closed face, or an unusual attitude.¹⁹

4. Broken phenomenology: Revelation as sense of the moral life

Anyway, he is the first character, who appears in *Decalogue I* (and consequently in the whole TV cycle)²⁰, and at the same time the character, who takes on a different appearance in each episode.

Nomadic camper, surveyor, nurse, bus driver, or rowboat driver, traveler on foot or by bike, the mute observer is the passerby (“passant-passeur”) par excellence. He becomes a stranger when he takes on the figure of the Surveyor, the outsider, the Kafkaesque outcast; or even a ferryman, like a modern Hermes psychopomp (the god of travelers, conductor of souls to hell in Greek mythology), when he appears in the costume of a nurse> so many incarnations of wandering.²¹

All these features indicate the importance of this character and the fact that he does not belong to the mundane phenomenology in which all the other characters of the *Decalogue* cycle are involved. He is a strange appearance as if from another world that evades the laws of the phenomena that make up our daily life. It is as if a curtain would break or be torn and from beyond it something foreign and strange would appear, difficult to integrate into our categories, but which is surprisingly so eloquent for us.

It is a torn and a broken phenomenology whose openness leads, to our huge surprise, to ourselves. In the meeting with this bizarre face we discover ourselves and have the intuition of more than that, which exists independently of us, but confirms or denies us – the intuition of what we call ‘truth’. Or, what is strange about this is with what power it does this. Maybe it is not a coincidence that this is the same question that the Pharisees ask Jesus in bewilderment, when he, in turn, tears apart their entire mundane phenomenology (Luke 20,2). A broken phenomenology remains behind, but from this the truth springs.

¹⁹ Campan, *Dix brèves histories*, 54.

²⁰ Monika Erbstein, *Untersuchungen zur Filmsprache im Werk von Krzysztof Kieslowski*, 28.

²¹ Veronique Campan, *Dix brèves histories*, 52.

References

- Amiel, Vincent. *Krzysztof Kieslowski, textes réunis et présentés par Vincent Amiel*. Paris: Jean Michel Place/Positif, 1997.
- Ashok, Rajarajeshwari. "Listening to the Silent Man's Testimony: A Reading of Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue." *Caesurae: Poetics of Cultural Translation* 3, no. 1 (2018), Akademia, 27 July 2023.
- Badowska, Ewa and Francesca Parmeggiani, eds. *Of Elephants & Toothaches. Ethics, Politics and Religion in Krzysztof Kieślowski's Decalogue*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.
- Campan, Veronique. *Dix brèves histoires d'image. Le Décalogue de Krzysztof Kieslowski*. Preface de Jean-Louis Leutrat. Presse de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1993.
- Coates, Paul, ed. *Lucid Dreams. The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski, cinema voices series*. Flicks Books, 1999.
- Erbstein, Monika. *Untersuchungen zur Filmsprache im Werk von Krzysztof Kieslowski*. Reihe Aufsätze zu Film und Fernsehen, Bd. 58. Alfeld: Coppi-Verlag, 1997, 2. Auflage 2000.
- Garbowski, Christopher. "Krzysztof Kieślowski's Decalogue: Presenting Religious Topics on Television." *The Polish Review* 37, no. 3 (1992): 327–334.
- Haltof, Marek. *The cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski, variations on destiny and chance*. Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Indorf, Annete. *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski*. New York: Hyperion, 1999.
- Kickasola, Joseph G. *The films of Krzysztof Kieslowski: the limital image*. New York – London: Continuum, 2004.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Entre nous. On Thinking-of-the-other*. Translated from French by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Maréchal, Valérie. *Krzysztof Kieslowski: le Décalogue ou „l'enfer éthique"*. La-Neuville-aux-Joûtes: Jacques Flament Alternative Éditoriale, 2019.
- Maurer, Monika. *Krzysztof Kieslowski*. Harpenden, Herts: Pocket Essential, 2000.
- Stok, Danusia. *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1993.
- Wach, Margarete. *Krzysztof Kieślowski. Kino der moralischen Unruhe*. KIM-Verlag, 2000.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Die Furcht vor echten Tränen. Krzysztof Kieslowski und die „Nahtstelle"*. Aus dem Englischen von Nikolaus G. Schneider. Berlin: Volk und Welt, 2001.

