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Abstract

This article proposes a reinterpretation of Krzysztof Kieslowski's exploration of the first commandment in *Decalogue I*. It argues that the narrative structure of the story is *chiastic*—i.e., inversely parallel—which follows from recognizing for the first time the crucial role that Irena, the devoutly Catholic sister of Krzysztof, a professor and religious skeptic, plays in the story. The pattern of inverse parallelism (*chiasmus*) emerges as Krzysztof and Irena respond separately to the tragic death of Krzysztof's son, Pawel: as Krzysztof's skepticism gives way to a new faith in God, inversely and unexpectedly Irena's faith retreats into doubt. This outcome, in turn, opens up the complex relationship between faith and doubt, which is at the heart of Kieslowski's status as a "secular theist."

Keywords

Faith, Tragedy, Paul Tillich, Decalogue, Chiasmus, Polish Cinema, Television, Krzysztof Kieslowski

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Author Notes

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“I don’t believe in God, but I have a good relationship with him.”

Krzysztof Kieslowski¹

“I don’t go to church, I don’t use the word ‘God,’ but that does not mean he does not exist.”

Zofia (*Decalogue VIII*)²

Introduction

Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *Decalogue I* (*I am the Lord thy God: Thou shalt not have other gods before me*) is by far the darkest of the ten short films in which, for each film, one of the ten commandments appears to be, in some degree, the organizing thematic principle. Nevertheless, this first film in the series, dark as it is, is in many ways typical of the remaining films, and so is preparatory of Kieslowski’s exploratory procedure throughout the series. That is to say, *The Decalogue* is not a didactic work; as Kieslowski takes pains to point out, the individual episodes are not homilies. They are, instead, hypothetical scenarios, or, as Kieslowski puts it, they present “circumstances which are fictitious but which could occur in everyday life,”³ circumstances in which particular commandments emerge, sometimes centrally, sometimes obliquely, sometimes even as they are evaded or violated, as relevant guiding principles of action for the characters of a given film. The films expose just how difficult it is to live according to the commandments—how fortuitous and unique circumstances test their authority; how characters, as they try to

do the right thing, adjust, bend, or even compromise these rules of conduct in response to the vagaries, inconsistencies and unpredictability of concrete experience, which rule-making will always fail to anticipate; how, subsequently, the attempt to obey one commandment sometimes will implicate other commandments. As Paul Coates puts it, “it is hardly surprising that several episodes seem swung in a cat’s cradle of more than one commandment.”⁴

Thus, didacticism simply cannot survive this casuistic sensitivity—this awareness, that is, of the difficulty of adjusting precept, legal or moral, to concrete disclosures of unpredictable and messy circumstance.⁵ Accordingly, as Coates observes, Kieslowski aims at “rescinding any incipient, almost pat didacticism.”⁶ The homily for Kieslowski unduly simplifies the problem of distinguishing right from wrong. This, of course, is not the same as saying that right and wrong are relative or unknowable. As Kieslowski says of what he and Piesiewicz wished to say,

[p]riests draw upon [the ten commandments] every day and we weren’t here to preach. We didn’t want to adopt the tone of those who praise or condemn, handing out a reward here for doing Good and a punishment for doing Evil. Rather, we wished to say: We know no more than you [about what is the right or wrong thing to do in this particular situation]. But maybe it is worth investigating the unknown, if only because the very feeling of not knowing is a painful one.⁷

Elsewhere, he says as much, but perhaps a little more: “I believe in Right and Wrong, although it is difficult to talk about black and white in the times in which we live. But I think one is definitely better than the other and I do believe that people want to choose right—it is just that sometimes they are unable to do so.”⁸

This is the precisely the conceptual territory of *Decalogue I*. The story concerns a father, Krzysztof (Henryk Baranowski), a professor and a scientist, whose precocious son Pawel (Wojciech Klata) drowns days before Christmas after he falls, while skating, through the ice on the pond near their apartment, even though the father's painstaking mathematical calculations indicate to his satisfaction that breaking through the ice is an impossibility. This story unfolds within the context of the polite but irreconcilable struggle that crystallizes in the film between Krzysztof and his sister, Irena (Maja Komorowska), over how to educate Pawel. On the one hand, Krzysztof is a religious skeptic, committed as he is to the scientific method and to the sovereignty and self-sufficiency of the human intellect—to, that is, one kind of god. On the other, Irena is a devout Catholic; her devotion to a Christian God is precisely opposed to the secular empiricism of her brother. Unhindered by her brother, she takes charge of Pawel's spiritual development in lieu of Pawel's mother, who lives abroad, and who is apparently estranged from Krzysztof. When the impossible happens, when the *mysterium* seems to forcefully trump human pretensions of control, we see immediately the relevance of the first commandment; we are clearly invited, on at least one level of interpretation, to consider the film a rendering of the intervention of a providence determined to chasten the scientist⁹—and that the film accordingly settles the conflict between the secular and religious in favor of the religious. The film does in fact push us very hard towards the view of Lloyd Baugh, who argues that the film, following this chastening, depicts Krzysztof's "journey from skepticism

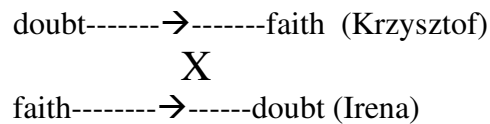
and indifference regarding issues of religious faith . . . to the first evidence of a renewed faith in the God of his youth”¹⁰

The film would be powerful enough if it left us with the father’s slow journey back to faith and to consolation for the otherwise inconsolable. But Kieslowski, as already suggested, will not let us settle for such a readily achieved landing place; there are unresolved ambiguities and tensions that do, in fact, rule out settling for a “pat didacticism.” Other critics concur. Marek Haltof argues, for example, that the film is something more than an illustration of “a straightforward thesis that the God of the Old Testament punishes those who put knowledge over faith or who worship false gods. *Decalogue I* does not offer a simple clash between rational science versus irrational religion.”¹¹ Similarly, Annette Insdorf argues that Kieslowski maintains a cautious neutrality: he “does not presume to offer answers” to unresolved interpretive issues.¹² Coates, elsewhere, puts the point more concretely: “. . . [N]either myth nor Enlightenment satisfies Kieslowski. His passion for alternative scenarios recognizes the limitations of each.”¹³

Even so, in spite of this rough consensus, these views capture more of the uncertain mood of the film than the substance that properly motivates it; critics tend to focus almost exclusively on Krzysztof’s responses to Pawel’s death and, accordingly, tend to misread and misrepresent the sources of the tension and ambiguity that are unmistakably *there* in the film. But what no account of the film has done so far is take up how hard and by what practical means the film pushes

us away from settling for the “renewed faith of the God of [Krzysztof’s] youth” even as it concedes the very real strength of Krzysztof’s recovery--how firmly, that is, the film keeps alive both belief and unbelief as equally compelling and undismissible responses to the central catastrophe.

What decisively promotes this cleavage is a fact that no one has paid sufficient attention to or has properly understood: that Krzysztof’s sister, Irena, plays a central role in the conception of the story. Most viewers seem to agree with Joseph Kickasola, who says that, although we find her weeping in the film, “there is a strong sense that she is better equipped emotionally and spiritually for the tragedy.”¹⁴ I would suggest that this is false; we can see Irena’s story quite unexpectedly running in an opposing, in fact, in a *chiastic* direction to that of Krzysztof. That is to say, the narrative structure of the episode takes the form of a *chiasmus*, a rhetorical and structural device that is pervasive in sacred texts¹⁵ (derived from *chiasmus*: “crossing” and *chiazein*: “to mark with the letter *Chi* [X]”)—insofar as the stories of Krzysztof and Irena are inversely parallel to each other: if it can be argued that Krzysztof has embarked on a difficult journey from doubt to faith, Irena takes a correspondingly difficult journey from a secure, even complacent faith towards a nullifying doubt. A schematic representation would look something like this, with the *Chi* (X) marking how the relevant terms crisscross—what is first comes last, and what is last comes first:



Kieslowski's "passion for alternative scenarios," taking form here as a chiastic movement, takes us far beyond the metafictional relativism that some of the critics I've mentioned seem to impute to Kieslowski; his interest here is not strictly epistemological or ethical, but rather, is of a religious order, but without permitting us to settle for the simpler and deeply attractive religious acceptance imputed by others. Indeed, the film does not choose between the alternatives, at different times adopted by both Krzysztof and Irena, but only because it refuses to, not because it prizes epistemological and playful irresolution as an *a priori* end in itself, which is the dogmatism we have learned to associate with metafictional analysis. The central irony of the film is that there are two incompatible gods, God the Father and Man the Measure of All Things, who share the unconditional demand of the first commandment for exclusive worship, which only serves to perfect the tension between the two positions.¹⁶ Complicating this tension is the fact that both of these positions are as plausible as they are also matters of faith—that neither position can be vindicated or ruled out by scientific canons of proof, which makes both positions profoundly vulnerable to the doubting counterclaims of the other.

The chiastic movement is predicated on that vulnerability; both Krzysztof and Irena reveal to us, as they change places with each other, that there is no safe

haven, that the integrity of either position depends upon a constant awareness of the haunting, even corrosive presence of the other position; oddly, one measure of the strength of either position is that Irena and Krzysztof are both drawn away from their original entrenched complacencies. One could argue, accordingly, that Kieslowski, in spite of the vexed question of his own commitment to Christianity,¹⁷ has found his way towards a conception of faith that is enriched and deepened by its entanglement with doubt. In fact, Kieslowski can be said to coincide with, even to explicate Paul Tillich's claim that "[f]aith embraces itself and the doubt about itself."¹⁸ As Tillich goes on to explain,

[f]aith and doubt do not essentially contradict each other. Faith is the continuous tension between itself and the doubt within itself. This tension does not always reach the strength of a struggle; but latently, it is always present . . . It does not remove the "No" of doubt and the anxiety of doubt; it does not build a castle of doubt-free security—only a neurotically distorted faith does that—but it takes the "No" of doubt and the anxiety of insecurity into itself.¹⁹

This paradoxical sense that faith "is the continuous tension between itself and the doubt within itself" is a position that Kieslowski's alleged "secular theism"²⁰ might especially attune him to. It goes a long way towards accommodating Kieslowski's paradoxical, even glibly evasive declaration of that so-called secular theism: "I don't believe in God, but I have a close relationship with him." Or, rather, the gravitational pull of Tillich invites a reinterpretation of Kieslowski's statement as, instead, an independently conceived restatement of Tillich's paradox. If this is the case, Kieslowski's artful dodging might tell us as much about the status of his religious conviction as it surely does about the nature of faith. In

any case, he also tells us why the intellectual and emotional power of *Decalogue I* depends as much on the struggle between faith and doubt—and the attendant pain of *not knowing*—as it does on the pain of loss and grief.

The One God? Which One?

The first of these inversely parallel stories—Krzysztof's movement from skepticism to faith—is powerfully conceived but fairly straightforward. The first signs of this movement are revealed through the working out of the central conflict between Krzysztof and Irena, a conflict between atheist and believer that isn't quite so polarized as it first appears. From the earliest stages of the film, we see this conflict between the two taking shape through their interactions with Pawel as they separately respond to his precocious questions about ultimate things. Apart from his playful posing of physics puzzles, the father's first extended teaching moment comes early on when, prompted by the sight of the frozen corpse of a neighborhood dog, Pawel asks what death is. As we learn to expect of Krzysztof, he, in reply, reduces it to a merely physical event—a simple moment of physiological cessation: “the heart stops pumping blood. It doesn't reach the brain. Movement ceases, everything stops. It's the end.” “What is left?” asks Pawel, not satisfied yet. Krzysztof replies, carefully fencing off any transcendental resonances: “What a person has achieved, the memory of that person. The memory's important—the memory that someone moved in a certain way, or that they were

kind, you remember their face, their smile, that a tooth was missing..." The boy, still unsatisfied, presses the point: "You didn't mention the soul." The father bluntly offers, and without hesitation, a demystifying answer: "There is no soul."²¹

Pawel then directly pits him against his aunt—and this is our first notice of her countervailing role in the film: "Auntie says there is." He replies: "Some find it easier thinking that." Later on, Irena clarifies her brother's position for Pawel, who is clearly puzzled by how brother and sister could be so different: "Your father noticed, even earlier than you . . . that many things could be measured. Later he concluded that measurement could be applied to everything." The published screenplay, in a passage excluded from the film itself, is explicit about the assumptions behind this view: "He used to say that Man is so intelligent he could do everything by himself. That he can rely on himself for everything." This makes him something more than, as Insdorf puts it, "a kind professor who believes in logic, science, and his computer."²²

The full extremity of this claim to a self-sufficient, god-like competence Krzysztof unfolds in a lecture he gives at the university; here, he seriously proposes, as a means to bridge the apparently untranslatable cultural gap between languages, the possibility of creating not just artificial intelligence but consciousness too, in a deep affront to divine prerogative. He proposes the possibility of a computer that "has not only a kind of intelligence, it also selects. That makes it capable of choice, perhaps even an act of will. In my opinion, a properly pro-

grammed computer may have its own aesthetic preferences, a personality.” That he might be on the road to such a breakthrough is evidenced in the actual, albeit primitive self-willing computer in Krzysztof’s apartment, programmed by Krzysztof himself, that, much to his surprise, turns itself on—a computer that might well prove to be, as Kickasola puts it, “hovering on the threshold of humanness.”²³ The computer, as such, is not in itself the rival god as many critics suggest; it is, rather, the instrument of its god-like creator, whom we can’t fail to see as a new version, if not quite a parody, of God the Father. The computer serves this creator, and the message on the screen affirms as much: “I am ready.”

Correspondingly, Irena unfolds her position as Pawel probes her with an equivalent persistence. We know that she has already been speaking to him about these matters, and that she, later, is making arrangements for Pawel to meet with a priest, presumably to prepare Pawel for his first communion. When Pawel goes to her apartment for lunch, we witness another teaching moment. She first shows him photographs of John Paul II who clearly doesn’t mean as much to him yet as he does to her or to any other devout Polish Catholic of her generation. However, the moment between them deepens as the boy, who is as open to her as he is to his father, then asks her if she believes in God; she says “yes” and the following poignant exchange ensues:

Pawel: So who is he?

Irena: What do you feel now?

Pawel: I love you.

Irena: Exactly. That's where he is.

For Irena, God is love, and his presence never seems so luminous as it is in this moment when the two warmly and happily embrace. We are utterly convinced of the strength of her conviction when she says, in the very next moment: "God is very simple if you have faith."

Yet, at the same time, in another measure of her apparent strength, we note the unguarded inconsistency and uncertainty of Krzysztof's conviction. This emerges in his earlier conversation with Pawel about the soul. After he rather abruptly appears to dismiss ("Some find it easier thinking that") Irena's affirmation, as reported by Pawel, that the soul exists, he retreats, momentarily at least; when Pawel asks him if he really feels this way, he replies: "Me? Frankly, I don't know." In confirmation of this tendency, Irena herself observes that Krzysztof's atheism might be a bit soft. For all his commitment to "measurement," she tells Pawel: "Perhaps he doesn't always believe it, but he wouldn't admit it. Your dad's way of life may seem more reasonable, but it doesn't rule out God. Even for your dad." His insecurity here appears in a telling way. The evening before the accident, he confirms to Pawel that, after checking his final calculations, the ice will easily bear his weight. Pawel is delighted—and in a gesture unexpected of a disciplined materialist, Krzysztof indulges in an old superstition, as he invites

Pawel, for good luck, to kiss his balding head, which Pawel does without comment.

Krzysztof: From Doubt to Faith

This isn't to say that Krzysztof doesn't resist these inclinations—only that there is something else we learn to expect of him: he is vulnerable; he is evidently struggling with ruling out God; he is vaguely, uncomfortably, and inarticulately aware of the insufficiency of his position; the film indeed invites us to consider that there might be good reasons to believe this. Throughout the film there are intimations of a religious order of experience—intimations, of a providential, supernatural presence, or, as Kieslowski puts it, of “an element of mystery, [of] something elusive and inexplicable.”²⁴ In close company with this invitation, the film awakens deeply rooted cultural expectations—Judeo-Christian and classical—of some causal relationship between Krzysztof's attempt to “rule out God” and the death of Pawel. The question is raised, if not answered: is Krzysztof punished for his *hubris*? These intimations are introduced in the very first sequence of shots where we discover that the story is an extended flashback. Even before we learn anything about the main characters, we are alerted indirectly to the fact that some catastrophe has already happened; we have enough information to cautiously conclude that it involves the death of a child. This foreknowledge of catastrophe is consequential; it casts a pall, with an almost Greek sense of tragic fatality, over

every narrative step that follows insofar as whatever follows will lead us helplessly closer to this outcome—to what, again, has already happened. To move forward in this story is only to go back to the beginning of it.

The sequence begins as we see a young man sitting by a pond tending a fire. We eventually learn that this is Kieslowski's famously mysterious Witness, the so-called Angel of Fate (is he human, is he an angel?), who reappears with sudden, uncanny prescience throughout this episode and *The Decalogue* generally, but whose interaction with characters is restricted to expressive eye contact.²⁵ He looks squarely at the camera with an admonishing look on his face. In the very next shot, we cut to a middle-aged woman, whom we later learn is Irena, who is walking down a Warsaw street, and who stops to look at stop-action video images on a television screen in a store display window of a smiling boy running towards the camera; the boy, as we soon learn in the next sequence when the story proper begins, is Pawel, who, later on in the episode, was filmed by a television news team visiting his school earlier in the day. The woman's face, at the moment she evidently recognizes the boy on the television screen, is suddenly awash with tears.

Then we cut back once more to the young man, whose tutoring glance softens as he too sheds a tear. The mystery surrounding him deepens from this point on. We naturally assume that he first appears after whatever happens to this boy has happened, but we later see him during the flashback, before the dreadful event, with the same mournful, admonishing look on his face as if to suggest that

he, a mute, unheeded prophet, already knows what is about to happen, although we can't safely make this inference until much later in the film. Furthermore, supporting this building sense of mournful destiny, is Zbigniew Preisner's stirring, portentous *leitmotif*, dominated by a piercing wooden flute, first introduced in the opening sequence, but which intervenes at critical moments throughout the film as if to reawaken us to the tragic trajectory of the action.

As the story progresses, the portents of the catastrophe to come multiply and accumulate at an accelerating pace: Pawel's encounter with the frozen corpse of a neighborhood dog, the sour milk curdling in Krzysztof's glass of tea, the ominous self-activation of Krzysztof's computer; there is the prolonged moment when Krzysztof, anxiously looking for confirmation of his calculations, tests the ice himself with his own weight under the watch of the Witness/Angel, whose eye Krzysztof catches, but whose face he cannot read. The final sequence leading up to the catastrophe properly begins with the remarkable scene in which Krzysztof's ink bottle mysteriously and fortuitously cracks, leaking black ink onto his books and papers—presumably at the moment Pawel goes through the ice. The pace of the action picks up noticeably. We hear the sound of the sirens in the distance as Krzysztof washes the ink from his hands. A young girl appears at the door looking for Pawel, a search in which viewers are now anxiously implicated. A phone call from Ewa, the mother of Pawel's friend, who, like Pawel, is not where he is supposed to be, sets in motion the agonizing process by which Krzysztof comes to realize, against his very strong resistance, that his son might actually be in the wa-

ter. When he is later told that someone has gone through the ice, his immediate response is: “The ice couldn’t break.” But as he painstakingly, and with mounting anxiety, tracks down the possible places he might expect to find his son, he finally learns, in addition to fact that the ice has been broken through, that Pawel did indeed go skating.²⁶ Only then does he go to the pond to witness the attempts to recover somebody’s body and then finally to discover that it is Pawel’s.

We come then to the most powerful sequence in the film—all the more powerful because it runs for almost 10 minutes without any dialogue; the meanings of this final movement are established in a profoundly nuanced economy of gesture and facial expression—an economy facilitated by the nature of silent film and perfectly exploited and executed by Kieslowski and his cast. Throughout this movement, we see Krzysztof enter into a state of painful and as yet incomplete transition; he gradually and painfully turns away from one kind of faith—his faith, that is, in the efficacy and authority of human reason—and turns towards another faith, towards, that is, a faithful acceptance of a mysterious providence. Implicit in this acceptance is an acknowledgement that there is a limit to human competence, a limit discovered only through tragically breaching that limit. Krzysztof, at the moment his son’s body is pulled from the water, at first stands out for his continued resistance to this turn. Everyone in the assembled crowd, almost in unison, kneels in prayer. Krzysztof and Irena are still standing. But Irena herself finally sinks down behind him, leaving him alone in mute defiance. Still, his rebellion paradoxically moves him further down the path of faith for, as

Kieslowski himself has observed, “in an act of rebellion, we come to recognize that someone who did not seem to exist, in fact, does exist. Rebellion is a manifestation of the faith that one denies.”²⁷

The next scene begins with a close up of Krzysztof alone in his apartment staring vacantly, when he is suddenly washed in the green light of his computer screen. For the second time in the story, his computer has apparently turned itself on, recalling his earlier lecture about the possibility of a self-willing artificial intelligence. Again, the prompt “I am ready” appears on the screen. The juxtaposition of this event with the death of Pawel couldn’t be more ironic insofar as there are, as I mentioned before, resonances here with God the Father: is Krzysztof’s relationship to his self-willing computer now exposed as a grotesque parody of the relationship between God and the Son and, moreover, the relationship between Krzysztof the father and Pawel the son? The irony here is devastating and repellent, and is probably not lost on Krzysztof—or forgotten, as he enters the church in the next scene.

Even so, we can’t affirm that he goes to the church, in the first instance, to seek sanctuary. For the moment, we see this paradoxical spirit of rebellion that both acknowledges and resists God still at work; the movement begins when, in defiance, he walks up to and pushes over the makeshift communion table. But, in the immediate and stunning aftermath, he unintentionally knocks over the candles that sit on the mantel above the icon of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, the wax from the candles dripping on the cheek of the Madonna, suggesting tears.

The tears of the Madonna are among the most heavily freighted symbols of Christendom—they assert her presence as *Mater Dolorosa*, the grieving mother who responds compassionately, whether as accidentally symbolic or as a miraculous immanence, to the father’s defiant grief. She typically, as Marina Warner puts it, “consoles the bereaved because she shares their sorrow.” But, furthermore, we are asked to remember that

Mary’s tears do not simply flow in sorrow at the historical event of the Crucifixion, or at a mother’s grief at the death of her child. They course down her cheeks as a symbol of the purifying sacrifice of the cross, which washes all sinners of all stain and gives them new life. . . . [A]t a more profound level, she satisfies a hunger of the believer, for the tears that gush from her eyes belong to a universal language of cleansing and rebirth.²⁸

Thus, not only are her tears marks of grief, but also of a cleansing and rebirth that follow from her perfect submission to God’s will. As Marie Regan has suggested, if there is consolation here, if consolation is possible, it will be modeled on the Virgin Mary’s example, insofar as, according to Regan, “[h]er story, and that of Christianity, is that of the sacrificed child to a greater cause.”²⁹

In the very next sequence, we witness Krzysztof’s extraordinary response, but one that we are not unprepared for, if only because Krzysztof’s rebellion, insofar as it presupposes an acknowledgment of God’s existence, opens the way for an acknowledgment and reception of his grace; we quickly cut to the next moment with Krzysztof sitting beside the baptismal font. In the brief ellipsis between the previous scene and this latter one, is it too much to suggest that Krzysztof has been moved by this symbolic, even miraculous compassion? He reaches into the

baptismal font and pulls out a plug of frozen holy water (the church is in use, even though it is under construction and unheated) and touches it to his forehead. There may be a measure of physical soothing to it, but the significance of the holy water is too highly charged in the context of the film's quietly relentless hints at a reality beyond the merely physical. More than one critic has sensed this moment as a kind of baptism—a gesture of rebaptism that, however grudgingly minimal, asserts his desire to return to an old communion. If seeking sanctuary was not his motive in going to the church, he nevertheless seems to have found sanctuary after all. There may be some significance in the fact that the holy water is frozen, if one way of marking that desire to return is the melting of the ice with his own touch. It hints at a truth to which we have already been alerted: the work of that return has only just begun and will take us well beyond the end of the film.

Irena: From Faith to Doubt

The precise trajectory of Irena's story is more difficult to establish than Krzysztof's because there is less of it and it unfolds more quickly. So much more of what we can know of her, compared to Krzysztof, depends on how we interpret the nuanced speechless economy of action in the final movement. The chiastic structure is in place, but the absence of a chiastic symmetry here recalls and is perfectly in keeping with Kieslowski's typically casuistic resistance to a schematic and, thus, reductive formulation. The pattern, as ragged as it needs to be, begins to take

shape for us unexpectedly but clearly, in retrospect; we are drawn back into Irena's story after we are returned, in the final moments of the film, to the slow motion, stop-action footage of Pawel, as witnessed by Irena at the beginning of the film. The troubling implications of this moment are yet another reminder of Kieslowski's bent for rescinding an incipient didacticism. Just as it appears that the film has provided us with a safe thematic landing place with the apparent return of Krzysztof to the faith of his youth, we realize there is unfinished work to do. The television images now stand out as a response to the earlier dialogue between Krzysztof and Pawel insofar as the television clearly provides one kind of answer to Pawel's question to Krzysztof about what is left after death; it also works as a commentary on Krzysztof's reply that there is no such thing as an eternal soul and that all that remains is memory.

The critics have captured something of the complexity of that commentary. Marek Haltof has a partial view, claiming as he does that the images affirm the positive spirit of what Krzysztof says about the importance of memory: the television image, he says, "extends our failing memory. It preserves the smile on Pawel's face and his moment of happiness."³⁰ It surely does this, but Haltof evades the darker context of this poignant moment. Insdorf correctively emphasizes how the gradual movement of the images from slow-motion to freeze-frame "graphically evoke an arrested life."³¹ Kickasola is more precise still when he says that "Pawel's form has also been frozen" on the television set and "plucked from the temporal flow. Here, after death, we see it echo his frozen death. It

moves again, slowly, abstractly, until the boy's face blurs out of focus and leaves the temporal frame forever."³² The memory may well be extended in the form of a video image; what it records may well survive those who knew and loved Pawel insofar as the story of Pawel continues to be told and witnessed—which is a function the film itself could be said to perform.

But the sequence has darker implications beyond the fact of the boy's death if we consider how Krzysztof's earlier declaration that only memory survives is seconded in the sequence. The final moments of the film bring us to the very edge of what we can know and what we can't. The television images constitute an emblematic account of the short life of a boy, an account that, in the sharpest possible contrast to the scene of the father in the church, is stripped of all religious imagery, of any trace of divine immanence, symbolic or otherwise; these final images, as a result, can promise no more than darkness and silence in the aftermath—Pawel's last movement is to disappear past the edge of the frame, for all we know, annihilated once and for all.

This might be the film's contrasting suggestion that undermines or questions the reconciliation that Krzysztof seems headed for; it makes clear that it is just as much a matter of faith as the idea of the eternal peace of the soul. But it also seems to be a view now imputable to Irena given that it is through her that we first encounter the television images, which, as she contemplates them, cause her to burst into tears. To see how this might be so, we need to pay as much attention to her actions as we do to Krzysztof's during the unfolding crisis, beginning with

the moment when she and Krzysztof are together by the pond as Pawel's body is recovered from the water.

Looking at her again, we see her first standing behind Krzysztof clinging to his shoulders; her face, or what we can see of it behind his shoulder, is wracked with fear and pain. When the boy's body is found, the gathered crowd, as noted before, kneels in prayer practically in unison. She doesn't, as noted earlier, immediately kneel along with the others, as we expect her to, and we quite naturally watch her closely to see if she will match Krzysztof's stiff resistance. We see instead something closer to stunned inertia or paralysis. When she kneels down, or, more precisely, when she sinks to her knees, desperately clinging to Krzysztof for support, she does so, not in attitude of prayer, but with the posture and demeanor of someone who is in the throes of an emotional collapse. Her face, pressed closely to her brother's back, is partially eclipsed in the broken light of the scene as if she, crouching mutely behind her brother, were in hiding; we can't see her eyes but we can see enough of her face to determine that, if she is trying to pray, she is nevertheless profoundly distracted by pain as she tightly grips Krzysztof's coat. She forms a sharp contrast to her still defiant brother and to the surrounding crowd kneeling in prayer.³³

This is, of course, an understandable, even expected response, but the film invites us to build on this perception. It is surely significant that she is alone in the aftermath, wandering the streets of Warsaw and pointedly not in church with

Krzysztof, now apparently stripped of the consolation that she perhaps complacently felt assured of earlier in the episode: “God is very simple if you have faith.” “Complacently” is perhaps appropriate if her characterization of faith appears to be untroubled by doubt in the way that Krzysztof is touched by doubts of his secularism—her faith would be all the more fragile if this were so, and might further explain, beyond the magnitude of the loss of Pawel itself, the precipitousness of her retreat from that confidence. In any case, the fact that God has proven not to be so very simple puts a very heavy if not insupportable burden on that faith—the absence of simplicity makes faith an even more pressing necessity even as that now absent simplicity makes it repellent. In this wordless moment, there is only the silent implication that she is in a desperate struggle to love the God who is Love, that she (and we) might be brought to the point where God’s love is no longer coherent. If Irena doesn’t lose her faith under the circumstances, she takes us to the very threshold of its extinction.

That this is something like Irena’s predicament is given a concrete shape through the repeated invitations to connect her, and, in the end, to contrast her with the Black Madonna. Irena, after all, is the evidently never married, devoutly Catholic and virgin sister who is also a mother, standing in as she does for the evidently estranged and absent wife of Krzysztof. The Black Madonna’s wax tears at the end of the film unmistakably point back to Irena’s tears at the beginning of the film. However, alone as she is, and, in contrast to her brother, wandering the

streets instead of seeking the comfort of the church, we sense that she is a tragic figure, that her particular tragedy is that she *is not* the Virgin Mary. Irena's tears, like the Madonna's, are tears any mother would shed for the loss of her child, and whose tears imply compassion for all aggrieved parents. But the silently accumulating testimony of Irena's gestures and expressions suggests that she is struggling to submit to the fate of Pawel, in contrast to the Madonna's submission to the death of her own son. Irena appears unconsolated by "the Virgin's story, and that of Christianity, . . . that of the sacrificed child to a greater cause" —to recall Mary Regan once again.³⁴

That Irena might not be ready to accept the sacrifice of Pawel to God's "greater cause" here is more credible if we accept Mirosław Przyłipiak's claim that the *Decalogue* provocatively proposes, episode by episode, that "[t]he idea of sacrifice is, if not totally ill-conceived, then at least problematic. In this way Kieslowski's series, so strongly rooted in the Christian tradition, makes one of its fundamental concepts disputable."³⁵ This judgment is most explicitly made in *Decalogue VIII (Thou shalt not bear false witness)* when Zofia, the ethics professor, declares to her class that "[n]o idea, no concept, nothing is more important than a child's life."³⁶ She is directly referring to what she knows of the events of *Decalogue II (Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain)* in which the life of an unborn child is "set against" the life of a man. The situation is this: if the man in question, Andrzej, who is suffering from cancer, lives, his wife, Dorota, pregnant

by another man, whom she also loves, will abort the child. If Andrzej dies, she will have the child. The husband's doctor, pressed by Dorota to confirm whether or not her husband will live or die, swears, in order to save the child, that he is certain her husband will die, when he is not certain at all. His long experience as a doctor has taught him that nothing is certain in determining the prognosis of cancer in a patient—and his withholding such prognostications is a matter of professional integrity. Nevertheless, he not only violates his professional code, but also, in perfect harmony with the complexity of the series as a whole, he violates two commandments (he takes the Lord's name in vain; he bears false witness) in the service of upholding another (he refuses to abet what he regards as a killing).

In another instance, Zofia happily reports to her class the outcome of *Decalogue II*, which we already know, and she appends the statement I've already quoted about the absolute priority of the ethical obligation to children. At the same time, her firmness on this point is deeply motivated by the fact that she is haunted by her own mistaken decision, during the war, to protect the security of the Polish resistance by sacrificing the safety of young Jewish girl, Elzbieta, who, although she survives the war, later returns as an adult to hold Zofia accountable. However, Przylipiak's gloss on *Decalogue I* points to only part of the story when he suggests that it settles on the simple conclusion that "the son should not die because of his father's misguided faith"—his faith, that is, that humankind is the measure of all things.³⁷ Przylipiak doesn't account for the hint that Krzysztof, by the end of the episode, might be drawn towards a faith in a benevolent providence

and that it is Irena who seems to question this sacrifice as her faith is severely challenged.

There might be a further relevance, then, to the chiastic structure of the film in the light of this emphasis on sacrifice in *Decalogue I*—in light, that is, of the suggested parallels between God the Father and Krzysztof the father, the father of a son, whom he has putatively sacrificed to a false god—and given that Kieslowski has incorporated, to such powerful effect, the Black Madonna, who sheds tears for the sacrifice of her son on the Cross. *Chi* (X) traditionally serves, as it does here, as a sign of the Cross, which is activated as a powerful emblem of sacrifice. And just as the tears of the Black Madonna might—as faith would direct—in some sense, be a real and efficacious presence, so too is the sacrifice of the Son on the Cross. The Madonna and the Cross in *Decalogue I* are as carefully deployed, as Lloyd Baugh has argued, as the numerous other references to icons and crosses in the rest of the series, which invite a corresponding sense of efficacy. We note an icon of the Madonna and Child, surrounded by candles, in *Decalogue VIII*; the gold crucifix around the neck of Elzbieta, again in *Decalogue VIII*; the crucifix worn by Roman in *Decalogue IX* (*Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife*); in the same episode, Roman stands, on two different occasions, under a cross in the bell tower of a distant church; in *Decalogue VI* (*Thou shalt not commit adultery*), on two occasions, figures of crosses appear in the *mise en scène* at critical thematic moments. There is at least one other reference to the cross in *Decalogue I*: when Krzysztof enters the church, he momentarily stands in front of

a large crucifix-shaped window between the two open doorways.³⁸ It is attractive to affirm, as Baugh does, that “it is the nature of the icon to point the viewer beyond itself to the Transcendent.”³⁹ But even as this is their native function, our view of both the Madonna and the Cross in *Decalogue I* is haunted by the doubt that would empty them of meaning, a haunting that proves heritable to instances in subsequent episodes.

In light of this, one final support for this idea of chiastic or inversely parallel lines of action is that this is only the first time Kieslowski and Piesiewicz make use of this structure in *The Decalogue*. It appears again in *Decalogue VI*, in which Magda and Tomek, in a similar crisscrossing interaction, trade places. As Magda passes gradually from cynicism about the possibility of love to actually falling in love with Tomek, so does Tomek pass from being in love with Magda to the cynicism that she has vacated. In *Decalogue VII (Thou shalt not steal)*, a young unwed mother and her own mother who has assumed guardianship of her daughter’s child also switch places—the birth mother abducts her own child from her own mother; her mother, in turn, hunts them down and takes the little girl back as is her legal right. At the same time, it is far from clear who is the thief and who is the victim and who has the rightful claim to be the child’s true mother.

In yet another instance, in *Decalogue IX (Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife)*, a husband and wife trade places. The adulterous wife, who still loves her husband, decides to break off her affair with her lover. The husband and aggrieved victim, assuming the worst of her, witnesses this final exchange, hiding in

a closet in the apartment where the assignation takes place. In the process, the victim, spying on his wife, suddenly becomes the wrongdoer. The wife finds her husband hiding and her outraged response suggests that the peeping husband is no less guilty of coveting his wife than the young man with whom she has broken off the affair has been—that the crime is not coveting someone else’s property but coveting the property someone else has in herself.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Thus, Kieslowski’s use of *chiasmus* as a structural and thematic principle helps to shape the story into an important statement about the nature of faith by having us follow the inversely parallel journeys of Krzysztof and Irena as they respond separately and incompatibly to the death of Pawel. That is, we trace Krzysztof’s journey from a settled but troubled religious skepticism to an equally troubled recovery of the faith of his youth even as we follow Irena’s path from a settled faith in God to an evidently awakened doubt. The story, in the process, reminds us that even skepticism is a kind of faith, and, like affirmations of God, is a commitment that is haunted by doubt, much as Tillich says—that, again, “faith is the continuous tension between itself and the doubt within itself.”

But the film offers a little more precision in characterizing that tension, which might suggest that theological clarity could be allied with the exploratory specificity of fictional narrative. Tillich treats this tension as built into the idea of

faith itself. There is no faith without doubt, but this doubt is safely controlled in static subordination to faith. When Tillich concedes that “this tension does not always reach the strength of a struggle; but latently, it is always present,” he opens the way towards imagining the relationship between the two terms as it actually works in the film: if this tension is constitutional, it nevertheless exists in variable degrees depending on circumstances over time; if that tension is also latent, that is, existing but not yet developed or manifest, it exists as the least degree of tension; as a result, we configure that relationship not as a static hierarchy in which faith is privileged over doubt, but as a dynamic process, as an always narratable movement along a continuum between faith and doubt. As Kieslowski moves us along that continuum in inversely parallel directions we find ourselves striving, along with Kieslowski, for a spiritual endpoint. However, this endpoint is no more available to a believer than it is to a “secular theist” (if there is, in fact, an essential difference) or to an atheist, with a final implication that there is no relief from the greatest loss imaginable—the death of a child—that can exist apart from an unrelieved consciousness of uncertainty. This aggravated uncertainty and as yet unresolved grief cast a long shadow over the rest of the series.

¹ Danusia Stok, ed., *Kieslowski on Kieslowski* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 149.

² “Decalogue VIII.” *The Decalogue*, directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski (1988; Chicago IL: Facets Video, 2002), DVD.

³ Stok, 145.

⁴ Paul Coates, “The Curse of the Law: *The Decalogue*” in *Lucid Dreams: The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski*, ed. Paul Coates (Bristol: Flicks Books, 1999), 94. Annette Insdorf reproduces Rahul Hamid’s charting of how several commandments are drawn into any given episode. See Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1999), 214.

⁵ This sensitivity might well be one of Piesiewicz’s lasting contributions to this collaboration, given his professional experience as a lawyer.

⁶ Coates, *The Red and the White: The Cinema of a People’s Poland* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), 175.

⁷ Krzysztof Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz, *Decalogue: The Ten Commandments*, trans. Phil Cavendish and Susannah Bluh (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), xiii-xiv.

⁸ Phil Cavendish. “Kieslowski’s *Decalogue*.” *Sight and Sound* 59, 3 (Summer 1990), 162-5.

⁹ Coates, “The Curse of the Law,” 95.

¹⁰ Lloyd Baugh, “The Christian Moral Vision of a Believing Atheist,” in *Through a Catholic Lens: Religious Perspectives on Nineteen Film Directors from Around the World*, ed. Peter Malone (Lanham MD: Sheed and Ward, 2007), 158.

¹¹ Marek Haltof, *The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski: Variations of Destiny and Chance* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 82.

¹² Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 74.

¹³ Coates, “The Curse of the Law,” 95. In addition, see Coates, “East Central European Cinema: Beyond the Iron Curtain” in *European Cinema*, ed. Elizabeth Ezra (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 126. He notes “Kieslowski’s preoccupation with alternatives, and alternative worlds, that pervaded his work from top to bottom.” Mirosław Przyłipiak also speaks of Kieslowski’s “obsessive urge to portray alternatives.” Both note how this ethos is present in his other work, such as the three versions of events in *Blind Chance*, the two versions of Veronique’s life in *The Double Life of Véronique*, and the two versions of *Decalogue V* and *VI*. See Przyłipiak, “*Dekalog/Decalogue*,” in *The Cinema of Central Europe* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 228.

¹⁴ Joseph G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski: The Liminal Image* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 170.

¹⁵ For example: Matthew 19:30: “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.” Isaiah 6:10: “Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.” See also David Dorsey, *Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic Press, 2004) and Nils Wilhelm Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament, a Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942)

¹⁶ As St. Augustine famously puts it, with chiasmic sharpness: “The two cities then were formed by two kinds of love: the earthly city by a love of self carried even to the point of contempt for God, the heavenly city by a love of God carried even to the point of contempt for self.” *City of God*, trans. Philip Levine (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 14.28.

¹⁷ For a full discussion of this issue, see Baugh, “The Christian Moral Vision of a Believing Atheist,” 157-172

¹⁸ Paul Tillich. *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (London: James Nesbit and Sons, 1955), 61. Michael Polanyi glosses this as follows: “...The Christian faith [is] a passionate heuristic impulse which has no prospect of consummation, and what it lacks in absolute assurance may be described as its inherent doubt. But this sense of inadequacy inherent in the Christian faith goes beyond this, for it is part of Christian faith that its striving can never reach an endpoint at which, having gained its desired result, its continuation would become unnecessary. A Christian who reached his spiritual endpoint in this life would have ceased to be a Christian. A sense of its own imperfection is essential to his faith.” See Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280. For an illuminating discussion of these passages from Tillich and Polanyi, see Garry Watson, *Opening Doors: Thought From (and of) the Outside* (Aurora CO: The Davies Group, 2008), 12-16. Watson makes use of them in his demolition of the atheism of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins from, interestingly enough, the point of view of a religious skeptic.

¹⁹ Tillich, *Biblical Religion*, 61. The fact that Tillich is a Protestant doesn’t seem to stand in the way of a possible connection with a Catholic agnostic.

²⁰ Christopher Garbowski, *Krzysztof Kieslowski’s Decalogue Series: The Problems of the Protagonists and Their Self-Transcendence*. East European Monographs CDLII (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 7

²¹ *The Decalogue*, “Decalogue I,” directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski (1988; Chicago IL: Facets Video, 2002), DVD. All subsequent references to *Decalogue I* will be from this source.

²² Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 74.

²³ Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski*, 168.

²⁴ Kieslowski quoted in Cavendish, “Kieslowski’s *Decalogue*,” 164.

²⁵ Insdorf compares this figure to the angels in Wim Wenders’ *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 of his “angel” that “he has no influ-

ence on the action, but he leads the characters to think about what they are doing . . . His intense stare engenders self-examination.” Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 73.

²⁶ Many critics have noticed that one difference between the shooting script and the final product is a purposeful mystification of details evident in the latter version. The original reason given for the ice breaking is that the power plant discharged warm water into the pond overnight. This explanation has disappeared from the final cut. There is no hint of any other rational explanation. See Kieslowski and Piesiewicz, 24.

²⁷ Kieslowski quoted in Baugh, “The Christian Moral Vision of a Believing Atheist,” 160.

²⁸ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, Knopf, 1976), 223.

²⁹ Marie Regan quoted in Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 76.

³⁰ Haltof, *The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski*, 83.

³¹ Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 73.

³² Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski*, 174.

³³ See Kieslowski and Piesiewicz, *Decalogue: The Ten Commandments*, 29-30. Kieslowski made fundamental, conception-altering departures from the shooting script, which leaves us with a steadfast Irena and a wavering Krzysztof. The next to last scene of the script provides us with an entirely different version of the moment when Pawel’s body is discovered. Three boys have drowned. Irena is present with Krzysztof beside Pawel’s body. The scene direction reads: “As the firemen put Pawel’s body on to the stretcher, IRENA bends over and pulls up the half-undone zip on his jacket before making a quick, small sign of the cross over his forehead.” The television images of Pawel that frame the film is a later insertion and improvisation. At the same time, Krzysztof draws much more attention and is the source of whatever emerges as a despairing note. This scene is sandwiched between two separate visits by Krzysztof to the church. In the first visit, he, having “forgotten how to behave in church,” lights a candle and anxiously makes sure that it stays lit. The presiding priest, who is absent, of course, in the final cut, hands him a match to light the candle. After the scene by the pond with Irena just described, he rushes back to the church, pushes over the communion table, knocking over the candles and, just as in the final version, wax simulating tears drips onto the icon of the Virgin Mary. Krzysztof soothes himself with the frozen holy water. Only here he mutters despairingly—and this proves to be the last word: “. . . who . . . who is . . . is there to . . . who is there to turn to? . . . who is there to turn to? . . . who . . .”

³⁴ Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 76.

³⁵ Przylipek, “*Dekalog/Decalogue*,” 233-4.

³⁶ “Decalogue VIII.”

³⁷ Przylipek, “*Dekalog/Decalogue*,” 234.

³⁸ My thanks to an anonymous reader for pointing out this detail.

³⁹ Baugh, "The Christian Moral Vision of a Believing Atheist," 169.

⁴⁰ This is Slavoj Žižek's point in *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI, 2001), 101: "In . . . [t]his most Hitchcockian of all of Kieslowski's films . . . the impotent husband covets his own wife (in parallel to Majka in D7 who steals what is hers). One would expect the commandment to refer to the young physics student who 'covets his neighbor's wife'; however, in a stroke of genius, Kieslowski transposes it to the cuckolded husband." There are many resonances between *The Decalogue* and Kieslowski's other films, especially the later ones, but only one film, *Blanc* (1993), from the *Trois Couleurs* (1993-94) trilogy makes use of a chiasmic structure--and in rather similar thematic circumstances to *Decalogue IX*; a recently divorced couple, Dominique and Karol Karol, through the course of their story switch places--the dominance of Dominique over Karol gives way to Karol's dominance over Dominique in Kieslowski's profound exploration of equality in marriage.

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