

No Other Gods: Blue and Green in Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog I*

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Directors have long exploited color's rich symbolism and potential for expression in the cinema. Taking their cue from the theater, in which specific colors often have specific meanings, film directors began using the advances in cinematic technology to express their visions more completely. Jean-Luc Godard, in films like *A Woman Is a Woman* [*Une Femme est une femme*] (1961) and *Contempt* [*Le Mépris*] (1963), used the colors red and blue with widely varying thematic connotations. Michelangelo Antonioni, in *Red Desert* [*Deserto Rosso*] (1963), applies an avant-garde painter's sensibility. Even the pioneer of Soviet cinema, Sergei Eisenstein, used color at the first opportunity, in the second part of *Ivan the Terrible* [*Ivan Grozny*] (1946). Color in cinema is not merely a commercially attractive aspect of production; it is an aesthetic tool available to a director for the fullest expression of his cinematic vision.

Even before the thematic color use in the trilogy *Three Colors: Blue, White, Red* [*Trzy kolory: Niebieski, Biały, Czerwony*] (1993-94), or the golden and red hues warming the world of *The Double Life of Véronique* [*Podwójne życie Weroniki*] (1991), Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski's expressive use of color pervades the ten films in the 1988 *Dekalogue* series [*Decalog*]. Here, as in his more famous, later works, color forms a visual device capable of expressing a mood, emotion, or atmosphere. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion is confined to *Dekalog I*, but color use in the other nine *Dekalog* films is also significant. Based loosely on the First Commandment (Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me), the first film uses blue lighting effects repeatedly to evoke loss and sadness, and also to suggest the enduring presence of the transcendent, the spiritual. Kieślowski's restrained use of the color green opposes this and points out a spiritual void, philosophical error, or moral quandary. In *Dekalog I*, green lighting is almost exclusively linked to the computer, the "false god." In this film, then, a visual device is used to illustrate a metaphysical problem, i.e., the erosion of the transcendent in contemporary society. The selected examples that follow show how the colors blue and green represent two sides of a debate in a world where science and reason hold the major truth claims for our sense of reality, yet where calculation does not preclude the existence of God.¹

Until quite recently, Kieślowski's preoccupation with color as an expression of a theme or mood was ignored in the critical literature on his films.

The importance of color apparently only came to critical attention with his last four films, *The Double Life of Véronique* and the trilogy *Three Colors*. A forthcoming book edited by the Kieślowski scholar Paul Coates makes limited observations on this subject, and there are occasional references in other critical studies, but for the most part this is a neglected area. This is all the more surprising not only because of the clear significance of color in many of the films in Kieślowski's oeuvre, but because he himself repeatedly discussed *mise-en-scène* color as central to his films, as do his frequent cinematographers, Piotr Sobociński and Sławomir Idziak.

The films of Kieślowski often dwell on personal responsibility, freedom, chance or coincidence, visual and psychological point of view, and voyeurism. Many of these common themes in Kieślowski's films reappear in the form of certain color associations. These themes and motifs serve as threads weaving together the whole of the oeuvre, linking them visually and philosophically. In *Dekalog I*, we can see many of these themes at work; and, in the *Dekalog* series as a whole, we see a very strong preoccupation with religious issues. While this is not unexpected in a series of films based on the Ten Commandments, it is particularly noticeable from a filmmaker like Kieślowski, for whom "religion" had a rather imperious, negative connotation. He seems to prefer the term "spiritual," a concept that for him encompasses fate and predestination, as we shall see in the later films, particularly in *Weronika* and the Trilogy films. In *Dekalog*, we see a much more conventionally religious portrayal, with "God" as a palpable presence.

Completed in 1988, *Dekalog* is a series of ten short films loosely related to the Ten Commandments, also known as the "ten words" (Exodus 24:28). The series stands as an example of Kieślowski's concern with man's inner, spiritual world, as well as the world in which he lives. Although he himself did not adhere to any institutionalized faith, Kieślowski's films clearly express his intensely moral and existential philosophy, and he asserts the presence of the transcendent in our lives. He also evinces an attitude of profound respect for those who do profess religious belief.

For Kieślowski and his co-scriptwriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz, the Commandments are omnipresent in our lives, but are constantly transgressed or willfully forgotten. The *Dekalog* films were only to be loosely related to the Commandments themselves. The two men decided early on that "[t]he films should be influenced by the individual Commandments to the same degree that the Commandments influence our daily lives" (*Decalogue* xiv). In other words, film A does not necessarily correspond exactly to Commandment A. This is particularly important to keep in mind when viewing the series. The films themselves are simply titled *Dekalog I* or *II*, rather than "Thou shalt not bear false witness," and so are not overtly

linked to a specific Commandment.² Additionally, an individual film may relate to more than one Commandment, and, moreover, the links between a Commandment and a film are not always immediately apparent. In this way, Kieślowski hoped to force the viewer to contemplate the meaning of both the films and the Commandments.

Although the *Dekalog* won him great European critical acclaim, back home in Poland Kieślowski still had to contend with the state-run production system, as well as the criticism of both the Communist government and the powerful Catholic Church. On the whole, however, the series was well received and widely watched (approximately 15 million viewers) (Stok 159). The films were produced by Polish Television [Telewizja Polska], based on the original scripts by Kieślowski and Piesiewicz, and growing out of Piesiewicz's casual suggestion that Kieślowski make a film about the Ten Commandments. Coming on the heels of his 1984 film *No End* [*Bez końca*], which was attacked by all sides in the media but met with widespread public support for its truthful portrayal of the dark days of the early 1980s (Stok 136-37), *Dekalog* was virtually ensured an audience. The series went on to become one of the best known of his works, until the fame of the Trilogy.

Dekalog I focuses on Krzysztof (played by Henryk Baranowski) and his young son Paweł (Wojciech Klata), and the effect that Krzysztof's faith in a "false god" (reason) has on his gifted and beloved child. The opposition of faiths (spirit versus reason, "God" versus the Computer) is played out on a terrestrial stage, with dire human consequences. Krzysztof's belief in the supremacy of calculation and reason, and in the pronouncements of science, seems to incur the wrath of the divine. His trust in logic leads to his son's death. Krzysztof and Paweł calculate the thickness of the ice on a nearby lake where Paweł wants to skate. He trusts his father unquestioningly and dies because his father's formula fails to take into account random chance, that is, something that cannot be calculated. This random chance seems to be associated with a spiritual force, angry at Krzysztof's homage to a false god, the same force, perhaps, which demanded Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. In this film more than in any of the other nine, Kieślowski points to the presence of the God who commanded, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." As Kieślowski himself wrote, in reference to the series, "[...] I must say that when I think of God, it's more often the God of the Old Testament rather than the New.[...] The God of the Old Testament leaves us a lot of freedom and responsibility, observes how we use it and then rewards or punishes, and there's no appeal or forgiveness" (Stok 149). This God is indeed a jealous and spiteful one, who seemingly smites a young boy to make His presence known. In the film, belief in anything, even reason, to the exclusion of God, is wrong, and Krzysztof must be taught this lesson. These

opposing faiths come to be represented cinematographically in *Dekalog I* as, among other things, the opposing lighting colors of blue (true God) and green (false god).

In order to develop a sense of how each color comes to represent one side of an ethical debate, let us look first at blue. Blue, as a lighting color, seems omnipresent, much as the God of the Ten Commandments seems to be, while green, or the "false god," intrudes in very palpable ways. In fact, *Dekalog I* begins almost immediately with what I will call a "blue shot," that is, a shot with predominately blue lighting or wherein the mise-en-scène is composed mainly of the color blue. The first three shots consist of white snow and dark water, gray sky, an anonymous man and his yellowish coat. The fourth shot — our first official "blue shot"—cuts to an as yet unknown woman, later identified as Irena, Krzysztof's sister (played by Maja Komorowska). Shots four through eight are all swathed in blue. We see the woman in medium close-up, her face and the screen space around her all heavily blue-tinged. A reverse shot establishes her optical point of view: She has seen a television screen in a shop window, and has stopped to watch. The TV seems to be what casts her in this blue light. In the reverse shot, the TV screen shows a slow motion montage of running schoolboys in varying shades of blue, and the TV screen eventually freezes on one boy's beaming face in particular. The camera then cuts back to the woman, who is now crying, unable to move her gaze from the frozen image of the boy (Figure 1). The intense blue lighting gives her tears an eerie, vaguely ink-like look as they roll from her eyes. The next cut is away from the blue, back to the direct gaze of the man in the sheepskin coat whom we saw in the second and third shots; he now wipes away one tear, followed by another.

This first sequence is rather disorienting; after all, we do not yet know any of the characters, nor can we yet know that what we have just seen was,

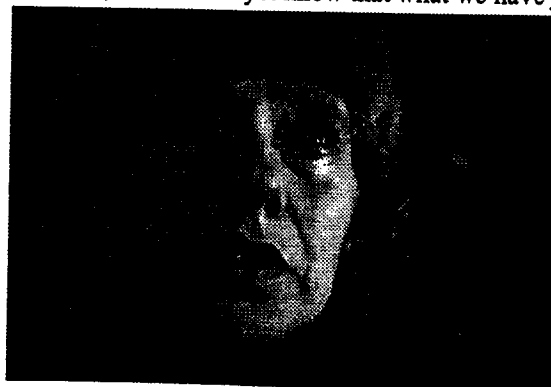


Figure 1. Maja Komorowska in *Dekalog I*.

in fact, a flashforward. But the opening series of shots is vital, if not for establishing characters then for creating a pervasive mood of sadness, as well as an overall sense of impending tragedy. The pronounced blue lighting contributes greatly to the establishment of this mood, which confronts the viewer from the very beginning of the film.

The blue later seems to invade Krzysztof's well-ordered life. Another pivotal "blue shot" occurs as he works at his desk and discovers that his ink bottle has suddenly and plentifully begun to leak. He sits, frozen, staring for a moment or two as the blue-black color spreads across his papers. The screenplay is even more explicit as to the color:

[He notices that the papers spread out in front of him are slowly turning a navy-blue color. He watches in astonishment as the blue swallows up the noted letters and numbers, whole pages. Only after a while does he realize the rational reason for this disappearance. He swiftly gathers up the papers and picks up a bottle of ink that has been standing on the desk; the bottle has cracked and the navy-blue fluid is escaping from it in a thin, dark stream (Cavendish and Bluh *Decalogue* 19, amended).

[Widzi, że rozłożone przed nim papiery zaczynają powoli zabarwiać się na granatowo. Patrzy ze zdumieniem, jak granatowość pochłania zapisane litery, cyfry, całe stronicie. Dopiero po chwili dociera do niego racjonalna przyczyna tego znikania. Szybko zbiera papiery i podnosi stojącą buteleczkę z atramentem. Buteleczka jest pęknięta i wąska, ciemną strugą wycieka z niej granatowa ciecz.] (Kieślowski and Piesiewicz *Dekalog* 20-21)

Clearly, in the screenplay, this scene becomes an almost explicit allusion to the boy's drowning, which may be occurring at the very moment the bottle cracks. At the time, Krzysztof thinks nothing of the ink spill. After his initial mute surprise he comes to and begins to clean up. The doorbell interrupts him (a neighbor is looking for Paweł), but then he goes to the bathroom to wash his hands. The blue ink splashes everywhere. It is as if something suddenly spilled over into his life, something which he can neither control nor understand. At this moment we sense that something terrible has happened. In fact, as he washes up, Krzysztof hears the urgent wail of sirens in the background, and, with wet hands, he goes to the window to see what has happened. We watch from Krzysztof's optical point of view as fire trucks down below rush off-screen. This does not impress Krzysztof as important, and he calmly proceeds to investigate Paweł's whereabouts. For the follow-

ing scenes involving his search for Paweł, he carries with him in his distraction the plastic bag full of ink-stained papers. This bag of ruined pages seems almost like an amulet for Krzysztof. He has tried to contain the stain, but perhaps the blueness has leaked out into the rest of his life.

Despite information about the ice having broken, Krzysztof avoids going to the lake to check. Even as he searches for Paweł, the color blue follows Krzysztof like a specter. The apartment buildings around him wear a looming blue tinge; when he returns home to check for Paweł, his rooms seem to have been permanently invaded by the color. Finally he finds a boy who can tell him: Paweł was on the lake. As Krzysztof goes down the stairs, he sinks slowly to the steps and sits, facing a wall of glass blocks, all brightly blue, like tens of miniature television sets turned on and glowing. His face is untouched by the color. He stares, unseeing, and his lips whisper words we can neither hear nor decipher. But he can no longer avoid the truth; he must now go and stand by the lakeside with the others, watching and waiting.

In contrast, Irena comes to the lake as soon as she is able. She appears at the lakeside and finds her brother. In a long shot, the camera establishes their optical point of view, and we see the hole in the ice as the firemen work to find the boys (Figure 2). Eventually, the bodies are pulled from the water. The people assembled by the lake spontaneously fall to their knees, and Irena slowly sinks to the ground behind Krzysztof, who alone remains standing. The communal outpouring of grief and prayer does not seem to move him. This powerful lakeside vigil is also powerfully blue: everything before the camera is colored by the blue lighting. Here is the other side, perhaps, of the demanding Old Testament God who punishes lack of faith. He is also the God in whom people may be united, as this scene shows. He is the God



Figure 2. Searching the lake in *Dekalog I*.

in whom Irena believes, the God who is in the loving hug she and Paweł had shared. He is with her in her loss, and she is, finally, able to mourn her nephew, showered by the blue light, the light of the enduring transcendent, both beside the lake and in the final shots of Paweł on TV.

The "false god," green, is less prevalent than blue, but is much more clearly linked to its source, and thereby, to its interpretation. The narrative links between the computer and the death of Paweł, as well as the fact that the green light originates from the computer screen, lead to the conclusion that this green is connected to the "false faith" in reason. In opposition to the blue shot, a green shot may be posited, one in which the computer dominates the frame space, either directly or indirectly (by casting its light). This "false god," in turn, leads Krzysztof to believe more in calculation than in his own senses.

Certainly one of the most significant scenes involving green occurs early on, when Paweł brings his aunt Irena home to show her some tasks that his father has programmed the computer to perform. Paweł tells Irena to stand by the doors, and the computer proceeds to lock and unlock the bolt; then Irena enters the bathroom, where the computer turns the tap on and off. Irena places her hand in the running water, playing the doubting Thomas. This entire scene illustrates the degree to which the computer has assumed control over the lives of Krzysztof and Paweł. Its presence is pervasive, and its influence extends even to appliances. Paweł also shows his aunt a program he has made for himself: Using a letter from his absent mother, he has typed in her activities according to the time of day. He asks what she is doing at 3:30pm, and the computer answers, "I am sleeping" ["śpię"]. Irena asks Paweł to inquire as to his mother's dreams. Paweł looks doubtful, but asks the question. The computer answers, in English, "I do not know!" Paweł seems upset, and Irena attempts to console him with assurances that his mother is dreaming of him. Paweł seems happier, although, as they leave, he casts a longing glance at his father's machine, which, he says, would surely have known the answer. This scene not only shows the influence of the computer on the lives of the protagonists, but also the limits to which its power extends. The computer can only know what it is programmed to know, and therefore cannot extrapolate the contents of a person's dreams. It is significant, however, that Paweł believes that his father's computer, a more sophisticated tool, would have known the answer. The computer instills a "false faith" even in young Paweł, who believes the machine is powerful enough to know what humans dream.

Not long after Paweł and his aunt discuss God, we have a scene that subtly juxtaposes not only the two colors, but also the two faiths that they represent. We see the bluish light from the corridor flood the apartment as

Krzysztof and Paweł come home. The living room is also cast in a blue light, as Paweł answers the ringing phone and then passes it to his father. They still have not turned on any lights in the room, so the blue, significantly, comes in from the outside: from the hallway, or, now, it seems, from the outside through the window. As Krzysztof talks with Irena about religious lessons for Paweł, the boy's attention is caught, and he goes to his father's computer screen, which reflects a slightly green light on his face. Paweł then leaves, and Krzysztof notices that the computer is on. Krzysztof pointedly asks Paweł whether he turned the computer on, to which Paweł answers, no, of course not. Moving closer, so that now his face is green-tinged, Krzysztof asks the computer, "Hey, friend, what do you want?" ["Ej, kolego, czego chcesz?"] (Figure 3). The computer spontaneously replies, in English, "I am ready." By now Paweł has come back into the room and his face, too, is greenish; he seems disturbed by this conversation between his father and the computer. Krzysztof tells the computer to turn off (since it apparently turned itself on), then reaches out to shut it down. We see the screen go from brightly-lit green to black. Paweł asks, "And what if it really had wanted something?" ["A jak on naprawdę czegoś chciał?"] Apparently, what the computer wants is its own cult of followers. The film is at one level a battle over Paweł's soul; he is enthralled by the power of technology, the lure of epistemology rather than mystification. But the blue light refuses to be transplanted, and finally, seemingly, Paweł must lose his life rather than lose his soul.



Figure 3. "Ej, kolego, czego chcesz?"

Throughout this scene we have a very nuanced interplay of the colors and the faiths they express: blue pervades the room, and then green asserts itself, making its presence felt as Krzysztof and Irena discuss lessons in religion for Paweł. It is as though the two faiths are subtly battling over the

mise-en-scène space as well as the hearts of the protagonists, as if the computer must call attention to itself, away from the telephone conversation about religious instruction. The blue light in this scene is very strong, but again it is external; it is not native to Krzysztof's domain, and, although the light drenches the scene, it does not hold or even attract Krzysztof's or Paweł's notice. It is simply there, unassuming and unostentatious, coloring the rooms. The blue light is absolute and ubiquitous, but Krzysztof is unaware of it, just as in the earlier sequence he was unaware of the ink spill. It takes him a long time to see the obvious, just as it takes him a long time to realize that the ice in fact broke.

The green light, on the other hand, immediately attracts Paweł's attention, and Krzysztof soon sees it, as well. In fact, this unparalleled act of apparent will by the machine warrants direct address by Krzysztof. Paweł's question lingers in the air: what if it really had wanted something? It is significant that the computer itself receives screen time; not only in this scene, but in many others, precious seconds of screen time are allotted the computer monitor. Even after Paweł's death, the computer is privileged with shots. This intrusion not only into the lives of the protagonists but into the screen space by the color green (and, of course, the computer) suggests an insidious demand for attention. The screen time devoted to the computer is, of course, not balanced by any actual film footage of God, though Kieślowski does point us in that direction.

If we still had doubts about the ethical message, a jump cut takes us to a shot from inside the church both Paweł and Krzysztof had earlier passed. We see a wide-angle shot of the entrance, its rounded doorways lit from outside by a blue source; Krzysztof enters. The camera tracks his approach, his head lit by the incoming blue light from the doorways. We see that the central icon of the church is a replica of the Mother of God of Częstochowa, the foremost religious symbol of Poland. Krzysztof seems to kneel at the candlelit altar, but instead he pushes with all his might. The makeshift dais collapses with a thud, leaving candles overturned and wax dripping. The wax, significantly, splatters onto Mary's face, and the icon now appears to be crying, grieving with the bereft father (Figure 4). The camera holds this image for several seconds. Not content with this sacrilege, Krzysztof reaches into the fount of holy water, taking out a chunk of ice with which he then cools his head, the locus of reason. We see his face in silhouette, lit in blue. Of course, we cannot help but connect the ice he presses to his head with the ice that broke and led to Paweł's death (Figure 5). It is also significant that here Krzysztof tacitly recognizes the true God—albeit angrily. After all, one must posit the existence of God in order to confront Him. Krzysztof has a