



***Listening to the Silent Man's Testimony:
A Reading of Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue***

***Rajarajeshwari Ashok**

Abstract

Krzysztof Kieslowski's television series called *Decalogue* (1989), based on the Ten Commandments, depicts various moral and ethical concerns of a group of people living in an apartment complex in Warsaw. Academicians like Christopher Garbowski and Slavoj Zizek have studied the *Decalogue* series with respect to the influence of the Commandments either on individual films in the series or on all the films in the series. Since the films are based on the Commandments, many see the television series as religious, and often tend to look at how each film in the series portrays the essence of what each Commandment stands for. This article however argues that Kieslowski's representation of the Commandments is not religious. That is, the director does not adhere to its literal meaning but instead, is searching for its practicality in daily life. The technique that the director has used to accentuate the influence of the Commandments and the segments in which its influence can be felt are explored here.

Key Words: *Krzysztof Kieslowski; Decalogue.*

Decalogue (1989) is a collection of ten television films set in a bleak apartment complex in Warsaw. The films are about an hour long and are influenced by at least one of the Ten Commandments. The plots of the films are not connected to one another, but one often sees characters from one film appearing momentarily in other films. The television films have been the focus of a number of studies and analysis, debates and discussions. For example, Christopher Garbowski tries to establish how *Decalogue* differed from other television shows that featured religious content. "Krzysztof Kieslowski, among the country's leading film

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directors, felt the time had come to transcend the political fixation of the Cinema of Moral anxiety and deal with basic universal issues” (Garbowski 327). He sees the Commandments as Kieslowski’s pretext to make ten good films and does not study the influence of the Commandments on the films in detail. Slavoj Zizek on the other hand examines the influence of the Commandments in *Decalogue* in detail. “. . . he takes a Commandment and then ‘stages’ it, actualises it in an exemplary life situation, thereby rendering visible its ‘truth’ . . .” (Zizek 111). He examines how *Decalogue* is related to the Ten Commandments and argues that each of the ten films is associated to the Commandment next in order. That is, *Decalogue 1* refers to the second Commandment, *Decalogue 2* to the third commandment and so on. This article concurs with Garbowski’s observation that Kieslowski was making films of universal appeal and relevance. But it does not study the relation of each film to a Commandment. It argues that Kieslowski’s representation of the Commandments is not biblical. That is, though the films are based on the Commandments, the focus is not on the religious aspect of the Commandments but rather on its contemporary interpretations and relevance. The main objective of this article is to explore in detail how Kieslowski is re-framing the Commandments.

The Representation of the Ten Commandments in *Decalogue*

Krzysztof Kieslowski is one of the most celebrated directors of Poland. Influenced by his experiences in Lodz Film Academy and by the Polish tradition of Documentary film making, Kieslowski’s initial films were influenced by his documentary method. These films were very realistic, direct, political, and focussed on how the policies of the government influenced people from different strata of society. One can see a clear distinction between the subject matter of the films that preceded *Decalogue* and the ones that came after it. Doug Cummings

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notes that the director's career "seems to have slowly inverted over the years from one centered on political realities to one of effervescent abstraction" (Cummings n.p.). The 1980s was a time of disorder and chaos in Poland. In *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, the director expresses how during this time, he felt that he was watching people who did not know why they were living. "Tension, a feeling of hopelessness, and a fear of yet worse to come were obvious" (143). There was a general lack of morality and decline in faith among the people and it is this disillusionment that Kieslowski addressed in *Decalogue*.

Hiltunen notes that Kieslowski was one of the most "socially conscious" (10) filmmakers in the country during the 70s and 80s. ". . . Kieslowski's experiences of politics continues to be frustrating, and after Martial Law (13 November 1981 – 22 June 1983) he gradually left politics behind" (10). Kieslowski and Piesiewicz wanted *Decalogue* to portray moral and ethical challenges that an ordinary person may face in contemporary timesⁱⁱ. The characters in *Decalogue* do not stand for righteousness. Nor are they the symbols of everything that is good and disciplined, a portrayal of what society expects one to be. These characters have both good and bad in them. Like people in real life, they too commit mistakes, make errors in judgements, are sometimes selfish and at other times generous. "We spent some time deciding what sort of heroes they should be. They had to be credible and recognizable to the extent that the viewer would be able to think: 'I've been in that position. I know exactly how they feel' or 'Something very similar occurred to me once'" (Kieslowski and Piesiewicz xiii). The plot of the films often brought out the complexity of the characters. "Everyday life was unbearably monotonous and terribly uninteresting. We knew then that we had to find extreme, extraordinary situations for our characters, ones in which they would face difficult choices and make decisions which could not be taken lightly." (xiii). The problems that the writers created for each of their characters are so sensitive that any decision that the

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characters make might bring about more complications. The influence of the Commandments in the series can be seen in these instances. Richard Porton believes that the director's "meditations on both Mortality and morality do not partake of political or religious dogma" (48). This article takes a similar stance. The director does not adhere to the literal meaning of the Commandments but instead, is searching for its practicality in daily life.

The dilemmas that the characters have to face, according to William Verrone, allows the audience to consider ". . . not just identifiable socio-cultural ideologies but also the complex and ambiguous meaning that the Commandments might have in contemporary daily life" (7). Kieslowski does not see the Commandments as an absolute law that forbids particular actions. He believes that the Commandments, while asserting the crimes that are punishable by God, also holds certain innate values. D. James Kennedy while interpreting the Commandments says that ". . . each Commandment contains both a negative action and a positive action for us to obey. For example, when a Commandment forbids murder, it inherently commands us to sustain life. When it forbids adultery, it commands purity. When it forbids theft, it commands honesty" (Kennedy n.p.). Kieslowski is exploring this possibility of the Commandments through his television films. Kauffman in his review of *Decalogue* notes that both Kieslowski and Piesiewicz saw the idea of basing television films of the Ten Commandments as "a chance for inquiry, not for sermon, ten avenues of exploration into the acceptances and the values of their world, investigations of the way the Commandments still function and apply-if they do" (1). Kieslowski's protagonists are all at some point in the films, in a conflict. They do not know what to do or how to find a solution to their problem. Principles like love, honesty, truthfulness and forgiveness perplexes them and complicates their life. The influence of the Commandments can be seen in these

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instances of inner conflict and the relevance of the Commandments can be seen in the way they resolve their issues.

Influence of the Commandments in *Decalogue*

“I don’t film metaphors. People only read them as metaphors, which is good. That’s what I want” (193), Kieslowski notes in *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*. Through the early films in his career, Kieslowski often criticised the Polish society. Because open criticism was not possible in the then prevailing socialist rule, he expressed his opinions through various indirect means. When he first shifted his focus from documentaries to feature films, he hoped that he would be able to get closer to the “inner word” (Hiltunen 11) of the people. Though it was a difficult task, he “. . . did succeed, if not in seeing inside the human being, certainly in problematising the representation of inner experience by cinematic means” (11). This indirect style of representation or portrayal that he chose later became his signature auteur style (12). Oscar E. Swan is of the opinion that Kieslowski uses symbols and motifs quite often in his films. These symbols and motifs, both serious and playful, often reflect on the action of the film and at other times, drive it. These “Kieslowskian symbols” (406) are placed so precisely into the narrative that they are often invisible at first glance. Viewers often notice it only in later viewings. “His symbols and motifs, once identified, partly support his deeper message but also serve to focus attention on the ultimately contrived nature of his cinematic world, in which every slightest detail has been meticulously arranged” (415).

The *Decalogue* is placed in late 1980s Warsaw and problems related to moral and ethical concerns and human emotions are the focus of these films. As there was no direct way to

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represent the inner turmoil of humans, Kieslowski used his distinct form and style to express these subjective experiences (Hiltunen 12). There is a motif that Kieslowski uses repeatedly in *Decalogue*. What is being repeated is what this article calls the silent man. In the script he is simply called “young man”. “His face is one we have seen before, perhaps in this cycle of stories, perhaps elsewhere. Perhaps it is a face we have all seen at one time or another...” (Kieslowski and Piesiewicz 53). This character played by the actor Artur Barcis has been interpreted in different ways. For example *Eva Badowska* calls him the “silent witness” (147) and sees him as a representation of the role of the camera itself. Christopher Garbowski on the other hand called this character a “guardian” or a “messenger” (332) and says that he at times “seems to be a crucified Christ whose only intervention could be the prayer: “Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (332). But the term ‘silent man’ might be more apt for he is the silent observer who does not interfere in anything that is happening around him. Sometimes, it is even difficult to discern any emotion on his face. In most of the films, the protagonist is alone while faced with a moral choice. He or she does not discuss the situation with close confidants or with family members. “Issues are solved mainly in the character’s minds, with little physical action . . .” (Hiltunen 82). The silent man appears on screen in those instances where the characters are in a conflict. He can be seen when the characters have to face inner turmoil and dilemma. A thorough study of *Decalogue* will help to elucidate this point.

The silent man appears in eight of the ten *Decalogue* films. He is seen in one more film in the background, but his close up shots had to be cut out because “. . . I didn’t film him right and had to cut him out” (Kieslowski and Stok 158). He can still be seen in the background of a scene in that particular filmⁱⁱⁱ. In the scenes that the silent man appears, Kieslowski has incorporated a small depth of field making the focus shallow. It emphasises the presence of

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the man while rendering the surrounding inconsequential. The camera has been used in such a manner as to suggest the point of view of the protagonists. The angle of the camera affects the manner in which the person or thing that is represented is perceived by the audience. High or low angle shots show where a character is looking from, hand-held camera shots and tracking shots signifies that the character is in motion and panning shots suggest that the character is inspecting the scene (Hayward 377-378). High and low angles are completely avoided in the scenes where the man makes an appearance. An overhead or high angle might have caused the man to look feeble and susceptible. The low angle on the other hand might have made him seem superior. He is consequently presented at an eye level just like all the other characters. This is the angle in which individuals see each other in real life too. This is done to establish that the man is no more remarkable than the other characters in the films. His physical appearance too aids the director's purpose of making him conventional. He is tall and slender with light eyes and light brown hair. He does not stand out in a frame in anyway. His presence draws attention either to a character's conflict at a particular point in the film or it records a change in the mentality of the characters.^{iv}

The future regarding their relationship is what causes the conflict in Anka and Tomek. The silent man is first seen in *Decalogue 4* while Anka tries to decide whether or not to open the letter. She knows that she is about to manipulate the situation in her favour and hence feels guilty. The man appears again when she confesses to Michael. This silent man can be seen on screen because she feels guilty for lying to Michael about their relationship. If she had not lied, they could have continued living as father and daughter. In this instance, the feelings that the two characters have for each other is clear. It is only their future that is troubling them. But Tomek in *Decalogue 6* is confused by the very feelings he has for Magda. Kieslowski contrasts between Tomek's feelings for Magda on the two instances that the silent

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man appears onscreen. Initially he is too proud to admit that his feelings might be lust. But by the time he sees the silent man again, he has realized what his true feelings for the woman is. He feels ashamed and humiliated thinking that he is no different than any of Magda's other lovers. The silent man appears near Dorota, from *Decalogue 2* as she tries to choose between her husband and unborn child. At first he is out of focus in the frame. But then in a medium shot, he is shown clearly. He stares at the two of them like she is staring at her husband. He is seen again when the doctor is studying the blood samples of Dorota's husband. At the time, the doctor was trying to determine whether his patient will live or die. The silent man is in a tram that Janusz and Ewa passes in *Decalogue 3*. He appears as each of them considers the possibilities of a rekindled relationship. He watches as they speed down the road, nearly hitting the tram that he was sitting in.

Krzysztof only sees the silent man once though he appears more than once onscreen in *Decalogue 1*. He sees the silent man when he checks the ice in the lake. The silent man appears as Krzysztof is making sure that the ice is thick enough for his son to skate on. Even though his calculations showed that it would be safe, he felt the need to check the ice himself for he felt uncertain. The opening shot of the film depicts the silent man looking around him. If placed chronologically, this scene takes place after all the events of the film. The audience only realises the relevance of this shot at the end of the film. Some time has obviously passed since the death of the boy. One wonders if Krzysztof is still searching for the reason that caused the ice to break for he had done everything possible to ensure his son's safety. Roman, from *Decalogue 9* unlike Krzysztof does not see the man at all. The silent man is first seen cycling by Roman as he has a break down in his car in the middle of the road. The news that Roman has received from his doctor makes him feel insecure and unworthy. All his mental conflicts arise from this feeling of emasculation. He finds it impossible to believe that his

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wife would still want to be with him. He jumps to the wrong conclusions within days of receiving the news. The silent man can be seen again through the wheel of the bicycle that is lying beside him after he jumps off the bridge. In that moment, Roman must have been regretting his decision to commit suicide. Or he must have been feeling foolish for his attempt was not fatal. In *Decalogue 5*, the silent man can be seen on the road when the car that Jacek is travelling in stops at a signal. He turns around and very slowly shakes his head at Jacek. As later in the film, Jacek murders the cab driver for no visible reason; the appearance of the silent man might indicate the moment that the idea of murder started taking root in Jacek's mind. The silent man is seen later, cycling away in the distance as Jacek is strangling the cab driver. But this time, the silent man does not see Jacek. Earlier, when the audience sees the silent man, Jacek was still contemplating and had not made a decision. But when the audience sees the silent man a second time, Jacek is too absorbed in his actions to reassess the situation. The silent man is shown in *Decalogue 7* too, but not clearly. Kieslowski cut out his close ups as he was not happy with the way it turned out. But the man can still be seen in the background limping on the platform as Majka wonders whether to go back to her parents. At the same time Ewa, the mother, too wonders whether to call her daughter back. Both women are reluctant to lose something that they hold dear. Majka has the opportunity to finally be free from her controlling mother and Ewa is reluctant to give back Anya. The last film is the only film in the series that does not show the silent man. “. . . he doesn't appear in film 10 because, since there are jokes about trading a kidney, I thought that maybe it's not worth showing a guy like that” (Kieslowski and Stok 158)^v.

The silent man's appearance in *Decalogue 8* best elucidates the argument that this article makes regarding the silent man being a representation of the conflict in the protagonist's mind. He is not present when Elzbieta starts her story. The camera moves to her right and

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focuses on a group of students and an empty space is noticeable in between the students (Figure 4). As Elzbieta continues, Zofia starts questioning her regarding the details of her story. The camera moves to the same spot in between the seated students and the silent man is now present (Figure 5). Eva M. Stadler notices this too, but does not dwell on the reason for the silent man's presence there. "The camera stops on the witness, played by Artur Barcis', whom we see in this film as a student in the lecture hall. He looks pensive, and stares straight into the camera, toward the front of the lecture hall and the professor. The camera stops more than once to allow us to contemplate his indecipherable look while other students comment on the complex moral issues"(89).The silent man appears at this instance because the story triggers something in Zofia's memory. Though it is not possible to be sure just yet, one suspect that Zofia is wondering if she and her husband were the couple who has refused to help Elzbieta all those years ago. The initial absence and then the presence of the man in this particular film strengthen the stand that this article takes. His presence implies that he is indeed the representation of the mental conflicts or the struggle in the characters.

Relevance of Kieslowski's Interpretation of the Commandments

Kieslowski called himself "a self-imposed pessimist" (Kieslowski and Stok xiv). "There is little doubt that Kieslowski places his characters in a fragmented postmodern world vitiated by a breakdown of moral values, by lonely, anonymous living, by materialism and practical atheism" (Baugh 7). Kieslowski knew that preaching morality to such a generation would be a futile effort. He chose to focus on the practicality of the Commandments for this very reason. By basing *Decalogue* on the Commandments, the director is drawing the attention of the audience to the importance of aspects like love, family, honesty and the unpredictability of life. *Decalogue 1*, *Decalogue 4* and *Decalogue 7* depict the relationship between parents

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and children. With the films, he is not just depicting the love a parent has for his or her child, but is also talking about the responsibility a parent has towards their child. While *Decalogue 2*, *Decalogue 3* and *Decalogue 9* focus on different aspects of the relationship between three married couple *Decalogue 6* on the other hand depicts the consequences of lust. While *Decalogue 10* depicts the unpredictability of life, *Decalogue 2* portrays the sanctity of one's words and *Decalogue 7* shows us the importance of family. "His great theme involves questions with a near-universal scope, such as individual responsibility; the place of God and religion in modernity; the deep psychological and legal implications of familial relationships and biological bonds; love, desire, and material greed" (Eva Badowska and Francesca Parmeggiani 6)

Kieslowski says that when someone talks about God, the image that comes to his mind is of a strict God who punishes every little offence. The impression that he has gathered over the years is of a "...demanding, cruel God; a God who does not forgive, who ruthlessly demands obedience to the principles which he has laid down" (Kieslowski and Stok 149). Kieslowski did not believe in such a God. To the director God is an ever present observer who lets individuals make their own decisions. Every person will have his or her own reasons for choosing to do things a certain way. Another person need not understand this. What is right to one need not be so to another. Every conflict in *Decalogue* is such a conflict. Thus the appearance of the silent man draws attention to the many options and possibilities that one has before them. His presence thus opens the possibility for multiple truths.

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“The concept of sin is tied up with this abstract, ultimate authority which we call God. But I think that there’s also a sense of sin against yourself which is important to me and really means the same thing” (Kieslowski and Stok 149). Through these words, the director is acknowledging the God within each one of us- that inner voice inside us that cautions and corrects us. The *Decalogue* therefore urges the audience to be true to themselves. Kieslowski’s representation of the Commandments implies that inner peace and a true sense of righteousness can be attained by acting sensitively and fairly. Kieslowski never implies that his interpretation of the Commandments is right or that it is the only right interpretation. Instead, it is one of the interpretations that can be considered among the different interpretations that exist of the Commandments.



FIG1 Above and FIG 2 Below



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FIG. 3 and FIG 4

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FIG. 5

Stills from Decalogue

Notes

ⁱ This paper is based on my M.Phil thesis titled *Representation of the Ten Commandments in Krzysztof Kieslowski's "Decalogue"*. I know that it is not common for a research scholar from India to write on European cinema. My father introduced me to the films of Kieslowski at a young age. The *Decalogue* series have always stood out to me due to Kieslowski's interpretation of the Commandments. This combined with its contemporary relevance is what lead me to write my thesis on the *Decalogue* series. I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer for his or her suggestions for it has helped improve this article. I would like to thank Dr Arya Aiyappan, Assistant Professor, Christ University Bengaluru who supervised my M.Phil

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ⁱⁱContemporary at the time *Decalogue* was made

ⁱⁱⁱ*Decalogue 7*

^{iv}That is, the characters might be leaning towards a particular choice when the silent man first appears. If and when they change their minds, the silent man can be seen again

^v In *Decalogue 10* two brothers Artur and Jerzy come to possess their father's valuable stamp collection after the old man's death. Realizing the true value of the collection, both brothers increase the security of the apartment where they have stored the stamps. Artur decides to trade his kidney in exchange for a stamp which will make their collection even more expensive. Both brothers return home from the hospital with the new stamp only to realize that the rest of their collection has been stolen from their apartment.

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