

Shadow Play, by Martha Bayles



Uncaptive Mind

All my films, from the first to the most recent ones, are about individuals who can't quite find their bearings, who don't quite know how to live, who don't really know what's right or wrong and are desperately looking.

—Krzysztof Kieslowski

WHEN CZESLAW MILOSZ WON THE Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980, the esteem he enjoyed in Poland blossomed into adoration. And as the struggle against Communist rule intensified during the 1980s, the long-exiled poet found himself cast as the "national bard." Yet as Milosz remarked to many interviewers (including this one), "I am not by nature a political writer." The example he offered was not his youth in Nazi- and Soviet-occupied Polish Lithuania, but his 1960 arrival in America, where his reputation rested solely on *The Captive Mind*, his 1953 study of the corruption of literature under Communism. "Pressed to play the role of the crusading anti-Communist but lacking the ability," he settled for being "an obscure professor in an obscure department" (Slavic literature at U.C. Berkeley). "But," he added with a wink, "I was happy. I had come in search of bread, and I found it."

Most Polish artists worth their salt are obsessed with the tension between individual expression and communal obligation. Not for them the tidy balance articulated by William James: "The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community." When for generations one's national identity has been brutally suppressed, and the only way to preserve it is through culture, the artist feels acutely his responsibility to the community. But when the dead hand of ideology squeezes the life out of all communal expression, the

artist feels just as acutely his responsibility to himself. To produce good work amid such cross currents takes not only talent but doggedness.

To some, this is ancient history, because Polish artists now enjoy Western-style freedom, albeit at the price of feeling marginalized by Western-style entertainment. Nevertheless, the international reputation of some Polish artists, notably the film maker Krzysztof Kieslowski, has never been higher. To use a crass commercial yardstick, the DVD boxed set of his *Decalogue* series (ten one-hour dramas based loosely on the Ten Commandments, made for Polish TV in 1988) is currently number 3,700 in Amazon.com's sales rankings (about even with The Alfred Hitchcock Signature Collection). Another Kieslowski boxed set released in 2003, the *Three Colors* trilogy (*Blue*, *White*, and *Red*), is a staple in video stores everywhere. And in 2005 Kino Video released The Krzysztof Kieslowski Collection, a six-disc boxed set including several of the director's earlier films and some fascinating interviews.

Loyalty to Poland

KIESLOWSKI DIED IN 1996 AT THE AGE of 54, while undergoing heart surgery in Warsaw. Accounts vary, but most agree that he turned down the chance to have the operation done in a Western hospital with state-of-the-art training and equipment. Christopher Garbowski, author of *Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue Series*, offers this explanation: "The hospital where he had the operation was supposedly qualified, and he simply didn't seem to have such an unusual problem. He was something of a patriot on these matters, not wanting to go abroad if it didn't seem necessary." This

explanation captures two of Kieslowski's most salient traits: his loyalty to Poland, and his skepticism toward newfangled gimmickry from the West.

The loyalty ran deep. Born in 1941, Kieslowski had an unsettled boyhood, because his father suffered from tuberculosis and had to move from sanatorium to sanatorium. Intense, gloomy, but gifted with wry humor, Kieslowski enrolled at age 17 in the College for Theater Technicians in Warsaw, because it was better than the alternative presented by his father, which was to become a fireman. As he muses in his autobiography, "My father was a wise man.... [He] knew perfectly well that when I got back from that fireman's training college, I'd want to study." The years 1958-1962 were extraordinarily creative in Polish theater, and Kieslowski aspired to become a theater director. But in order to do that, he had to attend another institution of higher learning. After three attempts, he was accepted by the Lodz Film School.

That it took three attempts should not reflect poorly on Kieslowski's abilities, since typically there were 1,000 candidates for five or six places. Nor should it suggest undue political conformity, because the Lodz Film School enjoyed a fair amount of freedom at the time—at least until 1968, when General Mieczyslaw Moczar cracked down on the student movement and purged thousands of Jews from higher education. With bitter sarcasm, Kieslowski recalls how the authorities cloaked their actions in "grand words" about "experimental cinema," which meant in effect that it was better "to cut holes in film or set up the camera in one corner for hours on end" than "to see what was happening in the world, how people were living and...why their lives weren't as easy as the paper described them."

To catch Kieslowski's drift, you need only watch *The Office*, a six-minute student film he made in 1966 that shows a line of patient sufferers getting the bureaucratic run-around in a state insurance office. Not only does the film draw a devastating portrait of official hard-heartedness, it also lights a spark of pure defiance at the end, when over the grating voice of the clerk repeating, "Write down everything that you have done in your entire lifetime," the camera pans a wall of shelves sagging with hundreds of folders, each containing an "entire lifetime."

The 1968 crackdown did not prevent documentaries from being made, however. During the 1970s they were perhaps even more highly regarded than feature films. And the production of both was generously subsidized by the state. Of course, no film could be shown without the approval of the Vice Minister of Arts and Culture and the State Board of Censorship, and many were shelved. But the film-making process was pretty much controlled by self-governing Production Houses (for features) and Studios (for documentaries). Each of these Zespoly (zespół means "team") had its own distinctive character and tended to attract...well, distinctive characters. Thus it was only natural that, after graduating from Lodz, Kieslowski would gravitate toward the Documentary Film Studio (WDF) in Warsaw.

At WDF Kieslowski continued for a while in the same vein, showing the evils of officialdom and the tribulations of the masses. And he became expert at the game of getting his films past the censors. Actually, one of the most fascinating interviews in the Kino collection is with Irena Strzakowska, an officer of the censorship board who (against type) is a smart, handsome woman who ended up collaborating with Kieslowski on a number of films. But as the 1970s wore on, Kieslowski's documentaries began to work on a quite different level, one that neither attacks nor defends the system but rather probes the humanity of all those who must live with it, including officialdom.

Not a Local Artist

THE MOST STRIKING EXAMPLE OF THIS is *From the Night Porter's Point of View* (1978), a 17-minute portrait of Marian Osuch, a watchman and all-around enforcer in a Warsaw factory. Shot on East German film stock known for its cold garish colors, the film combines a voice-over of Osuch's musings with scenes of him collaring a vagrant, monitoring the workers as they clock in and out, training his guard dogs, and finally hosting a group of visiting school children. His views are, shall we say, not those of the enlightened intelligentsia.

He believes in law and order, strict rules, total obedience, and (when necessary) public hangings. His home life elicits no warmth, only a comment about his daughter boiling his pet fish to death and his son drowning his pet budgie. To judge by the dog scenes, this is a man who prefers animals to humans because they are more trainable.

Yet the film is suffused with a strange tenderness. In his autobiography Kieslowski recalls that it took forever to find the right porter. The first one selected had the requisite "anti-humane or fascist opinions," but he also "had so many shortcomings it was absolutely impossible to make a film about him." In other words, Kieslowski went to great lengths to find a more sympathetic "fascist." At the end of the film, when the visiting teacher asks the children to identify "the officer in the fine uniform," we don't hear their reply (apparently it was cut). But we do see Osuch's expression: that of a lonely, beleaguered man whose heart positively aches for respect.

Kieslowski's distrust of the West may not have helped him in medical matters, but it served his art well. The humanity that shines through his portrait of Osuch continued to illuminate just about everything he did. Of course, humanity can be a liability among a certain class of cinéastes. One of Kieslowski's mentors, the director Krzysztof Zanussi, says Kieslowski was "long undervalued outside Poland," and that the Cannes Film Festival rejected two of his most accomplished films, *Camera Buff* (1979) and *Blind Chance* (1981), as the work of a "local artist." Why the same charge didn't apply to the ever-so-American *Norma Rae*, which took several prizes in '79, and the ever-so-German *Mephisto*, which did likewise in '81, is unclear.

Camera Buff is anything but "local." It's about a callow young factory worker named Filip (Jerzy Stuhr) who buys an 8mm camera to film his new baby, then gets mesmerized by the challenge of trying to film the whole world. Like Kieslowski, Filip is initially embraced by the authorities—the bosses in his factory ask him to chronicle a big meeting. But Filip cannot resist showing them sneaking out to the men's room, so he loses his new status, his job, and eventually—as he proves incapable of curbing this new passion for truth-telling—his wife and child. Along the way, though, Filip does one good thing. He makes a TV documentary about a fellow worker who is a dwarf, and despite some fussing on the part of the censors over whether the film disparages its subject or (here's the real disparagement) insults Polish labor, the film is broadcast—and everyone loves it, including the dwarf, a simple man who weeps because "it is beautiful."

Chance and Purpose

BLIND CHANCE, ONE OF KIESLOWSKI'S most fascinating films, is based on a clever device—a "butterfly effect" arising from a mishap that occurs while a medical student named Witek (played by Boguslaw Linda) is running for a train. In the first scenario, Witek bumps a man in the crowd, pauses briefly to apologize—and catches the train. In the second and third, he pauses a moment longer—and misses the train. Then the story splits again, as the first miss leads Witek to a scuffle with the station guard, the second to an encounter with a woman from his anatomy class, whom he later marries.

In 1998 this device was copied in a fluffy British movie, *Sliding Doors*, and a trendy German one, *Run, Lola, Run*. But there's nothing fluffy or trendy about *Blind Chance*. On the contrary, each of Witek's possible lives presents him with choices that still resonate today. Catching the train, he meets an older man who recruits him into the ruling Communist Polish United Workers' Party. Missing the train and getting into a scuffle, he is arrested and while doing community service gets drawn into a student-Catholic-worker movement that looks a lot like Solidarity. Missing the train and meeting his future wife, he decides to stay out of politics and focus on his career. Ironically, each path brings him to the same place: in the Warsaw airport trying to board a plane out of Poland. In the third life he succeeds, only to have the plane explode during takeoff.

Blind Chance came out during an especially rough time. In December 1981 General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law, driving Solidarity underground and crushing the hopes of thousands. In that atmosphere, the film was attacked by all sides—indeed, it may be one of the most politically incorrect films ever made. But Kieslowski wasn't trying to be politically correct, he was trying to transcend a situation that felt politically hopeless. The title is meant ironically, because as he put it, "Witek, the main character, behaves decently in each situation. He behaves decently even when he joins the Party. At a certain moment, when he sees that he's been manipulated into a situation where he ought to behave like a bastard, he rebels and behaves decently."

Looking back, Kieslowski is quite critical of *Blind Chance*. But his remarks about that film illuminate both it and his subsequent masterpiece, the *Decalogue*: "We don't ever really know where our fate lies.... Fate in the sense of a place, a social group, a professional career, or the work we do. We've got much more freedom than this in the emotional sphere." In other words, human beings are subject to fate and

blind chance, not to mention the so-called objective forces of history. But they are also free to make choices. If they were not, then there would be no such thing as plot or character. According to Aristotle, the most important ingredient in tragedy is plot. It's not character, because character is revealed only through action, i.e., plot. It's probably worth noting that by "action" Aristotle did not mean helicopters crashing into suspension bridges. He meant moral action, the kind we judge "decent" or "like a bastard."

Aristotle also said that the best plots are so powerful that a bare-bones summary is enough to move a listener. To this ancient wisdom Kieslowski adds the modern insight that "everybody's life is worthy of scrutiny." That is why he and his co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz shot all ten *Decalogue* segments in the same large apartment complex. "It's the most beautiful housing estate in Warsaw," Kieslowski recalled, "which is why I chose it. It looks pretty awful so you can imagine what the others are like." For the sake of illustration, here is a summary of the first plot, reflecting on the commandment "Thou shalt have no other gods before me": An agnostic scientist and his adored ten-year-old son are so excited by the powers of their new computer, they ask it to calculate the exact hour when the ice on a nearby pond will be thick enough to hold a skater. The computer produces the answer, the boy goes skating, and when the ice breaks unexpectedly, he drowns. After watching all ten of these simple, powerful stories, you will never look at an ugly apartment complex in quite the same way again.

Kieslowski was a doubter not a dogmatist, and the *Decalogue* series ends with an anti-Ten Commandments rock song: "Kill, kill, kill / Screw who you will... Everything's yours." But this negation only underscores the affirmation of the whole. About the Ten Commandments, Kieslowski has said, "Everyone breaks them daily. Just the attempt to respect them is a major achievement."

The French Films

LIKE MANY EASTERN EUROPEAN ARTISTS, Kieslowski felt his own world start to crack after the fall of Communism. For one thing, there was no money to make films in Poland, so he relocated to France to make his final four: *The Double Life of Véronique* (1991) and the *Three Colors: Blue, White, and Red* (1993-4). It would be nice to say that the French climate agreed with our Polish emigré, but to judge by the results, it did not. By a strange sort of alchemy, the moral sense of Kieslowski's best films gets transformed, in the Parisian setting, into

a self-conscious preoccupation with the process of film-making.

Take, for example, the theme of alternative lives, which in *Blind Chance* is tied to such larger questions as how does one live when one's choices are constrained by injustice and repression? In *The Double Life of Véronique*, the larger question is...what? After an opening sequence about Weronika, a very pretty Polish singer (Irene Jacob) who dies of a heart attack, the focus shifts to picturesque Paris, where an identical very pretty young woman is mooning over mysterious "signs" sent to her by a very handsome young man (Phillippe Volter) who makes his living performing with marionettes. After much dithering they meet, and Véronique gets to moon over his marionettes, which, he explains, must be created in pairs because—*hélas!*—one of them might get "damaged."

The story ends with Véronique returning to her family homestead, where we can be sure she will be safe. The trouble is, she was pretty safe to start with. Compared with Weronika, whose life seems interesting, or at any rate real, Véronique seems incredibly idle and self-absorbed. In other words, she's a typical young woman in a French art film, beautiful to look at but devoid of any recognizable human emotion.

The *Three Colors* take their cue from the French flag: blue for liberty, white for equality, red for fraternity. *Blue* is about a woman (played by Juliette Binoche) who, after losing her husband and child in a car accident, tries to live a totally unfettered life, only to discover that this is impossible. *Red* is an intriguing study of a cynical retired judge (Jean-Louis Trintignant) who eavesdrops on his neighbors' phone conversations until a young fashion model (Irene Jacob again) gently restores his humanity. *Red* is beautiful to look at, but in a self-indulgent way, as the camera lingers a bit too obsessively on Jacob. Some feminist critics have accused Kieslowski of committing fashion photography on these female performers, which is certainly the case. Binoche is a more interesting actress than Jacob, but after a while both films start to feel like the "How To Spend It" section of the *Financial Times*.

My own reaction to *Blue* and *Red* is to start hankering for Warsaw. So my favorite among the *Three Colors* is *White*, in which the homely, slightly rotund Zbigniew Zamachowski plays Karol Karol (basically Charlie Charlie), a Polish hairdresser living in Paris whose French wife (Julie Delpy) wants a divorce because, as her lawyer makes painfully clear in court, the marriage has never been consummated due to a failure of husbandly equipment. This is only the beginning of Karol's humiliation. By the

time he's begging for francs in the Paris subway, he is ready to accept the offer of a fellow Pole to return home in a way that makes flying coach look (relatively) comfortable. Crammed into a trunk, he suffers even worse when, upon its arrival in Warsaw, the trunk is stolen by a gang of thugs who, disappointed at Karol's lack of resale value, beat him severely and leave him for dead in the public dump. The best line in the whole trilogy comes when Karol wakes up covered in blood and garbage, looks around and says, "Home at last!"

Beauty is Strong

IF KIESLOWSKI HAD LIVED LONGER, IT would have behooved him to make more comedies, not more Frenchified art films. After completing *Red*, he announced that he was not going to make any more films, period. But he was also engaged in writing the screenplays for a new trilogy based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Only one of these has been made into a film—*Heaven* (2002), starring Cate Blanchett and directed by Tom Tykwer (who also directed *Run, Lola, Run*). It is an unholy mess, bereft of the *Decalogue's* moral honesty, and not even postcard-pretty like *Three Colors*.

Because of this disaster, many critics have concluded that Kieslowski's art was an exotic, twisted plant unable to bloom without political repression and state censorship. But that conclusion is unfair. What does the magnificent example of Czesław Miłosz tell us, if not that Polish artists can thrive in freedom and even survive consumerism? A few lines from Miłosz's poem, "One More Day," provide a fitting tribute to Kieslowski:

And though the good is weak, beauty is
very strong.
Nonbeing sprawls, everywhere it turns
into ash whole expanses of being,
It masquerades in shapes and colors that
imitate existence
And no one would know it, if they did
not know that it was ugly.

And when people cease to believe that
there is good and evil
Only beauty will call to them and save
them
So that they still know how to say: this
is true and that is false.

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