DIRECTED BY Krzysztof Kieslowski
WRITING scenario: Krzysztof Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz; scenario collaborators: Agnieszka Holland, Edward Zebrowski, and Slawomir Idziak
PRODUCED BY Marin Karmitz
MUSIC Zbigniew Preisner
CINEMATOGRAPHY Slawomir Idziak (director of photography)
FILM EDITING Jacques Witta
PRODUCTION DESIGN Claude Lenoir
SET DECORATION Lionel Acat, Christian Aubenque, Jean-Pierre Delettre, Julien Poitou-Weber, and Marie-Claire Quin

CAST
Juliette Binoche...Julie Vignon (de Courcy)
Benoît Régent...Olivier (as Benoit Regent)
Florence Pernel...Sandrine
Charlotte Vény...Lucille (as Charlotte Very)
Hélène Vincent...La journaliste (as Helene Vincent)
Philippe Volter...L’agent immobilier
Claude Duneton...Le médecin
Hugues Quester...Patrice (Mari de Julie)
Emmanuelle Riva...La mère
Florence Vignon...La copiste
Daniel Martin...Le voisin du dessous
Jacek Ostaszewski...Le flutiste
Catherine Theraouenne...La voisine
Yann Trégouët...Antoine (as Yann Tregouet)
Alain Ollivier...L’avocat
Isabelle Sadoyan...La servante
Pierre Forget...Le Jardinier
Philippe Manesse
Arno Chevrier
Idit Cebula
Stanislas Nordey
Jacques Disses
Michel Lisowski
Yves Penay
Philippe Morier-Genoud...Le juge (The Judge)
Julie Delpy...Dominique
Zbigniew Zamachowski...Karol Karol
Alain Decaux...Himself (Eulogist at the funeral)

KRZYSZTOF KIESLOWSKI (b. June 27, 1941 in Warsaw, Mazowieckie, Poland—d. March 13, 1996 (age 54) in Warsaw, Mazowieckie, Poland) wrote most of the 41 feature-length and short films he directed. It is thought that his work was only beginning to be recognized soon before his untimely death in heart surgery in 1996, though he had announced his retirement in 1994 after premiering Three Colors: Red* at that year’s Cannes Film Festival. Still, he was indicating plans for a new trilogy based on the Dantean framework of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory. Growing up in a Polish Communist regime that placed a premium on socialist-realist aesthetics, he began work as a documentary filmmaker. Even, as a filmmaker, conforming to the demands of socialist-realism, his work was imbued with questions and insights that interrogated the limits of the material world. His career is often broken into films he made before and after 1985’s No End, his first collaboration with writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz and composer Zbigniew Preisner, a creative team that was sustained through the rest of Kieslowski’s filmmaking career. He began to draw attention from filmmakers like Stanley Kubrick and critics like Roger Ebert in the late 1980s with the release of the 10-part series of short films based on the Mosaic Decalogue (Dekalog, 1989)* for Polish television. One of the extended shorts in this series granted him permission to enter the main competition at Cannes. He expanded parts V and VII of Dekalog into longer feature-length films, A Short Film About Killing (1988)* and A Short Film About Love (1988),* the former winning the Jury and FIPRESCI prizes and nominated for the Palm d’Or at Cannes in 1988. When The Double Life of Véronique* was first screened at Cannes, in 1991, Georgia Brown, of the Village Voice, declared: “Anything I say about [the film] is merely a labored minuet danced around my own ecstatic response.” The Financial Times’s Nigel Andrews commented, “I believe we are being hypnotized in The Double Life of Véronique . . . How else to explain the ability of a French-Polish film with a nonsensical plot premise . . . to enthrall and enchant us like no European film in recent history?” The film won the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury and the FIPRESCI Prize and was nominated for the Palme d’Or at Cannes in 1991. With the release of Three Colors: Red in 1994, he was nominated, once again, for the Palm d’Or at Cannes, and, the following year, he was nominated for Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Writing. These are

November 6, 2018 (XXXVII:11) Krzysztof Kieslowski: BLUE (1993, 98 min.)
Online versions of The Goldenrod Handouts have color images & hot links: http://csac.buffalo.edu/goldenrodrohandouts.html

still...

Indicates films Kieslowski wrote and directed


Indicates films Kieslowski directed


Indicates films Kieslowski wrote and directed

KRZYSZTOF PIESIEWICZ (b. October 25, 1945 in Warsaw, Mazowieckie, Poland) studied law at Warsaw University and began practicing in 1973. Through the late 1970s he became increasingly involved in political cases, defending opponents of the Communist regime, serving as a legal advisor for Solidarity, and assisting in the successful prosecution of the murderers of Jerzy Popieluszko. In 1982, he met Krzysztof Kieslowski, who was planning to direct a documentary on political show trials in Poland under martial law. Piesiewicz agreed to help, though he doubted whether an accurate film could be made within the constraints of the judicial system; indeed, the filmmakers found that their presence in court seemed to be affecting the outcomes of cases, often improving the prospects of the accused, but making it hard to capture judicial abuses. Kieslowski decided to explore the issue through fiction instead, and the two collaborated for the first time as writers on the feature film No End (1985). He remained Kieslowski’s collaborator throughout the rest of the director’s career. He was nominated, in 1995, with Kieslowski for an Academy Award for Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen for Trois couleurs: Rouge (1994). Since Kieslowski’s death, he has remained engaged with film writing. He has written for 14 films: A Short Film About Killing (1988 writer), A Short Film About Love (1988 writer), Dekalog (1989 TV Mini-Series, written by - 6 episodes, writer - 4 episodes), The Double Life of Véronique (1991), Three Colors: Blue (1993 scenario), Three Colors: White (1994 scenario), 2001 Silence (2001), Heaven (2002 screenplay), Hell (2005), Nadzieja (2007 trilogy "Heaven, Hell and Purgatory", written by), Uit Zicht (2009 Short, original screenplay), and Wander and Burn, the Endless Stars (2018).


from The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia, Ed. Andrew Sarris, Visible Ink, Detroit, NY, 1998. Entry by Blazena Urgosikova

In the late 1970s, when the conflict between the State and the citizens of Poland was imminent, a new trend emerged in cinematography—the “cinema of moral unrest.” All the films in this trend have one common denominator: an unusually cutting critical view of the state of society and its morals, human relationships in the work process, public and private life. It is more than logical that Krzysztof Kieslowski would have belonged to this trend; he had long been concerned with the moral problems of the society, and paid attention to them throughout his film career with increasing urgency. The direction of his artistic course was anticipated by his graduation film From the City of Lodz, in which he sketched the problems of workers, and by his participation in the stormy protest meeting of young filmmakers in Cracow in 1971, who warned against a total devaluation of basic human values.

A broad scale of problems can be found in the documentary films Kieslowski made between shooting feature films: disintegration of the economic structure, criticism of executive work, and the relationships of institutions and individuals. These documentaries are not a mere recording of events, phenomena, or a description of people and their behaviour, but always an attempt to look underneath the surface. The director often used non-traditional means. Sometimes the word dominates the image, or he may have borrowed the stylistics of slapstick or satire, or he interfered with the reality in front of the camera by a staged element. Kieslowski did not emphasize the aesthetic function of the image, but stressed its real and literal meaning.

His feature films have a similar orientation: he concentrated on the explication of an individual’s situation in the society and politics, on the outer and inner bounds of man with the objectively existing world, and on the search for connections between the individual and the general. He often placed his heroes in situations where they have to make a vital decision (in his TV films The Staff and The Calm, and in his films for theatrical release).

The Amateur is the synthesis of his attitudes and artistic search of the 1970s, and is also one of the most significant films of the “cinema of moral unrest.” In the story of a man who buys a camera to follow the growth of a newborn daughter, and who gradually, thanks to this film instrument, begins to realize his responsibility for what is happening around him, the director placed a profound importance on the role of the artist in the world, on his morality, courage, and active approach to life. Here Kieslowski surpassed, to a large extent, the formulaic restrictions of the “cinema of moral unrest” resulting from the outside—the art essence of this trend. These restrictions are also eliminated in his following films. In The Accident (made in 1981, released in 1987) he extended his exploration of man and his actions by introducing the category of the accidental. The hero experiences the same events (Poland in 1981) three times, and is therefore given three destinies, but each time on a different side. Two destinies are more or less given by accident, the third one he chooses himself, but even this choice is affected by the accidental element. The transcendental factor appears in No End (a dead man intervenes in worldly events), but the film is not an exploration of supernatural phenomena so much as a ruthless revelation of the tragic period after the declaration of the state of emergency in December 1981, and a demonstration of the confessed truth that private life cannot be lived is isolation from the public sphere.

In the 1980s Kieslowski’s work culminated in a TV cycle and two films with subjects from the Ten Commandments. A Short Film about Killing is based on the fifth commandment (Thou shalt not kill), while A Short Film about Love comes from the sixth. Both films and the TV cycle are anchored in the present and express the necessity of a moral revival, both of the individual and the society, in a world which may be determined by accidentality, but which does not deliver us from the right and duty of moral choice.

After the fall of communism when, as a consequence of changes in economic conditions, the production of films experienced a sharp fall in all of Eastern Europe, some Polish directors sought a solution to the ensuing crisis in work for foreign studios and in co-productions This was the road taken by Kieslowski, and so all his films made in the 1990s were created with the participation of French producers: The Double Life of Veronique and the trilogy Three Colours: Blue, Three Colours: White, Three Colours: Red—loosely linked to the noble motto of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity. In these films Kieslowski followed up on his films from the 1980s in which his heroes struggle with the duality of reason and feelings, haphazardness and necessity, reality and mystery. Even in these films made abroad we can also trace certain irony and sarcasm which first appeared in his films made in the 1970s in Poland.
Blue, white, red: liberty, equality, fraternity. It was Piesio’s idea that having tried to film the Decalogue, why shouldn’t we try liberty, equality, fraternity? Why not try to make a film where the commanding dictums of the Decalogue are understood in a wider context? Why not try to see how the Ten Commandments function today, what our attitude to them is and how the three words liberty, equality and fraternity function today?—on a very human, intimate and personal plane and not a philosophical let alone a political or social one. The West has implemented these three concepts on a political or social plane, but it’s an entirely different matter on the personal plane. And that’s why we thought of these films.

Blue is liberty. Of course it’s equality too. And it can just as easily be fraternity. But the film Blue is about liberty, the imperfections of human liberty. How far are we really free? …To love is a beautiful emotion but in loving you immediately make yourself dependent on the person you love. You do what he likes, although you may not like it yourself, because you want to make him happy. So, while having these beautiful feelings of love, and having a person you love, you start doing a lot of things which go against your own grain. That’s how we’ve understood freedom in these films. On the personal level.

In Blue the prison is created by both emotions and memory. Julie probably wants to stop loving her husband because it would make it far easier for her to live. That’s why she doesn’t think about him. That’s why she’s forgotten. That’s why she doesn’t visit the cemetery and never looks through old photographs. When someone brings her old photographs, she says she doesn’t want to see them. We don’t actually show this in the film but it becomes clear later on that she’s refused them. She wants to forget all this. But is it really possible to forget? There comes a moment when she begins to feel fine. She starts to function normally, smile, go for walks. So it is possible to forget. Or at least try to forget. But suddenly there’s jealousy and she can’t get rid of it. She becomes a prisoner of a jealousy which is absurd because it concerns somebody who’s been dead and buried for at least six months. There’s nothing she can do for or against him.

She can’t define herself in relation to him. She can’t say ‘I love you’ or ‘I hate you’. There’s nothing she can do yet the jealousy torments her as if he were still alive. She tries to fight it off and she does so in an absurd way. She suddenly becomes so good that she’s too good. But she can’t get out of the trap. She puts it quite clearly at a certain moment in the film, that all this is a trap: love, pity, friendship.…

All three films are about people who have some sort of intuition or sensibility, who have gut feelings. This isn’t necessarily expressed in dialogue. Things are very rarely said straight out in my films. Very often everything that’s most important takes place behind the scenes, you don’t see it. Either it’s there in the actors’ play or it isn’t. Either you feel it, or you don’t.


Introducing a Krzysztof Kieslowski film on television a few years ago, Lindsay Anderson commented that what he most associated with Polish cinema was a quality of seriousness. No one, he added, better exemplified this seriousness than Kieslowski. Some people consider Kieslowski to be the finest film director currently working in Europe that he’s among the most serious there can be no doubt.

His seriousness has an allure that can keep an audience in awestruck thrall - which is not always the best critical response a film-maker could wish for. His films are sparing with their humour and their moral gravity is of the sort that brooks no argument. Kieslowski favours the large themes. His acclaimed series of television films, The Decalogue (1988), illustrated the Ten Commandments. His last feature, The Double Life Of Veronique, addressed life, death and the elusive nature of identity. His new trilogy, Three Colours (Blue is released today with White and Red to follow), takes on the values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

For devotees of the art-house tradition at its most sombre, Kieslowski belongs in the lineage of Bergman and Tarkovsky, who figure in his own pantheon. He is another of those northern directors whose austerity suggests an uncompromising vision with transcendental import. A former documentarist, he made films in the 1970s and 1980s that dealt directly with the hard political realities of everyday life in Poland, notably Blind Chance and No End. But it was The Decalogue's more abstract moral concern that put him on the world map as an object of auteur adulation.

Fans of The Decalogue tend to be so reverent that it is hard not to wonder whether there isn't less to these dramas than meets the eye. Visually prosaic, the series had enough elusive symbolism and gravitas of pacing to make it more resonant than its anecdotal nature seemed to allow for. The Double Life Of Veronique, on the other hand, was extremely stylised, Sławomir Idziak's baroque photography bringing an eerie depth to an already elliptical story (Idziak achieves similar wonders in Blue).

Kieslowski is anxious to play down the mystery quotient of his work, but he's not inclined to give too much away. 'My part of the work is to make the film. Your part is to find something in the film, or perhaps not. For me it's always important to hear viewers' interpretations. They turn out to be very different to my intentions. I don't hide my intentions. I speak about them - but not about my interpretations.'
In fairness, Kieslowski cannot be accused of cultivating a gnomic air, but his tendency to reduce questions to commonsense basics only fuels the mystique. Interviewing him through an interpreter, you get a sense of somehow skirting the heart of the matter, and his Polish intonations - a drawl with peculiar dying cadences - contrive to make him sound either dismissive or excessively self-deprecating.

On his relationship with his audience, Kieslowski manages to suggest that he's at once out to make his meaning crystal clear, and the exact opposite. 'Whatever stage I'm at with a film, whether I'm writing the script or editing, I always look at it from the point of view of the viewer - what he's expecting, the way he'd like me to entrap him and the way he'd like to be released from the trap, when he wants to be surprised, when he wants to laugh, when he wants to cry. You could describe my job as a game with the viewer - to give him what he wants but at the same time covertly to slip in something that he might not be expecting.'

That covert something is, one imagines, the sense of the transcendental. 'People are looking for this,' he agrees, 'but it's not because of a particular director or film. I think they need something like that, because what they have isn't enough. What they already have isn't explained to them - the sense of getting up in the morning, the sense of its history, sometimes of religion or of politics, a sense of the terrible.

'The Stalinists used to get up in the morning to kill their opponents and pull their fingernails out - we're always looking for some meaning in life. Throughout history and even now, there are lots of us trying to find out a sense of why we're here, but nobody ever has.'

The vagueness and open-endedness of his narratives suggest that Kieslowski is something of an old-school existentialist. Things simply happen, who knows why, and people just have to react to them. In his notes for Blue, he makes it clear that the theme of freedom is meant in a non-political sense: 'We're talking about individual freedom, a profound freedom, freedom of life.'

It's debatable, though, how far-reaching Kieslowski's films really are as moral inquiries. In The Decalogue, the detached style gets us close to the characters' anxieties, but ultimately shrugs them off as unknowable. In Veronique and in Blue, he goes even further - the elaborate camera work and unwly beauty of Irene Jacob and Juliette Binoche make his heroines all but opaque.

Conversely, there's often an over-statement that seems intrusive in A Short Film About Killing (from The Decalogue), the argument against capital punishment comes across as incongruously rhetorical.

As a moral observer, Kieslowski again keeps his options open. 'I do think people are good. It's just situations that put them into terrible predicaments, although of course human beings like to create their own situations.' He explains that the young murderer of The Decalogue, who kills a taxi driver for no apparent reason, is basically good if his sister hadn't been run over by a tractor, things might have been different. 'It's important to get to the roots of things - the moment when something actually started happening.'

This approach is illustrated at the start of Blue. The story is about to begin with a car crash Kieslowski gives us advance notice by showing a close-up of an oil drip. But, he stresses, this is just chance: it's futile to look for a greater why. 'Every day thousands of people die in car accidents. Sometimes it's slippery, sometimes somebody falls asleep, perhaps a screw comes undone. I'm not for investigating accidents, I'm just saying there was an accident, a man and a girl died, and then I start thinking what's going to happen with the woman who's left behind.'

Kieslowski's films seem to invoke metaphysical imponderables while at the same time shrugging them off. But when things resist explanation, meaning is invested in the image itself. What really makes Kieslowski's films - which, arguably, he pulls it off with complete success only in Veronique - are those images that don't easily translate into words. It happens when Irene Jacob's face breaks out into a radiant grin as rain falls on it, or when we're given a luminously bloated glass globe to contemplate at leisure.

When the images do fit concepts, then beware. Kieslowski has a tendency to overburden objects with glaring symbolism: candle wax drips like tears on the face of the Virgin a wasp struggles out of a glass just as a dying man rallies round a devil's-head car ornament signals doom. And yet Kieslowski has insisted, 'I don't film metaphors ... For me a bottle of milk is a bottle of milk.' In Blue, he explains, 'Juliette Binoche's face is reflected upside down in a spoon. Spoons reflect images upside down.'

This denial of meaning seems disingenuous. Veronique, for example, was remarkable for the way Kieslowski turned funding circumstances to his advantage. Working with French co-production money, he devised a story about a girl who dies in Poland and her double who goes on living in France. Clearly his symbolic farewell to Poland? 'It wasn't my intention for it to be a symbol of anything. A girl dies in Poland, that's all.'

The fact that he has been working in France, Kieslowski claims, is strictly a matter of funding, even though his new trilogy refers to the tricolour flag and a set of values dear to the Gallic heart. 'These concepts touch on everybody, not just France. If you ask Arafat's warriors what they're fighting for, they'll say exactly the same - liberty, equality, fraternity. Ask the Bosnians or the Serbs, they'll say the same. The concepts themselves are just pretexts to make films.'

Nevertheless, the three concepts have provided him with some philosophical grist. 'They're impossible to attain from the point of view of individuals. Politically, perhaps - apart from equality, of course. You can say, I want to be free, but how do you free yourself from your own feelings, your own memories, your own desires? Perhaps we can't function without them -
which automatically means we aren't free, we're prisoners of our own emotions.'

As yet, it's hard to evaluate Blue, which has left many viewers feeling dissatisfied, especially in the light of a cryptic, portentous closing sequence. Perhaps Kieslowski would advise sceptics to wait and see how the rest of the trilogy develops? 'Absolutely no. I'd say, don't buy any more tickets.'

Nick James: “Blue: Bare Necessities” (Criterion notes)

The thematic ideas and inspirations that sparked Three Colors: Blue (1993), though typically ambitious in scope, seem sketchy when compared to the intense experience of watching this exquisite film. We know that Krzysztof Kieslowski’s Three Colors trilogy corresponds to the three hues of the French tricolor, and also to the French national principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and that Blue refers, however loosely, to liberty. It’s also generally said that Blue is an antitragedy, just as White is an anticomedey and Red an antromance. Yet so manifold and bittersweet are the ironies at work in Blue that these framing ideas do little to help us face its creative challenge, which is to understand and empathize with someone to whom we might otherwise feel no connection—someone we might even envy or resent—a relatively wealthy woman blessed with talent and good looks, as she freezes out everyone she knows.

Blue’s idea of freedom is willfully perverse. Julie de Courcy (Juliette Binoche), at the peak of her powers, seeks to erase all trace of her former life with her classical composer husband and their daughter, both of whom are killed in a car crash that she survives in the film’s opening minutes. That former life is eloquently evoked in just a couple of images of Julie’s daughter: the child’s hand holding a sheet of creased blue tinsel out of the car window; a medium shot of the girl looking curiously out the back window as the car goes through a tunnel.

Julie’s subsequent attempt at self-negation suggests more than one interpretation. Unable to go through with suicide, she wants to disengage, to be cold, to isolate herself in a low-key existence. Since she can’t physically do away with herself, she tries to do so psychologically, to annihilate her persona by removing all the props and trappings that made her who she was. Kieslowski and coscreenwriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz at first present this fragile new life as a kind of limbo, a space in which Julie can limit her world to the bare necessities. But the way her new existence is depicted is full of the ambiguities typical of this director-screenwriter pairing. On the one hand, Julie’s modishly spare apartment is a pleasant refuge, but in the context of the film’s moral questions about love and what binds people together materially, it can also be seen as a manifestation of contemporary solipsism. Kieslowski’s critique of a lifestyle often expounded in 1990s popular culture as a kind of freedom—that of the “Me Generation.”

Another layer of, perhaps unconscious, social critique arises out of the contradictions of Julie’s decision. The new identity that she adopts so aggressively—albeit while striving not to be cruel—can be seen as an embodiment of a certain idea of feminism, of a desire to no longer be dependent on even the concept of a male partner, the maternal instinct, or the family unit, things that are now ashes in her mouth. In the context of this film, Kieslowski seems to be frowning upon Julie’s decisive isolationism, one that may also be linked to an older, bohemian idea of how artists should live. And this points to a key question posed by the film: Who really was the artist of the couple? Is Julie, as the film hints many times, the actual composer of the music we hear, or was she at least an equal partner in its creation?

What this repositioning of Julie’s injured idea of self does for Blue is provide room for all these speculations about who or what she may become, and let us empathize with her self-transformation, because we, too, are freed, to some extent, of the baggage of who she was. The film binds itself to her. She still looks every inch the creative consort of a successful artist, but we soon see with what detailed thoroughness this young woman sloughs off the worldly rewards of her husband’s fame, as if she seeks some spiritual solace in being ordinary—and in the process, the film brings her closer to the audience.

But the first thing from her past that Julie can’t escape is in her head. In the most ironic sense of the cliché, she must face the music. It’s when a snooping journalist greets Julie at the hospital where she’s recovering that she hears the first burst of a loud orchestral movement that momentarily shuts out everything else—it is a section, we discover, of a concerto to commemorate the reunification of Europe. Yet this is a kind of shutting-out she doesn’t want, one that transports her back to the creativity that links her to her dead family. The music strikes at key moments throughout the film, suffusing Julie in blue light. Not even holding her breath underwater can drown it out.

Binoche gives a brilliant minimalist performance, putting much of herself into it, and indeed, she and Julie seem to have much in common. Blue came at a pivotal moment in Binoche’s career. The daughter of an actress and a sculptor, she first made her mark at the age of twenty-two, as the muse of the notoriously difficult French auteur Leos Carax, starring in his debut film, Mauvais sang (1986). Her breakthrough international success came opposite Daniel Day-Lewis in Philip Kaufman’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1988). By the time she’d illuminated Carax’s hubristic romantic epic Les amants du Pont-Neuf (1991) with her life-affirming presence, she was the hottest art-house actress on the scene. Then beauty and fame took her down some blind alleys: Peter Kosminsky’s rather chocolate-box production of Wuthering Heights and Louis Malle’s faintly tawdry Damage (both 1992). Blue came along at precisely the right moment for her. It restored her in the eyes of her art-house fans, who recognized that she was now a formidable actress as well as a screen icon.

Kieslowski encouraged Binoche to wear her own clothes, to be the chic woman-about-Paris that she was in 1993: transcendentally beautiful—pale, dark-haired, feminine yet slightly boyish—intelligent, self-possessed, pragmatic. We can soon tell
that her Julie doesn’t have the ruthlessness to carry through her plan to completion—the sight in her flat of mice with babies forces her to borrow a cat from a neighbor, but she can’t watch the consequences. Julie’s flaw, in this context, is her conscience. She is not, after all, so invulnerable that she can do without help. And this is perhaps the script’s turning point, the moment when Julie reluctantly has to break the carapace she has created and face humanity again, the moment when some sense of community becomes necessary to her. This change is reinforced when another neighbor, Lucille—who cleaned up for her after the cat had done its work—panicked by her father’s visit to the club where she works as a stripper, asks Julie to come and see her.

I once described Julie as an anti–femme fatale, by which I meant that she destroys the memory of her man after the fact of his existence, and she remains fairly enigmatic despite the film’s focus on her. We assume she was a good wife and mother, and one of the few clear things we learn about her husband is what he thought of her: “That you are good and generous,” she is told. “That’s what you want to be. People can always count on you.” The other telling detail about him is that he liked to repeat the punch lines of jokes. This is a typical barbed bouquet from Kieślowski and Piesiewicz—the husband told jokes, so maybe he was a fun guy; but he repeated the punch lines, so maybe he was a pedant.

One thing that seems clearer in retrospect about the films Kieślowski and Piesiewicz made together—from No End (1985) onward to Kieślowski’s final film, Red (1994)—is how immersed in legal issues they are. Piesiewicz was a lawyer, and his forensic approach to moral dilemmas seems as powerful a force in the trilogy as Kieślowski’s humanist pessimism (though both, finally, are subordinated to an aesthetic that some have dubbed the “agnostic sublime”—see the ending described below). Some of the central questions at the heart of Blue are what constitutes a person’s property and what is the ethical way to disburse the trappings of a life now ended. Julie, the widow, is clear that she wants none of the actual physical property, but when she uncovers an unknown part of her husband’s existence (one connected obliquely to the law—it causes her to blunder briefly into a courtroom scene from 1993’s White), she feels guilty that she failed to notice any hint of her husband’s secret life. It is this discovery that brings her the clarity of vision about her life that she had lost and tried to regain by stripping everything away. Knowing that her husband was not exactly who he seemed to be allows her to be less tough on who she was herself. This is the moment of recognition, amplified by all the earlier, unavoidable encounters with people who broke through her shield—including the ones with her Alzheimer’s-stricken mother (played by Emmanuelle Riva), whose mind has already erased Julie, mocking her attempts at self-negation. Instead of freeing herself, Julie had imprisoned herself. Now she is able to reclaim her past life, including control of the property (much of which she’ll give away), and break out of her overwhelming grief.

Kieślowski is the master of the telling detail, and seeing Blue again makes me think that he is one of the great originators of what has become the international style of so many films shown at festivals, films that favor low-key acting, an oblique approach to subject matter and scenes, the off-kilter photographic image, and patience with passing time. What his imitators’ work often seems to lack, however, is the lyrical intensity we see in Blue’s mise-en-scène, and the adroit use of images suggestive of the inner life. The prologue of the few moments leading to the car crash is itself a master class in pared-down visual storytelling, but its very austerity leads us easily into Julie’s reduced world, in which breath on a feather, or the distorted reflection of a white-coated physician in her eye, simultaneously describes her fragility and the diminished field of her awareness.

Some critics feel that the later phase of Kieślowski’s work, from The Double Life of Véronique (1991) on, is too glossy and politically vague when compared with his Polish work, but what Blue and the rest of the trilogy have that the earlier films lack is a much greater ambition to tackle the enormities of the day—the unification of Europe being the most obvious idea put under the microscope. In 2002, I suggested to readers of Sight & Sound that Blue should be considered a serious candidate for one of the top ten films of all time in a poll the magazine conducts every ten years. Though I conceded that Kieślowski’s film might seem of modest reach when set beside, say, Citizen Kane or Battleship Potemkin, the objection disappeared for me both in the context of the trilogy as a whole and when I considered how rich a portrait of spiritual survival in the contemporary world Blue was painting. To me, the film seemed, and still seems, to examine the feminist rallying cry “The personal is political” with greater scope and sensitivity than any other. And its rich ambiguities leave enough room for us to see that the price of freedom depends on what kind of freedom you want.

But nothing in a Kieślowski film is ever straightforward, and Blue’s ending gives us one of the great examples in cinema of that supposedly masculine idea of woman’s unfathomability, the Gioconda smile. In a montage seen while the completed concerto’s choral ending plays, with lyrics drawn from Saint Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, we are reminded of the people who have crossed Julie’s path—Antoine (the hitchhiker who witnessed the accident), Lucille, Julie’s mother—who constitute the community she can’t shake off. At the very end, Julie is in tears, but right at the last moment, the corners of her mouth turn a tiny bit upward. Binoche says she smuggled the smile past Kieślowski, so in this case, the source of the image may be female after all. In any case, Julie’s smile does not necessarily mean that Blue’s ending is “happy” in a conventional sense, for surely the prime lesson of Kieślowski’s
film is the one so difficult for the Me Generation to swallow. It is that absolute freedom and love are opposites.

“Three Colors: A Hymn to European Cinema” (Criterion notes)

In 1989, the Communist rule that had dominated Eastern Europe since the end of the Second World War collapsed with astonishing rapidity. If the long-term political, economic, and ideological consequences of Europe’s reunification are still unfolding, there was an immediate and extraordinary artistic result, as Polish and French cinema came together to provide a climax to the work of Krzysztof Kieślowski. In a remarkable burst of creative energy from 1988 to 1994, the filmmaker was to write and direct fourteen films, culminating in Three Colors—the trilogy made up of Blue (1993), White (1993), and Red (1994)—a feat for which there are few parallels in the history of the cinema. Kieślowski in this period went from being a well-respected filmmaker within his own country to being one of the all-time greats of world cinema. The trilogy itself, his final work, almost defies belief: written, shot, and edited in less than three years and screened in succession at Venice, Berlin, and Cannes, so that for one year, Kieślowski dominated art cinema as no one ever had, or likely ever will again.

Kieślowski’s apprenticeship had been long and thorough. By the time he came to make The Decalogue in 1988, a series of ten-hour-long films for Polish television based on the Ten Commandments, he already had behind him training at the Łódź film school, the most famous film school in Europe, and a long career as a documentary filmmaker, as well as a number of prize-winning features. Perhaps just as significant, he had developed a series of collaborations that were to form the infrastructure that would enable him to work at a furious creative pace. The first and arguably most important was with Studio Filmowe TOR, which Kieślowski joined in 1974 and which was to provide constant backing during both his struggles with Communist censorship in the seventies and eighties and his adventurous experiments with Western funding in the nineties. I remember well that when I first asked Kieślowski, as he was editing Red, to participate in a film celebrating a hundred years of Polish film—part of the sixteen-country Century of Cinema project, in which great directors were asked to make personal histories of their own national cinemas—he was adamant that, whatever his own interest, he would do nothing without the approval of TOR. I remember even better the day spent in TOR’s cramped offices in Warsaw, where Kieślowski sat, smoking more cigarettes than I have ever seen a human being smoke, listening intently to the negotiations but never intervening, until we had reached agreement that we would film his idea of a history told from the point of view of the audience, with a young and unknown director, Pavel Lozinski.

If TOR was Kieślowski’s bedrock from the early seventies, the filmmaker forged two further essential relationships while making the fiction film No End (1985). Earlier, while researching a documentary about the courts, Kieślowski had encountered the lawyer Krzysztof Piesiewicz, and when he came to make No End, a film about the consequences of a lawyer’s death during martial law, it was to Piesiewicz that he went, to suggest that they cowrite the script. This collaboration was to last until Kieślowski’s death in 1996. Similarly, the music for No End was provided by Zbigniew Preisner, who thereafter would compose for all of Kieślowski’s films. It was this formidable team that sat down in the late eighties to plan The Decalogue. Although the original intention had been to use several directors, in the end, Kieślowski directed them all. During this frenetic period, he and Preisiewicz also began to think that the films might have international appeal, and German television came in with the money to allow two of them to be turned into full-length features. The one based on the sixth commandment—“Thou shalt not kill”—was screened at Cannes in 1988 and, under the title A Short Film About Killing, became an international hit.

The final component of the infrastructure underpinning Three Colors now came into play. Marin Karmitz’s family had fled Communist Romania in the immediate postwar era, and he had built up one of the most important distribution and exhibition companies in France, MK2. That company now became the lead partner in Kieślowski’s next film, the Franco-Polish coproduction The Double Life of Véronique (1991), starring French actress Irène Jacob. She won best actress at Cannes for her performance, and Miramax picked up the film in America—where it grossed $2 million, an amazing feat for such an art film. All the elements were now in place for Three Colors.

These films gather many of Kieślowski’s earlier concerns, particularly the role of coincidence and chance in life, and take them to a level both more personal and more abstract. Each film elaborates one of the great ideas of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. However, Kieślowski is not interested in these slogans politically; indeed, it would be fair to say that, for Kieślowski, the final collapse of Communism merely acknowledged the end of politics, which had so obsessed Europe for two hundred years, and had been so prominent in his earlier films and life. Instead, the films explore what these concepts can tell us about life: we are presented with Julie, who must break free from the ties that bind her to her dead husband and daughter; Karol, who must find equality with his French wife, who so despises and misuses him; and Valentine, who discovers in her relationship with a snooping judge a genuine fraternity absent in her life with her boyfriend, with his petty jealousy. But it would be completely wrong to think that these interpretations, or any of the other allegories that one can lay out—so that equality in White, for example, is also about the inequality between East and West in Europe—in any way exhaust the films’ multiplicity of meanings. Indeed, it is more helpful to understand these themes as one of the elements that Kieślowski uses to make each scene and each shot pregnant with
meaning—for the individual films and, even more dizzyingly, for the trilogy as whole—which, in the end, the viewer can make sense of only in terms of his or her own life.

As a counterpoint to the great ideas of the Revolution are the three colors of the French flag: blue, white, and red. The colors punctuate each of their films, adding yet another layer to the rich palimpsest that Kieślowski creates from his gripping narratives. For they are all at the service of his abiding concerns: that each moment is full of infinite possibility, that our lives are connected and interconnected in ways that we can never fully grasp. The conclusion of the trilogy, when our major characters emerge from a tragic accident, both delivers the pleasure of a happy ending and leaves us all too aware of the five hundred deaths that the narrative has not had time for—an open ending without equal. This continuous reflection on the act of filmmaking never becomes coy or pretentious, but Kieślowski, in these final works, shows that he is perhaps the director in the history of the cinema who most recognizes the claims of narrative closure while also recognizing the falsifying simplicities of narrative.

When Kieślowski said that he was retiring from directing after Red, it was easy to read it as a gesture of exhaustion. However, it may be as true that Kieślowski saw that what he had achieved in these films marked a cross-fertilization of the two great postwar European cinemas that could never be surpassed. He had composed the hymn to Europe that provides such an important plotline in Blue, and his song was sung.

For more on Kieslowski, see Doug Cummings’ excellent article on him in Senses of Cinema’s Great Directors series: http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/kieslowski/

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NOV 27 TOM MCCARTHY, SPOTLIGHT, 2015….
DEC 4 JOHN HUSTON, THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING, 1975

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FEB 26 Jean-Luc Godard, Breathless 1960
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MAR 12 David Lean, Dr. Zhivago 1965
MAR 19 recess
MAR 26 Arturo Ripstein, Time to Die 1966
APR 2 Michelangelo Antonioni, Blow-Up 1966
APR 9 Michael Cimino, The Deer Hunter 1978
APR 16 Monty Python, The Meaning of Life 1983
APR 23 Stanley Kubrick, Eyes Wide Shut 1999
APR 30 Terrence Malick, Tree of Life, 2011
MAY 7 Alfonso Cuarón, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban 2004

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