

# Tears and Laughter: The Alpha and the Omega of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Decalogue*

涙と笑い：キェシロフスキの『デカローグ』のアルファとオメガ

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I want to warmly thank Prof. Sowa for the invitation to speak today at this lecture sponsored by the Institute for Christian Culture. I also want to thank Prof. Matthew Taylor, a dear friend, for all his work in arranging everything. I believe that beyond individual sin and redemption there is such a thing as cultural sin and redemption. That is, I believe that some cultural arrangements are more conducive to faith, others less so. Each of us can contribute to making our own culture more a culture of life, a culture that encourages the faith. I think that Institutes such as this one make such contributions and so, I am very happy to be here.

While there are some here who are familiar with Krzysztof Kieślowski, not everyone is, so a bit of background is in order. Kieślowski (1946-2004) was a Polish film director most famous for his series of three films *Tricolour: White, Red, Blue* (2002-2004). He began as a documentary film maker in Poland. He switched to fiction because he thought he could be more truthful that way. *The Decalogue*, first broadcast in 1989, was that work that made him well-known, especially in Europe. *The Decalogue* is a series of 10 films, based on the Ten

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Commandments from the Jewish Scriptures. A longer version of two of the films, *Decalogue 5: A Short Film about Killing* and *Decalogue 6: A Short Film about Love* were made and released for movie theaters.

From the beginning the critical reception of *The Decalogue* has been very positive and its reputation grows with time. In 2016 a new DVD set of the films was released by the prestigious Criteria Collection and new round of appreciative reviews appeared.

In this presentation I want to look at *Decalogue 1* and *Decalogue 10* - at the beginning and the end of the series. While each film in the series can be viewed on its own, it is also clear that Kieślowski and Piesiewicz intended the 10 films to form a whole. Thus, the first film is an introduction to the whole series and the last one is meant to bring it to completion. The first film begins with tears and the last one ends with laughter, hence the title of my talk and my belief that the whole of *The Decalogue* represents a kind of “Divine Comedy” that ends with the promise of salvation. In fact, I think both the first and the last film contain the same meaning but refracted differently through laughter or through tears.

By and large I am going to presume a basic knowledge of the Ten Commandments, and so I will not spend time filling in background information. Nevertheless there is a variety in the way that different groups number the commandments and so I will simply give you the version of the Commandments which I am using as background for today’s talk. It is the Catholic numbering which Kieślowski and Piewicz were most familiar, although I hasten to add that they were certainly aware of the different ways of counting the Commandments and were not overly concerned to make each movie correspond one-to-one with a specific commandment.

1. I am the LORD your God. You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.

2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

It will be helpful to bear in mind the first and the tenth:

1. I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have strange gods before me.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods.

Just a word about the first commandment. There is a long history of Jewish and Christian interpretation that sees all of the commandments as contained implicitly in the first commandment. The apocraphal book, the Wisdom of Solomon says: "For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning, and cause and end of every evil" (14.27). John Calvin wrote that what was called idolatry was more than just an individual sin, it was a reflection of the form of any sin. St. Thomas Aquinas before him had said that idolatry is the "cause, beginning, and goal" of every sin. Each commandment, then, is about, not avoiding, but overcoming the idolatry that we always already are perpetrating. The "first commandment" is not one alongside the other nine, but their principle, structure and intent. I believe that Kieślowski and Piesiewicz took this as their starting point.

The tenth commandment, on the other hand, forbids the desire for things that belong to one's neighbor. Thus, this commandment, in particular, has drawn the

attention of René Girard, the theoretician of desire. He writes: “The commandment that prohibits the desiring of the goods of one’s neighbor attempts to resolve the number one problem of every human community: internal violence.” He sees the tenth commandment as sketching a “fundamental revolution in the understanding of desire.” It alerts us to the fact that “our neighbor is the model for our desires. This is what I call mimetic desire.” He continues: “The principle source of violence between human being is mimetic rivalry” that “rivalry resulting from imitation of a model who becomes a rival or of a rival who becomes a model. ... Mimetic rivalries can become so intense that the rivals denigrate each other, steal the other’s possessions, seduce the other’s spouse, and , finally, they even go so far as murder.” As Girard points out, these are the acts forbidden by commandments nine, eight, seven, and six in the Protestant numbering. All those sins flow out of that which is prohibited in the tenth commandment: covetousness, or, simply, desire.

If the Decalogue devotes its final commandment to prohibiting desire for whatever belongs to the neighbor, it is because it lucidly recognizes in that desire the key to the violence prohibited in the four commandments that precede it. If we ceased to desire the goods of our neighbor, we would never commit murder or adultery or theft or false witness. If we respected the tenth commandment, the four commandments that precede it would be superfluous.

(Girard: (2001) 11-12)

Girard goes further and sees that mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry also form a kind of idolatry, based on the “double idolatry of the self and other.” We adore our models, but the adoration turns to hatred because we seek to adore ourselves.

Thus, both the First Commandment and the Tenth Commandment, in very different ways, encompass the whole of the Decalogue. This is one reason that the Decalogue could sustain a “cycle” of films in which each film stands on it

own while being related to all the others. I will show how *Decalogue 1* creates the tragic world in which the other Commandments will be examined while *Decalogue 10* leaves us with a comic vision of how to cope with it.

Before we discuss things like plot and characters I would like to summarize what we see in the first two minutes of *Decalogue 1*.

The movie opens with a shot of the place where the water of a pond turns to ice; so we see ice and water. We then see smoke and fire. We also, perhaps without being aware of it, see earth and sky. Earth, air, fire, water – the four elements. The most basic realities and the principles of everything else are presented for viewing in the opening seconds of the film. More than that, we see a boundary between ice and water, between water and earth. These are liminal spaces through which transformations occur.

We see a young man whose gaze turns towards us. He is watching us. Kieślowski is making us aware of what we are doing: watching. Our watching is to be a self-aware watching.

Suddenly the scene shifts and we see a woman, the image of a woman who is gazing at a television screen that has the image of a happy child running in a hallway. We see her tears. She is looking at something happy but she is crying. Strange. We return to the young man by the fire. He is also crying. Notice please that first two minutes of the film are without any words. Kieślowski begins with images and without words. It is a kind of implicit warning: beware of words. There are realities that language cannot handle. One of these realities is death - especially the death of a child. There are no words. Kieślowski respects this reality.

*Decalogue 1* is the story of the death of a child. There are three main characters: Pawel, the son who dies; Krzysztof, the father, who is a university professor and does not believe in God; and Irena, Krzysztof's sister, who

sometimes takes care of Pawel and is a devout Catholic believer.

It bears emphasizing what is missing in this film. What is not there. In *Decalogue 1* no sin is committed, unlike every other film in the series. No one lies. Also no one steals; no adultery is committed. Most importantly, given what we spoke of above, and in stark contrast to *Decalogue 10*, there is no rivalry between any of the characters. I think Kieślowski has arranged the movie to emphasize this point. I think this even goes a way to explaining structurally the absence of the mother. The father, the son, and the aunt are not in rivalry with each other. Krzysztof is a “good” man, who does not believe in God, and Irena is a “good” woman, who is a devout believer, and Pawel is a “good” child, who is open to reality. None of the three are perfect, but they represent ways of being in the world that are familiar to all of us. We all know people who have faith, imperfect but real faith. And we know people who do not believe but live lives of real goodness.

Two accidents occur simultaneously in the film. The glass bottle of ink on Krystof’s desk mysteriously cracks, spilling ink, ruining his work, upsetting him. At the same time the ice on the pond mysteriously cracks drowning his son, Pawel. This “cracking” or “breaking” of the glass and of the ice represents Krzysztof’s own fragility. We are capable of being broken by something breaking into reality. What happens when the ice breaks? Pawel drowns. Who do you blame? There is no one in this film to blame. I think that this is an absolutely critical point for the whole series. The film is not an accusation. Krystof did not fail in his duties as a father. Together with Pawel he carefully calculated the thickness of the ice on his computer. He then went out and checked the thickness, poking it with a stick, jumping up and down on it. But like the ink pot, an accident happened. The ice broke. The film does not blame God. Rather the film says, here is the reality of the world that we live in. Accidents happen and they can be tragic.

For her part Irena wept. Those with faith are not spared from tragedy. “Jesus

wept" (John 11.35). The shortest verse in the Bible. Christians mourn, but not like the others who have no hope.

As news of the ice breaking spreads, Krzysztof searches more and more desperately for his son. Once he realizes that his son is drowned he continues to search, but now for something else. Let us consider the last six minutes of the film that commence once Krzysztof realizes that Pawel has drowned.

Krzysztof searches. He goes to the church. He overturns the altar and thereby defaces the icon of Mary. But the defacement turns out to be revelatory. The wax that spills on the icon forms tears. Mary wept. The power of an icon, which is the opposite of an idol, is its ability to reveal the mystery not in spite of but because of its defacement. Rowan Williams wrote in his study of Dostoevsky: "The divine image establishes itself not by universally compelling attraction but by its endurance through disruption and defilement" (Williams, 2011, 208). Jesus was the icon of God who revealed God's love in his being defaced. This icon continues that revelation. If we are to move beyond idolatry, it is not so much the idols that must be broken, but it is ourselves. Our idolatrous hearts must be broken open and that allows the truth to enter. We see this in Krzysztof. He searches and what does he find. He finds in the baptismal font of the church a piece of ice. The very thing that has caused the tragedy. But ice is not his enemy. He does not fling it away in horror. He allows it to soothe his brow. Ice comforts him in his loss. We inhabit a world of great beauty and of great sadness.

There are no words. There are no words. Once Krzysztof realizes that Pawel is drowned no word is spoken in the movie.

Now let us turn to *Decalogue 10*, but keeping *Decalogue 1* in mind.

It can only be deliberate that *Decalogue 1* and *Decalogue 10* are so diametrically opposed in so many ways. *1* is a tragedy; *10* is a comedy. The climax of *1* is the death of a child; the death of a parent is the instigating occasion

for *10*. *1* is the story of a father, his son, and the father's sister. *10* is the story of two brothers. There are no sins committed in *1*. In *10* at least Commandments 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 are broken. It opens with a song commanding its listeners to break the commandments, and the singer, the younger of the two brothers, seems to hold to the philosophy of "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." *1* begins with over two minutes without words. *10* begins with the screamed/sung words: Kill! Kill! Kill! The only time in the series that the Decalogue is explicitly referenced is in this song that is urging its listeners to break the commandments because "everything belongs to you." In *1* God is spoken of but in *10* neither God nor religion is ever mentioned. And, as I wrote at the beginning, *1* ends with tears while *10* ends with laughter.

Nevertheless I claim that they reveal the same reality, just differently reflected. To show this I will summarize the plot of *10*, but I do ask you to remember that when you summarize the plot of a black comedy it is hard not to make it sound slightly scurrilous.

The two brothers are sons of man they hardly knew and did not love. The kindest way to put it is to repeat the words used at his funeral. His family, his professional life, even his emotions were sacrificed to a "noble passion." What was that noble passion? Stamp collecting. The man had managed to garner 11 *gran prix* awards and participate in six international exhibitions. In fact, the man appears in *Decalogue 8* visiting another inhabitant of the apartment complex to show her his latest acquisition. The woman comments to another that the man loves his stamps as if they were his grandchildren.

I must pause for a moment to point out from a mimetic viewpoint the sheer brilliance of choosing stamp collecting as the dead man's "noble passion." What are stamps worth? What are old, used stamps worth? The value of the paper and the ink, even of the art does not stand in any proportion to the price that people



will pay for a stamp or even a series of stamps. A stamp is worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it. Here desire is all - mimetic desire. If you are inside this world, then stamps have value, if you are outside of it – it is hard to see how they could be worth so much.

The older son is a kind of “salary man” in a failing marriage with one son. His quite-a-bit younger brother is the lead singer in a moderately successful punk-rock band. Neither has much money and they are dismayed to discover right after the funeral that their father has debts. With incredible economy Kieślowski shows the older brother's almost instinctual awareness of “value” when a neighbor offers to cancel the father's debt if he can help himself to some stamp in the collection. With no knowledge of stamps and up to that point no interest, the son still turns him down.

Gradually the brothers are led to understand and appreciate the value of the stamp collection. First, they are overwhelmed at its monetary value. Just one of the stamps is worth a new automobile. But fairly quickly each one becomes convinced of the value of the collection itself. Neither of them wants to sell it, nor do they want to break it up. Rather, they wish to complete the collection. They find that it is missing one stamp of a series, the Austrian Mercury stamps – blue, yellow and red. The red is missing from their collection. Their father had sought it in vain.

They discover that there is only one way to obtain this stamp. It cannot be bought with money. It must be done in an exchange. For the stamp the older brother must give up his kidney. He eventually decides to make the exchange. During the operation, however, the father's apartment is burglarized and the whole collection is stolen. The brothers get the stamp but to them it is now worthless - they do not have the rest of the series.

But the movie does not end there. In the subsequent police investigation into

the robbery each brother slowly turns on the other, becoming convinced that the other was somehow involved in the robbery. Each one secretly accuses the other to the police. After their mutual betrayal, they each witness something that allows them to understand how the heist was pulled off in way that did not involve either of them. They meet back in the apartment of their father and admit their own worse sin - the betrayal of the other. They then find that each of them has bought the same new series of stamps. “A series,” one says and they both laugh. Thus, the movie, and with it the series, ends with their laughter. Kieślowski would have it so.

But laughter is an ambiguous reality and so its context becomes all-important. One can laugh *at* someone and the laughter becomes a way of marking difference, of establishing one’s superiority. Laughter

can weaken as well as strengthen the barriers that separate each of us from the others. Laughter will erupt when we see our long-cherished prejudices confirmed and also when we see them finally crumble into dust. Baudelaire . . . is among the few who recognize the existence of a truly superior laughter, the one that welcomes its own downfall. Unlike so many of our peevish “demystifiers,” he was not building intellectual cages in which to imprison everyone but himself. He read laughter in a Pascalian light, as a sign of contradiction pointing both to the “infinite misery” and the “infinite greatness” of man. (Girard (1978), 130)

We see a reflection of this Pascalian light at the end of the *Decalogue*. All the way through Kieślowski has been tracking the human person as being caught between this infinite misery and infinite greatness. He has captured that betweenness in the daily of lives of ordinary people who populate one apartment block in Warsaw.

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