

The Decline of the Family - *The Decalogue's* Urban Politics of Uncertainty

by Dwayne Avery

In the fourth film of Krzysztof Kieslowski's television series *The Decalogue* the relationship between a father and daughter suffers a sudden and shocking transformation. Michal, so it seems, is not Anka's real, biological father. Yet, this is not the film's most scandalous moment. Rather, the couple's disturbing exchange occurs much later, when their freedom from the laws of the family leads them to play a very dangerous game of erotic fantasy, as paternal bonds are replaced by the energy of desire. Michal, in the end, rejects his "daughter's" incestuous flirtations, restoring order to the family unit by reclaiming his status as the Father-Figure; but, in the end, no matter how hard we try to imagine them in a normal relationship, what remains is an insurmountable feeling of doubt and uncertainty, as the solidity of the family bond - that most important bearer of the social order - lays in fragile tatters.

How should we interpret the uncertain relationship between Michal and Anka? According to Joseph Kickasola (2004), the trouble with identity in this film is deeply political: the uncertainty of the family bond, especially its inability to guarantee social order, is a sign of Poland's difficult national identity. Ruth Perlmutter (1997) goes even further, arguing that the *entire* series can be understood as a political meditation on the decline of family responsibility. "Although with *The Decalogue*, Kieslowski ostensibly abandoned political issues for more universal moral concerns," Perlmutter writes, "in a Kieslowski film the personal cannot be severed from the political. The struggles of his characters with identity, career options and parental responsibilities emanate from Kieslowski's ambivalence towards his own repressive "father"-land, which seems to hover in judgment over his Polish characters like a vengeful Old Testament patriarch."

Both Kickasola and Perlmutter's political reading of *The Decalogue* are noteworthy. Given Kieslowski's recent status as a postmodern obscurantist, who has supposedly abandoned the serious political work of the social documentary to explore various New Age themes on our spiritual interconnectivity, any political understanding of Kieslowski's fiction films is, quite frankly, welcome. Indeed, in the case of *The Decalogue* what often takes precedence is the series' metaphysical overtones, especially the novel ways in which Kieslowski modernizes the values inscribed in the Ten Commandments. This apolitical reception of Kieslowski's most recent works, however, is deeply misconstrued. For what is uncovered in these works is not some transcendent or retro-humanistic discourse on the universality of Man, and the great moral dilemmas that connect us all, but the immanent nature of ethics, how the universal is inscribed in a specific, concrete historical complex.

Of course, this does not mean that one simply discards the spiritual, even mysterious quality of Kieslowski's work. Indeed, one of the most satisfying and enduring attributes of *The Decalogue* is the delicate and glowing way Kieslowski

confronts the everyday world, imbuing many of his characters with an illuminating light of grace, spiritual longing and forgiveness. Rather, what is needed is to understand how the ethical dilemmas confronted by his characters are grounded in a complex and concrete historical situation. As Žižek writes: "Of course, it is not only legitimate, but also necessary, to inquire into the concrete social conditions within which Kieslowski accomplished the turn from socio-political concerns to more global ethico-religious ones: the fundamental lesson of dialectics is that universality as such emerges, is articulated 'for itself,' only within a set of particular conditions (2001:8)."

However, what is problematic about the previous socio-political readings is that they do not go far enough and provide all the necessary details needed to gauge the structural significance of the films' elucidation of Poland's political crisis. For example, after making his important socio-political reading, Kickasola provides very little clarity on what this nationalistic uncertainty entails: does the problem in Polish identity refer to its confrontation with socialism and the tension generated by the Solidarity Movement? Or does it refer to Poland's struggle in coming to terms with its racial identity, especially its not so hospitable relationship with its Jewish citizens? Likewise, Perlmutter's political reading of *The Decalogue's* overarching concern with the decline of patriarchy does not advance us much further. Other than her vague notion that uncertainty, blind chance and coincidence prevents characters from attaining control over their lives, and are thus incapable of bringing Poland out of its bleak experiment with socialism, there is very little account of the structural framework within which these individual, ethical dilemmas take place.

As a corrective of these earlier interpretations, in this essay I will not only map some of the concrete social conditions that constitute *The Decalogue's* historical context (socialist Poland on the verge of revolution) but I will flesh out how this period of national instability is reflected formally in the various individual episodes. Thus, not only is the shocking and turbulent personal relationship between Anka and Michal indicative of the ambivalent conditions of Poland's momentous shift from a centralized, one-party political system to a de-centralized one based in a global, liberal economy, but all the personal dilemmas encountered in the series provide an allegorical survey of Poland's uncertain future.

To accomplish this goal I will contextualize my reading in terms of a specific space-time dimension: first, the films' evocation of political and social uncertainty will be read not only in terms of Poland's socialist past, but what separates Kieslowski's critique from Poland's golden age in political filmmaking is the way he moves on to attend to Poland's uncertain future, especially the ambivalence surrounding its place within a multinational world order and the social role given to high technology. Second, since the entire series is set around a single apartment complex, I will focus on perhaps one of the most important, yet overlooked aspects of *The Decalogue*: the film's construction of urban space. While most critics undoubtedly reference the dreary apartment complex, which houses and frames all the characters' moral journeys, there has been little attempt at moving beyond mere description to determine how Kieslowski's mediation of urban space opens up the films to a broader socio-political analysis. This is unfortunate, since an in-depth look at Kieślowski's urban milieu allows the reader to observe many of the spatial transfigurations

currently taking place under the banner of globalization, especially how advanced technologies lead to new computer/human interfaces.

The Apartment Complex: Urban Form in the Socialist City

In *The Decalogue* one of the connecting threads which weaves in and out of all the individual films is a grey, concrete apartment complex, easily recognizable as one of Poland's ubiquitous experiments with communist mass housing. As the home of all the central characters, this piece of Kieslowski's cinematic city, however, forms much more than just a neutral backdrop for the narrative action. Rather, the architectural environment, which constantly permeates the lives of the characters, intrudes forcefully upon the viewer and forms its own recurring presence. To ensure the viewer of this ominous presence, Kieslowski will often open an episode *first* by showing a foreboding shot of the massive concrete structure, and only then does he move on to gaze upon one of the building's inhabitants. In a shot from the first episode, for instance, what impresses the viewer is the vertical scale of the concrete environment, as the camera strains upwards at an extreme angle, trying to frame a series of columns that recede into the infinite. The effect is dizzying. For no matter how hard the camera attempts to order the structure, by revealing its point of culmination, the columns continue to rise, leaving all sense of the ground behind, as we are engulfed by a wide open sky.

Architectural forms, especially windows and other transparent surfaces, hold a special place in many of Kieslowski's films. Unlike solid barriers, such as walls, which uphold the rigid distinction between inside and outside, windows challenge this dichotomy, condensing both inside and outside in a single site. In *The Decalogue* this condensation is performed by numerous window shots that initiate the detective work of the narration, as we peer beyond the objective life-world of the characters and cross over into their interiority. In this way, Kieslowski's love of beginning an episode with shots of open windows emphasizes our desire to traverse the ocular line, to break through the protective seal of privacy and reveal what is hidden and concealed within the characters.

Yet, while this understanding of the built environment clearly favors the subject's interiority - the way the inside is accessed via the outside - what would happen if we reversed the formula? Would we not find the powers of the outside, the constitutive force of an architectural landscape capable of acting upon its inhabitants, forming them in its own concrete image? For the Eastern European viewer, the constitutive force of the environment, especially the social purposes ascribed to urban architecture, is all too apparent. After all, *The Decalogue's* mass apartment complex is not merely one form of urban architecture amongst other equally available types of housing. Rather, for generations of Polish citizens, these mass housing units represented forcefully the materialization of ideology. To understand the intricate ways in which political ideology and urban development coincide (or rather, in the case of Poland, how they formed an immense gap) I will provide a very brief overview of the socialist city, particularly real estate patterns under communism. Then I will outline how *The Decalogue* critiques this urban legacy, while at the same time anticipates a new phase of urban development, one in which the centralizing

tendencies of socialist ideology gives way to a new techno-sphere based on high technology and decentralized systems of spatial organization.

One of the contradictions associated with the rise and spread of Soviet-style socialism relates to the development of the industrial city. Whereas the basic tenets of the communist ideology sought to eradicate any substantial social distinction between cities and the rural countryside, by providing all areas with the same resources and social benefits, in reality a very different pattern of spatial development emerged. In fact, much like other western nations during the early twentieth century, spatial development under the burgeoning drive of industrialization witnessed an ineluctable bias towards the city. Indeed, as many satellite socialist countries, such as Poland, underwent an intense and unprecedented process of industrialization, it was the city that quickly became the prime emblem for socialist progress (For an excellent study of the socialist city see French and Hamilton's *The Socialist City*).

Thus, despite an official political ideology that promoted even spatial development, communist countries shared with its western rivalries an intense investment in the status, development and industrialization of the city. However, despite this similarity there are substantial differences between socialist and capitalist cities. One of these, which relates to *The Decalogue*, is the absence of land markets and its impact on housing infrastructure. With the rapid process of urbanization, countries such as Poland, immediately witnessed a widespread shortage in housing. However, unlike capitalist counties, which rely partially on the free market to provide real estate, socialist urban policy favored a more centralized approach, which resulted in its own unique process of spatialization. According to Alain Bertaud and Bertrand Renaud (1995), since land has no monetary value in a socialist system, there is little incentive to redevelop and reuse specific areas within the city. Instead, whenever new land was required, older industrial areas near the city centre were simply abandoned, and suburban land became the prime site for urban development, especially mass housing complexes. Overtime this led to the rapid growth of the city, as the push to constantly use new peripheral areas caused the city to expand further and further away from the city centre.

Subsequently, during the 1960's and 1970's, when Poland witnessed its great surge of mass housing projects, the space allocated for its ubiquitous experiment in socialist design was the peripheral suburbs. However, unlike the suburbanization of the American city, which rested on the convergence of the single family home, the highway and the automobile, the design of the Polish suburbs rested on a combination of working class ideology, the modern high rise and social homogenization (Weclawowicz, 2005). In terms of design, much of the inspiration for these mass structures, which could house several thousand tenants, ironically came from the west, especially the functional works of the International Style. Concrete, reinforced steel, functional zoning, and the pure architectural laws of the straight and vertical lines – these were the revamped modernist tools for creating a better, socially homogenized urban society.

Yet, just as quickly as these housing units were erected, critics and citizens quickly began to see the dream unravel. Waiting lists for a place in the new

complexes were extremely long (Lizon, 1996). Also, while it is true that many different social groups lived side by side in the same buildings, the mere proximity of different classes did not immediately promote social equality (Weclawowicz, 2005). Finally, inefficient land use caused these housing projects to become extremely costly, since more and more infrastructure, such as public transit, heating and water, was required to meet the demands of the rapidly expanding city (Bertaud and Renaud, 1995). With time, the visible signs of neglect set in, as more and more of these complexes resembled communist ghettos rather than utopias of socialist progress.

Subsequently, when the camera closes in on and frames the mass housing complex throughout *The Decalogue*, it is helpful to place this piece of the urban environment within its socio-historical context, in order to appreciate Kieslowski's critique of the socialist state. Brought together artificially to execute the planned dream of socialist equality, the inhabitants of *The Decalogue* repeatedly demonstrates the failure of this grand project, as Kieslowski turns a critical eye towards the everyday, revealing a not so idealistic world plagued by uncertainty, rudeness, envy, suspicion, and even murder. Undoubtedly, as Perlmutter argues, this is in part the face of Kieslowski's "vengeful Old Testament patriarch" - the failed paternity of a communist bureaucracy unable to care for its socialist family. Yet, the crisis of familial responsibility evidenced throughout the series forms only one half of Kieslowski's critique. The other half faces the uncertainty of Poland's future.

A Present Future – Mapping the Flows of the Post-Industrial City

Located subtly in the background of *The Decalogue's* melodramatic stories of familial tragedy and ethical choice is a series of everyday material objects that reveal an urban environment in the throes of transition, as Poland's verges on its revolutionary return to a free market economy. For if the apartment complex represents the remnants of the socialist city, where communist ideology mixed concretely with the might of industrial technology, elsewhere in the films Kieslowski weaves into poignant focus another system of urban space, one dependent on new advanced technologies and open to various multinational, cross border flows.

Surely, it is quite possible to miss these material signs and objects, since the emotional and often haunting intensity of the central characters retain our focus. But, nonetheless, they are present, embedded in the everyday life-world of the filmic city, and include such familiar objects as passports, international money orders, personal computers, airports, television screens, telephones, western consumer products and advertisements. In the next few sections, my aim will be to bring together these material signs to map the socio-political significance involved in the everyday use of these technologies. My central questions will be: how do these everyday objects point to a different, decentralized reading of urban space? And how do they connect with the series' overarching familial problems to create an allegory for Poland's break with its socialist past? While it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a detailed reading of each film in the series, I will instead begin with a general description of the specific qualities associated with this new urban space and then move on to consider the specific role technologies play in the advanced techno spaces of the post-industrial city.

In his book *The World is Watching: Video as Multinational Aesthetics*, Dennis Redmond argues that *The Decalogue* should not be analyzed as a form of cinematic aesthetics, which Redmond associates with the nation state and the development of national cinema, but as an example of the multinational flows of video culture. This does not mean that the local context of video culture is of no importance. Rather, in order to gauge the international significance of a series like *The Decalogue* - its international financing or host of global inter-textual references - the local needs to be placed within a larger context, "a total system," to use Adorno's phrase. While Redmond focuses largely on the formal qualities of this context, especially the way Kieslowski joins distinctly Eastern European themes with various Western genres and film stylistics, his treatment of the multinational quality of *The Decalogue* is both unique and convincing. Perhaps one of the most interesting facets of his book - and the figure which will help us reach an understanding of the geo-political changes described in the films - involves his reading of *The Decalogue's* special reoccurring figure (known often as the Silent Observer), who appears in nearly all of the films as a different character.

For Redmond, the omnipresence of this strange and enigmatic character can be understood as a sign of a world system dependent on sophisticated media technologies. That is, by possessing the ability to freely cross over the film's diegetic barrier, the silent observer represents the unhinging of local places by new mobile technologies. In the opening scenes of episode 1, for instance, Kieslowski juxtaposes shots of Aunt Irena crying in the city centre with shots of the teary-eyed silent observer, who sits huddled before a fire in front of the apartment complex. Disconnected spatially, the editing techniques suggest their instantaneous connection, as though both were communicating on another emotional or spiritual level. Redmond, however, avoids any pseudo-mystical conclusions by grounding his analysis within media studies, arguing that the telepathic powers of the reoccurring figure provides an allegory for a shift in multinational telecommunications, as their simultaneous communication provides an image of the instantaneous flows of data in an age of information. As we can see, Redmond's theory of the silent observer provides one way in which *The Decalogue* describes a shift towards a decentralized system of global flows. However, there are other important qualities pertaining to this special figure that reveal other facets of the post-industrial landscape. These include: the force and temporality of perpetual mobility, space and trans-border crossings and the powers of the virtual.

Cities are spaces of intense movement. Like the body's circulatory system, which creates homeostasis by coordinating various movements throughout the body, cities consist of many types of mobile systems (physical, informatic, corporeal) that cross many kinds of spaces, from international commodity shipments to inter-city commutes. Today we are witnessing a new phase of urban mobility. In part this novelty has to do with the rise in multinational communicative technologies, which allow global spaces to be traversed instantly by various "invisible" data streams. Yet while the ability to transcend physical space through mobile technologies has brought about profound changes to how we understand space, it is important to acknowledge the physical dimension of global systems, especially how the multinational flows of

capital, consumer goods, pollution, labor and immigrants, also participate in reshaping how we understand the spatial boundaries of various local, regional and national places.

While Redmond has shown the mediatory nature of the silent figure, especially his ability to transcend space through a kind of telepathic communication system, throughout the series the reoccurring figure is in fact associated with a far greater range of mobilities: in film 3 he is seen rowing across a river; in episode 4 he speeds pass in an automobile; in episode 6 he is found returning home from a trip with several suitcases; and in episode 8 he is seen cycling across a newly constructed roadway. Thus, if the silent observer provides a succinct image of the transnational movements associated with "invisible" mobile technologies, it is equally important to consider how these physical movements fit into the film's system of urban space.

Of course one may object that these forms of movement (bicycle, boat, automobile) hardly describe the technological changes taking place today. Nor does the silent observer's movement within the city limits of Warsaw seem indicative of a move towards the multinational. This is true, yet the multinational significance of these movements I believe can be accounted for in other ways. Firstly, we need to consider how the inter-mobility of the silent figure relates to the narrative spaces of the film. Unlike, most narrative films, which prevent its characters from crossing over the diegetic barrier, in *The Decalogue* the silent observer continually breaks this law. As such, he maintains a contradictory spatial position: he is both here and not here, both inside and outside the narrative space. Subsequently, from this point of view, space is always something more, an excess or an elsewhere that is not limited to any local spatial demarcations. Does this not provide a perfect image of the contextual diversity of places in the multinational system, where the global is localized and the local globalized? And does not his ability to serially cross over into other films represent the permeability of borders in an age of transnational mobility.

This latter feature is particularly reinforced throughout the series by a multitude of everyday objects and references that signify a world preoccupied by international flows. Take, for example, the series' perpetual reference to international spaces and travel. In film one, we learn that Pawel's mother lives in a distant, foreign country; in episode two, Dorota is a musician, who not only references her experience with the medical profession in America, but her lover is a musician who presumably resides in Western Europe; in film three Anka takes her father to the airport. His destination also seems to be another westernized country, as his friend asks him to purchase some wonder drug to help with hair growth; Tomek's friend in film six is described as a soldier with the United Nations, who is serving in Syria; in episode seven Majka threatens to emigrate to Canada with her daughter; and finally in episode nine we learn that Hanka is a sales agent for the Dutch airline KLM.

Consider also the numerous references to passports and the constant sight and sound of airplanes travelling overhead. And there are the numerous shots of automobiles. To a western audience, the mere sight of an automobile hardly counts as a sign of the transformative force of car culture. Yet, within the context of socialist Poland, where automobile ownership was a rare luxury that could not compete with

the city's public transit, the fact that nearly all of the main characters have access to mostly western automobiles is significant. For does not this simple change in transportation signify a much greater socio-political shift, a desire for the privatized spaces of consumption.

Lastly, we must consider the silent observer's embodiment of virtual reality? As a character lacking a substantive body and social role, whose face is repeatedly shaped and reshaped through various spatial transformations, the silent observer clearly represents the pliable and malleable powers of the virtual. While Kieslowski makes numerous references to the problems of virtuality (in episode one for instance the televised images of the dead Pawel ask us to consider how media technologies produce new prosthetic memories) the only comedic reference comes in episode 10, where the fungible powers of the virtual are described in terms of the marketplace and the endless exchanges afforded by the speculative nature of money. In this story, two brothers come to learn that their deceased father's stamp collection is in actuality worth a small fortune. However, neither brother comes to benefit from this posthumous gift. Rather, both are led down a slippery slope of greed and grotesque absurdity, as they come to realize the cruel fact that everything, even human organs, is exchangeable in a market economy. In one scene, the brothers are absolutely dumfounded by the disproportionate realities encompassed in the speculative marketplace, when an appraiser "translates" the monetary worth of the almost intangible paper stamps into a host of other commodities: this stamp, the appraiser glees, can buy you a new apartment; this one can purchase several new cars. The absurdity continues, veering into grotesque, when one of the brothers is tricked into trading one of his kidneys for a rare stamp, which would complete the father's prized collection. In the end, the brother are swindled out of their fortune, but not before their entire perspective on the virtual nature of the economy is solidified into a new mode of desire, as both brothers decide to begin compiling their own stamp collections.

The Contingent Empowerment of Technology

In this final section, I want to briefly touch upon the role high technology plays in the series. For many critics, Kieslowski's response to the technological question, which is most apparent in episode one, is quite simple: with the rise of advanced technological systems, which permeate the everyday world, we mistakenly become the victims of a cultural system based entirely in rationalistic instrumentation. Thus, when Pawel falls through the ice and dies in episode one, in spite of the computer's prediction that the ice will not break, it is the father's absolute faith in technology that is held accountable. Even the father seems, in the end, unable to accept his own belief in the absolute mechanical nature of existence, since the same contingent, biological explanation he uses to describe the death of a dog Pawel discovers would have to be equally applied to the loss of his son. Yet, is this the film's only technological meaning? Must we interpret Pawel's death as a substantive view of technology, which would see all traces of intuition or faith immediately crushed by the might of reason? I believe there is indeed another view of technology found within this film, and to understand it we need to consider not only the perspective of the father, but the playful and inquisitive perspective of Pawel.

Amidst the many technological users in *The Decalogue* perhaps the most enthusiastic is the young Pawel. The young boy owns his own computer, and uses it profusely to play various games of calculation, like when he programs the computer to determine when Kermit the Frog will catch up and overcome Miss Piggy. In another scene, the boy gleefully demonstrates how high technology can be seamlessly embedded into the everyday environment, developing a primitive version of the Smart House owned by Bill Gates, where various activities, such as turning on and off lights or a security system is controlled by a central computer. In both cases, Pawel's joy in experimenting with the computer's potentiality signifies the exciting ways both the subject and the environment can be reconfigured by new computer interfaces. Yet this love of technology does not necessarily imply some child like naïveté. After all, the father's work as a university professor involves the development of a computational theory which envisions technological systems as capable of possessing both choice and personality. In one of his lectures the father even goes so far as to relate artificial intelligence to the English poet T.S. Elliot. This hardly seems like Aunt Irena's cold description of her brother as someone simply dedicated to the objectivity of reason. Instead, like young Pawel, the father embodies the playfulness of technology and its unexpected, even poetic potentialities.

But, if advanced technologies are understood by Kieslowski as embodying the element of play, how can we account for Pawel's unexpected and tragic death? After all, for most critics, the boy's death is directly related to the father's misguided faith in the supreme powers of technology. This interpretation is, however, inaccurate. For while it is true that the father trusts the computer to determine how much weight the ice can hold, he does not rely on it exclusively. Rather, he supplements the computer's prediction by personally testing the ice with his own body weight. Thus, in no way can the father be blamed for the boy's death. Instead, the tragic death of the young boy must be understood as a complete accident. It is the contingency of the real, as Žižek would say, that causes the boy's death, since no one or no thing could have foreseen what was to happen that day on the ice. This reading is especially clear when we consult the film's script, where it specifies that the break in the ice was caused by a factory, when it spilled hot water into the lake, a fact neither the computer nor the caring father could have known.

What is evoked by this mix of playfulness and tragic contingency is an ambivalent reading of technology. That is, technological systems can not be understood substantially as pre-determined entities that are inherently destructive (the computer is to blame!), but must be comprehended as a historically situated set of practices that may or may not result in human suffering. The key is to understand the role of contingency, how certain practices appear rather than others, how a playful technology can be transformed into pain. This is an extremely difficult position to accept, since a black and white portrait of technology provides a considerable degree of certainty. Yet rigid conceptual boundaries like these are not tenable for Kieslowski and, as such, uncertainty will always remain. In this way, then, Kieslowski begins *The Decalogue* with a very contemporary exploration of the empowering and disempowering facets of high technology. And while many of the subsequent episodes will not highlight the technological question in such an overt way, the same

overarching sense of ambivalence, coincidence and uncertainty will be reinstated over and over again, as each character attempts to find some guidance in a world of conflicting ideals, practices and perspectives.

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Dwayne Avery is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University, Montreal. His previous research involved the field of narratology, especially the status of non-linear, complex narrative structures. Currently his dissertation explores the technological mediation of urban space in contemporary cinema.