

A Short Film About Love (1988)

“I believe the life of every person is worthy of scrutiny, containing its own secrets and dramas.”
Krzysztof Kieslowski

Major Credits:

Director: Krzysztof Kieslowski

Screenplay: Krzysztof Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz

Music: Zbigniew Preisner

Cast: Grazyna Szapolowska (Magda), Olaf Lubaszenko (Tomek), Stefania Iwinska (Godmother)

Background:

In 1988, after an apprenticeship making documentaries and a decade of increasingly ambitious and critically acclaimed art films, Kieslowski embarked on an astonishing project to create a 10-part series based on the Ten Commandments for Polish television. *The Decalogue*, which he co-wrote with his friend Krzysztof Piesiewicz, directed (using nine different cinematographers), and edited within twenty-one months, remains one of the great achievements in the history of cinema. During the same period, he shot additional footage and released two theatrical features, this film and the equally powerful *A Short Film About Killing*, based on the Fifth Commandment.

Each of the 55-minute films constituting *The Decalogue* applies the Biblical commandment, interpreted loosely in some cases rather than literally, to the daily lives of ordinary citizens living in a stark, Soviet-styled apartment complex in the midst of Warsaw. Occasionally, characters from earlier or later episodes can be glimpsed in the margins or background of the frame. All of the episodes save one include the brief appearance of the same anonymous young man (called by Kieslowski scholar Annette Insdorf, the “angel”), who quietly observes events but never intrudes, a silent witness who might remind viewers of God’s unrelenting gaze. Here, he can be seen on the street watching Tomek deliver milk after Magda agrees to their date and later when he has been humiliated.

A Short Film About Love was originally shown on television as Decalogue 6: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” The lead actress, Grazyna Szapolowska, was so depressed by the story’s original ending that she implored the director to create a different conclusion. The result hardly constitutes anything like happiness, but it does shift the thematic emphasis, as a careful comparison of Decalogue 6 with the feature film will reveal. In addition to suggesting eternal moral questions, the Decalogue series offers a sociopolitical document of Poland at the very end of the Soviet period, an era of considerable chaos, deprivation, and despair. “I was watching people who didn’t really know why they were living,” Kieslowski has said.

Cinematic Aspects:

Keep in mind that *The Decalogue* was originally conceived for Polish television, which requires a different mise-en-scène for the small screen: reduced detail, minimal depth-of-field and landscapes, longer takes. Still, Kieslowski introduces a number of suggestive objects—

Magda's decorative circular glass, Tomek's gift of a glass snowball, the pendulum toy—that simultaneously ground the tale in reality and offer metaphorical associations.

1. Rapid panning: The zip pan of a delirious Tomek after Magda accepts his proposal stands out as an exception to the characteristic static long takes, an expression of pure exhilaration (as in the bicycle panning shots in Truffaut's *Jules and Jim*). "The shot is not merely a boy's excitement at a first love, but a supernatural view of pure, Transcendent possibility" (Joseph G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski*)
2. Circle motif: Annette Insdorf has noted the proliferation of circular imagery: the apartment window, the post office glass, the telescope, alarm clock, mobile, coffee cup, etc. While Insdorf suggests a symbolic interpretation of these images, they also serve as a structural motif to unify the narrative.
3. Close-ups: In addition to creating significance in certain ordinary objects, Kieslowski uses the close-up to examine the humanity of his two leading characters. Beginning with the mysterious opening shot, the film deploys many close-ups of hands. Magda's face viewed in close-up is beautiful but also flawed and weary; Tomek is neither handsome nor grotesque. His role was played by the assistant director of *The Decalogue* series.
4. Zooms: The story is framed by two prominent zoom shots. The first, near the beginning, imitates Tomek's act of peering through his telescope; the second, near the end, focuses on Magda's face as she learns of Tomek's fate from the postman.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What function does the seemingly irrelevant "Miss Polonia" sequence play in generating the narrative?
2. The characters' names are obviously symbolic (you can figure it out). How does the film transform the initial associations with their names? How are their roles effectively exchanged?
3. Although the director has denied it is anything but a material object, the bottle of milk seems to carry significant symbolic weight. What ideas does it represent?
4. The coda Kieslowski added at Szapolowska's request—Decalogue 6 ended with Tomek's response to her revisiting the post office—significantly alters the theme. What ideas does the new ending offer? Which ending seems more appropriate to the story?
5. What role does fate (rather than human compulsion) play in the developing relationship? One of Kieslowski's features made just before *The Decalogue* was entitled *Blind Chance* (later re-made by Hollywood as *Sliding Doors*).
6. The film's "gamble" (to borrow Truffaut's term) is to transform Tomek's perverse voyeurism and Magda's cynical view of sexuality into expressions of pure love. Does Kieslowski win his artistic bet? Explain how the film's "project" either succeeds or fails.