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A Short Film About Love

A FILM BY
KRZYSZTOF KIEŚLOWSKI

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A Short Film About Love

Poland 1988, 87 min

Director
Krzysztof Kieślowski

Screenplay
Krzysztof Kieślowski,
Krzysztof Piesiewicz

Cinematography
Witold Adamek

Editor
Ewa Smal

Art Director
Halina Dobrowolska

Sound
Nikodem Wołk-Łaniewski

Music
Zbigniew Preisner

Production
Tor Production House and Polish Television (Decalogue 6 in TV series)

Cast
Grażyna Szapołowska (Magda), Olaf Lubaszenko (Tomek), Artur Barciś (a man with a suitcase), Stefania Iwińska (Tomek's landlady), Piotr Machalica (Roman), Małgorzata Rożniatowska (post office manager), Stanisław Gawlik (Wacek, the postman), Rafał Imbro (Magda's lover), Jan Piechociński (Magda's lover)

Awards
1988 – Polish Film Festival in Gdynia: Golden Lion – Best Film (along with A Short Film About Killing), Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, Best Cinematography, Best Screenplay
1988 – Film Critics' Circle of Polish Filmmakers Association: Golden Reel Award – Best Polish Film
1988 – San Sebastián International Film Festival – Special Jury Award, OCIC Award
1989 – São Paulo International Film Festival – Audience Award
1990 – French Syndicate of Cinema Critics – Best Foreign Film

Synopsis

A grey apartment complex in Warsaw, the 1980s.

Tomek, a young postal worker, sets his alarm for 8:30 p.m. to be ready when a woman from across the street returns home. He's been spying on Magda, an attractive thirty-something, for about a year with all the innocence and single-heartedness of a nineteen-year-old boy. But his love gradually slips out of control and drives him to actions that go beyond quiet admiration. He calls Magda, sends her fake postal notices or becomes a milkman to meet her in person. He even reports a gas leak in her apartment to spoil her rendezvous...

When he finally gives in and reveals his feelings, the mature, unhappy and lonely woman takes revenge for his ungainly intrusion into her privacy – she invites him over and shows him what love means to her. Dejected and humiliated, Tomek doesn't want to live anymore...

The Decalogue

"I consider the Ten Commandments as a fundamental moral code. It is hard to put it into film. No one, no ideology has ever disparaged the Commandments, although they are daily violated – people steal, lie and kill all the time. They are here to tell us what sin is. The question is whether we are able to live with it."

Krzysztof Kieślowski



Genesis

A pivotal moment for the creation of the Decalogue TV series and all of Kieślowski's subsequent work was his meeting with Warsaw lawyer Krzysztof Piesiewicz in the early 1980s, during martial law. Kieślowski was planning a documentary about political trials, and was looking for someone well-versed in the legal environment and judiciary. The documentary was never made but the collaboration of these two men radically shifted Kieślowski's focus from realistic stories, drawing on common social situations and contradictions between authorities' demands and the needs of people living under Socialism, toward psychological dramas with metaphysical undertones.

It was also Piesiewicz who first suggested filming the Ten Commandments. "The initial idea came from him. He was convinced that I should make the Decalogue... Because people have already lost a lot, they could no longer tell right from wrong, they'd lost that ability amid the hustle and bustle of everyday life. They don't even know what they're chasing after. Yet they're still rushing somewhere, and have lost themselves along the way."

And Kieślowski, a self-declared agnostic, took up his suggestion. But instead of concentrating on the spiritual dimension of the Commandments, he accentuated the moral aspects of the characters' actions, shaped not only by the social, political and economic conditions of that time.



Production

The debates on how to translate the Ten Commandments into a visual form led to an idea of creating ten films, preferably for television, and giving ten young directors an opportunity to make their debuts. However, once the screenplays were ready, Kieślowski realized that he didn't want to hand them over to anybody else. He wanted to direct them himself.

Carrying out such a project was very challenging. Five years of preparations and writing screenplays were followed by eleven months of shooting. Kieślowski had to cope with a very limited budget and tight production schedule. He often worked on several episodes at a time, so that the cinematographers could use the same exteriors. There were nine cinematographers working on the project (Piotr Sobociński shot two episodes), which Kieślowski himself considered his best idea. They represented different generations and favoured different styles, and the director gave them full creative freedom, which was also one of the reasons why each episode has its distinctive visual style and a unique energy.

To expand the funding, Kieślowski ultimately turned to the second-largest financial source of Polish cinema, the Ministry of Arts and Culture, and proposed to adapt two episodes of The Decalogue into feature-length cinema versions. He chose the Fifth Commandment (You shall not kill), and let the Ministry select the second one. They chose the Sixth Commandment (You shall not commit adultery).

A Short Film About Killing was released in Polish cinemas in March 1988, and A Short Film About Love in October 1988. The series aired on Polish Television at the turn of 1988 and 1989.



Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments (or the Decalogue, “ten words”) is the cornerstone of Jewish and Christian morality which, according to the Bible, God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai as rules for a happy and fulfilling life.

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not takea the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
4. Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.
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 neighbour.
9. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife.
10. Neither shall you desire his house.



Decalogue 6 and A Short Film About Love

Each episode of the Decalogue tells a separate story, but they also share many common elements. They are all set in the microcosm of Ursynów, once-glamorous Warsaw apartment complex built in the 1970s; almost every episode features an unnamed, pale-faced young man who observes everything, but never intervenes (a reminder of providence?, personified fate?, an angel?); some characters from individual stories also make brief appearances in other episodes (Kieślowski takes a similar approach in the Three Colours trilogy). And what's more, the whole series is interwoven with recurring motifs, such as the telephone, a vital means of human communication, or milk (delivered, spilled, frozen...).

Most of the episodes refer to one specific Commandment, a few refer to two, in some cases the reference is somewhat unclear. The latter goes for Decalogue 6 or A Short Film About Love. You shall not commit adultery... How does this relate to an innocent nineteen-year-old man and an experienced thirty-year-old woman? The story places naivety against cynicism, devotion against resignation, sincerity against haughty arrogance. When Magda asks Tomek: "What do you want?", he replies, surprisingly: "Nothing."

Their story can therefore be understood as a confrontation between emotional love and pure lust. This confrontation has different outcomes in the series and in the film. A Short Film About Love is 30 minutes longer than the episode, and Kieślowski used the "extra time" to develop the psychology of his characters, especially Tomek's landlady, who becomes almost like a mother to the boy from a children's home. But not only that. Unlike the TV episode, the film adopts the retrospective framework which adds an air of ambiguity to the narrative. While Decalogue 6 ends with Magda's visit to the post office and Tomek's laconic statement: "I don't spy on you anymore," the film offers an elusive glimpse of a "happy ending." Here, Kieślowski was provoked by a remark from Grażyna Szapołowska who portrayed Madga,

saying that people love fairy tales most of all.

Can we therefore state that the TV version is a moral tale about sin and its consequences, while the cinema version is about sin, suffering and reconciliation?

Or does the film primarily talk about the blurred line between voyeurism and real love? Observing takes on various forms here: In the first part, Tomek spies on Magda and also interferes in her life; in the second part, it is Magda who becomes an observer, as she tries to get a handle on the situation and make contact with Tomek; and thirdly, Tomek's landlady also becomes an observer, worriedly watching what's going on in Magda's apartment. And ultimately, viewers of the film are also observers, watching all these intrusions into privacy (Witold Adamek used a 300mm or even a 500mm lens to convey the perspective of someone looking through a telescope). And is it mainly about mediated, primarily alienated communication?

No matter how viewers answer these questions, whether positively or negatively, Kieślowski's magnificent miniature has lost none of its impressiveness and urgency even after nearly forty years.



Krzysztof Kieślowski

(June 27, 1941 – March 13, 1996)

Krzyszof Kieślowski was born in Warsaw, to a family of a civil engineer and an office clerk, but due to his father's tuberculosis he spent most of his childhood "living out of a suitcase", as the family often moved from one sanatorium to another.

In 1957, Kieślowski entered the College for Theatre Technicians (Państwowe Liceum Techniki Teatralnej) in Warsaw, headed by his uncle, Kazimierz Pręczkowski. After graduation in 1962, he wanted to become a theatre director but he couldn't pursue the career because he wasn't a university graduate. Therefore, he decided to study film directing at the Łódź Film School (Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa, Telewizyjna i Teatralna), where he was accepted at his third attempt. He graduated in 1968 with his short documentary From the City of Łódź, which was also released in cinemas. Kieślowski devoted the next ten years of his career to documentaries. "The way I saw it, the fundamental duty of an artist in the 1970s was to depict. Life unfolded on multiple layers: Same people and events appeared differently depending on whether they were viewed from a personal or public perspective. All commonly known wrongdoings were rarely discussed in public. People spoke different languages. Such things needed to be addressed." Concerns about the moral state of the nation were also reflected in Kieślowski's early feature films – The

Scar, Camera Buff and Blind Chance. All of them were formally built upon the legacy of the director's documentary work. In the early 1980s, Kieślowski shifts away from the Cinema of Moral Anxiety after meeting Krzysztof Piesiewicz who incites him to broaden his interest in universal, pan-human topics. Metaphysical undertones were already present in their first joint project, No End, a story of a woman who deals with the death of her husband, a defense lawyer of political prisoners. This tendency was even more apparent in the Decalogue, marking the beginning of Kieślowski's period of "cyclical" projects. Following the success of the Decalogue abroad, Kieślowski was given the opportunity to shoot in France, and his next film, The Double Life of Véronique, was also enigmatic, and it was actually two films in one. Kieślowski's career winds up with the Three Colours trilogy – three films loosely inspired by the motto of the French Revolution: "Liberty, equality, fraternity." Another trilogy – heaven, hell, purgatory – was never completed due to the director's untimely death, and the screenplays were directed by other filmmakers (Heaven, Tom Tykwer, 2002; Hell, Danis Tanović, 2005; Hope, Stanisław Mucha, 2007).



Filmography:

1966 - The Tram (Tramwaj)
(short feature etude)

1966 - The Office (Urząd)
(documentary etude)

1967 - Concert of Requests
(Koncert życzeń)
(short feature)

1968 - The Photograph (Zdjęcie)
(short documentary)

1968 - From the City of Łódź
(Z miasta Łodzi)
(short documentary)

1970 - I Was a Soldier
(Byłem żołnierzem)
(short documentary)

1970 - Factory (Fabryka)
(short documentary)

1971 - Before the Rally (Przed rajdem)
(short documentary)

1972 - Refrain (Refren)
(short documentary)

1972 - Between Wrocław and
Zielona Góra (Między Wrocławiem
a Zieloną Górą)
(short documentary)

1972 - The Principles of Safety and
Hygiene in a Copper Mine (Podstawy
BHP w kopalni miedzi)
(short instructional film)

1972 - Workers '71: Nothing About Us
Without Us (Robotnicy '71: nic o nas
bez nas, dir: K. K., Tomasz Zygadlo,
Wojciech Wiszniewski, Pawel Kedzier-
ski, Tadeusz Walendowski)
(medium-length documentary)

1973 - Bricklayer (Murarz)
(short documentary)

1973 - Pedestrian Subway
(Przejście podziemne)
(feature TV film)

1974 - X-Ray (Prześwietlenie)
(short documentary)

1974 - First Love (Pierwsza miłość)
(short TV documentary)

1975 - Curriculum Vitae (Życiorys)
(medium-length feature documentary)

1975 - Personnel (Personel)
(TV film)

1976 - Hospital (Szpital)
(short documentary)

1976 - The Scar (Blizna)
(feature-length fiction film)

1976 - Slate (Klaps)
(short film)

1976 - The Calm (Spokój)
(medium-length TV film)

1977 - rom a Night Porter's Point of
View (Z punktu widzenia nocnego
portiéra)
(short documentary)

1977 - I Don't Know (Nie Wiem)
(medium-length documentary)

1978 - Seven Women of Different
Ages (Siedem kobiet w różnym wieku)
(short documentary)

1979 - Camera Buff (Amator)
(feature-length fiction film)

1980 - Station (Dworzec)
(short documentary)

1980 - Talking Heads (Gadające głowy)
(short documentary)

1981 - Blind Chance (Przypadek)
(feature-length fiction film)

1980 - Short Working Day
(Krótki dzień pracy)
(TV film)

1984 - No End (Bez końca)
(feature-length fiction film)

1987 - A Short Film About Killing
(Krótki film o zabijaniu)
(feature-length fiction film)

1988 - Seven Days a Week
(Siedem dni w tygodniu)
(short documentary)

1988 - A Short Film About Love
(Krótki film o miłości)
(feature-length fiction film)

1988 - The Decalogue (Dekalog)
(TV series)

1991 - The Double Life of Véronique
(Podwójne życie Weroniki/Le Double
Vie de Véronique)
(feature-length fiction film)

1993 - Three Colours: Blue
(Trzy kolory. Niebieski)
(feature-length fiction film)

1993 - Three Colours: White
(Trzy kolory. Biały)
(feature-length fiction film)

1994 - Three Colours: Red
(Trzy kolory. Czerwony)
(feature-length fiction film)



Archive Film Festival Network



Archive Film Festival Network

Archive Film Festival Network (AFFN) is a new European festival network organized around archival films and film heritage. AFFN members recognize the importance of film history and the urgent need to show films from the past, timeless masterpieces that represent their era.

Each of the network's festivals has a long experience showing archival films, attracting thousands of enthusiastic film-lovers every year from all over the world. The AFFN's goal is to present, in collaboration with European film archives and distributors, a full range of shared and mutual activities among its members:

AFFN Presents: a themed, labeled selection of heritage films shown at members' festivals
2026 theme: The Author's 50's

AFFN Film: recently restored film shown at members' festivals or as part of their year's activity
In 2026: A Short Film about Love
by Krzysztof Kieślowski

AFFN Education: educational activities for the young (aged 10-18)
In 2026: how to make your own film podcast

AFFN Industry: get-togethers for film professionals
In 2026: how to make archive films
„sexy“ for young audiences

AFFN is also developing a common strategy in the areas of gender parity and sustainable development.

In 2026, AFFN has 4 founding members:

Bergamo Film Meeting
Bergamo, Italy
https://www.bergamofilmmeeting.it/en/

Festival La Rochelle Cinéma (Fema)
La Rochelle, France
https://festival-larochelle.org/en/

Midnight Sun Film Festival
Sodankylä, Finland
https://msfilmfestival.fi/en/

Summer Film School
Uherské Hradiště, Czech Republic
https://lfs.cz/en/

Sources:

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Marek Haltof: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski


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