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POLISH
FILM
FESTIVAL

GDYNIA
21-26.09.2026

KIEŚŁOWSKI PUBLICATION

FIPRESCI & POLISH FILM FESTIVAL
JOINT PUBLICATION ON KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI

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FIPRESCI & Polish Film Festival *joint Publication on Krzysztof Kieślowski*

The year 2026 marks the 30th anniversary of the great Polish director's passing, and to honour his enduring artistic influence, FIPRESCI & Polish Film Festival prepared a special collection of seven essays written by international film critics associated with FIPRESCI.

The publication aims to reflect on Kieślowski's cinema and its continuing relevance for contemporary audiences, filmmakers, and critics around the world.



Krzysztof Kieślowski
1941–1996



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UBUNTU (INTERCONNECTEDNESS)
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ISOLATED INDIVIDUALISM vs COMMUNAL UBUNTU (INTERCONNECTEDNESS) *in KRZYSZT of KIEŚŁOWSKI'S THREE COLOURS: BLUE*



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Three Colours: Blue
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993)

Krzysztof Kieślowski's **Three Colours: Blue** is universally recognised as a masterpiece exploring individual liberty and grief. I viewed it for the first time 33 years ago in an arthouse cinema in Pretoria, South Africa. It was a year before the historic national elections, which ended the era of National Party rule and apartheid, with the promise of liberty for all South Africans. It became one of my top 10 all-time favourite films.

Since 2006 the film was part of my post-graduate course at the University of Cape Town about global auteurs including Bergman, Fellini, Angelopoulos, Wajda, Wertmüller, Tarkovsky and many more. I had the opportunity to discuss the film with students for more than 17 years. The course comprised an in-depth discussion on authorship and the great auteurs in film history such as Kieślowski. We engaged with the material through detailed formal analysis as well as through an exploration of central debates and issues in film theory.

Debates about auteurism in the cinema occupied a privileged position in film studies from the 1950s until the early 1980s. The course focused on the development of auteur theory from the fifties till the present day. Authors in mostly European cinema served as case studies.

According to various scholars the film author is not only the most important symbol of European cinema's cultural tradition and commitment but is also a crucial part of Europe's efforts to develop its cinema within domestic and international film industries.

We also studied authorship in the 21st Century. Once heralded and defined by the likes of François Truffaut and Andrew Sarris as a romantic figure of aesthetic individualism, the auteur was reinvestigated in our course through a novel approach. Bringing established as well as emergent figures of world art cinema to the fore, our course demonstrated how politics and philosophy are present in the works of these important filmmakers. They can be still seen leading a fight that their glorious predecessors seemed to have abandoned in the face of global capitalism and the market economy. A new world calls for a new cinema, and thus for new auteurs.

“Covering a range of global auteurs such as Abderrahmane Sissako, *The Global Auteur* provides a much-needed reassessment of the film auteur for the global age.

(Seung-hoon Jeong & Jeremi Szaniawski, 2016)

It also means to use a diversity of approaches to auteur studies.

Kieślowski's work is multivocal — many-voiced, that is, with inexhaustible meanings, which have been analysed by many scholars including Slavoj Žižek (2001), Marek Haltof (2004) and Annette Insdorf (2013).

From a South African perspective, the themes in **Three Colours: Blue** resonate deeply within a society transitioning from the collective trauma of apartheid to the heavy emotional and ethical responsibilities of hard-won political freedom. My analysis of the film attempts to uncover significant parallels between individual emotional trauma and a nation's collective socio-political journey. While Kieślowski intended the film to interrogate the French Revolutionary ideal of liberty on a deeply personal level, its themes of grief, forced reinvention, and the impossibility of absolute detachment resonate heavily with South Africa's post-apartheid narrative.

The **Three Colours trilogy** has been actively utilised within South African philosophical and art discourses to navigate local complexities. Notably, South African academic Bert Olivier (2002; 2025) has written extensively on Kieślowski's trilogy.

Olivier applies the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer as articulated in **Truth and Method** (1982) to argue that **Three Colours: Blue** demonstrates that absolute individual autonomy is an illusion. His work highlights that human relationships require navigating shared power and mutual vulnerability — a core component of South Africa's ongoing reconciliation process.

My argument in the essay explores the paradox of *individual freedom vs. social responsibility*. Kieślowski frames his film around the question: Is it possible to have true liberty without love? After losing her family in a tragic crash, Julie (Juliette Binoche) seeks total, isolating freedom by severing all attachments, but she ultimately realises that true freedom requires connection and

responsibility to others. In the film, Julie (Juliette Binoche) attempts to survive an unimaginable tragedy by cutting all ties with her past, selling her estate, and choosing total isolation. She treats her life as a blank slate to escape pain (Olivier 2002). For Julie her life seems to be utterly meaningless when she regains consciousness in hospital after a car accident. She learns from medical personnel that neither of the other members of her family has survived the accident. So devoid of meaning every-thing appears, in fact, that she attempts to commit suicide by stuffing a handful of pills into her mouth — only to find herself unable to swallow them. After discovering her inability to end her own life, Julie decides to withdraw from society, from friends and acquaintances, as well as from all forms of responsibilities. Julie is determined to liberate herself from all previous ties (Olivier 2002).

Then she looks for an apartment in a part of Paris where no one knows her, she sets out to live a reclusive life. She cannot refrain from taking something from her former life with her — a beautiful ornament consisting of pieces of glass in various shades of blue. According to Olivier (2002) this serves as a visual reminder that she is unable, try as she may, to divorce herself completely from her past memories. It captures, visually and chromatically, the significance of the colour blue. It is a colour of sadness, of melancholy, but it also connotes truth, as well as spirituality. Olivier (2002) argues that the blue ornament signifies the fusion, for Julie, of sadness, in the face of loss, with the beauty and truth of her memories of her lost ones. It also signals the truth about her inability to free herself from the things that constitute the material world.

Kieślowski uses the colour blue to challenge the notion of absolute liberty. Julie initially seeks freedom from memory, responsibilities, and love. Ultimately, this brings her an empty, cold existence. She only finds true liberty when she embraces the freedom to connect,

love, and finish her late husband's Concerto for the Unification of Europe.

For South Africans, this theme mirrors the tension between the country's macro-level political liberation and the micro-level realities of personal and community healing. Like Julie's initial instinct to withdraw from a world that inflicted pain, the "rainbow nation" initially brought a strong desire to look only forward and sever connections with a painful past. Just as Julie learns that her history, unfinished music, and human attachments cannot simply be erased, South Africa continues to learn that collective trauma, systemic inequality, and historical memory cannot be bypass-edited out of the national consciousness.

In South Africa, the constitutional achievement of political liberty (freedom from tyranny) was only the first step. The ongoing national struggle is defining how to achieve substantive liberty — the socio-economic freedom to thrive, which relies heavily on communal Ubuntu (interconnectedness) rather than isolated individualism. Julie slowly abandons her self-imposed alienation to embrace the love of the people around her. This reflects the South African philosophical concept of *Ubuntu* (the idea that *"I am because we are"*), directly challenging the Western idea of freedom as mere detachment from others.

Kieślowski explored interconnectedness as a spiritual and structural theme, focusing on invisible emotional bonds, shared human experiences and fate. He focuses on how shared vulnerabilities – like universal feelings of love, fear and suffering unite people across time, space and cultures. He believed that despite cultural, historical or political divisions, basic human experiences such as pain or fear are universal and bind everyone together.

His films feature parallel storylines, coincidences and mirroring lives, suggesting that a larger, unseen order influences human relationships. Films such as **Blind Chance** and **The Decalogue** explore how seemingly

random accidents or tiny decisions can radically alter destinies, demonstrating the fragility of connection. The interconnected lives of characters across **Blue**, **White** and **Red**, visually and thematically demonstrate fraternity and the possibility of cosmic connection. In **The Double Life of Véronique** Kieślowski explores a deep, inexplicable psychic and spiritual bond between two identical strangers who never actually meet. Kieślowski believed that there are too many things in the world which divide people such as religion, politics, history, nationalism... Feelings are what link people together (Stok 1993).

To broaden Bert Olivier's analysis I have included work by Professor Thaddeus Metz, a prominent philosopher at the University of Pretoria, who revolutionised African philosophy by translating the traditional southern African concept of Ubuntu into a rigorous, analytic moral theory through a seminal work like **Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa** (2011).

Metz systematically structured Ubuntu to serve as a comprehensive, single-principle framework capable of rivaling dominant Western ethical frameworks like Kantianism and Utilitarianism. Western ethical frameworks often prioritise individual autonomy (Kantianism) or individual pleasure/welfare (Utilitarianism). In contrast, Metz's formalised formulation of Ubuntu argues that an action is right if and only if it promotes, respects, or honors harmonious (communal) relationships, and wrong insofar as it creates discordance.

He breaks down this harmony into two distinct, interdependent psychological and behavioural pillars:

Identity (Shared Way of Life):

The psychological sense of togetherness where people think of themselves as a collective "we," thus coordinate their behaviours, and work toward cooperative goals.

Solidarity (Mutual Care):

The behavioural act of assisting others and showing sympathetic emotional care for their

quality of life, acting for the other person's sake rather than out of pure self-interest.

Together, Metz defines identity and solidarity as the foundational requirements for friendliness or love in human interaction.

Metz argues that Ubuntu functions as a "self-realisation" ethic. While humans are biologically human at birth, our moral purpose is to earn or achieve true personhood (Ubuntu) through our treatment of others by cultivating communal virtues such as compassion, generosity, hospitality, and forgiveness (Metz 2011)

Critics historically argued that Ubuntu was too collectivist and could easily justify abusing individual rights for the sake of the majority. Metz resolved this in Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights by introducing a relational conception of human dignity.

Human beings possess inherent dignity not merely because they can reason, but because of their innate capacity to commune with others. Metz (2011) notes that Ubuntu mandates a focus on reconciliation, public apology, and reparations to mend broken relationships, a philosophy visible in South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In **Three Colours: Blue**, Julie connects with others by gradually surrendering her absolute emotional isolation in exchange for the messy, unavoidable realities of human relationships. After losing her husband and daughter, she initially seeks complete "liberty" by cutting all personal ties, selling her possessions, and moving to an anonymous apartment in Paris. However, her journey shifts from cold detachment to emotional re-engagement through specific individuals and shared experiences. Julie initially tries to destroy her late husband's unfinished European unity concerto. When his assistant, Olivier, attempts to finish it from a copied draft, Julie chooses to actively collaborate with him. Completing the music becomes a profound creative and emotional connection that pulls her back into the land of the living.

While trying to isolate herself, Julie encounters a flautist playing the exact melody of her husband's concerto on the street. This moment shows her that art and memory are public, uncontainable forces that keep her tethered to the outside world, Julie moves to an apartment building that explicitly bans children, seeking a sterile environment. She befriends Lucille, a sex worker who lives downstairs and is shunned by the other tenants. By refusing to judge Lucille and granting her authentic empathy, Julie establishes an unofficial confidante relationship born out of mutual isolation.

Julie discovers that her late husband had a long-term affair and that his mistress is pregnant with his child. Instead of reacting with bitter jealousy, Julie tracks Sandrine down, treats her with immense grace, and gives her her late husband's old family home so the child can grow up with his name.

Olivier has long been secretly in love with Julie. Initially, she sleeps with him purely to sever his attachment to her, but by the end of the film, she accepts his genuine care. The final sequence shows her crying against glass while making love to him, signaling that she has finally allowed herself to feel both grief and affection simultaneously.

A young boy who witnessed the fatal car accident tracks Julie down to return a cross necklace he found at the scene. Meeting Antoine forces her to confront the physical reality of her trauma rather than burying it.



Three Colours: Blue
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993)

The film's famous closing montage weaves all these characters together visually while the finished choral anthem plays, underscoring that Julie's ultimate freedom is found not in isolation, but through her capacity to love and be connected. In the final sequence interconnectedness acts as the ultimate antidote to isolation, structurally proving that absolute individual liberty is an impossible and punishing illusion. The five-minute climactic montage — often called the "coda" — visually and aurally binds her to the surrounding world. As the music swells, it bridges different physical spaces, uniting disparate characters under a single, grand melody. The choir sings St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians (specifically verses on love). The line "*If I have not love, I am nothing*" delivers the narrative verdict: human liberty without love and attachment is empty and unsustainable. The sequence moves through a continuous, sweeping pan that dissolves barriers of time and space. It weaves together a specific tapestry of people who have inadvertently anchor-dropped Julie back into reality. The montage begins and ends with Julie, framing the entire human network as if it is existing directly inside her consciousness.

By closing *Blue* on a note of collective human entanglement, Kieślowski lays the groundwork for the next two films. He transitions the theme from personal liberty (**Blue**) toward mutual equality (**White**) and absolute fraternity (**Red**), suggesting that none can truly exist without the others. In the final frame, the blue light — which originally symbolised cold, debilitating grief — refracts gently across Julie's face. As a single tear falls, her mouth quirks into a tiny, almost imperceptible smile. She has surrendered her isolation, accepting that to be alive is to be fundamentally entangled with others.

Julie's experiment with radical independence ultimately fails because humanity refuses to let her exist in a vacuum. In perfect alignment with Ubuntu — which dictates

that our humanity is realised through relationships with others — external lives constantly break through her isolation: The neighbor (Lucille), seeking companionship and validation, whom Julie chooses to help rather than ignore. Olivier, who forces her to confront her emotional and creative identity. Julie discovers her husband had a pregnant mistress; instead of turning away, she gives the woman her late husband's house, acknowledging their shared human link.

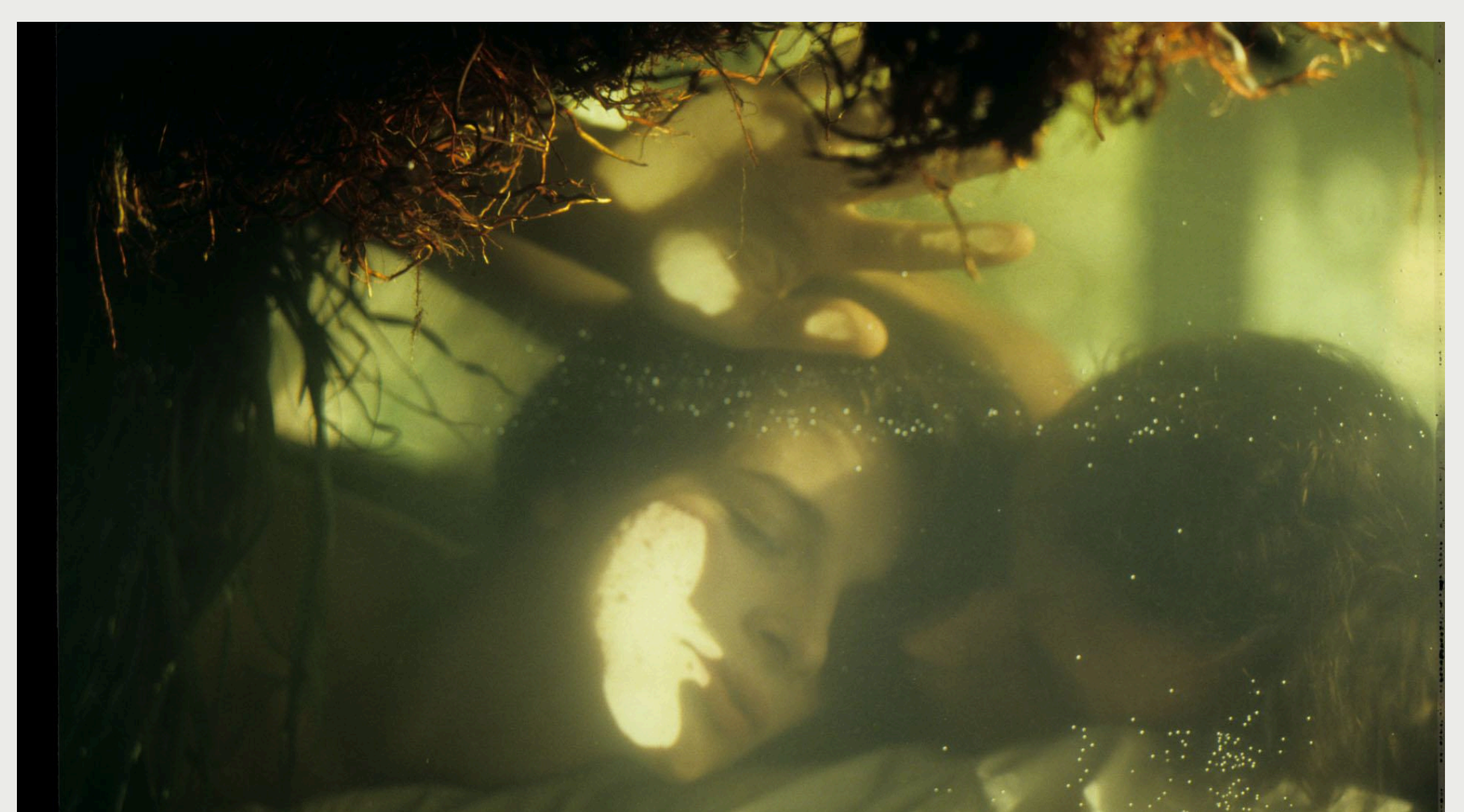
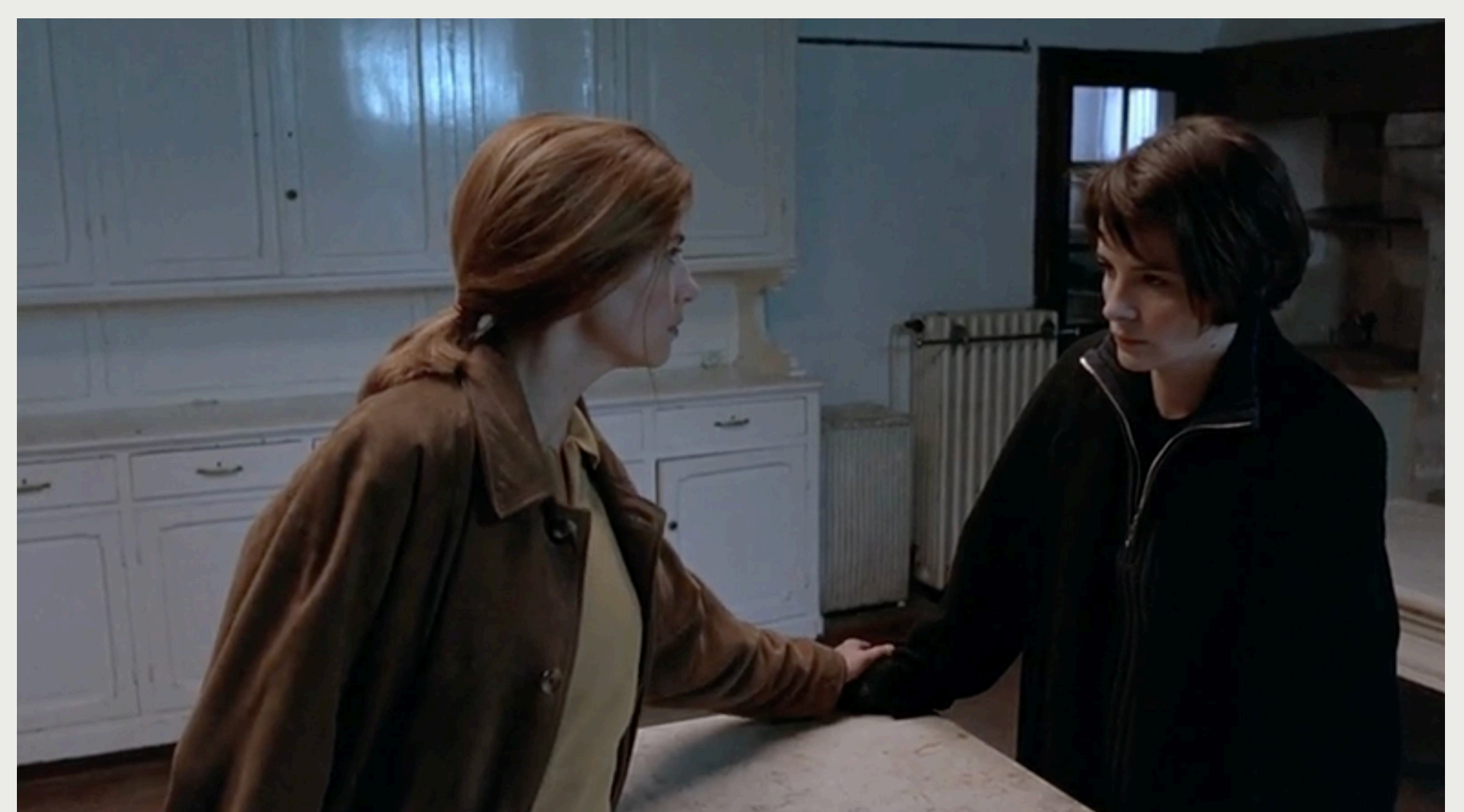
True liberation for Julie does not come from escaping society, but from re-entering it. Kieślowski uses Zbigniew Preisner's haunting musical score to represent the lingering, inescapable pulse of her human bonds. By the climax, Julie accepts that she cannot heal alone. Her ultimate act of freedom is completing her husband's unfinished Song for the Unification of Europe — a piece explicitly celebrating unity, love, and human togetherness. The music functions as an invasive, inescapable repository of memory and trauma that systematically thwarts the protagonist's attempts at emotional isolation. The brilliant, metadiegetic score renders her psychological erasure impossible, acting as a sensory manifestation of grief that forces her to remember.

Unlike conventional film scores that passively manipulate audience emotion, the music in *Blue* exists primarily inside Julie's mind. While Julie can physically throw away her husband's papers or sell her estate, she cannot lock out her auditory memory. Fragments of the unfinished Concerto for the Unification of Europe suddenly explode into her consciousness without warning. Kieślowski visually mirrors this internal musical hijacking by abruptly freezing the narrative action, flooding the screen with heavy blue lighting or fading completely to black while thunderous orchestral chords erupt. These moments operate as sensory flashbacks, proving that her trauma is pre-verbal and deeply embedded in her mind. Ultimately, the music evolves from a punishing

reminder of death into a vehicle for healing and personal rebirth.

Because Julie is a composer dealing with the sudden loss of her musician husband, music acts as the catalyst that returns her to the world, South African audiences and creators have long utilised the arts — whether through literature, theatre, or visual arts — as a medium to process historical trauma and push through emotional blockades. Music has served as a vital vehicle for collective healing, mourning, and historicising the immense trauma left by decades of state-sanctioned racial oppression. By bridging the gap where language or formal justice fell short, sonic expression allowed citizens to process unquantified grief and preserve the memories of those lost. During apartheid, funerals for activists targeted by the regime doubled as political rallies where freedom songs transformed private devastation into communal solidarity. In the post-apartheid era, these same melodies — such as the mournful yet defiant *Senzeni Na?* ("What have we done?") — continue to be sung to collectively externalise the historical pain of loss.

The physical act of group singing provides a shared psychological release. The harmonised structures of choral arrangements offer a safe framework to house intense emotions like grief, trauma, and anger that words alone cannot fully capture. Post-apartheid compositions, such as classical vocal cantatas or jazz arrangements, routinely sample the testimonies of grieving mothers from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). These works integrate classical Western musical devices for weeping (like the *pianto* semitone) with traditional African mourning structures to give a public voice to previously hidden tragedies. Apartheid purposely fractured communities along racial and tribal lines. Post-apartheid musical genres focused heavily on cultural reclamation as a way to heal that structural loss.



Three Colours: Blue
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993)

Our national anthem, for example, combines the anti-apartheid liberation hymn (**Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika**) with the old apartheid-era anthem (**Die Stem van Suid-Afrika**). Bringing these two opposing songs together forced a musical and cultural handshake between former adversaries. No single group had to entirely give up their musical heritage; instead, they created a shared asset. The anthem features five of South Africa's most widely spoken languages in a single song. It seamlessly transitions through isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho, Afrikaans, and English. To sing the anthem fully, citizens must pronounce languages outside their own mother tongue. This act builds deep cultural empathy. The opening section (**Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika**) translates to "God Bless Africa," focusing on communal well-being rather than individual triumph. The Sesotho section explicitly asks to "vanish wars and distress" and "save our nation," prioritising peace and togetherness.

The South African National Anthem and the philosophy of Ubuntu are fundamentally interconnected as dual symbols of the nation's post-apartheid reconciliation, unity, and shared humanity. By stitching together the songs of both the oppressed and the oppressors, the anthem became a master-class in compromise, forgiveness, and mutual recognition. When South Africans sing the anthem, the collective protocol expects citizens to sing every verse regardless of their native tongue. Acknowledging and speaking another person's language is a core tenet of Ubuntu, as it signals that you truly see and value their humanity.

The connection between **Three Colours: Blue** and **Ubuntu ("I am because we are")** centres this article on a critique of radical, isolated individualism. I used Ubuntu as a framework to explain how the film rejects absolute personal isolation in favour of human interconnectedness.

MARTIN BOTHA: Isolated Individualism vs Communal Ubuntu (Interconnectedness) in Krzysztof Kieślowski's Three Colours: Blue

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The DOUBLE LIFE of KIEŚŁOWSKI: IRÈNE JACOB and the AFTERLIFE of a TRANSNATIONAL GAZE



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All quotes from Irène Jacob are drawn from four interviews conducted by the author, in French and English, in Locarno, Berlin and Geneva. Quotes from Krzysztof Kieślowski are drawn from his autobiography — full references at the end of this article.

I. A TURNING POINT IN THE RECEPTION OF A CINEMA

There is something inherently elusive about identifying what separates a good film from a great one — the kind of work that becomes a watershed, retrospectively revealing its director as one of cinema's masters.

A distinctive signature is certainly part of it, yet it doesn't fully explain why certain films keep resonating across decades, generations, cultures and continents, while others — equally accomplished — remain prisoners of their own moment.

When **The Double Life of Véronique** premiered in 1991, winning both the FIPRESCI Prize and the Best Actress award for Irène Jacob, most Western European audiences discovered Krzysztof Kieślowski's cinema for the first time. A circle of cinephiles already knew his documentaries and, above all, **Dekalog** (1988) — the monumental series produced for Polish television and partly co-produced with West Germany. But it was the international success of **Véronique**, followed by the **Three Colours trilogy** (1993– 1994), that transformed his global reputation, casting a retroactive light onto **Dekalog** and allowing it to be recognised, beyond specialist circles, as one of the defining achievements of European screen fiction.

Before the fall of the Wall, Europe's divisions were not only geopolitical — they were cinematic. Films barely circulated across the Iron Curtain; Western distribution of Eastern European cinema remained marginal, filtered through festivals and

cinémathèques rather than commercial release. Shot in the immediate aftermath of 1989, **Véronique** emerged from a period of vertiginous uncertainty — political, economic, existential. Kieślowski could not have known how events would unfold, which may explain why the film never addresses the transition directly and remains atmospheric rather than declarative. **Véronique** became a way of returning Poland to the Western European cinematic imagination and of doing so aesthetically, refusing the reductive image of a grey, joyless country under a leaden sky.

II. A POST-COLD WAR PASSAGE: AESTHETICS, INDUSTRY AND A NATIONAL CINEMA REIMAGINED

The Double Life of Véronique stands as a hinge between Kieślowski's Polish cinema and the **Three Colours trilogy** — a trilogy that borrows the French republican motto while unfolding across France, Poland and Switzerland, composing a fresco of early-1990s Europe still haunted by the Wall's collapse, by the simultaneous porosity and rigidity of borders, and by the confrontation between a liberal West convinced of being on the right side of history and a transition-era East suspended between hope and uncertainty.

The chromatic signature devised by cinematographer **Sławomir Idziak** plays a decisive role in this repositioning. A golden-green light bathes the film, punctuated by recurring red accents — a sweater, an armchair, a wall, a satchel, a scarf — functioning as sensory beacons that connect the two women, creating a chromatic resonance of shimmer and reflection. This warmth sharply contrasts with the "grey of the real" then associated with Polish cinema. The golden light creates a crepuscular effect — suspended between



The Double Life of Véronique
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1991)

dawn and dusk — that serves as a sensory correlative for a world defined by its inherent uncertainty: individual as much as collective, political as much as economic.

Even the film's international title reveals the prejudices it first had to overcome. The screenplay was originally called *La Choriste* ("The Chorus Singer") — a title Kieślowski abandoned once he understood its resonance in France:

“ *In France, this word evoked negative associations. I heard the following remark: ‘My God, another Catholic film from Poland!’ In other words: nobody would go see this film.*

(Krzysztof Kieślowski)

He recalls in his autobiography. The anecdote is telling: in miniature, it encapsulates precisely the prejudice the finished film would go on to dismantle.

Production itself mirrored this transitional moment. While Kieślowski's plans for multiple market-specific endings were largely abandoned, two versions persist. The American cut adds explicit narrative closure regarding Véronique's father, whereas the original concludes with her hand resting on a tree — a contrast that serves as a parable for the film's transnational passage: an Eastern European sensibility, elliptical and suggestive, negotiating its entry into Western commercial cinema without ever fully surrendering its own grammar of ambiguity.

This negotiation also reflects the emerging logic of European co-production in the early 1990s, in which compromise and market accessibility became structural conditions of circulation — a logic that has only intensified over time, cementing these compromises as the very foundation of contemporary co-production practices.

III. IRÈNE JACOB: THE LAST FACE OF KIEŚLOWSKI'S CINEMA

If Véronique effected this passage between two cinematic worlds, it did so through a face: that of Irène Jacob — Swiss and French — who became, and remains, the enduring embodiment of Kieślowski's late artistic identity, from Weronika and Véronique to Valentine in **Three Colours: Red**.

She was, in every sense, the last cinematic face Kieślowski chose before completing his final trilogy and, shortly thereafter, his untimely death.

She recalls her first encounter with his cinema in terms that already carry the flavour of a small miracle of circulation across the Iron Curtain:

“ I had the good fortune of seeing *A Short Film About Love* in a cinema, but I never imagined I would meet a Polish filmmaker. The Iron Curtain was still there: East-West collaborations were still rare. When the casting happened, there were several actresses under consideration, but at the time it was difficult simply to see films, so it was pure chance that I had seen his.

(Irène Jacob)

She also remembers how Kieślowski described his intentions for the project that would become **Véronique**:

“ He had made many male roles, and female ones as well, but for the first time he had a young woman as protagonist. He told me: ‘I would like to make a film about premonitions, about sensations, about the fact that sometimes we feel deeply accompanied in life, and sometimes we feel abandoned.

What is this feeling of accompanied solitude? These invisible intuitions that don't belong to everyday conversation? What interests me is finding a way to film what is not visible.

(Irène Jacob)

For Jacob, this makes Kieślowski, above all, “*the filmmaker of the invisible and the intimate*”, a director possessed of “*a profoundly poetic vein*” who nonetheless insisted that poetry had to remain embodied if it was to touch something tangible. She also recalls that he edited fifteen different versions of the film — “*the first time that had ever happened to him*” — the mark of a director still searching rather than executing a preconceived design. That creative restlessness may explain why the film continues to be received, across decades, *in such a personal and singular way*” by each new generation of spectators.

IV. SEHNSUCHT, DOPPELGÄNGER, AND A CONTINENT IN SUSPENSION

The premise of **The Double Life of Véronique** rests on an elementary symmetry. Weronika in Poland and Véronique in France share almost everything — they sing, they are young, they each have a loving father but no mother — yet they remain unaware of each other's existence, while somehow linked by something deeper than resemblance. What emerges is not knowledge but instinct: a presence, an intuition of relation and of loss, without the capacity to name what has been lost.

This is a film built on sensation rather than exposition. Kieślowski's cinema privileges signs, echoes and correspondences over explanation, inviting spectators to construct meaning for themselves.

This emotional condition can be read through the German concept of *Sehnsucht*. This untranslatable blend of longing, nostalgia, and spiritual yearning forms the film's emotional core. Reaching as much toward an unrealized future as a lost past, it encapsulates the 1990s European *Zeitgeist*: a fractured continent, divided yet bound. The film translates this geopolitical upheaval into intimate sensation, most poignantly when Véronique photographs Weronika amidst a Solidarność demonstration. In this moment, while Weronika glimpses her double, Véronique — absorbed in the act of capturing the image — remains blind to her, a mirror held to continental history that simultaneously reflects the protagonist's own existential uncertainty.

Jacob extends the scene beyond its historical moment:

“Today we take so many photographs of everything that we no longer see anything... Véronique takes the photograph, and later in her life realises she saw nothing. By extension, she wonders whether she has, after all, missed her own life.

(Irène Jacob)

The observation resonates far beyond the film itself. It suggests a modern condition in which recording increasingly replaces seeing. The image becomes an end in itself, while history — and perhaps life itself — slips past unnoticed.

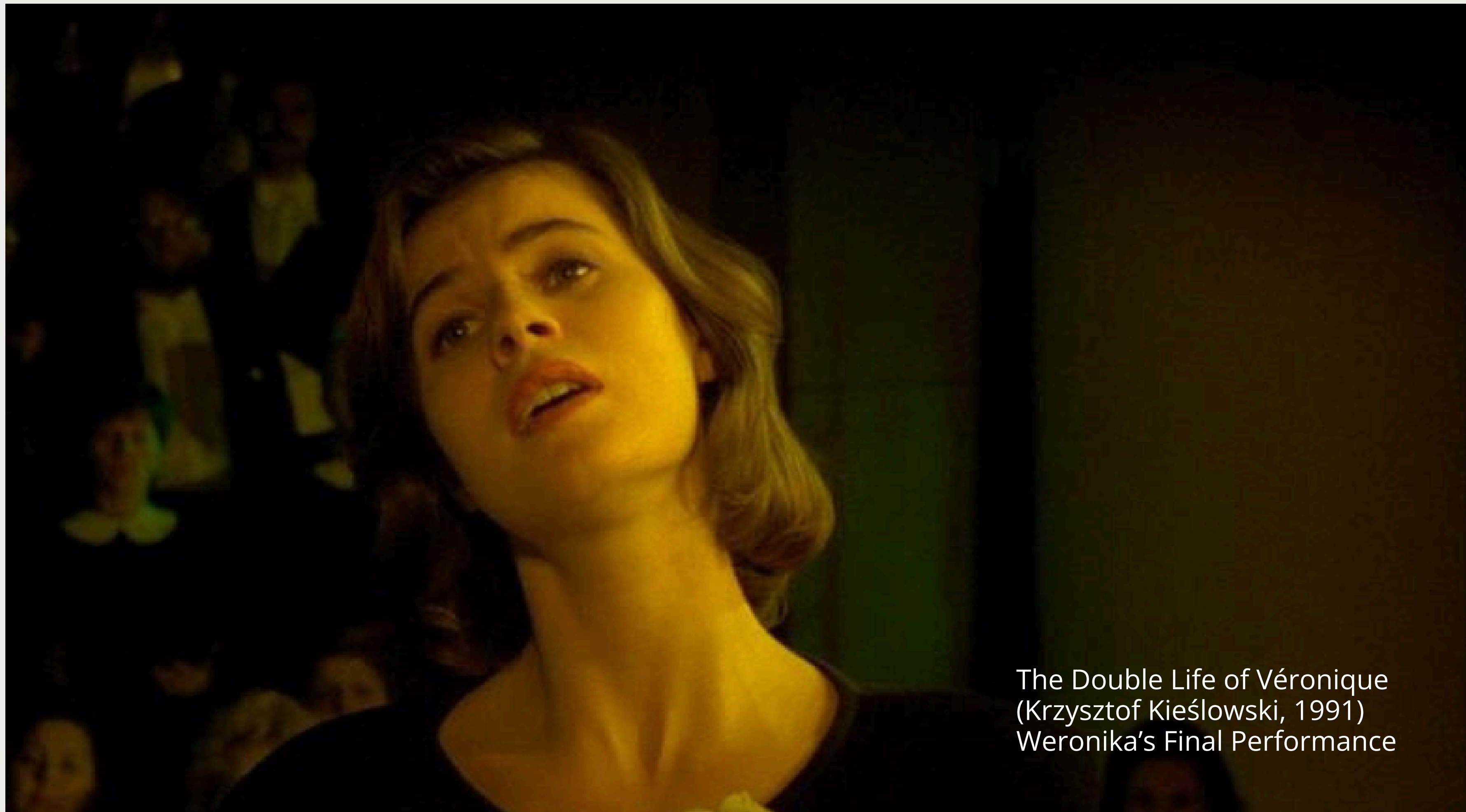
Within this framework, the notion of the *Doppelgänger* itself requires recalibration. This is not the threatening double of **Dostoevsky's The Double** or **Hoffmann's The Devil's Elixirs** — the double as usurper or rival. It is, rather, an ontological double: a divided self projected across a divided Europe, where the death of one mysteriously allows the other to continue living, feeling and searching. It is a *Doppelgänger* founded on invisible solidarity rather than conflict.

Kieślowski develops a coherent optical vocabulary — spheres, mirrors, windows, and lenses — suggesting a cinema concerned less with sight than with the conditions of perception. Fabbri, the puppeteer, acts as the filmmaker's alter ego and demiurge; through a *mise en abyme* of authorship, he manipulates two puppets in Véronique's likeness and literally articulates the film's title during his performance.

The visual style developed with **Sławomir Idziak** is fundamentally phenomenological. In the Kraków market square, Weronika's private joy — oblivious to the political turmoil — is enacted by a vertiginous 360-degree camera movement that mirrors the gulf between her interior state and external chaos. This subjective register returns during her death on stage: as she sings, the camera adopts her drifting gaze, curving through a disembodied, spherical space until her collapse completes the impression of her soul finally slipping free from the body. The decision to end Weronika's story barely twenty minutes into the film remains startling. Weronika lives with a heart murmur, a quiet flaw that she chooses never to heed. The condition is medical, yet Kieślowski films it almost as a metaphysical intuition: her body already knows what her mind cannot. In retrospect, that fragile murmur also becomes an unexpected metaphor for the heart of Europe itself, suspended between collapse and renewal, beating uncertainly in the aftermath of 1989. As Jacob observes:

“We are surprised... we wonder what we will do if the heroine disappears so early. Then we find ourselves in France before another Véronique who has the impression that something is missing without being able to say what it is. That is the poem: there is an answer somewhere. When we feel dispossessed of something without being able to name it – or nostalgic for something that never happened.

(Irène Jacob)



The Double Life of Véronique
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1991)
Weronika's Final Performance

Kieślowski himself resisted reducing the film either to autobiography or to allegory:

“*I have not dealt with myself in The Double Life of Véronique, Three Colours, Dekalog or No End. I think instead that I have enriched the portrait of the human being with an additional dimension—that of premonitions, intuitions, dreams and prejudices; in a word, of inner life.*

(Krzysztof Kieślowski)

He was equally clear-eyed about cinema's inability to represent that inner life directly. The for intérieur, he argues, belongs more naturally to literature; cinema can only approach it obliquely. Its real miracle lies elsewhere — in its capacity to generate meanings that exceed authorial intention. He illustrates this with characteristic dry irony: spectators found elaborate symbolism in a spilled bottle of milk, while for him, it remained simply “*a bottle of milk.*” “*That is what cinema is,*” he concludes.

It is precisely this openness that explains the enduring vitality of Kieślowski's work. Rather than imposing a definitive interpretation, his films create a space that each spectator completes differently. Their meanings remain unfinished, continually renewed.

V. THE GRAMMAR OF THE UNFINISHED SENTENCE

This refusal to overdetermine meaning lies at the heart of what Jacob describes as the communicative grammar that Kieślowski inherited from censorship — and chose to preserve:

“*In this kind of cinema that had to face censorship, you were not allowed to say all the things you wanted. So you had to say half of the sentence and the audience had to complete the other half. And even when Kieślowski worked in France, where he no longer had censorship, he said he liked this way of communica-ting with the audience.*

(Irène Jacob)

Kieślowski transformed this incompleteness into a mode of spectatorship, conceiving the relationship between filmmaker, film and spectator as fundamentally collaborative.

“*I think great directors allow the audience to fill the film with their own imagination.*

Jacob adds:

It's a participating audience that you are addressing. All the great directors have this quality of trusting their audience, requiring from their audience a personal perception of the film.

Kieślowski's own definition of a masterpiece, offered in his autobiography, converges precisely with this idea:

“For me, one can speak of a masterpiece when I feel the powerful, clear sensation of having lived or thought exactly what the work I am reading, watching or listening to expresses – that it says exactly the same thing I would say, but through a better sentence, a more beautiful musical or visual composition than I could have imagined myself.

(Krzysztof Kieślowski)

A masterpiece, in this formulation, is less a monument than an act of recognition: an encounter in which spectators discover their own inner lives reflected back to them, expressed more beautifully than they themselves could have done. Jacob extends this epistemology into the realm of science. Reflecting on her father, a CERN physicist, she notes:

“I was always impressed by scientists, because they know exactly what they know and what they don't – that they know only 5% of the universe, leaving 95% unknown. I found this idea in directors like Kieślowski. They acknowledge how little we know, choosing instead to move into the unknown approaching it with amazement, fascination perhaps, and questioning.

(Irène Jacob)

On the question of time, Jacob resists collapsing Kieślowski's cinema into either pure presentness or pure metaphysics, insisting instead on their coexistence:

“It was a combination, she says. Kieślowski's vision of time combined present – focused and metaphysical dimensions, rather than being exclusively one or the other. Most astrophysicists nowadays say that time doesn't exist. And in a way it is true – if you feel so present, and this is what you have to do in your work, finding this now and this uniqueness of now is the beauty of a film or an acting moment. But if you find this quality, I think it stays – it's eternal, in a way. I don't think his films were conceived for one precise moment, that's why they can be read today with another perception. His films were also full of mystery – the mystery of every little moment. He would be happy to know that he can be now and past and future, like in T.S. Eliot's poem (Burnt Norton: A.N.) – that it all exists in one particular time.

(Irène Jacob)

This simultaneity of temporalities may ultimately explain why **The Double Life of Véronique** has never become a period piece. It was never fully anchored in a single historical present to begin with.

VI. RED, FRATERNITY, AND THE LONG ECHO OF SURVEILLANCE

If Blue stands for liberty and White for equality, Red completes the republican triad with fraternity — and fraternity, in Kieślowski's late cinema, comes closest to naming the invisible thread that binds not only individuals but entire geopolitical spaces.

Red stages an improbable encounter between two ages and two visions of life: Valentine, a young Geneva model and student, accidentally strikes a dog; this leads her to its owner, a retired judge — solitary, cynical, embittered — who spends his days illegally listening to his neighbours' telephone conversations. Initially repelled, Valentine nevertheless returns to confront this elderly man, broken by an old heartbreak, and gradually challenges both his worldview and her own. A parallel plot follows Auguste, a young law student whose romantic disaster eerily echoes the judge's own youth — a gentler variation on the Doppelgänger structure underpinning **The Double Life of Véronique**.

Jacob reads the judge's surveillance not merely as autobiographical echo, but as evidence of a self-division within Kieślowski, as though he inhabited both sides of the conflict at once:

“With this judge who spies, there is an echo of what he himself experienced in Poland, including the censorship one had to work around. For Kieślowski, this film was the dialogue between wounded hope and a youth that needs to believe. These two characters are two voices rumbling within him – he was, at once, Valentine and the judge: the desire to be cruel, to be disappointed by life and by people, to no longer believe in anything – and yet, at the same time, the desire to believe in the possibility of the human being, who is not fundamentally bad but sometimes simply lacks the strength to be good.

(Irène Jacob)

A historical coincidence, little known outside Switzerland, enriches this reading. In 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell, the Fichenaffäre revealed that Swiss authorities had secretly compiled around 900,000 political files in a country of only 6.6 million inhabitants.

Without implying conscious intention on Kieślowski's part, the episode broadens the judge's surveillance beyond the communist experience into a distinctly European anxiety, suggesting that the continent's collective destinies were more deeply entangled than either side imagined.

What ultimately binds Valentine and the judge, Jacob suggests, is fraternity in its strictest sense:

“It's not about friendship. It's about seeing how two people who find each other unbearable will nonetheless bring something to one another. Perhaps Valentine's indignation at the judge's behavior is itself what each gives the other – she returns his dog, he treats her coldly, she discovers he spies on his neighbors, and yet she comes back. Why? Perhaps because there are things in our own lives we cannot resolve – and sometimes strangers offer us a place to sit with that. I find this resonates very strongly today, when reasoned dialogue seems almost impossible. And there, something happens – even between people who are opposites, they end up understanding each other despite everything. That, I think, is a form of fraternity.

(Irène Jacob)

The trilogy's finale enacts this fraternity on a structural scale, miraculously reuniting the survivors of all three films after a shipwreck, culminating in Judge Kern watching his television as Valentine's survival is announced — his face illuminating with an emotion that reads as nothing less than reconciliation with humanity itself. It is the final gesture of Kieślowski's cinema: proof that the invisible threads of destiny always, eventually, reconnect isolated consciousnesses.

VII. BEYOND THE FILMS: EMBODIED MEMORY AND A SHARED IMAGINATION

As President of the Institut Lumière since 2021, **Irène Jacob** views cinema less as a profession than as a vocation. She resists the idea of cinema as a *"finished object,"* defining it instead as a *"human and social adventure"* that only comes alive through its spectators, reaching beyond the confines of the theater by *"bringing films into schools, hospitals, and prisons"* — a vision that resonates perfectly with Kieślowski's own.

This conviction has turned Jacob, across three decades and several continents, into something like a living passport for Kieślowski's cinema. As she puts it:

“Very often, when I travel for a shoot or another project – in Europe, but also China, Mexico, Brazil – I’m asked to present a Kieślowski film at the local cinémathèque and discuss his work with students... This extraordinary collaboration has become a kind of universal passport: I can meet a South Korean, American, Japanese or Russian director who will speak to me about *The Double Life of Véronique*. Because Kieślowski’s films, his writing, his body of work, belong to the history of cinema. There is an emotion in his films that travels across cultures and time.

(Irène Jacob)

That may be the truest measure of a chef-d'œuvre in Kieślowski's sense: not permanence as monument, but as recognition — renewed each time a spectator encounters their own inner life, more beautifully expressed. Thirty years after Kieślowski's death, his cinema is still unfolding, and crossing borders, still inviting each generation to complete the unfinished sentence he left open decades ago, in Kraków or Geneva.

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FACELESS STATE and COLLECTIVE SOUL: from KIEŚLOWSKI'S DOCUMENTARY SHORTS to the HEART of BRAZILIAN CINEMA



Letícia Alassë

BRAZIL

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What happens when a camera stops looking at what a country is and starts searching for its soul?

Long before the Three Colours trilogy established **Krzysztof Kieślowski** as one of the leading figures of European cinema, he spent more than a decade documenting the social and political realities of communist Poland. Much of this early work, produced for Polish state television and largely inaccessible outside Poland until the rise of digital platforms such as YouTube, offers a revealing lens through which to examine the work of two pivotal Brazilian filmmakers:

Eduardo Coutinho and **Walter Salles**.

The three filmmakers never worked together, yet they share a central obsession: how can cinema resist historical erasure, institutional violence, and the administrative reduction of human lives?

This essay calls that structure the Faceless State, the bureaucratic stamp, the official statistic, the state-sanctioned version of history designed to outlive the people who actually lived it. Trained at the Łódź Film School, Kieślowski described his motivation simply as an *"impulse to describe"*: the belief that what remains undocumented is also at risk of disappearing from collective memory. For Kieślowski, Coutinho, and Salles, the camera isn't just a tool for documentation; it is a counter-archive built to protect human memory from the state's quiet, flattening power.

To understand how this ethical gesture works on screen, it helps to look to **Joseph G. Kickasola's** analysis in **The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski: The Liminal Image** (2004). Drawing from the Latin *limen* ("threshold"), Kickasola uses the term for images bridging the visible and invisible: a reflection, an empty chair, or a quiet face.

These objects remain physical while pointing toward unrepresentable truths: grief, faith, or political absence.

For Kieślowski, Salles, and Coutinho alike, the *liminal image* operates as a bridge between the immediate material reality recorded by the camera and the unrepresentable historical truths beneath it.

Kieślowski himself eventually questioned the absolute possibilities of documentary cinema, articulating this epistemological shift in **Kieślowski on Kieślowski** (Stok, 1993). He came to believe that recording actual suffering placed him in an ethical position he no longer trusted himself to occupy. Because documentaries deal with ordinary, vulnerable lives, any truth shared in trust could easily be weaponized by an oppressive state or exposed to an intrusive public. He put it even more bluntly elsewhere, admitting he was *"frightened of those real tears"* and unsure whether he had any right to record them at all. That discomfort drove his move toward fiction — not to abandon reality or escape political engagement, but to reach the hidden interiority that a camera pointed at a real, vulnerable subject could never safely touch.

While Kieślowski protected his subjects through imagined narratives, Coutinho chose the opposite route — refining a documentary practice built on radical consent and subject autonomy. Walter Salles occupies the space between them, deploying narrative fiction to reconstruct historical wounds while keeping the archive strictly intact. Together, they offer three distinct strategies for cinematic testimony under the eyes of the Faceless State.

INSTITUTIONAL ANONYMITY: THE OFFICE AND COUTINHO'S RESISTANCE



The Office
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1966)

Kieślowski begins his formal investigation of institutional power in early documentary shorts such as **The Office** (Urząd, 1966). Filmed inside a Polish state pension bureau, the camera observes elderly citizens processed through a machine reducing decades of labor to administrative procedure. Clerks remain hidden behind frosted glass, disembodied voices and hands stamping documents. Kieślowski avoids narration, allowing sliding counters, endless queues, and suffocating paperwork to speak for themselves. Kieślowski neither narrates nor editorially intervenes; he simply allows the sliding counters, the endless queues, and the suffocating paperwork to speak for themselves.

The result is quietly devastating: The Office demonstrates that the state does not need a human face to exert control. A small glass window, a counter, and a rubber stamp are more than enough to enact institutional violence.

If The Office observes the bureaucratic machine from the outside, **From a Night Porter's Point of View** (Z punktu widzenia nocnego stróża, 1977) reveals what happens when an individual willingly becomes its instrument. The film centers entirely on Marian Osuch, a factory night watchman who speaks candidly on camera about his



From a Night Porter's Point of View
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1977)

obsession with discipline, surveillance, and punishment. Kieślowski neither interrupts nor judges him; the camera simply lingers as Osuch scans the street, eager to report minor infractions.

Here, authoritarian ideology shows itself not through party slogans, but through the quiet routines of a low-level enforcer, refusing to treat state violence as an abstract force imposed from above.

The significance of **From a Night Porter's Point of View** lies in its total refusal to treat state violence as an abstract force imposed strictly from above. The Faceless State operates not only through central ministries and executive decrees, but through ordinary citizens who willingly internalize and reproduce its repressive logic. Osuch is simultaneously a distinct individual and an instrument of the system — a human face speaking fluently on behalf of an impersonal, dehumanizing authority.

Taken together, **The Office** and Night Porter function as complementary studies of power: the former observes bureaucracy operating on the bodies of citizens, while the latter reveals how bureaucratic logic settles deep into the habits, language, and moral imagination of the individual.

This concern finds its Brazilian counterpart in **Eduardo Coutinho's** non-fiction methodology. In **Twenty Years Later** (Cabra Marcado para Morrer, 1984), Coutinho illustrates what happens when state machinery turns its destructive force directly against the act of filmmaking itself.

In early 1964, Coutinho had begun shooting a fiction film about the assassinated peasant leader João Pedro Teixeira, casting real rural workers and family members to recreate their own lives. When the March 1964 military coup struck, production was violently halted: police seized equipment and footage, the cast and crew were scattered into hiding, and the film project was effectively buried under two decades of state censorship.

When Coutinho returned to the surviving footage in the early 1980s during Brazil's political transition, he was no longer merely attempting to complete an unfinished fiction film. He was launching a cinematic search for the human beings the dictatorship had spent two decades trying to erase, beginning with Teixeira's widow, Elizabeth, who had spent years living under an assumed name in rural obscurity. Elizabeth becomes the moral and emotional anchor of the finished work, embodying the persistence of lived memory against state-imposed oblivion.

What makes Cabra Marcado para Morrer landmark non-fiction is not only the testimony, but the physical state of the 1964 footage: scratched, faded, emulsion-scarred.



Twenty Years Later
(Eduardo Coutinho, 1984)

The celluloid retains a cellular memory of state violence. Cutting these flickering black-and-white fragments against crisp 1980s color footage physically inscribes those lost years onto the screen.

Like Kieślowski, Coutinho refuses an omniscient voiceover to declare that Brazilian history was violently fractured; the material texture of the medium makes the argument, transforming damaged film stock into a liminal artifact of historical trauma.

TWO SIMPLE QUESTIONS: TALKING HEADS

If *The Office* examines institutional anonymity and *Night Porter* reveals its internal adoption by the subject, Kieślowski's **Talking Heads** (Gadające głowy, 1980) explores the inverse trajectory: the conscious recovery of individual agency. The formal premise of the short documentary is remarkably spare.

Kieślowski asks a cross-section of Polish citizens, arranged chronologically by age from a one-year-old child to a hundred-year-old woman, the same two fundamental questions: "Who are you?" and "What do you want?" The camera simply holds on their faces in medium close-up as they confront the difficulty of responding.

The results are quietly profound. A child utters a truth of startling existential weight; a teenager freezes under the gaze of expectation; an elderly woman hesitates thoughtfully before voicing her modest desires. Sequentially arranged, these brief testimonies aggregate into a collective portrait of a society thinking aloud across generations. *Talking Heads* performs an extraordinary act of resistance without issuing a single ideological statement. By granting each subject the screen time and dignity to answer, the film systematically dismantles the state's attempt to reduce its citizens to an anonymous mass.



Talking Heads
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1980)



Edifício Master
(Eduardo Coutinho, 2020)

Eduardo Coutinho develops a remarkably similar ethical strategy in **Edifício Master** (2002), translating this pursuit of singular testimony to urban Brazil. Restricting his shooting location entirely to a single building in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, Coutinho converts a mundane residential block into a complex microcosm of society. His camera moves from apartment to apartment over a few days, relying on ambient light, dispensing with voiceover narration, and providing no preliminary biographical data beyond what each resident chooses to disclose during the face-to-face encounter.

The residents of Edifício Master offer an expansive tapestry of urban existence: one reflects quietly on a marriage that dissolved decades ago; another speaks openly about — recounts a brief, unforgettable encounter with Frank Sinatra. Coutinho approaches each subject with the same concentrated, non-judgmental attention. No story receives priority simply because it appears more dramatic or politically overt than another.

Each testimony expands the emotional geography of the building while fiercely safeguarding the subject's narrative autonomy.

The visual and formal restraint shared by Talking Heads and Edifício Master reflects a fundamental ethical commitment. In both films, the director steps back from the role of authoritative interpreter to assume the far more demanding responsibility of an active listener. Formally, this manifests through radical yet minimalist choices: no dramatic musical cues dictating emotional response, no omniscient narrator asserting historical importance, and no aggressive editing designed to force a preconceived thesis. It represents a quiet, uncompromising refusal to reduce a complex human life to a mere sociological illustration.

STATE VIOLENCE AS CATASTROPHIC ABSENCE

Walter Salles translates these same documentary ethics into the grammar of narrative fiction. In **Central Station** (Central do Brasil, 1998), the letters dictated by illiterate travelers to Dora — a cynical former schoolteacher set up at a small desk inside Rio de Janeiro's central transit hub — function as Salles's narrative equivalent to Kieślowski's "talking head." These dictated letters offer physical proof that marginalized individuals existed and demanded remembrance.



Central Station
(Walter Salles, 1998)

Salles lingers on the material textures of writing — paper grain, flowing blue ink, hands unaccustomed to pens — treating these documents not as plot devices, but as evidence of human presence amidst rapid modernization. Through the simple act of transcribing spoken words, Dora inadvertently becomes an ethical bridge between citizens the state has abandoned and the historical record that insists they were here.

Salles pushes this instinct further in **I'm Still Here** (Ainda Estou Aqui, 2024), adapted from Marcelo Rubens Paiva's memoir of his family's ordeal during Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1970s. Salles could easily have framed the film as a conventional political thriller centered on clandestine interrogations. Instead, he anchors the camera inside the Paiva family home, immersing the viewer in a domestic life filled with music, beach trips, family dogs, and chaotic dinner conversations.

By establishing this vivid atmosphere of warmth, Salles allows state terror to arrive not as a sensational graphic spectacle, but as a sudden, catastrophic absence. When Rubens Paiva, a former congressman, is taken from his home by plainclothes security agents for routine questioning and never returns, the film refuses to depict the torture occurring in hidden military dungeons. Instead, it measures the full weight of state violence through the domestic space left behind: an empty chair at the dinner table, unread newspapers accumulating in the living room, a car sitting silent in the driveway, and family photographs that remain fixed to the wall as time moves forward.

The dictatorship's most insidious weapon in **I'm Still Here** is not merely physical brutality, but the state's flat, years-long refusal to acknowledge that Rubens Paiva was ever detained, transforming a human being into an administrative non-person through official silence. This impenetrable bureaucratic vacuum is perhaps the most Kieślowskian element in Salles's film.



I'm Still Here
(Walter Salles, 2024)

Yet Eunice Paiva refuses to allow that state-enforced oblivion to stand. Rather than remaining frozen in passive grief, Eunice rebuilds her life, earns a law degree, raises five children, and spends decades forcing the Brazilian state to formally issue a death certificate admitting its crime. In chronicling her quiet, legal victory, Salles converges with Kieślowski and Coutinho at a shared ethical destination: history only retains its moral meaning when anchored to the singular, specific individual forced to survive it.

CHROMATIC METAPHORS AND THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF WALTER CARVALHO

The ethical imperative to make visible what institutions erase finds its visual expression in **Walter Salles's** long collaboration with cinematographer **Walter Carvalho**. Their partnership reaches an aesthetic milestone in **Behind the Sun** (Abril Despedaçado, 2001), adapted from Ismail Kadare's novel Broken April and relocated to the arid Brazilian sertão of 1910. In this world, the state is entirely absent — there are no police officers, courtrooms, or legal institutions. There is only an ancestral blood feud between two landowning families, locked in a cycle of reciprocal murder that neither side knows how to break. Salles and Carvalho translate this psychological trap into purely visual terms,



Behind the Sun
(Walter Salles, 2001)



A Short Film About Killing
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1988)



Behind the Sun
(Walter Salles, 2001)



Behind the Sun
(Walter Salles, 2001)

expanding upon a chromatic language established in *Central Station*. In **Central Station**, Carvalho's camera bathed the journey across the northeast in warm, golden sunlight and dusty yellow tones, using natural light to evoke a sense of spiritual search and human connection. In **Behind the Sun**, Carvalho takes that same palette of amber, ochre, and blinding light and transforms it into something far more oppressive. The scorched yellow hues and blinding glare construct an environment that is both physical and psychological, a landscape that acts as a trap rather than a refuge. Within the frame, physical objects gain symbolic weight while retaining tactile reality: the black armband tied around Tonho's arm signaling his approaching death, the dark blood smeared across the wooden sugarcane mill, and the endless rotation of the ox-driven press turning in circles like inescapable fate.

Both filmmakers have spoken publicly about how directly Krzysztof Kieślowski's visual masterworks influenced their approach to color, atmosphere, and camera movement during this period (Arte1, 2020).

The connection becomes immediately apparent when examining the visual strategies of Kieślowski's primary cinematographers. In **A Short Film About Killing** (1988), cinematographer Sławomir Idziak famously utilized customized, sickly yellow-green filters that stripped the city of Warsaw of any visual warmth, transforming the urban landscape into a moral indictment against both private murder and state-sanctioned execution. In **The Double Life of Véronique** (1991), amber light, vintage glass lenses, and constant reflections on windowpanes continuously blur the boundary between the physical material world and the invisible intuition that Véronique experiences. Throughout the ten episodes of **The Decalogue** (1989), the color palette shifts subtly from story to story, acting as a visual barometer for each character's private moral crisis.

For Idziak and Kieślowski, as for Carvalho and Salles, color, light, and texture aren't just extra details tacked on at the end. They do the heavy emotional lifting that dialogue simply can't handle.

The yellow and amber tones Carvalho uses across *Central Station* and *Behind the Sun* bring Kieślowski's "impulse to describe" to life — a visual style built to capture those quiet, hidden parts of human experience that speeches or official reports inevitably strip away.

RECLAIMING MELODRAMA: THE PERSONAL AS POLITICAL

This visual language of color and restraint provides the aesthetic foundation for **Walter Salles's** engagement with melodrama. Though Salles's filmography — ***Central Station*, *Behind the Sun*, *I'm Still Here*** — utilizes melodramatic tropes like broken homes and absent fathers, he deploys them with deliberate intent. He recognizes that melodrama's emotional architecture offers a direct accessibility that abstract political analysis or cold documentation lacks.

In Salles's cinema, melodrama is never a cheap tool to manipulate the audience; it functions as a vital bridge linking private interiority with national history. Dora's gradual, reluctant attachment to Josué in *Central Station* reveals far more about a nation abandoning its most vulnerable citizens than a statistical report on urban poverty ever could. Similarly, Tonho's obligation to avenge his brother in *Behind the Sun* takes the abstract concept of feudal violence and turns it into an immediate, physical weight borne by one specific young man. In *I'm Still Here*, the domestic warmth of the Paiva family causes the dictatorship's cruelty to land with crushing force, precisely because the audience has shared in the everyday beauty that the regime systematically destroys.

Crucially, Salles avoids the trap of sentimental excess by exercising extreme formal restraint

at the exact moments where traditional melodrama usually overflows. In ***Central Station***, when Dora sits alone in a bus terminal to read the letter she wrote to her estranged mother, she does not break down into dramatic sobbing; she simply sits quietly with the paper, allowing her face to hold the weight of decades of isolation. In ***I'm Still Here***, when Eunice Paiva is finally presented with the official state document recognizing her husband's death after decades of silence, Salles denies the audience a grand courtroom monologue or a heroic musical swell. Instead, the film offers a quiet moment of internal recognition — decades of patient waiting compressed into a subtle shift in her posture.

This commitment to emotional restraint mirrors Kieślowski's own artistic philosophy when he stepped away from non-fiction filmmaking: a deep conviction that the most profound human experiences demand the smallest cinematic gestures rather than the loudest ones. Melodrama, under Salles's direction, becomes less a conventional genre than a rigorous visual language capable of connecting private memory with collective history without sacrificing either intimacy or political urgency.

THE UNSEEN BURDENS OF EXISTENCE

Kieślowski's early documentaries established a core conviction: the filmmaker's primary duty is to observe what official institutions reduce to silence. Moving into narrative fiction did not weaken his political vision; it simply offered a new syntax for addressing the unseen burdens of existence.

Mapped onto Brazilian cinema, this framework shows how Walter Salles and Eduardo Coutinho join a shared lineage of artistic resistance.

Though working under distinct conditions, all three directors recognize that official history favors the language of authority: bureaucratic silences, administrative records, and institutional denial. Against this erasure, their films insist that collective memory requires preserving singular individual lives.

Ultimately, the convergence of Kieślowski, Coutinho, and Salles shows that cinema's most radical power lies in cultivating a patient, attentive gaze. Whether through quiet non-fiction listening, the physical texture of a letter, or the restraint of fictional re-enactment, these directors position the human face as the threshold between private grief and public history. In an era of historical amnesia and abstract metrics, their cinema asserts that no institutional silence holds the final word on human experience.

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DOCUMENTARY as HISTORICAL RECORDKEEPING: KIEŚLOWSKI'S EARLY APPROACH to DOCUMENTARIES and ITS AFTERLIFE in HINDUTVA-ERA, RIGHT-WING INDIA



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“If something hasn't been described and a record of it doesn't exist – it doesn't matter what form the description takes: a film, a sociological study, a book, or even just a verbal account – then you can't refer to it. You have to describe the thing or situation before you can deal with it.

(Krzysztof Kieślowski)

To borrow and perhaps mangle the opening of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, it's a truth less universally acknowledged that Krzysztof Kieślowski, beloved director widely known for his fiction features, began his early career by making documentaries.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, Kieślowski put into practice what he believed the documentary form was designed to accomplish under strict censorship. He argued that in a state where official culture manufactures reality, description itself is a political act — before argument, before critique, before any position the film might take. The record must exist before somebody is able to do anything with it.

Thirty years after Kieślowski's death, this essay reads his two early documentaries — **Robotnicy '71** (*Workers '71*, 1971) and **Życiorys** (*Curriculum Vitae*, 1975) — through this philosophy. It probes Kieślowski's reasons for abandoning the form and escaping to fiction. Despite his retreat, there remains an enduring power in Kieślowski's articulation of the purpose documentaries serve under authoritarian-adjacent regimes that continues to be relevant.

Indian documentary filmmaker **Anand Patwardhan**, working under structurally comparable conditions of state censorship for over five decades, has no plans for a similar escape to fiction. Comparing the two reveals something uncomfortable about Kieślowski's retreat, and something clarifying about Patwardhan's persistence: that the act of filming itself can become a form of historical recordkeeping against a regime intent on rewriting the past.

WORKERS '71

Kieślowski called **Workers '71** his “*most political film*” because it is deliberately devoid of any humanistic point of view.^[2]

The film documented the aftermath of the December 1970 protests in Poland, where workers went on strike expressing dissent against the sudden increase in prices of basic amenities under the Communist leadership of Władysław Gomułka. Due to nationwide protests, Gomułka was replaced by Edward Gierek as the new Party leader. The documentary laid bare the reality that while the face of the leadership might have changed, it made little difference to the material living conditions of the Polish working class. The film's crew travelled to small towns, villages and factories where workers articulated their desire for change, a sentiment that was at odds with the Party and its newly crowned leader Gierek. The Party was keen to whitewash its image and prove that the reforms it had brought about as a result of the protests were having their desired impact.

Kieślowski acknowledged that by making the film, the crew was in a race against time, filming those contested moments before they disappeared, knowing they would end. The point was to get the record into existence while it was still possible, before somebody erased it forever.

It's important to understand Kieślowski's underlying fear of creative expression being co-opted by the state with an agenda of its own.

^[1] Krzysztof Kieślowski, “The Unique Role of Documentaries” in *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, Danusia Stok, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 58.

^[2] Krzysztof Kieślowski, “The Unique Role of Documentaries” in *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, Danusia Stok, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 55.



Workers '71
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1971)

This fear is central to both — the formalist choices made in **Workers '71** as well as his eventual retreat from the documentary form altogether and escaping towards narrative features.

Kieślowski and his team were forced to make cuts they termed “*particularly nasty*.”^[3] The version they shot was never shown. One day, the sound rolls suddenly disappeared from the cutting-room and rolls containing interviews were deliberately left out of the film. When the rolls reappeared two days later, Kieślowski was summoned by police and accused of smuggling the recordings to Radio Free Europe. This experience made Kieślowski feel like he was being used as some kind of pawn in a larger political game.

“*Somebody was playing with someone but I didn't know what the game was. I didn't know what they were playing at and, to be honest, I didn't know who was playing with whom. I suspect that was one of the reasons why I grew sick of it all. I realised yet again how unimportant I was.*”^[4]

(Krzysztof Kieślowski)

This feeling of helplessness, of becoming an unwitting player in the larger machinations of the state, is one Kieślowski keeps returning to in the decade of 1971-1981, and it chips away at his conscience.



Curriculum Vitae
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1975)

By the time the events surrounding the making of **Station** (Dworzec, 1981) occur — which I will touch upon later — Kieślowski had made up his mind to say goodbye to the documentary form and fully commit to fiction. The seeds of this departure were sown in **Workers '71**. Kieślowski had made a film that was designed to evade manipulation, and yet he failed in that endeavour. The counter-record he had created to document the workers had, in the state's hands, become a potential instrument against them.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Curriculum Vitae is another important film from Kieślowski's body of work that demonstrates the creativity he employed to create a counter-record while functioning within the limits of censorship.

The film depicted a real Party Control Committee, an authentic disciplinary body with the power to expel Party members, sitting in judgment over a fictional defendant whose life history Kieślowski had written.

“*Everything concerning the Party Board of Control in Curriculum Vitae was real, because it was a real Party Board of Control. Nobody was specially selected for it. I simply went to various Party Committees and asked them to give me the most enlightened,*

[3] [4] Krzysztof Kieślowski, “The Unique Role of Documentaries” in Kieślowski on Kieślowski, Danusia Stok, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 57.

*the most liberal, the most circumspect
Party Board of Control in Warsaw.
So they gave me this Board because
it was the best.*^[5]

(Krzysztof Kieślowski)

This is just the beginning of where the lines between fiction and reality blur. Kieślowski cast a real victim in the role of the defendant, who had been expelled and harassed by the Party, to perform a fictional version of his own experience before a real tribunal. This resulted in a film whose factual core rang true because the frame around it had been artificially constructed. The film directly addressed the state apparatus — Party members, reformist insiders, the political class — but did so in a subversive manner. By showing how absurd the state machinery was in practice, the film presented an honest account through manufactured circumstances. **Curriculum Vitae** is notable, and not just for its ethical considerations. It shows that sometimes, a deliberate distortion of reality, when strategically employed against an oppressive apparatus, can reveal truths the state would prefer to remain hidden.

DEPARTURE FROM DOCUMENTARIES

While making **Station** (1981), which would prove to be Kieślowski's last dance with documentaries, police confiscated footage shot as part of the film. A girl had murdered and dismembered her mother near the vicinity of where the film was being made, and the police suspected the crew's hidden camera may have captured the killer. The ordeal resurfaced long-suppressed fears that Kieślowski had held for over a decade: that he was once again at the mercy of someone else's agenda, with no power over the outcome.

Despite Kieślowski's best efforts, the camera, rather than being a powerful medium of record-keeping and truth telling, had become a mere tool that could be seized and repurposed at will by a powerful regime and its actors.

When pressed about his departure from documentaries, Kieślowski gives a different answer that has more to do with the limitations of the form than with his own fears.

“*Not everything can be described. That's the documentary's great problem. It catches itself as if in its own trap. The closer it wants to get to somebody, the more that person shuts him or herself off from it.*”^[6]

(Krzysztof Kieślowski)

I am inclined to take Kieślowski's words with a pinch of salt. Notwithstanding his critique of the form and ethical considerations around how realism is often manufactured by the filmmaker for his own benefit — a live debate in documentary circles that persists till today — Kieślowski's previous work had showcased that he was more than adept at using creative license to circumvent the limitations of documentaries he describes above. In **Curriculum Vitae**, where direct description was impossible, he manufactured the circumstances under which authentic behaviour could be recorded. The man who worried that partial records could be used to manipulate the truth had also shown how that same truth, even in manipulated form, was an important historical counter-record against the official version of the state.

Reading between the lines, you can't help but sense that Kieślowski's abandonment of documentaries has less to do with the limitations of the form and more to do with his own fear of not having full control over the final cut.

[5] Krzysztof Kieślowski, “The Unique Role of Documentaries” in Kieślowski on Kieślowski, Danusia Stok, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 60.

[6] Krzysztof Kieślowski, “The Unique Role of Documentaries” in Kieślowski on Kieślowski, Danusia Stok, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 86.

The events around **Station** reconfirmed that counter-record could be captured by the state, just like in **Workers '71**. Kieślowski's response was to conclude that creating a counter-record was therefore impossible, and to withdraw to fiction. This is a personal choice. It's also a kind of defeatism. His philosophy of description functioning as a counter-record survived. What Kieślowski lost instead was the will to keep testing this philosophy against the oppressiveness of the state. As always, when it comes to Kieślowski, what remains unsaid reveals more about the truth than what is spoken.

This brings me to an important question: is it possible for a filmmaker to sustain the will in producing a coherent counter-record over a long period, against a state actively working to seize, suppress, or rewrite it? That's where Indian documentary filmmaker **Anand Patwardhan** comes into the picture.

ANAND PATWARDHAN AND THE CAMERA AS A COUNTER-RECORD IN INDIA

Across five decades, **Anand Patwardhan** has employed a socio-political lens to document and counter preferred narratives of the Indian state machinery, exploring issues such as the unchecked rise of religious fundamentalism (**In the Name of God**, 1992), deep-rooted casteism (**Jai Bhim Comrade**, 2011), sectarianism violence and its impact on reformulating masculinity (**Father, Son and the Holy War**, 1995), and the death of rationalism under the current Hindutva-regime in India (**Reason**, 2018).

While today he is considered a forerunner of the Indian independent documentary movement, Patwardhan calls his entry into the medium “*somewhat accidental*”.^[7]

While studying sociology in the United States back in 1970, Patwardhan was influenced by the student-led anti-war protests against the Vietnam War, which became a catalyst for him to first pick up the camera and document his surroundings.

“*I ended up briefly going to jail twice but also began my film journey by borrowing a camera to film the protests. The footage did not end up as a finished film, but I got a taste for the medium.*”^[8]

(Anand Patwardhan)

Two years later, he returned to India to work as a volunteer in a village development project. The idea that he would become a filmmaker hadn't yet crossed his mind. However, during this time, he made a twenty-minute filmstrip comprising still frames arranged in a particular order to tell a story to motivate tuberculosis patients in a rural Indian clinic.

Then in 1974, he travelled to the state of Bihar to visit a mass student and workers-led movement against widespread corruption and state repression.

Having sourced a Super 8 camera from Delhi, he photographed anticipated police attacks on a non-violent protest rally.

He reassembled the footage in 16mm that eventually became the film **Waves of Revolution** (1974-75). When Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended democracy and declared a state of Emergency in 1975 before the film was finished, Patwardhan went underground while many of his friends were imprisoned. He cut the film into smaller segments so it could be smuggled abroad.

When he received a teaching assistantship in Montreal, he reassembled the film in Canada and made an English translation to help raise international criticism against the Emergency back in India.

^[7] ^[8] Virat Nehru, Interview with Anand Patwardhan (Sydney, 14 July 2026).

“*I never made a conscious choice to become a filmmaker but slowly by stops and starts, filmmaking overtook my other modes of expression and became the way I most contributed to the causes I was attracted to.*”^[9]

(Anand Patwardhan)

The Emergency ended in 1977. However, official television channels had not covered anti-government protests at all in 1974–75, prior to the Emergency being enforced. This meant the only footage the state could use or rely on to ‘officially’ document the events of the past three years was part of Patwardhan’s Waves of Revolution.

“*When the government changed in 1977, and television channels wanted to show the movement that had helped end the Emergency, little documentary footage was available other than what we had sho.*”^[10]

(Anand Patwardhan)

There is a delicious irony at play here. The state that had once refused to describe the movement because it didn’t fit its preferred narrative now needed the description, but the only one in existence belonged to those who were creating the counter-record. This isn’t where the story ends. The state-backed Indian public broadcaster, Doordarshan, went on to steal Patwardhan’s Bihar protest movement footage. Patwardhan and his legal team proved the act of piracy in India’s courts, but the matter has remained in limbo without any resolution.

This scenario is where Kieślowski’s fear, the very reason why he left documentaries for good, returns. Once again, the counter-record is seized and repurposed by the actors of the state for their own agenda. A Hindu nationalist government looked to mine an anti-authoritarian archive to help embellish its own anti-Emergency credentials. But the outcome here is different to the lesson that Kieślowski took to heart.

The theft of Patwardhan’s Bihar footage did not compromise the record. Instead, it proved the counter-record’s power. The footage existed, which meant it could be fought over, litigated, and defended in court. The ongoing litigation record of the piracy case is now part of the counter-record.

For Kieślowski, external interference was a cause for defeatism and for retreating from the form entirely, escaping towards fiction. **For Patwardhan**, the state’s interference is yet another event that must be documented as part of the counter-record. The very act of documentation becomes a form of truth-telling.

FUTILITY AND BEYOND

After the Association of Polish Filmmakers’ attempts to fight the censors came to nothing, Kieślowski was wracked with a sense of futility.

“*We thought we were very important and then it turned out that we were completely insignificant.*”^[11]

(Krzysztof Kieślowski)

Patwardhan, looking back at his own body of work, arrives at a similar sentiment.

“*After the Modi regime came to power in 2014, I felt the futility of my forty years of filmmaking that had clearly failed to check the rise of right-wing forces in India.*”^[12]

(Anand Patwardhan)

This confession of failure is where both Kieślowski and Patwardhan unwittingly meet. Neither man’s films were enough to stop what they opposed.

[9] [10] [12] Virat Nehru, Interview with Anand Patwardhan (Sydney, 14 July 2026).

[11] Krzysztof Kieślowski, “Background” in Kieślowski on Kieślowski, Danusia Stok, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 39.

The difference lies in what path both took once this realisation dawned. Kieślowski's sense of defeatism compounded — the aftermath of films such as **Workers '71** and *Station* led to his eventual withdrawal from documentaries.

For Patwardhan, the epiphany became a galvanising force for the film titled *Reason*.

“*The murder of rationalists that began with the killing of Dr Narendra Dabholkar in 2013, followed by the murder of Comrade Govind Pansare in 2015, shook me out of paralysis. Both were killed by Hindutva gunmen on motorcycles. In the three years it took to complete Reason, two more rationalists, Professor MM Kalburgi and journalist Gauri Lankesh, were gunned down in a similar manner.*”^[13]

(Anand Patwardhan)

Patwardhan is also cognizant of Kieślowski's plight and offers a kinder reading of his eventual escape into fiction. He believes his status afforded by birth in India's social hierarchy, an upper-class Hindu male, inadvertently shielded him from a fate that could have been worse.

“*Under the system he [Kieślowski] worked, he had no choice. I would have done the same or given up on cinema perhaps. India even in the worst of times has failed to muzzle me. That's mostly due to class and caste privilege. My class, caste and religious type could get away with much more than others could.*”^[14]

(Anand Patwardhan)

Patwardhan's persistence extends beyond making the films to the machinery of their circulation, because in India the fight over the public record continues even after documentation.

He has fought legal battles against censorship and to force an unwilling public broadcaster to show his films to a national audience. The censorship battles, often playing out in the public sphere, meant that his films were discussed and talked about more than they otherwise would have. He has also held numerous community screenings across schools, colleges, trade unions and venues that citizens' rights groups can access. In Patwardhan's practice, the counter-record remains unfinished and incomplete until it reaches the people whose reality it describes.

“*In my fifty years of filmmaking, I spent at least as much time and effort to show my films as I did to make them.*”^[15]

(Anand Patwardhan)



Workers '71
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1971)



Waves of Revolution
(Anand Patwardhan, 1974–75)

[13] [14] [15] Virat Nehru, Interview with Anand Patwardhan (Sydney, 14 July 2026).

KIEŚLOWSKI'S PHILOSOPHY AND ITS FUTURE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Over June and July this year, India has seen nationwide protests sparked by anger over the leaking of a medical entrance exam paper that impacted over two million students. As a result of the paper leaks, the original test results were deemed invalid, and the government forced the students to repeat the exam. ^[15] Reportedly, at least twenty students took their own lives as a result of this ordeal. ^[16]

While the protests may appear to be about exam paper leaks, that issue was only a catalyst for compounding grievances that have piled up over the past twelve years against the Narendra Modi-led right-wing government, which has come to be seen as refusing to take accountability for its failures.

What's equally interesting is that much of India's news media channels refused to cover or even acknowledge the plight of the student protesters. In the absence of mainstream coverage, the Gen Z protesters became citizen journalists, with phones in their hands documenting their daily sit-ins and disseminating key messages through memes and social media platforms such as Instagram. In the absence of an 'official' state record, this process of counter-recordkeeping became a vital medium that legitimised the protest movement.

The act of recordkeeping gained even more significance in the final weeks of July, as the Indian government relied on police violence to mercilessly quash the movement.

^[16] Asim Ali, "Revolt of the Cockroaches: How India's Gen Z Humbled Modi," TIME, 1 August 2026.

In the absence of mainstream media coverage, it was up to YouTubers such as Samdish Bhatia and small digital news outlets such as Peek TV, among others, to document the extent of police brutality, including the use of tear gas, pellet guns, lathis and water cannons, so these acts could be documented. Bhatia, in the thick of the action, directed his camera person to shoot specific acts of police violence, capturing them on record so they couldn't be disputed later. ^[17]

In the aftermath of the protests, Modi's regime is working overtime to whitewash its image, including directing Meta to take down videos from Instagram and arresting students who were involved in exercising their democratic right to protest. ^[18]

And so, we come full circle. Just as Kieślowski and his crew were in a race against history to document the truth during Workers '71 before the Communist regime would paint over it, the student protesters in today's India went through the same experience.

Fifty-six years and continents apart, the two regimes of Poland and India come across as remarkably similar, albeit wearing different masks.

What Kieślowski didn't realise is that in an ideologically driven regime intent on manufacturing its own version of reality — be it Poland's Communist Party of the 1970s or Modi's India in 2026 — the very act of documentation is one of truth-telling. The description exists. We can fight over it. But we cannot erase it.

^[17] Mujib Mashal, "Phones in Hand, India's Young Protestors Blast Through Modi's Media Control," New York

^[18] Frontline News Desk, "Nationwide Crackdown on CJP Protesters Continues Despite Assurances of FIR Withdrawal," Frontline, 29 July 2026.

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KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI *and* IRANIAN INTELLECTUAL CINEMA: *a LEGACY BEYOND* BORDERS



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REMEMBERING KIEŚLOWSKI THIRTY YEARS LATER

Thirty years after the passing of Krzysztof Kieślowski, his cinema continues to speak with extraordinary clarity to audiences across the world. Few filmmakers have managed to transcend the historical moment in which they worked as completely as he has. Political systems have changed, ideological conflicts have evolved, and cinema itself has undergone a profound transformation in the digital age. Yet the moral questions that lie at the heart of Kieślowski's work remain as urgent today as they were when **The Decalogue**, **The Double Life of Véronique**, and **the Three Colours trilogy** first appeared.

Many great directors leave behind unforgettable images. Others revolutionize cinematic form or redefine storytelling. Kieślowski achieved something even more enduring. He transformed cinema into a space for moral reflection. His films rarely ask who is right or who is wrong. Instead, they invite us to consider how ordinary people struggle to live honestly in a world where certainty is almost always beyond reach. They remind us that compassion begins when judgment ends and that the deepest truths often emerge not through certainty but through doubt.

For this reason, Kieślowski occupies a unique position in world cinema. His work belongs unmistakably to Poland and to the cultural and historical experience of Eastern Europe, yet it has never remained confined there. His films travel easily across languages and cultures because they address questions that belong to every society: responsibility, guilt, memory, coincidence, love, loss, forgiveness, and the mysterious connections that bind one human life to another.

As an Iranian American film critic who has devoted more than four decades to writing about both Iranian and international cinema, I have long been fascinated by the dialogue that quietly developed between Kieślowski's work and Iranian intellectual cinema.

Although no direct artistic movement linked Poland and Iran, many Iranian filmmakers, critics, and students discovered in his films something profoundly familiar. They recognized an artistic vision that trusted ambiguity over certainty, compassion over ideology, and moral inquiry over simple answers.

This recognition did not emerge from academic theory alone. During the final years of the twentieth century, Kieślowski became one of the European filmmakers most admired within Iran's intellectual film community. His films circulated among critics, universities, film societies, private screenings, and eventually home-video collections. Discussions of his work became common wherever serious conversations about cinema took place. For many members of my generation, watching a new Kieślowski film was not merely an encounter with another accomplished European director; it was an encounter with an artist who believed, as many Iranian filmmakers did, that cinema could become an exploration of conscience itself.

The connection between Kieślowski and Iranian cinema has rarely received sustained critical attention. Studies of his legacy understandably emphasize his influence upon European filmmaking and the broader development of international art cinema. Yet his place within Iranian intellectual film culture deserves equal consideration. The relationship was never based upon imitation. Iranian directors did not attempt to reproduce Kieślowski's visual style, nor did they adopt his narratives wholesale. Rather, they found in his work confirmation that cinema could remain intimate, philosophical, spiritually searching, and socially engaged without sacrificing artistic integrity.

This affinity becomes especially meaningful because Iranian intellectual cinema emerged from its own rich traditions of literature, philosophy, and poetry. Long before Kieślowski's films reached Iranian audiences, Persian culture had cultivated an appreciation for ambiguity, metaphor, introspection, and ethical reflection. The works of great Persian poets and thinkers seldom divided humanity into simple categories of good and evil. Instead, they explored the contradictions of the human soul, acknowledging that truth often reveals itself gradually through uncertainty. When Iranian filmmakers encountered Kieślowski, they did not discover an unfamiliar worldview. They discovered another artist, shaped by a different history, who had arrived at remarkably similar questions.

Both Kieślowski and the leading figures of Iranian intellectual cinema rejected simplistic morality. Their films are populated not by heroes and villains but by ordinary men and women confronted with choices that resist easy judgment. Their characters struggle with conscience rather than ideology. They make mistakes not because they lack virtue but because human life itself is irreducibly complex. In both traditions, the audience is asked not to judge but to understand.

This shared moral sensibility explains why Kieślowski's films found such an attentive audience in Iran. His cinema demonstrated that the most profound drama often unfolds not in moments of spectacle but within the quiet conflicts of everyday existence. A telephone call unanswered, an accidental encounter, a gesture of kindness, or a seemingly insignificant decision could become the beginning of a profound ethical journey. Such moments resonated deeply with Iranian filmmakers who were themselves discovering the extraordinary within the ordinary.

This essay explores that remarkable dialogue between Kieślowski and Iranian intellectual cinema.

It argues that his most enduring legacy in Iran lies not in stylistic influence but in the affirmation of cinema as a form of philosophical inquiry. Through the works of directors such as **Abbas Kiarostami**, **Asghar Farhadi**, and others, we can see how similar concerns with truth, responsibility, ambiguity, and compassion developed within different cultural traditions while remaining united by a common belief in the moral possibilities of cinema.

Thirty years after his death, Kieślowski remains one of the rare filmmakers whose work continues to build bridges between cultures. His cinema reminds us that although history may divide nations, the questions that define humanity belong to all of us.

THE DISCOVERY OF KIEŚŁOWSKI IN IRAN

The relationship between Iranian intellectual cinema and the films of Krzysztof Kieślowski developed gradually but once established it proved remarkably enduring. During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, as Iranian cinema itself was gaining increasing international recognition, Iranian filmmakers, critics, and film students were also looking outward, searching for voices that could broaden their understanding of what serious cinema could achieve. Among the European directors who left a lasting impression, Kieślowski occupied a place of special importance.

Although access to international cinema in Iran was often limited, his films nevertheless found devoted audiences. They reached viewers through film festivals, cultural centers, university film clubs, private screenings, and the informal circulation of videotapes among cinephiles. Every new opportunity to watch one of his films was welcomed enthusiastically.

For many young filmmakers and students, discovering **The Decalogue**, **The Double Life of Véronique**, or later the **Three Colours trilogy** became an important moment in their artistic education.

What fascinated Iranian audiences was not simply Kieślowski's extraordinary craftsmanship. They admired the way he transformed ordinary human experience into profound ethical reflection. His films demonstrated that the greatest dramatic tension often arises not from action or spectacle but from the silent conflict between conscience and circumstance. A seemingly insignificant decision could alter the emotional direction of an entire life. An accidental encounter might reveal hidden truths about human nature. These were ideas that resonated deeply with Iranian filmmakers, who were themselves exploring the moral complexity of everyday existence.

As someone who spent those years writing about cinema and participating in Iran's critical film culture, I witnessed firsthand the admiration Kieślowski inspired. His name frequently appeared in conversations among critics, filmmakers, and students whenever the discussion turned to the future of art cinema. We did not speak of him merely as an accomplished Polish director. We regarded him as one of the essential filmmakers of our time, a director who had discovered new ways of expressing the moral uncertainty that defines modern life.

His films encouraged discussion rather than consensus. After screenings, conversations often continued for hours. We debated the choices his characters made, questioned their motivations, and frequently disagreed about their moral responsibilities. Yet those disagreements never diminished our admiration. On the contrary, they revealed the richness of Kieślowski's cinema. His films resisted definitive interpretation because they respected the intelligence of their audience.

This quality distinguished him from many contemporary filmmakers. Kieślowski never imposed moral conclusions upon his viewers. He trusted them to complete the ethical journey themselves. Instead of presenting heroes and villains, he offered human beings whose virtues and weaknesses existed simultaneously. Compassion replaced judgment. Understanding became more important than certainty.

That approach found a particularly receptive audience in Iran. Persian literary tradition has long embraced ambiguity as an essential part of human understanding. The poetry of great Persian writers rarely offers absolute answers. Instead, it invites readers to contemplate paradox, contradiction, and the hidden dimensions of experience. Although Kieślowski emerged from a completely different historical and cultural background, many Iranian viewers instinctively recognized a similar respect for complexity within his films.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Iranian filmmakers sought to imitate Kieślowski. Their cinematic language had evolved from their own cultural history, literary traditions, and social realities. The relationship was far more profound than stylistic influence. Kieślowski demonstrated that cinema could remain intimate while addressing universal questions, philosophical while remaining emotionally accessible, and socially engaged without becoming ideological. He confirmed that moral inquiry itself could provide the foundation for compelling drama.

KIEŚLOWSKI IN THE PAGES OF IRANIAN FILM CRITICISM

Kieślowski's presence in Iran extended well beyond filmmakers. His work became a recurring subject of discussion in Iranian film magazines and among the country's leading critics. The late 1980s and the 1990s were an exceptionally fertile period for Iranian film criticism. Serious journals devoted substantial space to international cinema, introducing readers to important filmmakers from around the world while encouraging thoughtful engagement with their work.

Kieślowski quickly became one of the directors most frequently discussed within these intellectual circles. Critics were drawn not only to the elegance of his filmmaking but to the philosophical depth of his stories. His cinema invited criticism that reached beyond questions of style and technique into ethics, psychology, literature, and spirituality. Reviewing a Kieślowski film often meant reflecting on the nature of responsibility, freedom, guilt, memory, and compassion.

I remember countless conversations with fellow critics in which Kieślowski's work became the starting point for broader discussions about the purpose of cinema itself. We did not ask merely whether a film was successful. We asked what it revealed about human nature. We debated whether moral certainty was ever truly possible. We discussed coincidence, destiny, forgiveness, and the limits of rational understanding. His films transformed criticism into a continuation of the philosophical dialogue that began on the screen.

This influence has reached younger generations as well. Film students encountering Kieślowski for the first time discovered that cinema could engage the intellect without sacrificing emotion.

They saw that silence could speak more eloquently than dialogue, that suggestion could be more powerful than explanation, and that unanswered questions often remained with viewers longer than definitive conclusions.

Looking back today, I believe Kieślowski's greatest contribution to Iranian intellectual film culture was not that he inspired imitation but that he elevated expectations. He reminded filmmakers that audiences were capable of confronting complexity. He reminded critics that cinema deserved to be discussed with the same seriousness as literature or philosophy. Most importantly, he reminded all of us that great films do not simplify life; they deepen our awareness of their mysteries.

This is why Kieślowski became more than a celebrated European director within Iran. He became part of an ongoing intellectual conversation about the moral possibilities of cinema itself. His films did not provide answers for Iranian filmmakers or critics. They provided something far more valuable: the confidence to continue asking difficult questions.

KIEŚLOWSKI'S LEGACY IN CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN CINEMA

If Kieślowski's influence in Iran had ended with admiration among critics and filmmakers of the 1990s, his place within Iranian intellectual cinema would still deserve recognition. Yet his legacy has proved far more enduring. It continues to live not because Iranian directors imitate his style, but because the questions that animated his cinema remain central to the finest works of contemporary Iranian filmmaking. His presence is less visible in individual images than in a shared ethical sensibility.

One of Kieślowski's greatest achievements was his refusal to separate morality from

from everyday life. His films remind us that ethical decisions rarely announce themselves dramatically. More often they emerge quietly, in conversations between strangers, within families, in moments of hesitation, or through choices that initially appear insignificant. The true drama lies not in external events but in the invisible movement of conscience.

This understanding has become one of the defining characteristics of Iranian intellectual cinema. Rather than constructing narratives around spectacular action, many Iranian filmmakers have chosen to explore the consequences of ordinary decisions. A lie told to protect a loved one, a promise that cannot be fulfilled, a misunderstanding between neighbors, or an unexpected act of kindness may become the emotional and philosophical center of an entire film. Such stories invite viewers to become participants in ethical reflection rather than passive observers.

Among contemporary Iranian filmmakers, the work of **Asghar Farhadi** offers perhaps the clearest example of this shared moral terrain. Farhadi's cinema is built upon uncertainty. His characters are neither innocent nor guilty in any absolute sense. Each possesses understandable motivations, hidden fears, and moral blind spots. As new information emerges, the audience is repeatedly forced to reconsider earlier judgments. Sympathy shifts from one character to another until certainty itself becomes impossible.

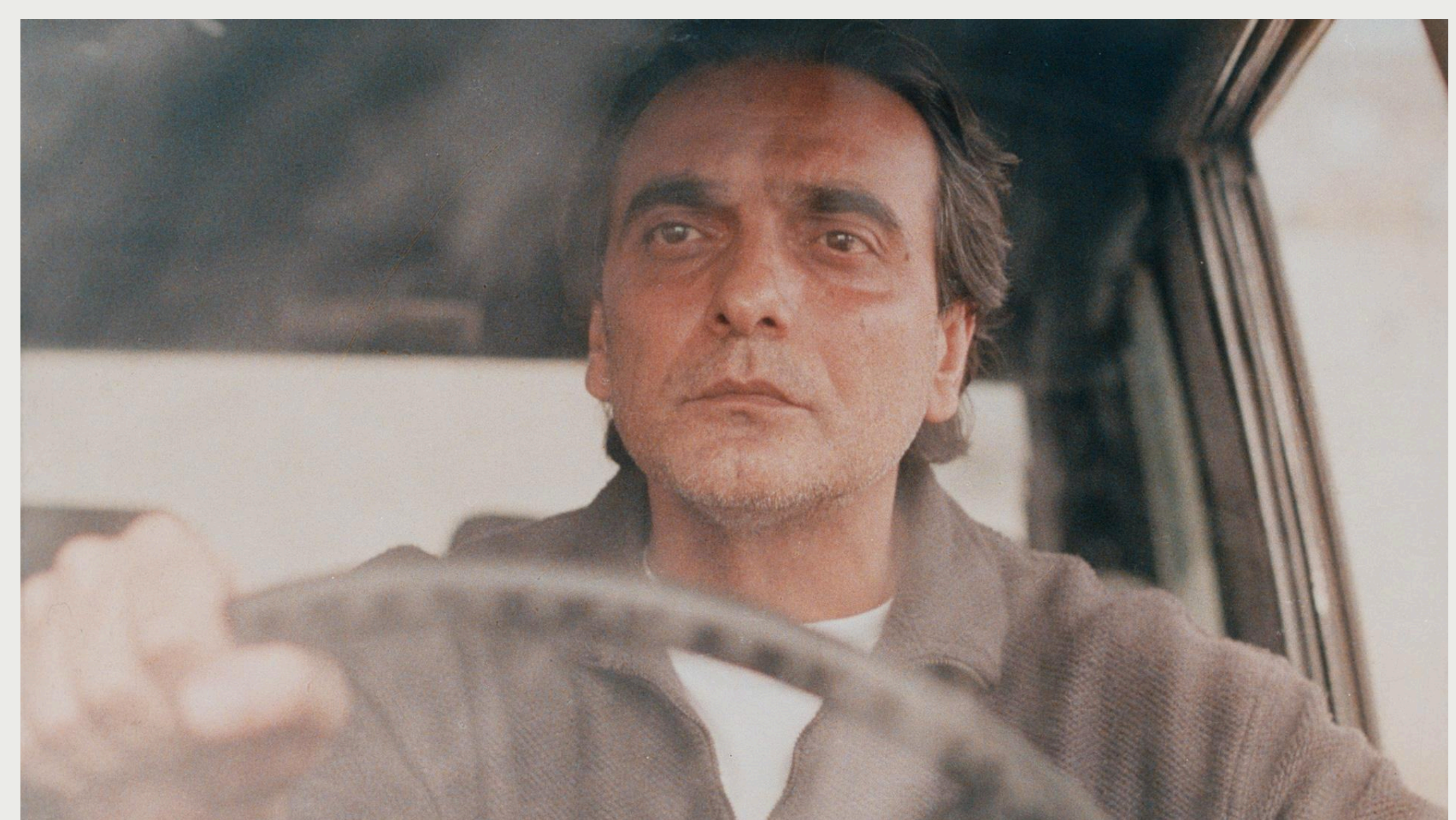
This approach recalls Kieślowski not because Farhadi imitates him, but because both filmmakers understand that truth is rarely singular. Human beings experience reality from different perspectives, and every perspective contains both insight and limitation. Their films reject the comforting illusion that moral conflicts can always be resolved through simple conclusions.

Having had the privilege of knowing Farhadi personally over many years, interviewing him, and following the evolution of his career from its earliest stages, I have often been

struck by the seriousness with which he approaches moral responsibility. He rehearses extensively with his actors, encouraging them to discover the emotional truth of every situation before the camera begins to record. His concern is never merely dramatic effectiveness but ethical authenticity. In this respect, his artistic philosophy often brings to mind Kieślowski's own profound respect for the complexity of human behavior.



The Double Life of Véronique
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1980)

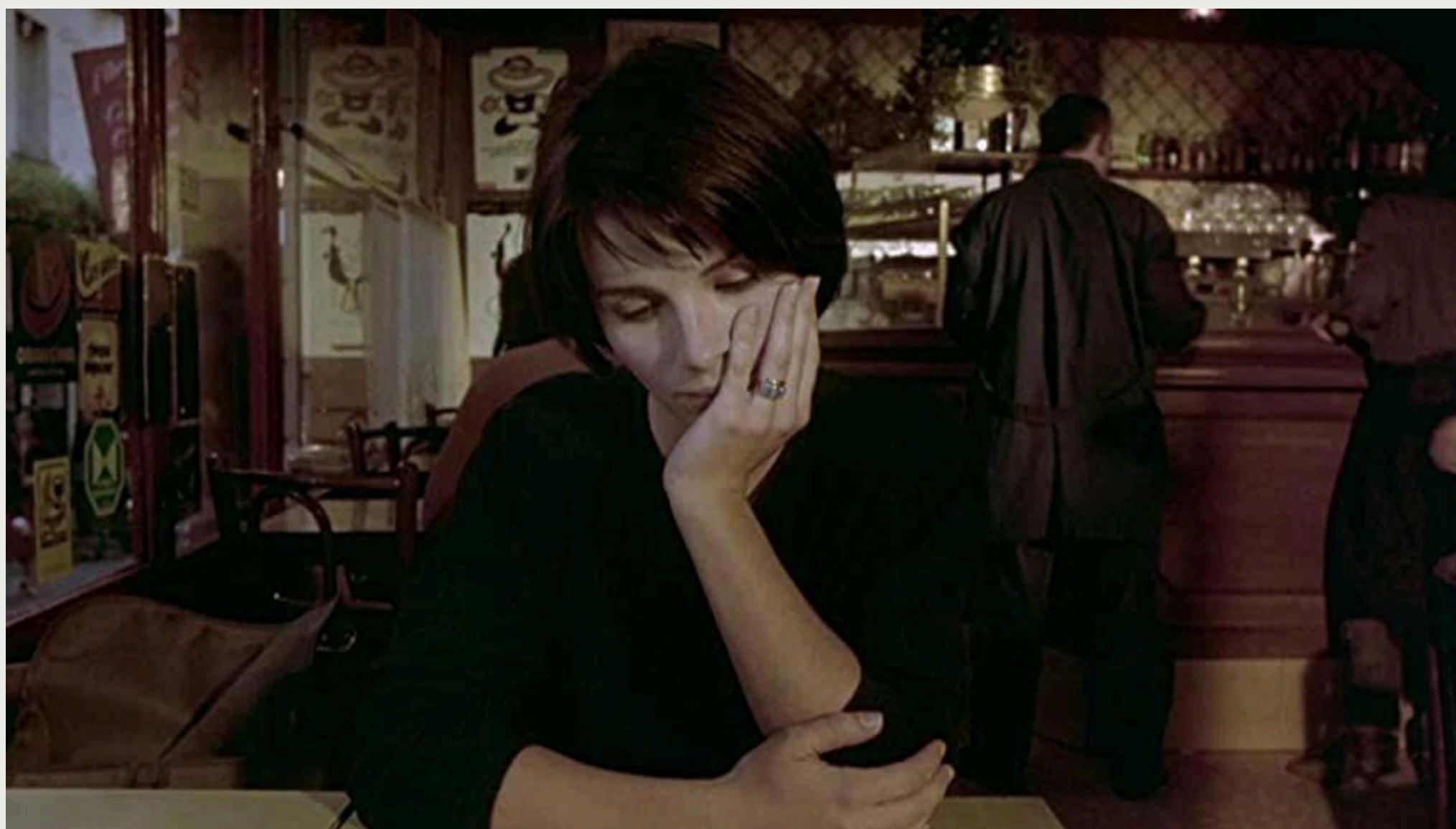


Taste of Cherry
(Abbas Kiarostami, 1997)

The same spirit can also be found, though expressed differently, in the cinema of **Abbas Kiarostami**. Kiarostami's films frequently dissolve the boundary between documentary and fiction, between observation and interpretation, inviting audiences to question not only what they see but how they see it. Kieślowski's cinema follows another formal path, yet it arrives at a similar destination: the recognition that certainty is often an illusion and that understanding requires patience, humility, and empathy.

During the years I knew Kiarostami, one quality always impressed me above all others. He possessed complete confidence in the

intelligence of his audience. He never felt compelled to explain every symbol or resolve every ambiguity. He trusted viewers to complete the film through their own imagination. Kieślowski shared this trust. Both directors understood that the audience is not the final recipient of a finished work but an active partner in its creation.



Three Colours: Blue
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993)



A Separation
(Asghar Farhadi, 2011)

Beyond these celebrated figures, Kieślowski's moral legacy can be felt throughout Iranian art cinema. Numerous directors have continued to explore the fragile relationship between appearance and reality, between private conscience and public responsibility. Their films differ greatly in style, rhythm, and subject matter, yet many share a belief that cinema achieves its greatest power when it encourages reflection rather than certainty.

Perhaps this explains why Kieślowski's work continues to attract younger Iranian filmmakers who belong to generations born after his death. They discover in his films not historical documents but living works of art. The political landscape has changed. Technology has transformed filmmaking

and distribution. Audiences consume images at unprecedented speed. Yet the ethical questions that Kieślowski posed remain remarkably resistant to time.

His cinema also reminds us that genuine humanism is not sentimental. Compassion does not require ignoring human weakness; rather, it begins by acknowledging it. His characters fail one another, misunderstand one another, and often make painful mistakes. Yet he refuses to reduce them to those failures. He insists that every individual deserves to be seen in the full complexity of his or her humanity. This belief has become one of the enduring strengths of Iranian intellectual cinema as well.

WHY KIEŚŁOWSKI MATTERS TODAY

We live in an age increasingly dominated by certainty. Social media rewards immediate judgment. Political discourse often divides humanity into opposing camps. Complex questions are reduced to slogans, while hesitation is mistaken for weakness. Under such conditions, Kieślowski's cinema offers a quiet but powerful form of resistance.

His films ask us to slow down. They encourage us to listen before judging, to observe before concluding, and to recognize that every human life contains invisible struggles inaccessible to outsiders. In a culture that often demands instant answers, Kieślowski reminds us that some of the most important questions should never be answered too quickly.

This may be why his work continues to resonate so deeply across cultures. Whether viewed in Warsaw, Tehran, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, or Los Angeles, his films invite audiences into the same ethical conversation. They demonstrate that cinema possesses a unique ability to bring together people whose histories, religions, and political experiences differ

profoundly, yet whose moral concerns remain surprisingly similar.

Looking back over more than four decades of writing about world cinema, I have come to believe that the deepest dialogue between Polish and Iranian cinema never depended upon official cultural agreements or institutional exchanges. It occurred in darkened screening rooms, in university classrooms, in the pages of film journals, in conversations among critics and filmmakers, and above all in the minds of audiences who recognized in Kieślowski's work questions that transcended national identity.

His legacy within Iranian intellectual cinema therefore cannot be measured by stylistic influence alone. It should be understood as an affirmation of cinema's highest calling: to deepen our understanding of ourselves and of one another. He showed that a film could be philosophical without becoming abstract, political without becoming propagandistic, spiritual without preaching, and emotionally powerful without manipulating its audience. Thirty years after his death, Krzysztof Kieślowski remains one of cinema's great bridge builders. He connected Eastern and Western Europe through his humanity, and perhaps less visibly but no less profoundly, he also helped create an intellectual bridge between Polish and Iranian cinema. That bridge was built not upon imitation but upon shared faith in the moral possibilities of art.

For those of us who have devoted our lives to cinema — as critics, historians, filmmakers, and audiences, that may be his most enduring gift. He reminds us that the greatest films do not tell us what to think. They invite us to become wiser, more compassionate, and more attentive to the extraordinary complexity of ordinary human lives. In that invitation lies the enduring legacy of Krzysztof Kieślowski — not only for Poland, but for Iran, and for world cinema.

The COLOURS of “CHANCE”: KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI’S LASTING LEGACY in CONTEMPORARY CINEMA, from DOCUMENTARIES, PASSING by THREE COLOURS TRILOGY to MODERN ITALIAN DIRECTORS



Michela Manente

ITALY

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INTRODUCTION: THE GEOMETRIC INTERSECTION OF FATE

Thirty years after the death of Krzysztof Kieślowski, the landscape of contemporary European art cinema still shows a persistent and deep presence of his formal and ethical structures. Far from being just an archive of 20th-century stylistic elements, the legacy to the Polish director has worked as an organizing principle in staging, a splitter of varied narrative paths, which finds one of its most fertile and complex expressions in contemporary Italian cinema.

Kieślowski’s artistic journey, shaped at the Łódź Film School — the Polish training institute where he took his first steps and shot his first essays — historically moved along a path of gradual transition from observational documentary to metaphysical fiction. In Poland during the 1960s and 1970s, documentary filmmaking was not just an informative genre, but mainly an artistic and politically independent one, an exercise in *‘living in the truth’* against the haze of communist state propaganda. It is within this framework of the *‘cinema of social unease’*, and also moral unease, that the filmmaker’s perspective takes shape: a relentless rigor, seemingly anonymous but profoundly human, focused on revealing the mechanisms of power and where they hide, not through ideology, but by studying the intrusion of conscience into the paradoxes of everyday life. When economic restrictions and censorship in his country pushed his work toward relocating production to France and focusing co-productions in the West, this ethical demand turned into a universal ontological investigation. It was here in the nineties that the boundaries of global film geography were redefined, partly softening the divide between central and peripheral hubs of international production, also thanks to festivals that helped spread lesser-known cinemas.

Among these, the Rotterdam Festival stands out, having discovered Kieślowski back in the seventies, long before he gained recognition at more prestigious festivals like Venice and Cannes. Although the director always said he wasn’t specifically inspired by any single filmmaker and wasn’t explicitly political, his move into fiction consistently questions the *“trap of well-being”*, the *“paradox of choice”* and the need for illusions.

In conducting this first investigation, Kieślowski looked up to the great masters of film history and expressed particular appreciation for two key figures in Italian cinema: the geometric precision of alienation in **Michelangelo Antonioni** (The adventure - L’avventura for Decalogue and Red Desert - Deserto rosso for Three Colours) and the humanist dreamlike quality of **Federico Fellini**, whom he studied from his time at the Łódź Film School, admiring The Road (La strada, 1954), from which he drew inspiration for some universal themes like existence, suffering, and human destiny.

THE PROTOTYPE OF THE CHROMATIC DRAMA: THE ARCHITECTURE OF TROIS COULEURS: BLEU

To understand Kieślowski’s contemporary influence, it’s necessary to look at the starting point of his Western turn: **Three Couleurs: Bleu** (Trois couleurs: Bleu, winner of the Golden Lion in Venice in 1993, tied with Robert Altman’s Short Cuts).

The first chapter of Colour Trilogy, created in honor of the French motto Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Three Colours: Blue is a fundamental and solid piece of the puzzle that focuses on emotions, death, and passion, linking them to colour symbolism.

The film stages the unforgettable prologue of Kieślowski's universal storytelling through the story of a painful journey undertaken by a young woman, Julie (Juliette Binoche, awarded the Volpi Cup in Venice for Best Actress). Having been made a victim of being separated from her loved ones due to the car accident that took away her husband and little daughter, Julie pursues a quest for freedom understood as denying the past and isolating herself in an anonymous apartment in Paris. However, the formal structure shows the impossibility of this existential self-sufficiency. To know who this woman is and who her husband was (it will turn out he was a famous composer and conductor who left unfinished a concert that Europe was waiting for), the viewer is led to let themselves be captivated by the music. The soundtrack, created by the Polish composer **Zbigniew Preisner** (who also composed the music for *The Double Life of Véronique* - *La double vie de Véronique*), is not just a commentary, but the very score of memory. From Julie's search, preceded by a varied, explicit, and recurring symbolism, painful truths about the husband's "other" lives emerge. The protagonist's return to life is metaphorically represented by repeated dives into water, which, from immersive breath-holding, bring her back to breathing the air of her own existence. Julie thus experiences a path of gradual liberation where gaze becomes an experience of the gaze: at the height of desperate resignation from the attempted suicide, she rediscovers a freedom broken by a tragic fate but reclaimed with a strength equal to that of Joan of Arc.

The Antonioni-like theme of incommunicability in *Three Colours: Blue* influenced the aesthetic of **Nanni Moretti's** film ***The Son's Room*** (*La stanza del figlio*, 2001). Even though he has a decidedly personal stylistic signature, in portraying grief and the inability of family members to communicate their sorrow after the death of a child, Moretti clearly approaches the emotional sensitivity of *Three Colours: Blue*.

MICHELA MANENTE: The Colours of "Chance": Krzysztof Kieślowski's Lasting Legacy in Contemporary Cinema, From Documentaries, Passing by Three Colours Trilogy to Modern Italian Directors



Three Couleurs: Bleu
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993)



The Son's Room
(Nanni Moretti, 2001)

There's the same respect for silence, the isolation of characters in their own mental rooms, and the (strenuous) attempt to return to life through small everyday fragments.

Another similarity in the processes of incommunicability can be seen in **Giuseppe Tornatore** (*The Unknown Woman*, *La sconosciuta*, 2006; *The Correspondence*, *La corrispondenza*, 2016). Tornatore shares with Kieślowski the attention to invisible bonds, intertwined destinies, and unspoken secrets. In *The Unknown Woman*, the drama of the past and the existential loneliness of the protagonist Irene (Ksenia Rappoport) closely resemble the hermetic isolation of Julie, made livelier by an international intrigue. In *The Correspondence*, the central theme is precisely the lack of communication mediated by technology and the physical absence of the other, combined with a strong presence of the soundtrack as a narrative element (a clear legacy of the partnership between Kieślowski and composer Zbigniew Preisner).



Three Couleurs: Bleu
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993)



The Consequences of Love
(Paolo Sorrentino, 2004)

Moving on to **The Consequences of Love** (*Le conseguenze dell'amore*) by **Paolo Sorrentino** (2004): Titta Di Girolamo (Toni Servillo) lives in a hotel in Switzerland, locked into a geometric routine and in tomb-like silence. He is the embodiment of incommunicability and the refusal to live in order to protect himself from pain. Visually, Sorrentino uses precise shots, geometries, and highly stylized cinematography that closely mirrors the formal rigor Sławomir Idziak brought to *Three Colours: Blue*.

In **Happy as Lazzaro** (*Lazzaro Felice*, 2018), her third feature, **Alice Rohrwacher** touches on the same theme. Even though Rohrwacher's style leans more towards magical realism, there's a profound element she shares with the Polish director: the spiritual and ethical dimension of the "pure" characters who can't communicate or make themselves understood by a cynical society. Rohrwacher, like Kieślowski, films the invisible and the movements of the soul through matter and details, eventually directing her latest film made of rarefactions on a current theme, that of commissioned art theft, like

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The chimera (*La chimera*, 2023). Firmly rooted in this vein, Alice Rohrwacher will direct the film adaptation of Italo Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*, an author with whom the Polish director shares the theme of a divergent perspective on analyzing the world, along with a deep dive into the existential complexity of human desire.

THE ITALIAN CONSTELLATION: SYNCHRONICITY, REALISM, AND TRANSCENDENCE

The influence of this realism cinema that becomes metaphysical has found a deep ground for reinterpretation in contemporary Italian cinema, surpassing the historical tradition of political and civil cinema of the Seventies and Eighties. While directors like **Francesco Rosi** (with whom Kieślowski shared work in the documentary field, socio-political commitment, philosophical analysis, and a deep dissatisfaction when facing reality, expressed in masterpieces like **La sfida** and **Le mani sulla città**) and **Elio Petri** had explored power as a top-down structure identified in the State and law enforcement, the arrival of Kieślowski's cinema in Italy shifts the focus toward a social unease represented by the chiaroscuro of the human soul, which had become the chiaroscuro in the cinematography of the *Decalogue* (*Dekalog*) shorts. A tangible link in this cultural transition is represented by the Polish actor **Jerzy Stuhr**, a key collaborator known in the national theater, for whom Kieślowski wrote **The Amateur**, and who starred in films from his early work, offering his own perspective on Polish life under communism, such as *The Scar* (first feature, 1976, he plays the assistant to director Bednarz) and *Calm* (TV film, 1976, he plays a young man coming out of prison after serving a short sentence), as well as being cast in episode 10 of **the Decalogue** and in one of the *Three Colours: White*.



Dekalog. Jerzy Stuhr
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1989)



Il sol dell'avvenire. Jerzy Stuhr
(Nanni Moretti, 2023)

Stuhr, an actor also skilled in the Italian language, was symbolically chosen by **Nanni Moretti** for the role of the Polish ambassador in his film **Il sol dell'avvenire** (2023), visually highlighting the persistence of this connection that began on the set of **Il caimano** (2006) and was reinforced in **Habemus Papam** (2011), where he played the role of the Polish spokesperson for the Holy See, Marcin Raijski. Today, the “ghost” of Kieślowski resonates among a wider range of Italian filmmakers who have redefined the turning point of national cinema, engaging with reality through imagery and the intrusion of consciousness.

PAOLO SORRENTINO’S SECULAR SPIRITUALITY

Paolo Sorrentino, who brought Italy back to winning an Oscar with **The Great Beauty** (2013), inherits from Kieślowski a fascination with the metaphysical and the exploration of the sacred and the profane in a secularized dimension.

The visual opulence and existential emptiness explored in **The Great Beauty**, together with the traumatic pain in **The Hand of God**, closely echo the atmospheric melancholy of **Three Colours: Blue** and the visual obsession with fate and suffering that also characterizes **The Double Life of Véronique** (1991). Sorrentino shares with the Polish master a stylistic inclination for the use of transcendent music, used to reveal the invisible forces of chance that govern human lives. The soundtrack stops being an external element and becomes the balancing point that guides the characters within a dark satire and existential contrast, where private trauma turns into a universal inquiry into the meaning of loss.

PIETRO MARCELLO’S POETIC REALISM

Pietro Marcello’s cinema (director of **Martin Eden**, 2019, freely adapted from Jack London’s novel) faithfully reflects Kieślowski’s ability to blur the lines between documentary truth and lyrical fiction, capturing the temporal fluidity and poetic realism of the Warsaw director. Marcello adopts an extremely fluid treatment of time and memory, allowing the weight of historical and social constraints to collide with the poetic and fragile destinies of his characters. In this kind of storytelling, archival memory merges with intimate human dramas, just as it did in Kieślowski’s early films, where observing social reality never excluded the lyrical element. The camera serves a historical reconstruction that is, first and foremost, an experience of the soul, where the paradox of choice and the necessity of illusions guide the characters’ paths toward their inevitable encounter with fate.

GIANFRANCO ROSI’S ETHICAL CAMERA

Directly recalling Kieślowski’s roots as a rigorous documentarian in the 1960s and 70s, **Gianfranco Rosi’s** cinema (creator of works like **Fire at Sea** (Fuocammare, 2016), and **Notturmo** (2020) embodies the moral imperative of the Polish director. Rosi’s documentary approach is based on patient observation of marginalized realities and human tragedy, carried out in a rigorous and non-judgmental way. This method elevates the documentary form to a universal and spiritual investigation of suffering, closely aligning with the philosophical depth of **The Decalogue**. For Rosi, as for the early Kieślowski who loved handling the camera (his 1968 short film Photography is a tribute to this), the camera acts as a true ethical tool: an aesthetic device capable of revealing the invisible metaphysical links that connect human pain and showing the human condition in its most authentic chiaroscuro.



Fire at Sea
(Gianfranco Rosi, 2016)

This attitude can also be found, with different nuances, in the raw and realistic but non-judgmental style that **Matteo Garrone** uses in films like **Gomorra** (2008) or **Dogman** (2018), where, like in the works of the Polish master, there isn’t a black-and-white view of good and evil, or in the human dynamics explored by **Leonardo di Costanzo** in the clash between the ambiguity of the human soul and institutions (for example, prison in **The inner cage**, **Ariaferma**, 2021 and **Elisa**, 2025), confirming how widespread this ethical stance is.

CONCLUSIONS: THE VITAL MODEL OF INTROSPECTIVE RESTLESSNESS

The path traced shows that Krzysztof Kieślowski’s legacy in contemporary Italian cinema isn’t just about sterile formal references; instead, it acts like a vital lifeblood that fuels some of today’s cinematic perspectives. From **Paolo Virzì’s** films focusing on precarious work and labor inequalities, like **A Whole Life Ahead** (Tutta la vita davanti, 2008) and **Human Capital** (Il capitale umano, 2013), to the international heights reached by **Luca Guadagnino** with **Call Me by Your Name** (Chiamami con il tuo nome, 2017) and **After the Hunt** (After the Hunt dopo la caccia, 2025), the existential themes of the Polish master continue to provide guidance for interpreting a society struggling with the past, totalitarianism, and new visual or economic regimes.

Thirty years after his passing, when facing the ontological dilemma that was already **Pier Paolo Pasolini’s** in exploring the relationship between man and society (**Teorema**, 1968), though more focused on the sacred-profane pair, Kieślowski’s cinema remains an essential model for modern filmmakers dealing with the fragmentation of existence. Through the eruption of consciousness, chromatic symbolism, and the decoding of reality mediated by the skillful use of visual language, contemporary Italian authors continue to move in the groove of that masterful lesson: turning the colours of chance into the necessary trajectories of art.

We also owe the Polish director for the unrealized trilogy dedicated to Dante Alighieri’s The Divine Comedy, which was supposed to be created as three feature films, each devoted to **Inferno**, **Purgatorio**, and **Paradiso**.

NOTIONS of INTERTEXTUALITY in the CINEMA of KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI



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The Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva developed the term "*intertextuality*" (intertextualité) in her 1966 essay *Word, Dialogue, and Novel*, while adapting the "dialogism" and "heteroglossia" theories of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) to post-structuralist semiotics, defining any text as a "mosaic of quotations" where "any text is the absorption and transformation of another". Applied to film, intertextuality is the deliberate or subconscious referencing of other texts (books, films, art, or music) within a film text. Filmmakers use it to build narrative layers, evoke nostalgia, or create entirely new meanings by connecting their work to a broader cultural context.

In a career that embodied short and feature-length documentaries and narrative films for cinema and television, Krzysztof Kieślowski was immersed in the cinematic process. Intertextuality in his films was defined by self-referentiality, recurring motifs, and philosophical dialogue across his own filmography rather than overt pop-culture references. He frequently engaged in narrative echoing, where characters, musical themes, and visual artifacts cross over between parallel storylines and individual features. This essay will explore those aspects to help identify who or what influenced him, how he meta-influenced himself, and those he influenced in his career and beyond.

EARLY LIFE, FILM SCHOOL AND DOCUMENTARY SHORTS

Krzysztof Kieślowski was born in Warsaw in 1941 during the Nazi occupation of Poland in World War Two. After 1945 his formative years would be synonymous with the Polish People's Republic and the overriding Soviet influence. The young Krzysztof would move around several small Polish towns to where his engineer father, continually suffering from

tuberculosis, could find available treatment. Raised Roman Catholic, religion would continue to have a lasting effect on Kieślowski throughout his life, as would later become most evident in **Dekalog** (1989).

His initial career direction did not involve film as at sixteen he joined a firefighters' training course. Although he quit after just three months, the lives of ordinary people would form the subject of his early documentaries.

In 1957 Kieślowski was accepted into the Warsaw College for Theatre Technicians. Although it was run by a relative, his ambitions to become a theatre director were halted by not having the required bachelor's degree for the theatre department, so his initial experience was attained working as a backstage dresser and set builder. However, he was able to study film as an intermediate step and this background deeply informed his filmmaking, learning to direct the viewer's eye within constrained environments, making his later films feel intimately staged. After Kieślowski graduated from the college he subsequently applied to the Łódź Film School, but it would take him three attempts before getting accepted. During this time he also became an art student to help avoid otherwise compulsory military service.

As a film school student Kieślowski was able to travel around Poland for his documentary film research and he progressively rejected the traditional Łódź Film School teaching approach to embrace a more free-flowing documentary style with the short films: **The Office** (Urząd, 1966), **Tramway** (Tramwaj, 1966), **Concert of Requests** (Koncert życzeń, 1967), **The Photograph** (Zdjęcie, 1968), and **From the City of Łódź** (Z miasta Łodzi, 1968). Their uniting subject matter was the lives of ordinary people, and a visual approach synonymous with the U.S. Direct Cinema movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This was an observational style, seeking to capture real-life events objectively and spontaneously, omitting the use of director-led interviews,

or reenactments, with the camera serving as an invisible, objective observer. Famous examples were **Primary** (1960, Dir. Robert Drew) shot by Richard Leacock and Albert Maysles (also producer), with D.A. Pennebaker as editor, chronicling the 1960 Wisconsin Democrat presidential nomination primary between John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey; **Don't Look Back** (1967), D.A. Pennebaker's documentary of Bob Dylan's 1965 concert tour in England; and **Salesman** (1969), directed by the Maysles brothers and Charlotte Zwerin, following the lives of four door-to-door Bible salesmen.

After graduating from Łódź in 1968, Kieślowski was commissioned by the Polish documentary film studio to make documentary shorts along with documentaries for television. Despite censorship, he would continue to develop and perfect a personal style from the late 1960s and into the next decade. The 1975 film **Curriculum Vitae** (Życiorys), which he also co-wrote, is important in his career trajectory as it forms a bridge from the earlier documentary shorts to his later feature films, particularly in subject matter, and at forty-two minutes long was a short-length feature film. The narrative depicts a communist party control committee's interrogation of a worker and party activist who is to be excluded from the party. Significantly, its formal approach is more in keeping with Kieślowski's earlier documentaries, with elements like hand-held camera reframing as opposed to fixed tripod alluding to Direct Cinema.

EARLY FEATURES: DOCUMENTARY INTO NARRATIVE AND EMERGING

Commissioned for television in 1975, the one-hour film **Personnel** is considered Kieślowski's first feature. It stars twenty-year-old actor Juliusz Machulski, who would

later become a director in his own right. The film combines methods taken from Kieślowski's documentary and fictional films, alluded to in his half-hour fiction film **Pedestrian Subway** (Przejście podziemne, 1974) and **Curriculum Vitae**. The story in **Personnel** unfolds over an hour in a theater in Warsaw where a young technician sees the world of theater from the other side, not the side of the stage but from the side of the backstage with all its physical work, toil and engineering that is required to put on a theatrical show with all the bureaucratic and personal politics of a stage troupe.

Therefore, **Personnel** can be considered semi-autobiographical, and the theater is also foregrounded in Kieślowski's 1979 short **Seven Woman of Different Ages**, and in the puppet scenes from **The Double life of Veronique** (1991).

Significantly, **Personnel** exemplified a loose genre of films in Poland known as *Cinema of Moral Anxiety* (circa 1976-1981), films which depicted young and idealistic characters entering adult life, a life of labor, of professional careers and very quickly discovering that the whole system is rigged, corrupt, and not based on meritocracy, rather on who knows whom and on those hierarchies of authority, power and the privileged that in fact had nothing to do with the official rhetoric of the communist state. The young character in **Personnel** finds that the world of theater is very hierarchal and partial so he cannot really see any justice in this world.

Kieślowski's first feature film for theatrical release was **The Scar** (Blizna, 1976). The simple story premise is of local businessmen making a shady deal to build a chemical plant in a Polish village, whose inhabitants strongly oppose the construction. To smooth things over, the party hires Stefan Bednarz (played by Franciszek Pieczka) as director of the plant. Being an honest man who wants to improve relations with the town, he carries almost too much on behalf

of its residents but the party undercuts any goodwill he might accrue, leading him to frustration and domestic troubles. Within the film a small team of documentary filmmakers follow Bednarz (one of them strongly alluding to Kieślowski himself) as the subject of their own film and their honest portrayal of the factory is deeply troubling to the party.

By the end of the 1970s the development in Kieślowski's unique visual and narrative style became even more progressive. The fictional feature **Camera Buff** follows a white collar factory worker who buys an 8-millimeter movie camera to film his new daughter's childhood. The factory director hears that he owns a movie camera and so hires him to film events at the factory. Before he knows it he's attending film festivals and he becomes obsessed with filmmaking.

The film, which again almost certainly draws experiences from Kieślowski's own life, follows the birth and growth of an artist in Poland that underlines a surreal trajectory of fate, as well as hinting at divine and magical elements that would progressively be incorporated into his later films.

FROM POLITICAL OPPRESSION TO ARTISTIC STATURE

The 1980s were still a time of great public and political upheavals in Poland, and Kieślowski made **Blind Chance** (Przypadek) in 1981 during the period of Solidarity.

This was an independent labor union led by Lech Walesa and it partnered with the Catholic Church (Pope John Paul II being Polish himself), to lead an anti-Soviet Union social movement throughout all of Poland. Solidarity was short-lived, lasting only from August 3rd 1980 to December 13th 1981, when General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared Martial Law in Poland. This itself would last until 1983 and by 1986 there was declared a general amnesty for

political prisoners. However, the effect of Martial Law was heavy censorship and films not approved under this system were taken out of theaters and confiscated. Kieślowski's **Blind Chance** was one of these, so although the film was made in 1981, it wasn't until 1987 that it secured a release, suffering the same delay fate as his 1976 film **The Calm** (Spokój) that was banned for four years before it was shown on television.

In essence, **Blind Chance** is both political and apolitical, showing how one event can drastically alter the life of a person. Depending upon what happens to him at the train station, the protagonist either becomes a prominent party member, a Catholic member of the resistance, or he remains apolitical. When finally released, critics from both sides of the political spectrum accused Kieślowski of being on the opposing side, and many people saw the film as merely a time capsule of Solidarity- era Poland as its delayed release hindered its political relevance. Despite this, **Blind Chance** uses a storytelling approach that maps out three different potential destinies for one protagonist. This structure of exploring multiple unfulfilled timelines influenced later films such as **Sliding Doors** (UK, 1998, Dir. Peter Howitt) and **Run Lola Run** (Lola rennt; Germany, 1998, Dir. Tom Tykwer).

Solidarity and Martial Law would also play a major role in Kieślowski's 1985 film **No End** (Bez końca), a ghost story in which a grieving widow copes with her husband's recent death. Her husband (spiritually omnipresent), an idealistic yet talented lawyer leaves behind an unfinished case, the defense of a jailed union member. She calls upon her husband's old mentor to take on the case while she tries to help the client's wife and family. Although it is arguably his most political film, the politics is more as a backdrop in illustrating the hardships of love divided by borders, whether division is between life and death or between freedom and imprisonment, a subliminal but overriding theme Kieślowski would return to.

CLASSIC KIEŚŁOWSKI: DEKALOG

Kieślowski's ground-breaking ten-episode television series **Dekalog** (1989) was created for Polish television with each episode loosely inspired by the Ten Commandments. Written with frequent co-collaborator Krzysztof Marek Piesiewicz (1945-2026), the series rejected the classic structure of television, instead being a collection of standalone films all set within or around a drab Warsaw apartment block. Initially, Kieślowski intended to allow younger directors to direct each episode but he grew attached to the project and ended up directing all ten himself, although almost every episode used a different cinematographer. The low budget meant Kieślowski would often have to shoot scenes from different episodes on the same day, and also work with more than one cinematographer on the same set on the same day.

For **Dekalog** Kieślowski created striking visual contrasts that ranged from faded greens and greys to deep, artificial blues. Each segment features unique color palettes, and the all-encompassing style relies on looking at characters' internal struggles as if looking through glass. The thematic through lines of human consequence, morality, and an overarching 'angel of fate' (played by Artur Barciś) observing human suffering were cemented here.



Dekalog
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1989)

Kieślowski shares the Russian literary focus on things unseen — spirituality, the mysterious alignment of events, and the tragedy of human limitations in the face of larger meta-physical forces. Therefore, Kieślowski is frequently compared to Russian literary giants like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, and Leo Tolstoy. In Dekalog the human soul is put on trial, like modern-day extensions of Dostoevsky's **Crime and Punishment** (1866) and **The Brothers Karamazov** (1880).

Individual moral choices are examined so characters frequently wrestle with the heavy burden of freedom, the crushing weight of guilt, the abstract nature of justice, divine intervention, and the conflict between the mind and the soul.

Two of the episodes from Dekalog (5 and 6) were expanded then released as full theatrical films, titled **A Short Film about Killing** (1988) and **A Short Film about Love** (1988) respectively in order to recoup some of the costs of filming the series. More importantly, Kieślowski succeeded in demonstrating how short narratives could be deepened into rich, morally ambiguous tragedies. For both films, Kieślowski re-contextualized the same moral dilemmas from different narrative perspectives. The Dekalog TV series not only allowed Kieślowski's mature style to shine through but also showcased his ability to elevate deeply intimate, localized struggles into profound philosophical questions.

Its influence is found in modern complex, ensemble-led television. Popular series from **Six Feet Under** (2001-2005) to **Lost** (2004-2010) with their thematic depth, ethical probing, and character study that can be traced back to the structural framework of Dekalog.

INTERNATIONAL FAME: THE DOUBLE LIFE OF VERONIQUE AND THREE COLOURS TRILOGY

Despite the success of *Dekalog*, it wouldn't be until his next projects that Kieślowski would break into the Western market. His classic late-period style emerged where he shifted away from explicit socio-political critique into deep philosophical and narrative experimentation. The 1991 French-Polish co-production **The Double Life of Véronique** is a highly metaphysical film about two identical women called Weronika and Véronique (both played by Irène Jacob), living parallel lives in Poland and France, and who share a profound, unexplained spiritual bond. Both are passionate singers with perilous heart conditions and Kieślowski uses the visual representation of puppets to explore the exhilaration and confusion of being doubled. In the highly regarded Australian online film publication *Senses of Cinema*, Indigo Bailey wrote in Issue 104 (January 2023):

“*In The Double Life of Véronique, director Krzysztof Kieślowski uses puppets and marionettes to reflect the uncanny, sometimes terrifying realization that our identities and actions might not be entirely our own. The film uses this device to illustrate the puppet-master nature of human connection and the mysterious, often irrational bonds we share with others*

(Indigo Bailey)

Aside from the gently tragic and uncanny aspects, *The Double Life of Véronique* operates as a metaphor for the geopolitical divide and ideological mirroring between Eastern and Western Europe after the fall of communism.



The Double Life of Véronique
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1991)

Kieślowski's final crowning achievement was the **Three Colours Trilogy: Blue** (1993), **White** (1994), and **Red** (1994) respectively exploring the ideals of the French Revolution and taking the foundational principles of the French Enlightenment — Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity — and reimagining them for the late 20th century, exploring these grand socio-political ideals through deeply intimate, individual lenses. Each film uses a different cast and, like **Dekalog**, a different cinematographer. The three films connect in subtle ways:

- 1 Saturated Color Palettes: Using primary colors (blue, white, and red) to symbolize abstract concepts like liberty, equality, and fraternity.
- 2 Symbolism and Reflections: Framing characters through distorted mirrors, water, and glass.
- 3 Zbigniew Preisner's Score: Employing lush, operatic, and haunting musical scores as a character of their own.
- 4 Visual Motifs: Rather than relying on overt political dialogue, Kieślowski used recurring objects (like breaking milk bottles) to communicate complex philosophical states.

Kieślowski's internal *intertextuality* is exemplified in the motif of the 'double', visible in both **The Double Life of Véronique** and **Three Colours: Red**. This directly descends from Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and his spiritual quest for understanding, the limits of human knowledge, and divine intervention.



The Three Colours Trilogy
(Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993-1994)

The characters in these Kieślowski films often experience mysterious, almost telepathic connections and coincidences that echo the structural symmetries of Dante's work, in particularly his classic poem "The Divine Comedy" (circa.1306-1321), completed just before his death. Just as in **The Double Life of Veronique**, the **Three Colours Trilogy** exemplified how deeply he integrated the grounded observations from his short films with the spiritual, universal mysteries of the human condition. Beyond structure, Kieślowski transformed how directors utilize color, music, and metaphysics to externalize internal emotion. The **Three Colours Trilogy** mapped the ideals of the French Revolution into lush, psychological dramas and also marked Kieślowski's stylistic maturity.

The stunning visuals he developed in collaboration with cinema-tographer Slawomir Idziak and composer Zbigniew Preisner set a new standard for modern art house cinema.

RETIREMENT, DEATH AND LEGACY

After the release of **Three Colours: Red** in 1994, Kieślowski announced his retirement from filmmaking. On March 13th 1996 he died from a cardiac arrest at the age of fifty-four following heart surgery. It was a profound loss to World Cinema as despite having announced his retirement after **Three Colours: Red**, Kieślowski was already working with his long-term collaborator Krzysztof Marek Piesiewicz on script development for a second trilogy of films called **Heaven, Hell and Purgatory**, based on the three parts of Dante's **The Divine Comedy**. Following his death, the scripts were adapted and produced by three different directors: **Heaven** by Tom Tykwer in 2002; **Hell** (L'Enfer) by Danis Tanović in 2005; and **Purgatory**, although the latter 2007 film **Nadzieja** (Hope), directed by Ibo Kurdo and Stanislaw Mucha, also scripted by the third part of the trilogy, but is in fact an unrelated project.

Kieślowski's masterful use of interconnected lives, parallel realities, and chance encounters altering character trajectories, left an undeniable imprint on contemporary film and television and formed his legacy that continues thirty years on. Furthermore, although he left an outstanding body of work in the form of his films, Kieślowski was also a prolific film teacher. Fortunately, many of his masterclass interviews and cinema classes still exist on video and online so that his vision of cinema may be passed on to future generations. Today, his legacy is actively preserved through initiatives like the Hommage à Kieślowski film festival in Sokolowsko, Poland, where his early archive is housed.

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