

On Krzysztof Kieślowski
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Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941-1996) was a Polish film director and screenwriter. He began making documentaries in Poland in the 1970s. In the early '80s, also in Poland, he began writing and directing fictional films. In 1990 with the breakup of communist control in Poland and with it the state-controlled film industry within which he worked, Kieślowski, supported by French and other western European financing, began to making films in France and Switzerland.

Kieślowski first came to fame in the West with his 1991 film, "The Double Life of Veronique." He attained super-star-director status with his "Three Colors" trilogy--"Blue" (1993), "White" (1994), and "Red" (1994). All three were shot in a burst of creative energy from November of 1992 to May of 1993. The three films are based on the three political ideals of the French Revolution: liberty ("Blue"), equality ("White"), and fraternity ("Red"), though in focus they are very personal and private rather than political.

With all of the attention the "Three Colors" trilogy garnered, ten hour-long films Kieślowski made for Polish television in 1989--which collectively came to be called "The Decalogue"--gained attention and enormous critical praise. "The Decalogue" films are each based on one of the Ten Commandments, though it isn't always clear which commandment a particular film is about. As well, some of Kieślowski's Polish films in the '80s received wide distribution, including "Blind Chance," "A Short Film About Love," and "A Short Film About Killing"—again, to great critical acclaim. Of the Kieślowski films I've mentioned, the only one that is tough to get for streaming is "The Decalogue," and it is very expensive to purchase. I bought a used copy for \$15 on eBay.

Starting with "No End" in 1985 and on through "The Decalogue," "The Double Life of Veronique," and "Three Colors," Kieślowski co-wrote the screenplays with a non-writer, prominent

Polish attorney and politician, Krzysztof Piesiewicz. Piesiewicz was responsible for the basic concepts of the films and much of the plotting; Kieślowski contributed the details, wrote the dialogue, and cast, directed, and edited the films. Kieślowski worked with a number of Polish cinematographers, all of them remarkably accomplished, most notable of which was Slawomir Idziak, who died at 41 of a heart attack. Zbigniew Preisner contributed brilliantly to the music in “Veronique” and the Trilogy films. The acting was stunningly good throughout (I know I’m raving, but I find the Kieślowski films dazzling)—Juliette Binoche in “Blue” and Irene Jacob in “The Double Life of Veronique” and “Red” particularly stand out. Kieślowski sure knew how to gather great talent around him and utilize it to the fullest.

Kieślowski announced his retirement from directing at a press conference for “Red” in 1994 and died while undergoing open heart surgery in 1996.

This past week, I’ve had a wonderful time watching Kieślowski films and plan to continue it when “The Decalogue” arrives from eBay in a week. I had seen all of them before, but this time I got so much more out of them. It was as if they were new. I’m much more capable of experiencing art (and life generally) than I was in past years. As I watched each film, I read about it in Annette Insdorf’s superb book, *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski*. I subscribe to the Criterion Channel, which has “Veronique” and “Three Colors,” and was fascinated by the numerous features analyzing those films and Kieślowski himself.

I’m not up to going into detail here about what I took from the films. Enough to say, I found them truly great artistic expressions, incredibly engaging, and that they touch down of what it means to be a human being, and that they affected me deeply in very personal ways. The two that gave me the richest experience this past week were, in this order, “Blue” and “Red.” If you are just going to see two of Kieślowski’s films, those are the two I’d recommend. I strongly suggest that you see both. Filmmaking simply doesn’t get better than those two films.

