

Krzysztof Kieślowski INTERVIEWS

Edited by Renata Bernard and Steven Woodward



Krzysztof Kieślowski: Interviews

Conversations with Filmmakers Series

Gerald Peary, General Editor

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Introduction

The story of Krzysztof Kieślowski, at least as it is known outside of Poland, is of a filmmaker rooted in the social documentary and politically engaged cinema of his homeland whose original tendencies, by force of personal, political, and economic changes, became grafted onto the wider cinematic tradition of Europe and the stylistics of the art cinema in the 1980s and 1990s. This book strives to give much greater nuance to that story, to represent Kieślowski's hybrid career and oeuvre by mapping his own thoughts and feelings about his work, from 1968, when he was still in film school, to 1996, when the *Three Colors* trilogy had won him global critical acclaim and yet he had announced his retirement from filmmaking, at the relatively young age of fifty-two.

In tracing this psycho-biographical narrative, our selection of interviews ranges across three different languages. Interviews with Kieślowski begin with Polish, expand to French in the late 1970s and 1980s, but only really appear in any number in English in the late 1980s and 1990s, after the international distribution of the *Decalogue* and the two related theatrical films. This development reflects Kieślowski's expanding reputation beyond the borders of what was, until 1989, Eastern Bloc Poland. Kieślowski visited North America for the first time in October 1986, for the screening of *No End* at the New York Film Festival. (*Camera Buff* had been shown at the Chicago Film Festival in 1980 and *Blind Chance* in 1987.) However, only after 1991, when *The Double Life of Véronique* opened the New York Film Festival (and Miramax became involved in the distribution of his films), did U.S. publications take any prolonged interest in him. And even then, he was seldom properly interviewed. Instead, his comments at public screenings and film festivals filled out profiles of the man and reviews of his films. Even Kristine McKenna's interview for the *LA Times*, reproduced here, is focused much more on the man and his beliefs than on the films themselves. This, in short, is one explanation for the rather unusual table of contents of this volume, oriented so heavily towards translations from Polish and French publications.

But there is another reason, too. In seeking interviews for this book, we have carefully considered the merits of interviews in three different languages and their current accessibility. From that perspective, we believe that there is a considerable advantage to publishing translations of interviews that many

readers will never have encountered before, even with the apparent accessibility and completeness of information enabled by the Internet. This applies especially to the early interviews in Polish, conducted in the different socio-political reality of Communist Poland, which afford a rare opportunity to trace Kieślowski's filmic trajectory back to its beginnings. These interviews also highlight the difficulty of compartmentalization of his work, with interviewers' attempts to do so even early in his career refused by the filmmaker himself.

As a result of drawing on interviews in three different languages, we believe we have also traced three different tracks of reception to Kieślowski's work, many different registers of engagement, partly owing to significant differences in socio-cultural context. In comparison to English-language interviews, Polish interviews tend to focus on how the films engage with existing Polish discourses on politics, religion, and morality. The Polish interviews reveal the different function of the cinema within Communist Poland where it answered to the dialectical imperative of social betterment central to the social mission of all media. Correspondingly, Polish critics functioned differently in comparison to their Western counterparts, not bound by codes of deference to filmmakers nor fearful of production companies and distributors, but ready to challenge and argue with filmmakers over the morality of their ideas, their engagement with politics, and, occasionally, the aesthetics of their work. Just a quick glance at Bożena Janicka's 1988 interview with Kieślowski, after two of the films of *Decalogue* had been released, films which to Janicka seem to be disengaged from the urgency of contemporary events and emotionally distant, even while dealing with murder and love, will confirm this. (Interestingly, Janicka focuses on the philosophical and social implications of Kieślowski's films, rather than on their particular details.) Kieślowski was quite clearly ready to respond in kind to his Polish critics, not only countering with his own appropriately laden defence, but elaborating on themes and techniques that get very little mention in those interviews conducted for English-language publications (see, for example, his elaboration of a notion of a collective consciousness—or perhaps, subconsciousness—that he describes to Tadeusz Szczepański, 1991). In short, Kieślowski seems to have been intensely aware of both the predilections of his interviewers and the readers of his interviews, and he tailored his responses accordingly.

Perhaps one consistency across all the interviews is Kieślowski's reticence to connect explicitly his films to political and personal developments. Nevertheless, because Kieślowski lived through a period of social, political, and cultural turbulence in Poland that directly affected his life and work, we have included in our chronology far more detail than is typical for books in this series, especially for the benefit of those readers unfamiliar with that part of Polish history. However, readers may wish to consider just how little of the events mentioned

in that chronology are made explicit in the interviews and how the subtextual strategies he developed as a filmmaker in a communist context, which he had in common with other filmmakers of the Eastern Bloc at the time, are carried over to the interviews.

Fortunately, before his premature death in 1996, Kieślowski participated in Faber and Faber's book series in which directors, through the intermediary of an editor (and, in this case, translator, Danusia Stok, the wife of Witold Stok, Kieślowski's sometime cinematographer in the 1970s), contemplate their own life and professional accomplishments. Readers of *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* will find some continuity of voice in the interviews collected here, especially in that apparent cynicism (what Tony Rayns interprets as persistent irony) of the man who became determined to go to film school because of his mother's disappointment when he failed the entrance exam for a second time, who continued to make films despite his sense of the foolhardiness of the process because, he claims, he didn't know how to do anything else, and who saw Poland as his home despite his increasing abhorrence of its politics and his amazement at the absurdities of his countrymen. *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* is an invaluable resource for fans and critics, but its mode of address is fundamentally different than will be found in the interviews collected here.

We hope, then, that every reader will find new discoveries in this collection. Ours include Kieślowski's references to "comic-strip cinema" (Sobolewski 1995) and to the difference between anecdotes and stories (Otrębska and Błach 1996). Kieślowski's *Diaries* from 1990, although not strictly interviews, highlight his surprising vulnerability, as when he is defrauded out of all the money in his wallet by a Parisian con artist, and confirm the power of social observation evident in his films, as when he becomes aware of the sifting of races outside the airport in Los Angeles.

Our selection begins with four early engagements with Kieślowski, when he was deciding on his credo as a filmmaker and applying that credo in the filming of ordinary Poles, some of whom were apparently removed from the flow of life (the blind veterans of *I Was a Soldier*) and some who were immersed in, and driving, momentous contemporary events (*Workers '71*). Whatever the subject, though, the young Kieślowski is committed to "The Dramaturgy of the Real" and an authentic engagement with individuals, not types (whether soldier or worker), pushing the production cooperative to allow him to use new methods (particularly 16mm equipment) to do so. In his 1968 dissertation, he refers to Marshall McLuhan's prediction of a post-literate future of children operating cameras in primary school, film libraries, and "accessorized televisions" as an obvious exaggeration, a great irony from our current perspective. His idealistic belief that he can describe the world in his films, bringing "cognizance of what is,"

is balanced by his experiences with *realpolitik* as film after film of his is “archived” rather than shown. And here, too, we can already detect the yearning that would ultimately drive him to abandon documentary altogether: to supersede the physical, external limitations of the medium with “thoughts and reflections reaching far beyond the photographed picture and recorded sound.”

By the time of our fifth selection, a 1976 interview for *Polityka*, Kieślowski was emerging as one of the seminal practitioners of the Cinema of Moral Anxiety (or the Cinema of Moral Concern) and the magazine had chosen him as an influential and provocative figure, the laureate of “Ferment 1976.” Nevertheless, he denies that the generation of filmmakers to which he belongs has adopted a new documentary approach. He does admit that “there has come a time when you want to look inside people’s skulls,” not just to capture their exteriors or their social performances, but he ascribes the possibility of doing so to technical developments. In this same interview, he describes the scope of his ambition for feature films—to make “a fresco, or a mosaic, but not a panorama”—in terms amazingly prescient of the ten-film series and trilogy with which his career would reach its height and end.

Kieślowski’s connection with France began long before he made films there since he found a sympathetic French audience in the late 1970s, when he was interviewed by *Jeune Cinema* about *Camera Buff*, and *The Scar* was reviewed in *Positif*. For *Jeune Cinéma*, one of the first magazines outside Poland to pay attention to Kieślowski’s work, Kieślowski is able to offer a broader view of the place of *Camera Buff* and his own work within what others would call the Cinema of Moral Anxiety: describing an undescribed reality so that it may be known and possibly changed. Amazingly, here, just two years before the imposition of martial law, Kieślowski can speak of a very liberal attitude among censors and political leaders: “the censor knows, like everyone, that there are many things to change; people in power know it just as well as the population.” When Jacques Demeure tried to interview him in the fall of 1979, however, he simply couldn’t get Kieślowski into a room, suggesting both Kieślowski’s lack of interest in being in the spotlight and the peculiar position he occupied in French critical circles, at that moment, of being both unknown by many and yet much in demand by some. His fame in France was clearly about to break, and Demeure’s extensive interview offers an overview of Kieślowski’s career to date, an investigation of the relationship between television and cinema, of documentary and fiction, and a more extensive discussion about *Camera Buff*. Here, also, we discover Kieślowski’s interest in a persistent theme, since he describes the protagonist of *The Calm* as someone like Julie in *Three Colors: Blue*: as someone who “has only one ambition. . . . He does not want a career, nor money nor friends nor love.” And finally, Kieślowski’s focus at the end on intergenerational unity among filmmakers

and the vitality of Polish cinema suggests his uncharacteristic optimism at this moment, less than a year before the founding of Solidarity.

Even though Kieślowski had begun his career with an insistence on the dramaturgy of the real and, would even tell Demeure that “I think life is smarter than me, that it creates situations more interesting than those I could invent myself,” his last four films, the French co-productions, turned away from the kitchen-sink realism and documentary-inflected aesthetics of his earlier work, a shift descried by some critics, especially the Polish. But this turn had been a long time coming and was by no means solely the result of the collapse of government structures of film funding. During the brief period of liberalization after August 1980 and before the imposition of martial law in December 1981, Kieślowski wrote a manifesto, “In Depth Rather than Breadth,” announcing that cinema’s previous function of description could now be taken over by journalism and that cinema itself must turn to “more universal and sagacious diagnoses” and must develop “a richer vocabulary if accounts of political events, intrigues, captains of industry or delinquent wives are also to be a forceful comment on love, hatred, jealousy, or death.” And the forcefulness to which he refers will come from “evoking in audiences feelings similar to my own: the physically painful impotence and sorrow that assail me when I see a man weeping at a bus stop, when I observe people struggling vainly to get close to others, when I see someone eating up the leftovers in a cheap restaurant, when I see the first blotches on a woman’s hand and know that she too is bitterly aware of them.” In short, here, Kieślowski seems to be envisioning the very images and situations with which his filmmaking career would reach its apogee: the suffering of a range of ordinary Poles would be reflected in *Decalogue* while a more select, beautiful, and effete range of individuals would undergo their own passion in the *Three Colors* trilogy.

After the manifesto, however, we enter a period of ominous silence, the martial law period and its aftermath. Although martial law was only in place for a year-and-a-half, it was a relatively dark period in Polish lives, which further intensified the obvious economic shortcomings and other deficiencies of the system, and which it was aiming to remedy. Martial law also obliterated Kieślowski’s remaining interest in serving Polish society. By the time Maria Marszałek interviewed Kieślowski in 1987, she could speak of a turn in his films: characters’ fates are now determined by psychological rather than institutional factors. And when Bożena Janicka interviewed him the next year, after the two extended versions of the *Decalogue* films had been released but before the democratizing Round Table talks had begun in Poland, he is speaking bitterly of the world of politics and even of his fellow Poles who “all hate one another,” and he is defending his turn to a metaphysical cinema that, although still depicting

Polish individuals, has no interest in commenting on Polish society, “the People’s Republic.” In a curious echo of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s famous remark in 1987, Kieślowski intones, “What is society? No such thing exists. Only 37 million people exist.” In his interviews with French magazines in the same period, as the first of the *Decalogue* films in their theatrical versions were being screened there and his earlier work was being discovered, he insists that he is still a realist director with a technique rooted in documentary, but it becomes clear, as he talks, that the reality to which he is now attuned is one more in keeping with idealist philosophies: “realism is not photographing things as they appear. It’s conveying the impression you have when you look at the work, it’s re-creating your ways of seeing what’s around you” (Tixeront 1988). And from his documentary background he claims that his feature films have taken not a sensitivity for accurate description but their construction around an idea rather than a story. In short, the interviews complicate rather than clarify Kieślowski’s turn to a metaphysical cinema. Was it simply the fulfilment of the change of direction he had announced in the 1981 manifesto? Was it a result of the despair he felt at the political turmoil of the 1980s. Or, indeed, was it a response to the government’s restructuring of film funding, which began with the 1987 Cinema Act?

Yet another possible answer is revealed in an interview for the French-Canadian *24 Images*. Here, Kieślowski suggests that the *Decalogue* films were really a separate project from the story of *A Short Film about Killing*, which had been conceived much earlier, the other films serving to give relief—in both senses of the word—to the extraordinary brutality of that film. He insists, too, that the brutality is there to comment less on the issue of capital punishment than to make an existential point: “In reality, the death which threatens us every moment is just as horrible for everyone.”

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of Kieślowski’s career is just how little known he was to English-language audiences before 1989, even though his work had previously shown at Cannes and films like *Camera Buff* and *No End* had been screened and reviewed in Britain on their release. The abruptness of the change in Kieślowski’s reputation outside Poland is brilliantly captured by Steve Goldman’s reference to how Kieślowski’s “twenty-year overnight transformation from an obscure documentarist . . . to Poland’s leading director came on November 26 when Kieślowski’s *A Short Film about Killing* took the first European Oscar.”

Kieślowski’s defensiveness and taciturnity ebbed lowest when he was conversing with a genuinely sympathetic interlocutor, and for Kieślowski there was none more sympathetic than Polish film journalist Tadeusz Sobolewski, whose interviews are generously represented here. One notices immediately the balance

in their conversations. The first of these Sobolewski interprets as Kieślowski's first serious attempt at re-evaluating "the People's Republic" as a system and his own role within it, calling for clear demarcation of individual responsibilities. While discussing the *Decalogue*, Kieślowski speaks most openly about the connection between his metaphysical turn and his own sense of religious faith, which lies far outside the typical scope of Polish Catholicism (which, they agree, depends upon an economy of suffering and consolation), perhaps also explaining why his late works were received much better outside Poland, where faith is a possibility rather than a necessity. He defines his films as a conversation between filmmaker and viewer, "about finding in someone else what you don't have in you." He also emphasizes how his own expressivity comes through montage, when "the soul of the film reveals itself," while viewers may concentrate more on *mise-en-scène*, thus finding symbols of which he was unaware.

His diary entries after the *Decalogue* reveal a lonely, isolated Kieślowski traveling extensively outside Poland, discovering an uncertain, tawdry world of con artists and young hooligans, of bomb scares and wilful segregation, of disconnection from home and family, and of artistic uncertainty (that he shares with Wajda and Zanussi). He is disgusted with the slander and hatefulness that passes for Polish democracy and dismayed in equal measure by the Polish Catholic Church's attempt to become the moral arbiter for the secular state. As he begins production on *The Double Life of Véronique*, his exhaustion with the process (including the publicity so essential to commercial cinema) is quite evident, though his enthusiasm for the painstaking process of editing continues.

Amazingly, however, once the film was released, Kieślowski seems to have rallied, describing the luminous quality of the film to interviewers as optimistic and speaking with excitement about his next grueling project, the *Three Colors* trilogy. In short interviews, like the one with Stéphane Brisset, Kieślowski appears as uncharacteristically concise and direct. In longer ones, like that with Michel Ciment and Hubert Niogret, he describes how music and warm light add to the sense of mystery in *Double Life*, and he mentions his idea of producing multiple versions of the film for release.

The interview with Tadeusz Szczepański is quite unique, and not only because Piesiewicz is included. But perhaps because of that, the interview probes very large-scale issues, like the import of film, the question of its enduring value, the complementary nature of the two Krzysztofs, the sources of morality and wisdom, the possibility of salvation through love, and the tension between religion and the sacred, between national and universal subjects, a major discussion theme of Polish filmmaking circles at the time.

To Hiroshi Takahashi, in whose Paris flat they used to meet, Kieślowski

reveals more directly than anywhere else how the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity are a distortion of the truth of human nature and of our real desires, thus explaining the irony of the *Three Colors* films.

Kieślowski's later discussions with Tadeusz Sobolewski are extraordinarily frank and intimate. In a van on the location shooting for *Three Colors: Red*, with a (red) Marlboro cigarette packet as a constant fixture in the conversation, they discuss whether mass culture has ever been or can ever be truly rebellious, ending with the chain-smoking Kieślowski's assertion that an artist can be most provocative not in the social or political sphere but by touching viewers' subconscious with lingering effect. The details of how that might be done in *Red* are the subject of their second conversation. And in a third conversation, this time intended for a Catholic publication, the specifics of how one detail is used—the blue lollipop in *Three Colors: Blue*—allow Kieślowski to explain how symbolism is really at the discretion of the viewer. He also speaks defiantly of the enslavement of religion, the freedom that comes from faith, and the dangers of the Church involving itself directly in politics, a significant trait of post-communist Poland.

If Kieślowski was one of the Polish filmmakers most successful in crossing over into the commercial market outside the Eastern Bloc, his success did not come without suspicion and even hostility, and not just from Polish critics. The “elusive symbolism” of all Kieślowski's work from *Decalogue* on, as Jonathan Romney describes it in his interview for the *Guardian*, could be interpreted simply as a pose, contrived art-house poetics of the kind described by David Bordwell, a cynical calculation designed by Kieślowski to earn himself a place among European auteurs. And Romney's scepticism is just the beginning of what Tony Rayns describes as a critical backlash against Kieślowski, as much fueled by Kieślowski's responses at press conferences, often interpreted as “bitter and arrogant,” and his announcement of his retirement, as by the films themselves. Even while probing Kieślowski's integrity with his questions, particularly in terms of the relationship of his stories to his funding sources, Rayns insists that Kieślowski has “pinpointed the mood of Europe in the nineties” better than any other filmmaker.

Katherine Monk's interview with Kieślowski during the 1994 Vancouver International Film Festival focuses particularly on the reasons for his retirement, with Kieślowski ultimately insisting that his films are all of a piece and that none have really enabled him to find the meaning for which he has been searching. Now, he insists, he may as well continue the search in private. On his way home from that festival, he stopped in Montreal and offered John Griffin a slightly different sense of his reasons for retiring, which we could summarize as an exhaustion not just with filmmaking but with the state of the world and the direction it was taking (perhaps signaled in Quentin Tarantino's win with *Pulp Fiction* over Kieślowski's

Three Colors: Red at Cannes in 1994). And finally, to Simon Hattenstone of the *Guardian*, he comes across as a Beckett-like existentialist, having had a happy childhood and achieved success in adulthood, but never being able to escape the awareness of the grave. In that context, filmmaking is neither enjoyable nor honourable, but merely the only thing Kieślowski was trained to do.

As already mentioned, American interviewers took an interest in Kieślowski only late in his career, but that fact produces a happy effect in interviews like Kristine McKenna's, where there is a freshness and directness to her very broad questions and an answering optimism in Kieślowski's responses, even if it is qualified, in this case by his awareness of such pitfalls as the egotism of romantic love or the illusory benefits of personal freedom.

We conclude with a series of interviews with Kieślowski as he moved deeper into his retirement, the first with Sobolewski again, who begins by asking why Kieślowski is still so busy and then compares him to Ken Loach, the filmmaker whom Kieślowski most admired. Loach is going on making films of protest about the "simple man" whom Kieślowski had, according to some critics, abandoned in his elegantly packaged French films. Sobolewski himself wonders, though, whether effective protest is even really possible anymore, given the kind of manipulation of reality that is endemic to the mediated world and perhaps most prevalent in the United States. This, Sobolewski's last one-on-one meeting with Kieślowski, took place in the socio-realist interior of the famed Mozaika café in Puławska Street in Warsaw.

Paul Coates's extended interview offers a survey of Kieślowski's career and themes, and aims to place his work within broader European filmmaking traditions. Here, too, Kieślowski insists that the mystery of our presence in the world is an existential one, for which religions offer one kind of response and his films one possible other. Many of his filmmaking strategies he explains as attempts to touch on that mystery, leaving the viewer enough space of interpretation (as, for example, in not giving interpretive titles to the *Decalogue* or *Three Colors* films) to feel their way into it. The films are also attempts to meditate on foundational concepts, like liberty, equality, and fraternity, to connect those concepts to individual lives in the present and thereby to make those words meaningful again.

At a theatre in Poznań, an ailing, but relaxed and reflective Kieślowski invites questions from the audience, whether about his films or about life itself, and the result is an extraordinarily diverse discussion, of night porters, of old ladies eating donuts, and of the importance of his daughter in his life, among other things. In a TV studio for the taping of the show *I Love Cinema*, Kieślowski once again faces Sobolewski, accompanied this time by Grażyna Torbicka, and the three consider documentaries in general and, in particular, how Kieślowski's early documentaries

on the most mundane, unspectacular subjects have endured, especially those that emphasize the fleetingness of life, like *Seven Women of Different Ages*, and those that celebrate achievement in the face of adversity, like *Hospital*.

And finally, in a discussion with two high school students four days before his death, Kiesłowski patiently responds to the implications in their questions that he has become a cultural icon, with corresponding responsibilities to the younger generation, that his films have lost any sense of story and specific place, and that the arts are fraudulent because they simply package up the same old material in different form. One particularly strong thread here is that none of us are free—capable of keeping our “neutrality,” as the students put it—but absorb the influence of everything and everyone that we contact and, indeed, of everyone that has lived before us. For we carry some awareness of those earlier lives—especially of those who have more or less lived the same life—whether that awareness is a dim apprehension [as in *The Double Life of Véronique*] or a more powerful sense conveyed to us by a force that some identify as God, but that is imperfect and lets us often slip from his hands (just as the judge does not predict the ferry disaster in *Red*, even though his plan for Valentine is nevertheless realized). The recording of this interview ended mid-way so it is now lost in that moment forever, because the excited high school student Jacek Błach had only one tape on him, a fact he came to regret for years to come. And that is where our collection ends, with Kiesłowski anticipating his upcoming heart operation during which he, too, somehow slipped from God’s hands.

Most interviews are included in their entirety. However, in the cases of interviews that included long introductions to the actual conversation, we have sometimes summarized the preamble in our own brief introduction.

In translating, we have kept some of the rhythms and metaphors more particular to Kiesłowski’s native Polish, only converting them fully to English patterns and idioms when necessary for the sense. Kiesłowski did tend to use eccentric metaphors, which were reflective of his work and worldview. Nevertheless, for the French interviews, Kiesłowski’s contributions to which were themselves translated from Polish, we have translated more aggressively. Punctuation has been silently altered to correspond to current English practice.

Interviews are presented in the order in which they were conducted, since the publication of some (like Kołodyński’s) was delayed by more than twenty years.

Acknowledgments

Krzysztof Kiesłowski: Interviews maps out some of the creative processes underlying Krzysztof Kiesłowski’s filmmaking trajectory, especially those previously obscured from anglophones by language barriers or difficulty of access, and

it does so through the lenses of particular socio-cultural moments in which each of the texts included here came into being. The challenge of combining these texts into a coherent entirety was lessened by the generosity of the people who knew the influential Polish film director. Although their recollections are rarely made apparent in the book, their stories of encounters with Kieślowski, relayed in cafés in Warsaw and Krakow by Tadeusz Sobolewski, Stanisław Zawiśliński, and Jacek Błach, permeate the inevitable interpretative choices that had to be made in the translation of Polish interviews. The complexities of untangling the copyright knots tied by the systemic changes in Poland post-1989 and of locating the interviewers and copyright holders were made less cumbersome by Irena Strzałkowska at Tor Film Studio, Adam Wyżyński at Filmoteka Narodowa, Ewa Misiewicz at Fama Films, Maciej Korbut at Polska Federacja DKE, Dorota Dołęgowska at PISM, and the invaluable Paul Coates. In the case of interviews in defunct French film magazines, Jean-Luc Gaignepain pointed out how we might find the interviewers themselves. And to help with translating the French interviews, the meticulous Simon Gilbert devoted many hours of his attention.

The generosity of interviewers and copyright holders in granting their permissions to have the texts included here translated and published without a fee speaks volumes of the Kieślowskian spirit. Maria and Marta Kieślowska, Tadeusz Sobolewski, Andrzej Kołodyński, Professor Marek Hendrykowski, Dr. Mikołaj Jazdon, Bożena Janicka, Maria Marszałek, Tadeusz Szczepański, Maciej Korbut of Polska Federacja DKE, Jacek Ślusarczyk at Tygodnik Powszechny, Marian Turski, Tomasz Raczek at Instytut Wydawniczy Latarnik, Grażyna Torbicka, Jacek Błach, Agata Otrębska, Lucien Logette, Marie-Claude Loiselle, Stéphane Brisset, as well as Hiroshi Takahashi and Paul Coates all made a selfless contribution to this book. Wojciech Druszczyk generously agreed for his mesmerizing portrait of Krzysztof Kieślowski, laden with retrospective symbolism, to be printed on the cover (*ad patriae gloriam*, Panie Wojciechu). Bishop's University helped defray some of the costs of preparing the book for publication.

It has been a surprisingly long journey, which could only be navigated safely with an understanding nod from our family members, Steven's wife, Wendy, and son, Jamie, and Renata's husband, John, and daughter, Apolonia Gigi Bernard, as well as her mother, Barbara Murawska-Berkowicz. Especially warm thank you extends to Gosia Murawska for doing the bulk of initial leg work in Poland.

RB

SW

Chronology

“Andrei Tarkovsky was one of the greatest directors of recent years. . . . Unfortunately, he died. Probably because he couldn’t live any more. That’s usually why people die. One can say it’s cancer or a heart attack or that the person falls under a car, but really people die because they can’t go on living.”

—Krzysztof Kieślowski¹

The following narrative chronology synthesizes details about Kieślowski’s life and progress as a filmmaker from many different sources, including the most extended book on Kieślowski’s life in English, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, edited by Danusia Stok. Not all films are mentioned, only those that seem to have been critical in developing Kieślowski’s unique attitude and approach to filmmaking. For a complete list of films, see the filmography. Events crucial to the general state of Polish cinema and Polish political and social life are also detailed.

- 1941 June 27: The son of Barbara and Roman Kieślowski, Krzysztof Kieślowski is born in Warsaw.
- 1944–49 Kieślowski’s sister, Ewa Kieślowska, is born in 1944. After the Germans are pushed out of Poland by Soviet forces, the country is promised political freedom through democratic elections, but Stalin manipulates the situation so that the communists take control in 1947 and forge the non-democratic People’s Republic of Poland. During and after the war, Kieślowski moves around with his family in search of health for his tubercular engineer father, Roman (whose pessimism Kieślowski felt he had inherited).
- 1947 Kieślowski begins his elementary school education. Being a sickly child, throughout the first year, he is taught by teachers at home.
- 1948 March: National Higher School of Film, Television and Theatre is founded at Łódź. The Łódź Film School becomes an important window into the world beyond communist Poland.
- 1949 The Documentary Film Studio (WFD—Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych) is established in Warsaw.

- c. 1952 Kieślowski sees his first film at the age of around eleven, probably *Fanfan la Tulipe* (Christian-Jaque, 1952).
- 1953 March 15: Joseph Stalin dies.
- 1955 May: Film production is decentralized with the establishment of film units. By 1957, there are eight units with relative independence, each with an artistic head, a literary manager, and a production executive. The units remain centrally funded, so the role of film producer does not exist in Poland until the late 1980s.
- 1956 June: Large protests in Poznań against poor working and living conditions are violently suppressed. October 19: In an attempt to quell continuing widespread unrest, the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) elects the moderate Władysław Gomułka as First Secretary, beginning the "Polish October." In the new climate of relative cultural freedom under Gomułka, the "Polish School" of filmmaking emerges, with filmmakers like Andrzej Wajda, Kazimierz Kutz, and Andrzej Munk contesting the socialist-realist aesthetic imposed during the Stalinist period and re-examining Polish history. It persists until about 1964. October 23: The Hungarian Uprising begins with student protests in Budapest, but very quickly spreads nationwide, eventually resulting in the complete overthrow of the Soviet-directed communist authorities. On November 4, a large Soviet force invades Hungary and a Soviet-approved government is eventually re-established.
- 1956–57 Having completed his elementary education in Mioszszewo in southwest Poland, Kieślowski decides he wants to work rather than study and attends the Fireman's Training College in Wrocław. He drops out after three months and tries a high school in Wałbrzych, which he also quits.
- 1957 Kieślowski's father, Roman, dies on February 22, aged forty-nine, and his mother, Barbara, moves to Warsaw with her children. Through the influence of an uncle, Kieślowski is admitted to the State School for Theater Technicians in Warsaw, a school unique in the European context for the intense and practical focus of specialization.
- 1962–63 Kieślowski graduates from the State School for Theater Technicians. With the goal of becoming a theater director, Kieślowski applies to Łódź Film School. He manages to get through the grueling two-week exam process in an attempt to win one of the fifteen spots available, but without success at first. In September 1962, he starts classes at Warsaw Teachers' College, but soon quits. In the meantime, he tries to make his living by working on the side as a theatrical dresser and a cultural clerk in Warsaw's Żolibórz District National Council, while

- writing poems and stories and shooting short amateur films with an 8mm camera. In 1963 he makes a second unsuccessful attempt to pass the entrance exams for the Łódź Film School. At the same time, he adopts various ruses, including starving himself, to avoid being drafted into the army (see Stok 23–28).
- 1964–68 Kiesłowski is accepted to Łódź Film School on his third attempt and has the opportunity to see foreign films there that are not accessible by the general public, at the habitual rate of two films a day. He is deeply impressed by Ken Loach's *Kes* and by the films of Federico Fellini, Orson Welles, Robert Bresson, and, to an extent, Ingmar Bergman. Jerzy Bossak, Kazimierz Karabasz, and Jerzy Toeplitz are the teachers who make the strongest impression on him. While studying, he tries different ways of subsidizing his student life, by working as a pollster, photographer, and actor. He makes a number of short films, including *Tramway* (1966), *The Office* (1966) (for which he receives his first festival award at the student film festival in Warsaw), *Concert of Requests* (1967), and *The Photograph* (1968) (his first professional film, for Polish Television).
- 1967 Kiesłowski marries Maria (Marysia) Cautillo on January 21.
- 1968 January 5: The "Prague Spring" begins when Alexander Dubček is elected First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and institutes a series of liberalizing reforms. In response, the Soviets and other countries of the Warsaw Pact invade Czechoslovakia on the night of August 20. March: Following the suppression in January of a distinctly patriotic nineteenth-century poetic play by Adam Mickiewicz, used as a canvas for political and anti-censorship statements, student demonstrations in Warsaw are put down with violence, provoking more widespread student demonstrations across the country. In response, the government intensifies its anti-Zionist policies, begun in 1967, with a purge of Polish Jews from positions of authority, including Jerzy Toeplitz and Jerzy Bossak teaching at Łódź Film School, as well as such important cultural figures as Zygmunt Bauman, Leszek Kołakowski, or Bronisław Baczko. Kiesłowski participates in the political unrest with other students, for instance trying, if ineffectively, to defend professors expelled from the Film School. Thousands of Polish Jews are forced to emigrate in the next few years. Kiesłowski shoots his Łódź Film School graduation film, *From the City of Łódź*, which is partly funded by the WFD, in 1968.
- c. 1969 Feeling that there is no easy way into the film industry, Kiesłowski bands together with three other young filmmakers to try to found the

- Irzykowski Studio, with the goal of supporting young filmmakers in making their first feature for about a sixth of the typical cost. The enterprise fails, apparently because of lack of Party support, but materializes many years later, in 1980, when Kieślowski is no longer involved. At the same time, he is earning a living by making commercials and short films on commission and working as an assistant at the WFD.
- 1970 February: After defending his MA dissertation *Film and the Dramaturgy of the Real* (a portion of which is reproduced here), Kieślowski receives the Łódź Film School diploma of graduation with top marks and the title of Master of Arts.
- 1971 Kieślowski starts his first full-time job as a director's assistant at WFD, which significantly improves his financial condition, with a salary well above the national average. At the end of the year, he makes *Before the Rally*. The same year, Kieślowski finishes the documentary *I Was a Soldier* for the Czołówka film studio, which funds projects about the army. December 13: Gomułka raises food prices 30 percent, provoking demonstrations by shipyard workers followed by violent reactions from police, a broadening of demonstrations, and army intervention, the whole resulting in hundreds of deaths. Edward Gierek succeeds Gomułka and begins economic expansion, on credit from the West, temporarily improving the standard of living. *Workers '71: Nothing about Us without Us*, directed by Kieślowski and Tomek Żygadło, documents the hopes of workers who had been involved in demonstrations the previous year and who are still waiting for more radical reform from Gierek, but the film in its original cut is never released. Some of the audio recordings of interviewed subjects are stolen, then mysteriously returned. Despite protests from the filmmakers, a highly edited and slightly longer black-and-white version titled *Housekeepers* is broadcast on Polish television in 1972.
- 1972 January 8: Kieślowski's one child, Marta, is born. Kieślowski's first prospect for a feature film, based on Kazimierz Orłoś's short story *Camel*, falls through due to the banning of Orłoś's work. (A film based on Kieślowski's treatment would be made by Jerzy Stuhr in 2000, titled *The Big Animal* [Polish: *Duże zwierzę*]).
- 1973 Kieślowski makes his first professional non-documentary, the thirty-minute TV feature *Pedestrian Subway* about a man from the country searching in Warsaw for the wife he still loves. Shooting conventionally for nine nights, he adopts a documentary and improvisatory approach for the final night to try to create something more authentic. He also makes *Bricklayer*, a documentary about a middle-aged man

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