

Kieślowski's Echoes

*A study of A Short Film about Killing/Dekalog V (1988), A Short Film about Love/Dekalog VI (1988), and The double life of Veronique/La Double Vie de Veronique (1991)*¹

Krzysztof Kieślowski, one of the best known Polish film directors, started his career in shorts and documentary film making in the 60s and 70s through the transitional period of Poland. As he progressed through film school, etc., he developed his own way of expressing his concerns of reality and realism, humanity and humanism. He moved away from documentaries as he realizes the limitation genre on portraying true reality, both from the observer's effect and its inability to show the spiritual and imaginary².

Kieślowski had many collaborators throughout his career. He had worked with a diverse group of cinematographers each having their own styles. For example, the extensive use of filters in *Killing* and *Veronique* is rooted from the cinematographer Sławomir Idziak. On the other hand, he often develop stories and co-wrote screenplays with Krzysztof Piesiewicz, and a lot of his famous musical themes were composed by Van den Budenmayer, the fictitious 18th century Dutch musician created by Zbigniew Preisner and Kieślowski himself, and his coherent style could also be attributed to his long-term editor Ewa Smal³. I will attempt to point out a few recurring characteristics of Kieślowski's work from the direction of visual styles, narrative structures, and music.

Optical distortions

Kieślowski often calls attention to the camera only to enhance a sense of realism, just like the puppeteer Bruce Schwartz's unique way of communicating his "avant-garde" story of a ballerina to 200 children without hiding his "enormous paws"⁴.



Figure 1 – The hands of the puppeteer, Bruce Schwartz, in *Veronique*

¹ From here on, the italic forms of *Killing*, *Love*, and *Veronique*, are referring to the title of these films.

² Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski*, pg. 21

³ Haltof, *The cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski*, pg. 80

⁴ Stok, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, pg. 181

Even Kieślowski himself recognizes that he had a tendency to put in lots of reflections in his mise-en-scène. As he once said about *Killing*, “there are many reflections in my film, through windows through doors... because this horrible story reflects the world⁵.” But of course this abundance does not stop at this single story, as we will see in Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4 later.

In addition to the optical intrigue created by these reflections and distortions, they often serve very specific purposes at each scene. In Figure 1 below, we can see how (a) shows us the oppressive feeling the prison cell like uniformity of the apartment complex being doubled with the reflection. In (b), our killer Jacek is contemplating his day’s purpose, reflecting against a head shot of a young girl who most probably reminded him of his sister. In (c), we see an example of a character (the advocate)’s self-image being revealed by the mirror. In (d), this reflection is used as a startling foreshadowing of the heinous business that is going to take place in (f). But just before the murder takes place, we can see Jacek checking his own coldness and nervousness in his reflection shown in (e). The final glare in (g) is almost as powerful as our dear advocate’s silent weep (in the longer version) as if delivering a final question: has the light (justice) truly returned⁶?



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

⁵ Insodorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, pg. 91 (Interview by Claude-Marie Trémois, *Télérama*)

⁶ Although Kieślowski himself would probably say that “I don’t film metaphors. People only read them as metaphors, which is very good. That’s what I want.” Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski*, pg. 22

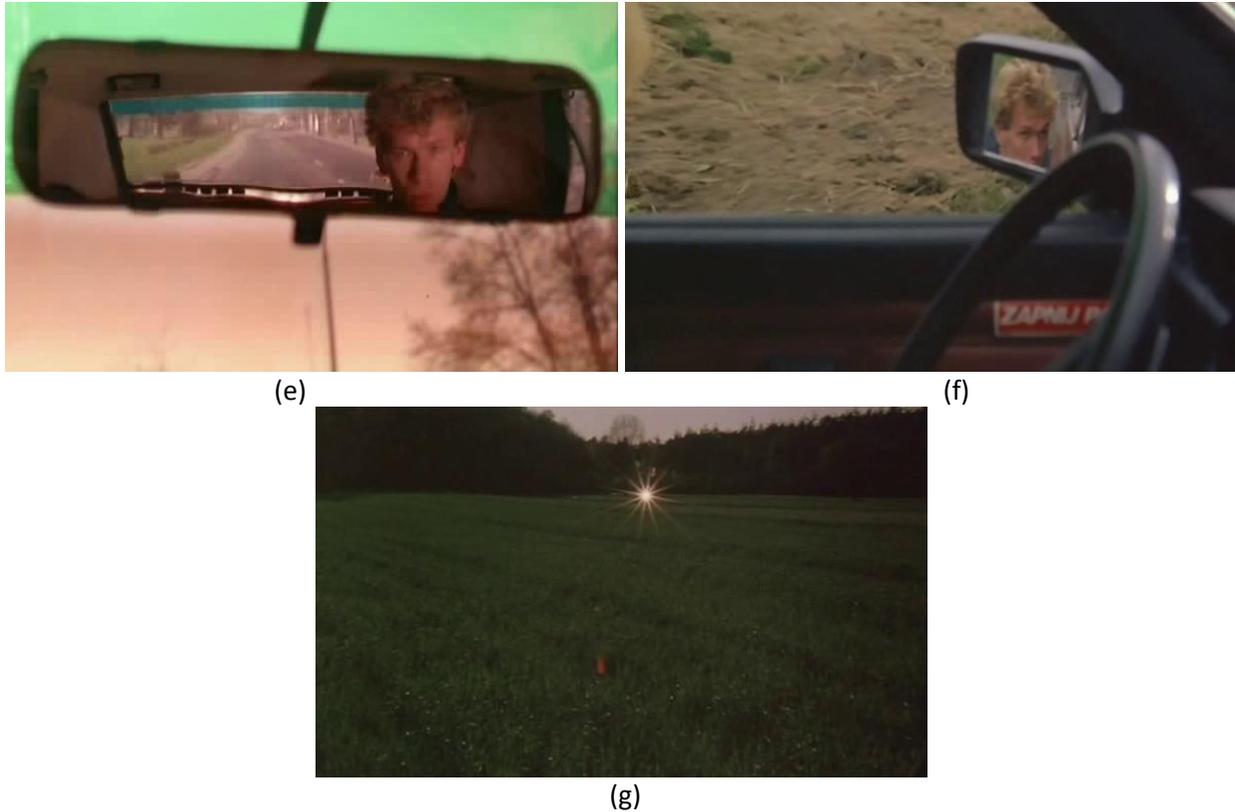


Figure 2 – Examples of reflections in *Killing*

In *Love*, our original subject of obsession, Magda, is being reflected subtly as Figure 3 below. These reflections quietly created a multi-layer texture to the mise-en-scène, aesthetically complimenting the visual experience. (Especially in (b), this elusive image of Magda projected over Tomek's face precisely prescribed the distance that he inexplicably feels as her stalker.)



Figure 3 – Examples of reflections in *Love*

This trend of optical “illusions” became more and more prevalent as he moved into his longer feature film productions, such as *Veronique*. The film itself begins with a series of distorted views, one an inverted view of the night sky in search of a distant star (Figure 4 a,b), the other through a magnifying glass in examining details on a leaf (Figure 4 c). The film continues with various uses of distorted views (d) and reflections (e). If one is indulged to interpret, we can see Veronique's viewing of her world through

distorted lenses (e,f,g), unlike Weronika's bare looks to her surroundings on her (unfortunate) march of passion, which is cleverly exemplified in (h) where she moves nature with her angelic voice.

The mirrored shot in (i) shows us an action of Weronika that will be temporally reflected by Veronique later. And the (j) the disorienting feeling of uneasy Veronique felt when Weronika died.

In the stunning shot (k), we see Alexandre Fabbri's reflected light of temptation (a shine (l) that resembles the glare in Figure 2 (g)) hits Veronique, with her mirror image in the mirror.

As she wanders to Alex's books on display/listens to his tape, Veronique's mirror images are frequently displayed (m,n), in what could be an attempt to communicate the character's own progress on reflecting her newfound feelings of unknown love.



(a)



(b)



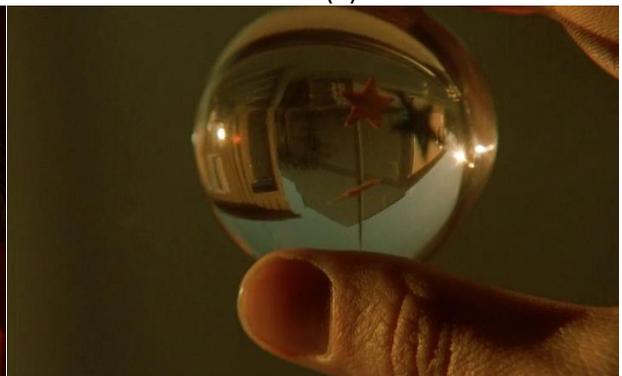
(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)



(g)



(h)



(i)



(j)



(k)



(l)



(m)



(n)



Figure 4 – Examples of optical distortions and reflections in *Veronique*

And finally, we see the story ends with an echo of the similar distortions we see in the beginning (o,q).

The second kind of recurring optical symbolism is the feeling of separation created by a simple sheet of transparent glass. In many scenes, interacting characters are separated by a glass barrier (e.g. the interaction between the killer and movie ticket sales person and between the lottery ticket sales person and the taxi driver in *Killing*).

Part (a,d) of Figure 5 below shows us the connection and Jacek's complete lack of agency in retrieving his connection with his lost sister. What he could do with the ice cream is still stopped by the glass (d). In (b) we were shown a different kind of separation, the lack of empathy of the general public comparing to the excited barrister. The window in (f) disconnected the murder from the murderer. Together with the ironic disgust Jacek (and I) feels when seeing the falling denture, a forceful statement shows that the true cruelty of killing is too much for anyone.⁷

⁷ Although (h) is not technically a shot through window or glass, I just wanted to include it for it is still a good "transparent" framing.



Figure 5 – Examples of glass separators in *Killing*

As the story of *Love* unfolds as Tomek watches Magda using a telescope through a window, a separation is naturally created transparently. In Figure 6, we have some of the most interesting examples. Unable to bring himself in direct interaction to his subject of obsession, Tomek can only watch Magda through a pinhole, be it a stolen telescope (a), or the service window at his job. But later we see that even the “official” boyfriend still have this desire and tendency to peek through the peephole in (c). And finally as Magda realizes her love towards Tomek, she becomes the one sneaking behind glass and watch for Tomek’s return (d,e,f).



Figure 6 – Examples of glass separators in *Love*

In *Veronique*, the shortest separation between the two main characters occurred when Veronique went on a trip to Krakow. But this disconnect is unbreakable, as seen in Figure 7 (a) below and Figure 4 (g) above. For Weronika, her desire to connect with the outside world of lesser passion is eminently stopped by the window (b). Eventually, we see the final separation in (c) during the funeral. Meanwhile, the blurry windows fog Veronique’s grasp on her condition and her sudden connection to Weronika (d).

Then in (e) and (f), Veronique's unnamable melancholy is masterfully revealed as she stares outside the window barrier into the outside where Weronika was.

Much later in (g), (h), and (i), the glass/door separator conveys to the audience about Veronique's doubt of her own feeling of love and Fabbri's true intentions.

Near the end, Veronique's final revelation made her to go home and touch her roots and reach out of her own personal glass box (j).



(a)



(b)



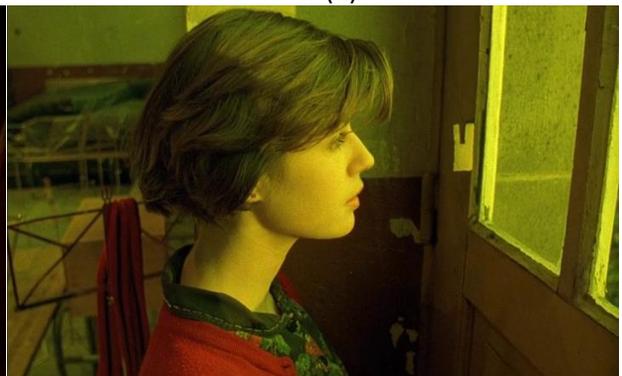
(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)



Figure 7 – Glass separators in *Veronique*

Last but not least, there is a consistent smart interplay between lights and shadows on Kieślowski’s screen. Take the examples shown in Figure 8 (a) below, the exaggerated usage of filter powerfully projects the kind of shock the audience would receive, along with being a conventional foreshadowing and created space for credit placement. Jacek, our original murderer, was frequently cast in light but facing the darkness on screen (b,f,g,m,n). Contrast this with how the empathetic lawyer often facing the light even in the shadow (k,q). These hints on morality were only exaggerated as we watch the murderer consistently moves into the shadow (c,d,e) while our advocate does exactly the opposite (h,i,j and o,p,q).





(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)



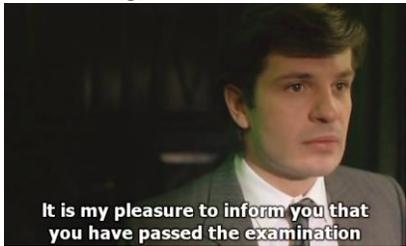
(g)



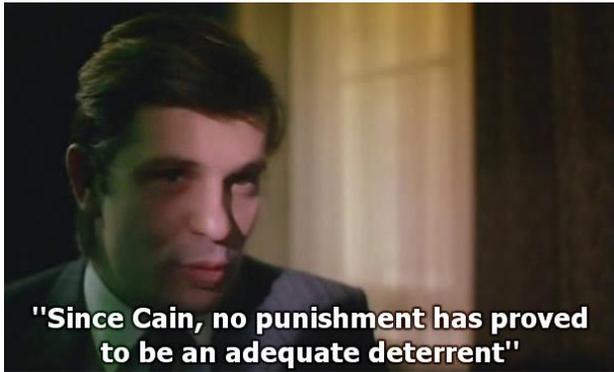
(h)



(i)



(j)



(k)



(l)



Figure 8 – Use of light and shadow in *Killing*

Even with a different cinematographer, Kieślowski managed to keep this dichotomy of light and shadow that splits the screen in *Love*. One excellent example is this over the shoulder shot sequence shown in Figure 9 below.

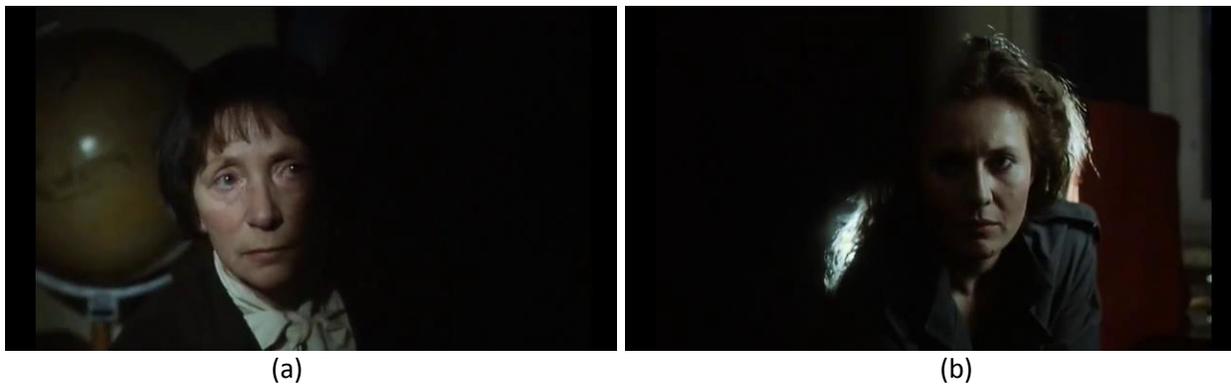


Figure 9 – Shadow overcast in over-the-shoulder shots in *Love*

In *Veronique*, shadows are used to their full potential as artistic devices. The silhouettes of Weronika kissing in Figure 10 (a), the contrast between the off stage and on stage versions of herself (b,c), and the mystique surrounding the artist/manipulator Alexandre (d) all bear powerful expressionistic values. In (e), we see a familiar type of pure darkness on sections of the screen⁸, and in (f) we see a beautiful sliver of sunshine singles out Veronique, who just found her strange sensation of aloneness.

⁸ Most likely due to Slawomir Idziak



Figure 10 – Lights and shadows in *Veronique*

Narrative dualities

Many stories told by Kieślowski contained dual perspectives. In *Killing*, we first were told the story of the murder of an irrelevant⁹ taxi-driver through a distant and almost stranger-like descriptive portrayal. But next we were shown the second “murder” of our original killer. Albeit with add-ins of emotion touches and tragic background stories, it has a striking similarity of brutality comparing to the first half of the story, pondering us if violence against violence is truly justifiable.

⁹ Not counting the almost Freudian connection that our murderer’s sister was killed by a drunk driver.

In *Love*, we started to portray the love and obsession of Tomek, but ended with Magda's infatuation with Tomek, as illustrated by the progression in Figure 6. This change of perspective enriches the lesson on sanctity of love into a question of what is more important, our feelings or how it comes about.

Veronique's duality is probably quite obvious; double is in the title! The first half tells the story of passion and liveliness, flamboyance and impulsions, with a beautiful yet tragic ending. Next we move on to the more calm, rational, and attentive version (she is able to play detective and found Alex!), where the physically similar character with a similar background (early death of mother) and talent ends with very different revelations about life (pursuing to the max or return back home).

Musical reverberations

To a keen ear used to the variations of Bach, at times it seems that Zbigniew Preisner's music takes over Kieślowski's films¹⁰. But this is indeed what Kieślowski appreciates about Preisner's work. Kieślowski knows that Preisner is "interested in working on a film right from the beginning and not just seeing the finished version and then thinking about how to illustrate it with music" or just "fills the gaps with music."¹¹ In a sense, many of Kieślowski's film is deeply musical in nature.

Kieślowski's often adopts a focused use of music (See Figure 11). Precedence is given to the eerie silence¹² similar to the work of Truffaut. But the soundtrack of a Kieślowski film is the thread that stitches up the story with liveliness and emotions. In both *Veronique* and *Love*, a single theme is echoed over and over again at crucial scenes to crescendo the story to its climax.

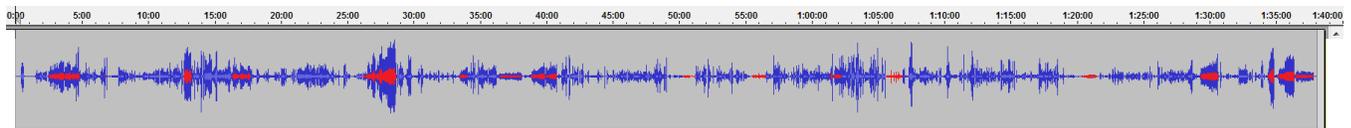


Figure 11 – The soundtrack of *Veronique*. The (recurring) theme music is highlighted in red.

For *Killing*, the dual nature of being both a film of human cruelty and empathy created a small dichotomy in its soundtrack. Although the two parts fits together, the portion with low bass and high screeches are used for suspense and the killings, while the more major nostalgic and peaceful with a deep dose of melancholy is played at various foreshadowing of Jacek's dealings with young girls who remind him of his sister and at the end after his tragic execution and the advocate's tears.

In conclusion

To me, Kieślowski's works are full of comparisons and contrast, echoes and recurrences. Visually, the characters are put against themselves through mirrors and reflections, and against each other and their worlds through lenses and windows. Even the storylines often repeats itself in an ever so slightly different way to convey his deep humanistic messages. Finally, the soundtrack for each film usually creates echoes in a literal sense to help take the audience along an emotional ride.

¹⁰ Kickasola, The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski, pg. 111

¹¹ Stok, Kieślowski on Kieślowski, pg. 179

¹² Kickasola, The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski, pg. 87

Kieślowski produced an undeniable legacy. His personal touch was able to tunnel through and express themselves on the screen. He was capable of building *his* universes. His films had recurring rituals (moving in circles of happiness by the advocate after his passes his test and by Tomek after the invitation to a date). He had effectively created meaningful recurring characters (“angel” for the *Dekalog* series, and the origin of Weronika in *Dekalog IX*¹³, etc.). And this recurrence does not limit itself to tangible objects such as the tea cups (Figure 12 (a,b) in *Killing* and *Veronique* resp.) or the glass balls (Figure 12 (c,d) in *Love* and *Veronique* resp.), but also the representation of pain with the shocking use of color red (Figure 12 (e,f) in *Love* and *Veronique* resp.), or the feeling of tension and worry represented by the dragging scarfs (Figure 12 (g,h) in *Killing* and *Veronique* resp.).



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)

¹³ Stok, Kieślowski on Kieślowski, pg. 177



Figure 12 – Examples of recurrences in all three films

All of his achievements in his visual and audio style made Kieślowski an enigmatic and powerful story teller. Thus, he was able to ask and attempt to give his answers to the essential humanistic questions¹⁴, and try to understand the inner reality of human beings of all sorts¹⁵ through cinema.

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¹⁴ Stok, Kieślowski on Kieślowski, pg.144

¹⁵ Stok, Kieślowski on Kieślowski, pg.59

There he talks about “even if something is happening which isn’t right, even if somebody is acting badly, in my opinion, I have to try and understand that person...”