

POSSIBLE WORLDS IN KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI'S *DECALOGUE*

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There are several clear patterns, or common motifs, which characterize *The Decalogue*—a series of movies based on Ten Commandments. In this series the fictional world constructed by Kieślowski is simple and logical. It is based on the following oppositions, to mention just a few:

life : death
child : adult
male : female
good : evil

For example, in every *Decalogue* appears a child and his/hers world is revealed in a conflict with the world of the adults. The motif of death always emerges as well.

In the first film the motif of death concerns Paweł. He talks about death with his father and his aunt and soon after he dies by falling underneath broken ice.

In the second *Decalogue* the doctor talks about his children, who died during the war in a bombed house. He also saves Dorota's unborn child.

In the third narrative a supper on Christmas Eve¹ is shown, as well as a conversation about the birth of Jesus, and children being lavished with gifts by Santa Claus. The motif of death appears here as a search in the morgue for Barbara's missing husband. The pills in her purse attest to her preparation for suicide.

The fourth commandment is illustrated through the photographs of Anna's childhood, the discussion about her past, especially about the death of her mother.

In the fifth *Decalogue* Jacek talks about his sister who lost her life at the age of twelve by being run over by Jacek's friend who was drunk and drove a tractor. Also the baby of Jacek's lawyer is born. There is no need to discuss the motif of death in this movie because it is present everywhere.

In the sixth *Decalogue* Tomek acts like a child: he suggests to Magda to go for an ice cream and spies on her. His slitting his wrists confronts him with death.

The seventh film shows Ania, the daughter of Maja, who is convinced that her grandmother is her biological mother. During the ending scenes Wojtek sees Ania's teddy bear at the edge of the river searching the rapid stream; he is terrified that his daughter might have drowned.

The essence of the eight commandment is shown through the story of a Jewish child, Elżbieta, whom Zofia was supposed to hide during the war. This did not happen though because of conspiracies of the AK (Polish Underground Army) to which Zofia belonged. Having this incident in mind, Zofia's conscience has been tormenting her whole life. She is convinced that Elżbieta died. Taking advantage of the academic exchange program, Elżbieta, who survived the war and lived abroad, comes to Poland and goes to hear Zofia's lecture, who at the end of her speech delivers words of wisdom: "There is no aim, no thought; there is nothing, which would be more important than the life of a child." And then Elżbieta speaks up and allows Zofia to identify her. In one of the student's story we have additional reference to the second film and Dorota's story.

In the ninth *Decalogue* we hear this dialogue between Anna and Roman:

- We never wanted children.
- We didn't.
- If they were here, maybe, it would be easier.
- Maybe.
- We should have a child. I will ask a lawyer about the possibility of adoption.

Roman towards the end of the movie suggests that he is going to commit suicide, and leaves a farewell letter by the telephone.

The last film begins with these song words sang by Artur: "Kill, kill, kill and commit adultery, commit adultery and desire throughout the entire week, throughout the entire week. On Sunday beat your mother, beat your father, beat your sister, beat the younger one and steal." Artur's and Jurek's father died. They are both acting like children by occupying themselves with postage stamps from their father's collection. Jurek says, "I feel like I used to, like we had for a few years, not having to worry about adult problems. (...) It is childish but enjoyable."

A few questions, which I would like to address now are as follows: what are the films about in the series titled *The Decalogue*? One is about Paweł, who dies under ice, another about Dorota, who plays in a symphony orchestra, the fifth about Jacek, who kills a taxi driver and receives a death sentence, etc. Are these stories true? The answer

is straightforward—no, all the stories are fiction. Did these people really exist? In reality Jacek, Elżbieta, Ania etc. never actually existed. Since there never were these people, then we can make a hypothesis that these films are about no one, but this is an absurd statement because they are about Maja, Roman, Anna... Therefore we are dealing with a certain type of a philosophical puzzle. In order to solve it we say that all the main characters from *The Decalogue* existed, and all states and events presented in this movies took place—not in a real world but in another, possible world. In a possible world one could find those objects we talk about, imagine, believe in them or even wish to bring them to reality. In other words, the real world means everything that takes place here and now, and possible world means everything fictional, imaginable, etc. If I say that world is real, I say it from my point of view. Somebody else could see my world as a fictional one, and vice versa. The idea to treat a specific world as a derivative of another world gives a broad possibility of interpretation of worlds. It also gives a chance to compare states and events of possible worlds with states and events of a real world.

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Possible worlds can be divided into the “real,” where laws of the realistic world are preserved, and the “unreal,” where all these laws do not have to exist. The best example of the latter is any novel or film with SF quality, like *Solaris* by Stanisław Lem (and a movie based on it by Tarkovsky), where a certain possible world was created and ruled by completely different laws, such as physical and biological. These types of worlds are impossible to be physically built, but are capable of being logically constructed.

The idea of the description of possible worlds is taken from modal logic, but is also fully entitled to describe the world introduced in the movie. The audience will not think of a fictional world in the movie as reality. They will, however, compare the worlds, using their own imagination and experience in interpreting the states and events from the world in which they live. Furthermore, one of the functions fulfilled by possible worlds is continually persuading the audience to take all that we see in these possible worlds as likely to exist in the real world. But, at the same time, it leads to the dynamic connection between worlds and the imagination, owing to which the audience can identify with the movie’s characters, as well as with the states and events in this very world. But this is not all about the audience. The far more interesting subject of the interpretation of possible worlds is the way these worlds are constructed from the artist’s point of view, and I would like to focus on this phenomenon, showing with selected examples how Krzysztof Kiesłowski constructs the possible worlds of his *Decalogue*.

First of all, Kiesłowski places the action of his ten movies in the possible world of family. He constructs the family in such a way that it will be dysfunctional. This gives the impression that Kiesłowski chooses a certain family model, and then clones it in ten different possible worlds. The fates of the members of the families are different in each, but these ten worlds overlap and are ruled by similar laws. One of the laws—the double lives of the characters—are reflected in the lives of children. In movie number

two, for example, Dorota wants to abort the baby she conceived with her lover, but only if it turns out that her husband survives his sickness. In this possible world, the life or death of Dorota's husband is to decide the life or death of the unborn child. In the seventh *Decalogue*, Maja leads a double life, being the mother and the sister of Ania at the same time. The story is complicated, because Maja gave life to her daughter when she was a student in the high school. Her mother, in order to avoid a scandalous situation, registered the child as her own. At one point Maja runs away with Ania, telling her the true story. In this possible world Ania does not know who her mother, father, grandmother and grandfather really are. In movie number eight, where the action is taking place during the Nazi occupation of Poland, Zofia leads a double life—a public life and a conspired life. This second life of hers decides the life of Elżbieta, who, because of that second life, cannot be protected by her.

Let us now ask ourselves a question: what do these three worlds have in common? One could wonder whether the situations and occurrences affecting Dorota, Maja and Elżbieta are *necessarily* authentic and real, or it is *possible* that they are genuine, or that they *could* be genuine, but are *not*. The answer to this question suggests the second option as the right one. Something may be genuine or real by having a connection to the given world, and it is only so if it is real in a possible world which stands in a close relation to the original world. In other words, situations and occurrences in these three films could truly exist in a real world, where similar circumstances will surely come to frequently presence, but in case of *The Decalogue* this is useful only to construct narrative structures and to convince the audience about access to the possible world from the point of view of the real world. Kieślowski himself confirms this, saying in an interview for the *Film na Świecie* magazine that "...the story which we created [with Piesiewicz] differentiates itself from ordinary event chronicles. For example, in the seventh *Decalogue*, there is an account about a woman who kidnapped her own child. Piesiewicz, who wrote the script, was inspired by an actual legal case wherein he appeared briefly as a lawyer" (Ciment and Niogret 30). In the same interview Kieślowski says, "...it just happened that one of my friends recounted me a story about a certain Jewish child, to whom someone had promised help during the war and ultimately never fulfilled the promise" (ibid., 33).

For the construction of possible worlds Kieślowski uses not only people, but also objects, and consistently draws on the idea that objects play a significant role as modes of expression. He also speaks of this in the aforementioned interview:

I think that equally important is knowledge about what kind of watch the protagonist is wearing, as how he/she walks. This defines everything. That is why I often make use of objects, in order to describe the protagonist's characters. Moreover, I frequently use object in close-ups in order to emphasize their presence. (ibid., 34)

One of the objects featured in the process of construction of Kieślowski's movies is a window. It is possible to call it "a modal frame of reality," because similarly to a painting's frame, it cuts out the picture of the possible world from the non-picture world.

All of *The Decalogue*'s characters use a window for that purpose. Paweł watches doves out the window, and at the same time he peeps out the jaunty world of nature, whose picture will only be disrupted by the discovery of the dead dog. In the second movie Dorota isolates herself from the outside world, observing it only through the corridor window; the floor she also lives on. The world is also being observed through the window by the old doctor, and the fusion of these two scenes into one shot suggests the union of two parallel worlds. These two worlds will be one mutually encompassing world for Dorota and the doctor. The third *Decalogue* features neighbors who are watching, through their window, Christmas Eve supper at Janusz's apartment. The first shot of the fourth *Decalogue* shows Anna and Michał at a window through which they observe the outside world. Jacek from *Decalogue* part five is observing photographs through a window of a photographer's studio. Magda in film six does not cover the window and thus she lets herself be spied upon by Tomek's telescope. In the seventh episode, during the final scene, Majka gazes out the window of the train at Ania, who remains at the platform. In the eighth film windows appear in the office of the Dean through which Elżbieta observes the street, and also in the scene when the tailor gazingly escorts Elżbieta with his eyes out of the tailor shop. In the ninth episode of *The Decalogue* Hanna awaits Tomek's return by gazing out the window. Finally in the last film a window gets barred-up, annihilated, which adds intensity to the given situation of separating two different worlds.

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As I have already mentioned, Kieślowski uses windows as a "modal frame" and that specifically underlines the difference between an outside world, where possible states and events are in constant dynamics, and a world that is enclosed by one's house where static and slow actions live their own lives. The creation of two possible worlds, in the inside of the already existing world of a film, is an extremely difficult and risky exercise which Kieślowski, superbly and with artistic precision, manages to perform.

Another element in the construction of different worlds is a mirror. It plays a similar role to the window but it shows an opaque world. Reflections in mirrors demonstrate to the protagonists that a possible world in which they live has also a copy of itself. There is a famous story about Kieślowski, who used to teach film directing at the University of Silesia in Katowice. Talking about the role of a mirror in his cinema, he pointed out to the poem by Jennifer Blum titled "Love Thy Neighbour as Thyself." The poem goes as follows:

...And the God created the mirror
 To reflect himself
 That is how Adam was created
 And God loved him as himself
 Then he gave Adam the mirror
 Who saw his image too
 That is how Eve appeared
 Likewise Adam loved her

As he loved himself
 And out of their play
 Children appeared
 But Eve loved them more
 Than herself
 That is why the children
 Loved only themselves
 One day Cain killed Abel
 And angry God smashed the mirror
 Sending its pieces afloat in the world
 That is why we do not see
 The world whole through the eyes
 Of its creator
 But through the mirror's shards²

350 Kieślowski had commented on the poem poetically by saying that every creation of reality in cinema is based on “mirror’s shards.” It means that we never create (and consequently never perceive) the possible world as a whole.

In *The Decalogue* we have mirrors everywhere: in washrooms, hallways, offices, and other public places; we have pocket mirrors and mirrors in cars, motorcycles and bicycles. Almost all the protagonists of *The Decalogue* look within mirrors for affirmations of their self, and look to measure themselves up to them. In mirrors they see themselves caught in certain acts whose consequences are sometimes tragic. In addition, mirrors, like windows, have frames and they only reflect pieces of reality that model a possible world, but do not create them. Mirror images often affirm pictures of reality that cause a transcending of both worlds. This is evident in the famous scene that opens the fifth *Decalogue*. At first we see a lawyer’s face in the mirror—captured in a way to be a picture onto itself, as if “framed in a picture.” Later Piotr moves out of the shot and covers his own reflection. From this moment we know that the “opaque world” must retreat to the real world of crime and punishment, where law is based on a “mirror picture” of itself—the law kills Jacek because of his crime of killing.

Another consequential item that constructs possible worlds in *Decalogue* is photographs. Death ceaselessly accompanies the protagonists of all the films in the series, with children being no exception. Family photographs halt the time of the world in which these people live. It is to these pictures that persons still living make reference so that they can return to those worlds, experience a shared sense of being and the events of the past. A doctor often peers at the picture of his family, who had perished during the war. He turns away from it only when Dorota appears. In this way he does not allow her to enter that particular world. For him, a totally different possible world should exist with him and his family, but now he can only ask himself “what if...”, and when Andrzej asks him “do you know what it means to have children,” the doctor answers shortly, “yes, I know.”

Jacek always carries with him a picture of his sister Marysia. This way he is able to “return” to the world of childhood. He reflects about a possible world with Marysia

in it: “If she only be alive! Everything would be different. I had three brothers, but she was the only one I loved”. This constant thinking about his sister’s death and imagining a possible world with her could not prevent a tragedy—a real world prevails.

Anka stares at her mother’s picture, where she stands with two men. One of them is Michał, her father. Anka asks herself, “what if this stranger is my father and not Michał, and if so, could Michał be my lover?” In this possible world Anka would not need to search for her mother’s farewell letter to verify who her father is. In the real world, however, she must falsify the letter to keep her dreams alive.

The essence of possible worlds is closely connected to the fact that some states and events take place accidentally and some have a feature of necessity. A modal semantics of possible worlds is based on the principle that necessity and causality are either in a relation of entailment or conditionality. It means that possibilities and necessities appear one after another—if A occurs, then B is necessary. Of course, in our real world we have similar situations—our whole life is a series of decisions, selections and choices, but is also unpredictable. “Past” always influences “present,” but it does not help us to project “future.” “Our all life is a series of choices,” says Kieślowski. “Our life very often depends on a blind chance. I know how important it is even in my life. This is why when I write my movie scripts I have to take this fact into consideration” (Ciment and Niogret 32). Because science is interested in a discovery of laws related to the real world, possible worlds are only a way of philosophical speculations: “what if...” This is why *The Decalogue* could be treated as a series of metaphysical movies, where the book of events is always half-open. 351

WORKS CITED

Ciment, M., and H. Niogret. “Pańskie filmy są rentgenogramami duszy...” *Film na Świecie 3/4* (1992): 26-38.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Supper on Christmas Eve: according to Polish tradition it is a supper consumed on December 24, at the time when the first star appears in the sky; it includes a minimum of twelve food dishes that meatless and the context for the supper is a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.
- 2 This information came from a private source, a former student of Kieślowski.