Of Elephants and Toothaches

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CHAPTER 2

Tablets of Stone, Tablets of Flesh: Synesthetic Appeal in The Decalogue

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It very quickly became clear that these would be films about feelings and passions, because we knew that love, or the fear of death, or the pain caused by a needle-prick, are common to all people, irrespective of their political views, the colour of their skin or their standard of living. . . . We decided to place the action of Decalogue in a large housing estate, with thousands of similar windows framed within the establishing shot. Behind each of these windows, we said to ourselves, is a living being, whose mind, whose heart and, even better, whose stomach is worthy of investigation.

—KRZYSZTOF KIEŚLOWSKI

In the films The Double Life of Veronique (1991) and The Three Colors Trilogy (1992–94), Krzysztof Kieślowski left behind most of the aesthetic trappings of his early documentaries and moved into more sensuous and formalistic territory.¹ Much of the power of Kieślowski’s later cinema hinges on the aesthetics of immediacy—that is, the perceived directness of affect-as-meaning it produces.² I argue that in the series of films before Veronique—the monumental Decalogue series (1989)—we see hints of this stylistic shift as he searched for new ways of expressing the spiritual and moral themes that interested him.³ If we draw upon a crude dualistic analogy—that is, the factual ideations of the documentary as corresponding to mind and the sensuous nature of form as appealing to body—we might say that The Decalogue demonstrates a dialectic between the mind and body, stylistically and thematically.

It is not clear that Kieślowski would have wanted his career to be seen in this stark way, as if his documentaries were coldly intellectual and his later features were lacking ideas. If anything, Kieślowski saw himself on a singular trajectory in pursuit of reality, and his later features simply strain into those areas of metaphysical reality that resist reportage or easy figuration.⁴
In *The Decalogue*, Kieslowski is reacting to (and working within) a cultural and historical construct, that of the Ten Commandments. Here, a particularly interesting dynamic evolves as a tension between the ideal, rational, abstract, disembodied Word (the Commandments as an abstract ideal) and the body that comprehends, struggles with, and lives through it.

As I will discuss, in recent years a wide variety of otherwise disparate thinkers have argued for a notion of embodied meaning. In other words, in contrast to the strict alignment of meaning with its linguistic manifestations, they argue for meaning and knowledge that is bodily, prelogical, and epistemologically heavy. These thinkers—ranging from cultural theorists to philosophers to neuroscientists—often disagree about a great many things, but they may be united under the moniker of embodied epistemology, in that they see a fundamental symbiosis between sense perception, emotion, and knowledge.

In this essay I will use this general triangulation and this literature of embodiment to explore a particular dimension of Kieslowski's immediacy in *The Decalogue*. Kieslowski was not interested in the exposition of the Ten Commandments but rather in their sensual and dynamic force in our contemporary lives. Throughout the films, he treats sensual evocation to be part and parcel of real knowledge. His sensual strategy in effect does not tell us what the Commandments propositionally mean, but how they mean, even as we appropriate their meanings through the films. In this vein, I would like to trace one particular sensory path in *The Decalogue*, that of tactile synesthetic appeal. This path will serve as an example of the sort of lived meaning for which, I believe, Kieslowski aimed.

I will begin with a general discussion of synesthesia, so that we might define and clarify our terms. In the process, I will survey a number of interrelated epistemological concepts that reveal a paradoxical power in Kieslowski's images—a strength he intuitively understood as crucial—that even when certain sensual experiences like touch are amputated from the physical contact that gives them life, their cinematic evocation can still resonate with a certain immediacy of meaning. This will be followed by a discussion of specific examples of synesthetic appeal in the films of *The Decalogue*, and some reflection on the impact of synesthetic immediacy on the overall theological tone of the series.

*Understanding Synesthetic Appeal*

Synesthesia is a general term that encompasses all experiences in which stimulus from one sensory mode evokes or literally triggers another. The
range between evoking and triggering can be wide, from everyday synesthesia (e.g., commonplace matching of shape between touch and vision) to the clinical variety of synesthesia (a very literal engagement of secondary sense through a unique sensual pathway, which likely arises from hard neurological wiring in clinical cases). My emphasis here will be on the universal, everyday variety.

When I say “everyday” synesthesia I am essentially talking about cinematic phenomena that appeal transmodally. Transmodal processing—that is, the confluence of modes of perception (such as sight and touch, for instance)—is a very large part of everyday perception, but we are only just beginning to understand the complexities of its mechanics. We often use multiple senses to comprehend something, and some senses (such as touch) regularly evoke an image (feel and identify your car keys in your pocket or purse, for instance) even if you are not seeing that image with your eyes. Transmodal appeals are considered a form of synesthetic appeal for this very reason; one sense triggers a memory from another sense experience. Films, of course, hinge on this experience as well, and the phenomenon is ubiquitous, but some films highlight and function through transmodal qualities more than others, and in Kieślowski’s case, this is critical to his approach to the subject matter.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty once wrote, “The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter and are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea.” More recently, neuroscientists Barry E. Stein and M. Alex Meredith noted that some stimulus features, such as intensity, form, number, and duration are believed to be amodal—that is, not the function of one particular modality—and are, in fact, transferred readily across modalities, and are thus transmodal. The ramifications of this theory for our study of Kieślowski are that much of what we consider to be everyday synesthetic experiences are these properties of stimuli—like time, intensity, form, number, and duration—that directly transfer through various modalities. These elements function as a type of vocabulary for Kieślowski’s nonverbal eloquence regarding the lived experience of The Decalogue.

In order to incarnate and animate the abstract ideals of the Commandments, everyday synesthetic experience must be epistemologically heavy even as it is immediate (i.e., bypassing linguistic mediation). For centuries in Western philosophy there has been a division between so-called higher mental operations and lower ones, with historically varying degrees of emphasis placed on the former, but rarely equal epistemological status granted to the latter. The former operations (e.g., language, intellect,
reason, rationality, reflection, and so on) have been privileged over sensation, emotion, feeling, intuition, and even perception itself. By contrast, the literature of embodiment largely reinforces two assertions made by the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl over a hundred years ago: the epistemological heaviness of intuition and imagination, and the fundamental idea of intentionality (that we reach out or intend toward meaning in all perception).

The film critic Vivian Sobchack draws upon a later phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, who avoided some of the transcendental idealist traps into which Husserl fell and managed to detail how any evaluation of cinematic perception must always account for the body of the subject. In her essay “What My Fingers Knew,” she articulates a bodily, precognitive, nonlogical, immediate tactile knowledge, synesthetically evoked by seeing Jane Campion’s film The Piano (1993). The opening shot of the film is an abstract image, revealed only in the second shot to be a woman’s fingers underwater with sunlight shining between them. Clearly, Sobchack’s reaction to the shot is fundamentally contingent on memory recall, but her account makes it clear that this is not mere semiosis of the linguistic variety:

Despite my “almost blindness,” the “unrecognizable blur,” and resistance of the image to my eyes, my fingers knew what I was looking at—and this before the objective reverse shot that followed to put those fingers in their proper place. . . . From the first (although I didn’t consciously know it until the second shot), my fingers comprehended that image, grasped it with a nearly imperceptible tingle of attention and anticipation and, offscreen, “felt themselves” as a potentiality in the subjective and fleshy situation figured onscreen. And this before I refigured my carnal comprehension into the conscious thought, “Ah, those are fingers I am looking at.” . . . Those fingers were first known sensually and sensibly as “these” fingers and were located ambiguously both offscreen and on—subjectively “here” as well as objectively “there,” “mine” as well as the image’s. . . . We do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium. (Carnal Thoughts, 63)

Here is the rub: The essence of the experience and what makes it knowledge is the content of that memory, but content is only valuable to the extent that it is reified and experienced. Her fingers “know,” and she knows that she knows through experience. Likewise, the synesthetic migration of abstract visual forms into the haptic domain says something about the
transmodal properties of such images. I have argued elsewhere that abstraction (including editing strategies that highlight abstraction, similar to those Sobchack describes) is fundamental to Kieslowski’s style.  

Along these same lines, Laura U. Marks argues for the weightiness of non-verbal knowledge as it is cinematically transmitted. She contends “that many new works in film and video call upon memories of the senses . . .” and the title of her book, *The Skin of the Film*, “suggests the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes.”  

She calls this “haptic visuality,” an emphasis on the synesthetic relation between sight and touch, and argues that Gilles Deleuze’s “Time-Image” cinema offers her a model and terminology with which to discuss these “new languages” which are not verbal, as Deleuze draws on the philosopher Henri Bergson, who always embodied memory in the senses. Marks writes:

> I have found it necessary to understand how meaning occurs in the body, and not only at the level of signs. The elements of an embodied response to cinema, the response in terms of touch, smell, rhythm, and other bodily perceptions, have until recently been considered “excessive” and not amenable to analysis. I will argue that they can indeed be analyzed—or, more properly, met halfway. Ultimately I argue that our experience of cinema is mimetic, or an experience of bodily similarity to the audiovisual images we take in. Cinema is not merely a transmitter of signs; it bears witness to an object and transfers the presence of that object to viewers. (xvii)

Sobchack and Marks find an unusual complement in an important aesthetician from the analytical school of philosophy, Jenefer Robinson, whose book *Deeper than Reason* (2005) argues that emotion should not be the Cinderella of the epistemological family, and reason should not be the wicked stepmother. Her question of what emotion is leads her to believe it is an exceptionally efficient (however general) appraisal of a given situation. If it is an appraisal (and Robinson makes a very comprehensive case), it is a type of evaluation that yields a type of nonverbal knowledge. Some emotions are, in fact, “quick and dirty non-cognitive affective appraisals.”

If we were to summarize what this immediate knowledge is, we might say that it is epistemologically heavy and direct knowledge, which precedes verbal language and includes bodily experience (including synesthetic, transmodal evocation) and emotion, both of which convey knowledge without the mediation of verbal categories. These are the feelings at the
gut—or “stomach”—to which Kieslowski alluded in the quote opening this essay.

Part of the reason philosophers and film theorists are returning to these notions of bodily experience and direct knowledge is that the hard sciences are too. Many neurologists are leaning away from the old dichotomy of sensing vs. understanding, precisely because there does not seem to be a direct, linear process from the low to the high stages in perception; the model is more like parallel processing than linear flow. Likewise, a lot of very fundamental perceptual work happens in the low areas, such that it is hard to imagine thinking without them. If that is so, perhaps even these low stages have a claim to knowledge. The psychologist Rudolf Arnheim argued for years that both intellect and intuition are essential for what it means to be human, and one should not be preferred over the other. In one of his many essays on the matter, he writes:

As far as the differences between verbal and nonverbal language are concerned, I will cite only the obvious example that many verbal languages treat things and actions as separate entities, whereas the directly perceptual media, especially the ones presenting movement such as pantomime or film, display them as aspects of an inseparable experience. . . . Both means, the resources of direct experience and the instruments of concepts, are needed, whether by a scientist or an artist or indeed by any person curious about the world where he or she is living.

Arnheim’s idea of the projection of meaning is nearly identical to Husserl’s intentionality. It is worth noting that most neuroscientists support this notion of active perception today. Likewise, philosopher and cognitive theorist Mark Johnson has recently developed an entire theory of aesthetics based on intentionality, the primacy of emotion, and the deep, visceral foundations of knowledge. Thus, scientists have affirmed the Husserlian hunch on intentionality and epistemological weight. This forms a foundation for our exploration of everyday synesthesia, what scientists consider a type of multisensory process.

The everyday synesthetic experience is what I would call a diluted or semi-sensation. It is not exactly a memory, though memory drives it: It is a physiological, sensual response that evokes a cascade of other physiological and sensory responses, forming an epistemologically heavy dynamic of immediate meaning in the perceiver. This is quite different from semantically mediated knowledge.
The next section will analyze some instances where cinema is synesthetically evocative, and I hope to show that this is not merely association or memory, or that our visceral reactions are merely crude impulses. Rather, both of those elements are inextricably bound together to form experiential knowledge, something close to Sobchack’s “what my fingers knew” in her articulation of an embodied existential phenomenology.

The Synesthetic Immediate in The Decalogue

The preceding section formed a philosophical and neurophysiological case for sensuous knowledge. It is precisely this type of knowing that enables Kiesłowski's lived theological reflection to function. Our examples from The Decalogue, to be explored here, will merely serve as that: examples, occasions for experiential knowledge. Kiesłowski draws on common memories, and neurophysiological sympathies, to convey the lived experiences of his characters, as they navigate the arenas of morality demarcated by the Commandments.

One might argue that this cinematic resonance is not unique to Kieslowski or even The Decalogue. However, one might also reflect on the theological substrate undergirding the series, to which I alluded earlier in this essay. By tackling some of the most foundational sets of ideas in Western culture, Kieslowski attempts to inject the Commandments with life, animating them as zones of experience in which we struggle to connect the ideal with the lived body.

One way he does this is through haptic synesthetic appeal, which takes on several stylistic manifestations. For instance, close-up shots of objects appeal to the haptic sense through a magnification of texture. Particularly intense, abstract visuals have a function all their own in Kiesłowski’s cinema, but their synesthetic qualities lie in their emphasis on primary sensory qualities (some of which—such as intensity and form—hold trans-modal appeal). Shots of the tactile organs (hands, skin, and tongue) are also common, and they evoke a strong mimetic response. Images of hands induce strong synesthetic reactions, and powerful images of hands about to cut or being cut can be found in episodes Two and Three. Finally, haptic associations include images of things that have some natural or indexical relationship with the sense of touch (e.g., a shot of a flame evokes the memory of the feeling of heat, or pain, or both).

We might say that Kiesłowski’s films appeal to the universal triangulation of sense experience, emotion, and morality. This is most evident
in *One*, where Paweł’s metaphysical questions—“who is God?”—are answered by a hug from his aunt Irena:

**AUNT:** What do you feel now?

**PAWEŁ:** I love you.

**AUNT:** Exactly. That’s where he is.

In our perception of the conversation, we are given a standard, back-and-forth edited conversation. Paweł and his aunt do not appear in the same frame throughout their verbal, intellectual conversation. The end of this Socratic dialogue, however, culminates not in a linguistic answer, but a sensual one, as the two characters draw close into one frame. We see this proximity, but we also, transmodally, sense the smell of the aunt’s coat, the texture of her clothing, and the haptic intimacy of the diminished space between the characters. Kiesłowski seems to be indicating here that the *Decalogue* series will present the possibility of God through the context of human relationships and sensual experience (the aunt and her nephew, and the intimate contact between them). In this way, Kiesłowski presents the Commandments as abstract ideals that purport to order human life. Yet, their real impact is found in the nonverbal, emotional and sensual dynamic they create. They must be animated within a human sensual arena to have any real force, effect, or—as we have discussed—complete meaning.

Indeed, we might initially consider the first episode as something of a template for how Kiesłowski utilizes such appeals. It is worth noting that *One*, like so many of the episodes, begins with almost no dialogue. Here we see Kiesłowski employing a stream of sensual appeals as well as looks and glances that index emotions. One image is the mangy frozen hair of the dead dog touched by Paweł, with which we might contrast Paweł’s later petting of the guinea pig, a cuddly little animal strikingly noted for its sharp teeth. From a semiotic perspective, the guinea pig is not a sign for soft sentiment. Rather, through synesthetic evocation of contrasting sensations, Kiesłowski problematizes a simplistic logical equation. Through sensation, the animal is at once felt to be lovable and threatening.

This sort of paradoxical duality is common in the synesthetic appeals Kiesłowski makes throughout *The Decalogue*, and it functions as a phenomenological analogue to the intellectual paradoxes that are inherent in most theologies. To cite an example Kiesłowski himself often pursued, how can one propositionally believe in fate or predestined future and still preserve some notion of free will? Theologians have wrestled with this paradox for
centuries, and many have labeled it a divine mystery beyond verbal or intellectual reach. However, we often experience things that embody the paradoxes, and so we know them bodily, but not intellectually. In this case, the dialectic of the cuddly creature and its menacing sharp teeth manifests a concrete, sensual binary rather than a propositional one. This, and many other examples like it, suggests that we live through the paradox rather than intellectually resolve it.

The synesthetic appeals also inform our understanding of the characters and do something to advance the plot. For instance, Paweł shows his aunt a device to turn on the water in his apartment. His aunt, being a sensual person who touches and engages the world more than she talks, sticks her hand in the stream. It is interesting that Kiesłowski, fighting against the limiting time of 50 minutes for this episode, chooses to spend the extra time watching the aunt putting her hand in the water, for no other reason than to experience the water rushing over her skin. We might naturally see this in semiotic terms: She is a woman who is connected to water, moving water, as it stands as a symbol of life (and where frozen, still water will become a symbol of death) (Figure 2–1).

However, this interpretation can work only retroactively, since it is not part of the original experience of perceiving the image. What is primary is the synesthetic response: We sympathetically (Marks would say “mimetically”) remember something of the feeling of wetness on fingers, and that memory works more in the mode of feeling than abstract fact. Likewise, it is a key sensation for us to feel water (as well as the coldness of the dog fur and the milk bottle Paweł touches), because it will become central to what Paweł tragically feels at the end of the film. Cold water also elicits pity in *Three*, when the cruel jailor hoses down the naked drunk, as well as humor.
in the opening to *Four*, as father and daughter playfully douse each other with water. These are not merely symbols or propositions, but sensory engagements with the things that universally matter: life, death, joy, pain, love, and fulfillment.

Later, Paweł’s touch of the blade of the skate represents childhood wonder, but synesthetically it evokes an instantaneous danger or pain reaction that provides the story, even as it expresses another ironic binary, with childhood wonder and pain rolled into one image. Fire is a similar binary, which can be warm and comforting as well as painful. In addition to the campfire of the young man in *One*, images of flames (and flames near hands) can be found in *One, Two, Three, and Four*.

The father’s walk on the frozen ice plays out a particularly interesting transmodal theme in Kiesłowski’s *Decalogue*: the experience of tension and testing of limits. Kiesłowski lingers on the image of the father walking on the ice, giving us time to anticipate whether the ice will break or not, and giving us synesthetic markers of its solidity. We might call this haptic testing, and it is a common theme throughout *The Decalogue*, a sensual analogue to the ideas of the Commandments as conceptual, intellectual limits. Characters often pensively nudge and push things, as if testing their material boundaries. These small challenges often happen at high emotional moments for the characters, and may serve as a search for reality in a surreal moment, or as tests of the physical laws of the universe, performed in the hope that there may be some escape from them. The central point is not that there are such material limits, but that we know those limits bodily and we often wish to negotiate or transcend them. For instance, in *Two*, Dorota slowly pushes a mug of tea to the edge of the table, until it finally falls. In *Four*, a father, after hearing his daughter had an abortion, aimlessly pushes around some cordials on a table. In *Five*, ominously, Jacek nudges a rock closer and closer to the edge of the bridge rail, until it falls onto traffic below, causing an accident (Figure 2–2).

Throughout the rest of *The Decalogue*, we see numerous other examples of these sorts of synesthetic engagements. For the sake of brevity, I will not itemize them all here, but only draw attention to a few more examples that might expand our understanding of how Kiesłowski utilizes the synesthetic immediate to express what he called “essential, fundamental, human and humanistic questions.” We might develop some themes here, within which these synesthetic engagements can be contextualized: synesthetic evocations of life, struggle, and death.

We might include in the category “life” synesthetic moments of haptic intimacy (for example, when Pawel hugs his father after the chess match
in *One* and sexual tension (as in most of *Three*, the story of an affair in the making, or in *Four*, when Anka’s drama coach tells her to “get closer” to her fellow actor). We remember in *Seven* that little Ania will not let go of her father’s finger, while her mother Majka asks in vain for kisses and tender hugs.

In *Six*, the relationship between synesthetic appeal and voyeurism is made plain, and the bodies of the characters become Kieślowski’s script. We may wish to touch Magda, even as her lover touches her. This intimacy provokes the jealous Tomek to report a fictitious gas leak, after which, in a sort of mad joy, he wildly punches the wall out of an embodied surplus of emotion. When Magda spills her milk, she plays in it with her finger. Later, Tomek’s hands on Magda’s thighs send him over the edge. Before long, he cuts his wrists. In each case, Kieślowski synesthetically appeals through lingering, carefully constructed, wordless images.

In a sense, all the episodes are about struggle on some level, but *Two* manifests this theme the most synesthetically. For instance, after Dorota coolly picks the leaves off her houseplant and mangles the stem, Kieślowski’s camera hangs on a close-up of the slowly rising remains of the plant. The stem rises, bit by ugly bit, refusing to die. In Andrzej’s hospital room, the dripping of water on the bed frame, peeling paint, and the drowning bee all exude a tension of time and duration that excruciatingly appeals to our sense of touch, and the embodied, sympathetic struggle for movement and life.

In *Five*, the most visceral of all the episodes, we are given this same struggle unto inexorable death. The agonizing detail of each of Jacek’s blows,
and Waldemar’s desperate bodily surges and twitches in death, are matched only by the unbearable synesthetic tensions mercilessly present at Jacek’s hanging. The Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky famously said that the purpose of art was to “make the stone feel stony.”20 In Jacek’s hands the heavy, unrelenting stone feels so to mortal effect. Indeed, the entire episode is steeped in synesthetic evocation, from Jacek’s menacing twisting of the rope around his hands to his slovenly consumption of the pastry in the café. 21

Finally, we might see *Eight* as one of the most direct instances of the mind/body dialectic. The film begins with a moving camera, a child’s hand clasping an adult’s hand in the frame. The child’s finger moves delicately, trusting, setting the synesthetic and emotional stakes high enough that we wince when we learn of her betrayal later. The old professor Zofia says nothing throughout the opening sequence of the film but, instead, exercises, exerts, and comes to rest on the rough, wooden rail. The crooked picture frame symbolizes something of the outside forces which philosophy never seems quite to conquer, even as it disrupts our transmodal sense of balance. This episode—which has more dialogue than most others and deals far more with abstract ideals, language, and rationality—is constantly being balanced by human touch and forces beyond control or articulation. The acrobatic rubber man in the park—who transmodally strains and pulls through our sense of our own bodily limitations—synesthetically embodies the balance between ideals and embodied knowledge: “It’s just a matter of exercise,” he says to Zofia. Even though the man declares that it may be “too late” for Zofia to learn the embodied practice of flexibility, Kieslowski suggests otherwise. 22 Elżbieta, in the end, begins to pray again (one of the few overtly religious images in the series), and Zofia and Elżbieta have several tender moments of contact. The film ends with a silent image of reconciled touch between them—where God is, according to Aunt Irenka in *One*—thoughtfully observed from a distance by the weary, jaded tailor.

Kieslowski’s *Decalogue* presents the ideals of the Commandments as they meet the embodied, living person. He does not pretend that this meeting is always happy, easy, or even fully comprehensible, but our bodies know something of these Commandments and the reality to which they speak. Kieslowski’s embodied appeals remind us of their relevance, and—literally—engage us in their meanings. Their meanings, and the ideals they embody, are directly connected to theological assertions, which Kieslowski treats more like metaphysical themes. To conclude this essay, the relationship between these themes, their theological substrate, and the synesthetic immediate dynamic warrants some reflection.
Theology and Synesthetic Appeal

In Carnal Thoughts, Sobchack has sketched out an existential, phenomenological, descriptive account of One that is articulate, insightful, and similar to my account, at least in some of its phenomenological concepts. What I have called “evocative” and “transmodal” phenomena, she refers to as “mimetic ana-logic” (89), and what I have called “nonrational knowledge” she refers to as “emotional turbulence” that has “equal weight” with “logical contingency” in Kiesłowski’s cinema (90). In effect, she sees Kiesłowski as demarcating the boundaries at which our “irrational” senses, desires, fears and dreams confront the brutal, limiting, material realities (87). I would not, generally, use the term irrational, but there is an overall sympathy between our arguments.

Sobchack ignores any kind of theological underpinning or context to the films, and sees everything phenomenologically in terms of material existential experience and secular conjectures beyond that experience, such as contemporary chaos theory, which attempts to track patterns of randomness and orderliness in the universe quite apart from any first cause (90 n. 7). Her descriptions about how the “lived body” makes “sense” of the experience is inflected—she readily admits—by her own philosophical presuppositions which are radically material and leave little room for anything beyond what she calls a “concrete metaphysics,” which contemplates the interface of material body and material world (1–2, 87). She comes close to a theological concept when discussing the inexplicable and ominous “I am ready” of the computer screen in One, but couches it in standard cultural studies language (i.e., “an emotional signature of otherness that doesn’t deign to ingratiate itself” [92]).

She conceives of Kiesłowski as a pessimist-yet-humanist, “tormented by transcendence” despite the “harsh dialectics” of his films, which undermine stable religious metaphysical systems (86, 107–108).

For sure, one ought to be cautious when applying theological concepts to Kiesłowski, given his dubious theological commitments and well known suspicion of organized religion. However, I would like to open up the materialist bracket here and allow for some theological reflection. We are, surely, free to assume that theological ideas are not out of bounds in a film built on the structure of the Ten Commandments, and there is evidence to suggest that Kiesłowski himself was concerned with more than material reality. Rather than pursue a particular theology, however, it seems wiser to pursue some more general—rather than dogmatic—philosophical theology here. What I mean by this is not to insist upon a particular religious
portrait of God or the particular creeds of a given church, but to see the Commandments as a type of zone, within which one can engage the questions of ultimate reality, morality, and purpose. There is evidence to suggest that Kieslowski felt this way about the films. His friend, the filmmaker Agnieszka Holland, once remarked:

I think that Krzysztof is somebody who had an incredibly deep need to believe in something transcendental. He did believe, but at the same time he wasn’t really the member of any church, and his relationships toward the religious were less theological than ethical and metaphysical.25

Within a broad theological context, one finds some parallels that Kieslowski himself might have found attractive. Kieslowski’s need for “something transcendental” may very well grow from the same ground as the anti-materialist, anti-positivistic concerns of Poland’s most famous religious son, Karol Wojtyła, Pope John Paul II (whose photo appears, and whose person is discussed, in the very first Decalogue installment, and comically in Nine). Wojtyła was known as a serious philosopher, theologian, and even a poet, but his most significant achievement, in the eyes of most Poles, was simply as a native son, unafraid to speak out about the oppression in his own country. At the time Decalogue was made, few figures—religious or otherwise—were more important to the ordinary Pole than he was.26

Remarkably, Wojtyła’s theological approach to the body is contrary to much of religious history, where sensual experience and Western religious ideas have not been good bedfellows. Note how sensory experience is also akin to synesthetic experience in this quote, from renowned art historian David Freedberg:

From Clement of Alexandria (with all his antipathy to images) to Bernard Berenson (with all his love of them), the eyes are the channel to the other senses. These are what are dangerous, or enlivening, or both—touch above all. Once our eyes are arrested by an image, so the argument more or less runs from Plato onward, we can no longer resist the engagement of emotion and feeling. . . . We may be moved; we strive to touch the unloving object before us. Whether inevitable processes or merely inclinations, these are what detract from the purity of mental operations tout court. That higher side of our beings that sets us apart from animals, the realm of intellect and spirit, is brought down and sullied. (Emphasis added)27
Wojtyła’s approach, however, is to argue that a proper theology of the body begins with the notion of the material world as a divine gift (including our material bodies, and all their sensual modes of understanding). He fights against a Cartesian—or neo-Manichaean—division between matter and spirit, and argues forcefully that human beings should never be reduced to “mere matter.”

He sees official strictures on sensual life not as a Manichean tendency, but rather as its opposite: a safeguard for assuring the “dignity of the body” (309). As for the human person, he admits an aspectual dualism of body and spirit, but does not admit a dualism of person: “We cannot consider the body as an objective reality outside of man’s personal subjectivity” (364–365). Thus, whereas Wojtyła might applaud Sobchack for the importance she has placed upon the body in perception and the generation of meaning, he would likely be concerned that the philosophical basis for her approach—her “concrete metaphysics”—still contains the danger that the body (and hence the other) will be reduced to “mere matter,” and thus abused as an “object” (94–96).

Kieślowski, no doubt, differed from the pope on many things, but they did share essential concerns for sensory experience, a bodily experience of the world, and that life and truth not be measured solely in scientific, material, or rationalistic terms. This is the essence of the quote that opened this essay, the Kieślowskian tripartite “mind,” “heart,” and “stomach.” It is also at the heart of Kieślowski’s assertion—after hours of study of religious commentaries and philosophies surrounding the “meaning” of The Decalogue—that he and cowriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz felt no compunction to articulate an authoritative interpretation of the Commandments. Rather, “we wished to say: ‘We know no more than you. But maybe it is worth investigating the unknown, if only because the very feeling of not knowing is a painful one’” (KK, xiv). The “pain” of “not knowing” is, it seems, indexical of the Commandments’ significance for this generation.

Wojtyła’s theology of the body aims at the celebration of personhood—persons as unity of body and spirit—as a remedy to those who would treat the body as an object. Such a notion is also at the heart of Martin Buber’s I-Thou binary. Buber’s conception of treating something as an “it” is to treat reality (be it a person or a tree) as an object for use or mastery. Rather, he encourages us to consider all of reality as a “Thou,” not objectified, but giving and receiving in reciprocal relation to us. The Commandments, in summary, can be seen as a set of principles for avoiding the temptation to mastery. Kieślowski’s synesthetic appeals may be seen as simulations of that very struggle, even as it also presents sensory alternatives to an ar-
rogant neo-Manichaeism. Mastery is, after all, a temptation that is both intellectual and sensual.

Kieślowski critiques the former, neo-Manichaean temptation in the very first episode. “Eliot said poetry is what’s untranslatable,” Paweł’s father remarks in his lecture, and this is another clue to Kieślowski’s pursuit of the Commandments (all that meaning attached to and suggested by those words, but which cannot be circumscribed by the words themselves). He goes on, in his materialistic fashion, to describe a godlike computer (“Try to imagine an interpreter capable of accumulating all knowledge of words and language with an unlimited memory that can be used at any time”), and as he speaks we ironically see that precise thing that the computer cannot truly have: feeling-as-meaning, indexed by a close-up on his hands. Significantly, this view belongs to his curious and affectionate young son, who has recently been told by his aunt that God dwells in the touch between persons. As Sobchack’s example has shown, hands are often the gateway for synesthetic experience, not simply conceptual symbolism of such experience.

The sensual temptation to mastery is found at the intersection of desire, body, action, and morality, and so it is natural that Kieślowski’s synesthetic appeals would function so effectively here as well. For example, the cruel hosing of the drunk by the anti-Semitic orderly in Three provokes a double-synesthetic response: that of mastery and power over another, and a painful, haptic sympathy of cold. Likewise, our abstract, rational knowledge of anti-Semitism informs our emotional and moral response. The balance here should not be lost. The temptation to hate the body must be countered by sensual knowledge, as it is through that appeal that so much of our sense of meaning, purpose, and ethics are foundationalized. At the same time, the senses are often inclined toward mastery and must be tempered by principle and compassion.

In Kieślowski’s case, not only does he rely upon transmodal evocation, but he also uses it as a means of amplifying the sensual interface of the body with a given ideal. Essentially, this animation is through struggle, through experiential knowledge and the sense of pressure and limit, and the emotion within the thematic space the command demarcates. No episode is like a sermon or a lesson, but rather, as Kieślowski says, “the films . . . [are] influenced by the individual Commandments to the same degree that the Commandments influence our daily lives” (“Introduction,” xiv).

Kieślowski surely struggled over spiritual issues and nothing approaching a religious conversion or certainty has been documented, but strug-
gle, to the religious mind, is an essential part of the faith experience. The prominent “harsh dialectics” in Kieślowski’s films, as Sobchack describes them (*Carnal Thoughts*, 106–108), are also complemented by numerous, mysterious occasions of grace, salvation, redemption, and joy. We should note that the family contact that defined God and opened *The Decalogue* (Paweł and his aunt embracing) returns in one of the final images of *Ten*. We see two reconciling brothers, who not only forgive each other but press their foreheads together: a symbolic and haptic union of mind and body, to heal the Manichaean rift and to close this monumental film series.

It is in these hopeful moments that the religious hope for the body makes its presence known in Kieślowski’s cinema. The theologian T. J. Gorringe argues that God has purposed sensual life as a mode of his own self-expression, and within this embodied experience we might find hope. It is a hope of human touch and sensual delight which facilitates healing, as suggested in episode *Eight*, through Zofia and Elżbieta’s reconciled embrace. Intellectual and moral questions remain, but healing begins nonetheless. As Gorringe writes, “Through the exercise of our senses, God moves towards the creation of a new world, a world of the celebration and affirmation of bodies, and therefore of the creator who imagined them and gave us them materially, as the consummate sign of the grace of God’s essential nature” (27).

Unlike Gorringe, Kieślowski was not setting out to find a theology of the body, but even so his *Decalogue* exhibits the same embodied drama of human brokenness and redemption. Kieślowski picked the Ten Commandments as his structure because, in his own words, he looked around Warsaw and had the impression that he was “watching people who didn’t really know why they were living” (*KK*, 143). He simply wanted to see if these abstract ideas mattered, and if that mattering is measured by lived experience.

As Rudolf Otto wrote in his meditation on *The Idea of the Holy*, the rational and nonrational are the warp and woof of the spiritual fabric. One cannot have authentic religious experience without both, and Kieślowski’s films address each of these perceptive arenas. His work is about the dance between the intuitive, intentional, emotional, and rational self and the raw forces of the world. Meaning is the essential dynamic, and in Kieślowski’s hands the Ten Commandments are less a set of decrees for him to interpret and more a description of the dance (and the dance floor), as well as the zones of sense, movement, and morality. One may assume that the Commandments are simply expressions of norms or ideas, but the consummate
achievement of Kieślowski’s films is that he demonstrates how these ideas still matter, that they form occasions for living encounters with the spiritual, however broadly one wishes to define it. In this light, it becomes clear that synesthetic appeal is a chosen vehicle to accomplish what has historically been a primary goal of religious experience—that is, in Cytowic’s words, “to describe that which transcends language” (The Man Who Tasted Shapes, 319).

This essay has only begun to chart Kieślowski’s embodied approach to meaning. Kieślowski’s affirmation of the body as the ground of knowledge acts as a corrective to overly idealist approaches to the Commandments. In other words, Kieślowski stitches the abstract ideal back into the body, where it matters, even as he ruminates on the instance of its mattering. We are not simply minds, pursuing the Divine, shirking off the body. Neither are we just brains, biomaterially processing input. The cinematic incarnation of the Decalogue reminds us who we are, and it asks us who we wish (and ought) to be, body and soul.

NOTES


3. For more on this transition, see ibid., 15–26.

4. See a more extended argument on this point in ibid., 41–89.

5. It may be—if neuroscientist Richard Cytowic is correct—that the two types are physiologically related. If so, this promises further support for theories of embodied knowledge. Cytowic puts forth numerous amplified clinical examples in his groundbreaking studies Synesthesia: A Union of the Senses (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002) and The Man Who Tasted Shapes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003). Further references to these works will be cited in the text. Cytowic’s principal clinical example centers on his friend Michael, who really feels a geometrical, tactile shape in his fingertips when he tastes certain foods (The Man Who Tasted Shapes, 4).


9. Sobchack lays out her phenomenological approach in *The Address of the Eye* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and gives more extended examples of application to individual films in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Further references to these works will be cited in the text using the abbreviated titles, respectively, *Address* and *Carnal Thoughts*.


12. Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55–56. It is important to note, however, that emotion and feeling are not always the same thing, but we instinctively know them to be related, as with the common phrase “you hurt my feelings.” This may be because emotions can be an appraisal of oneself. Such is Jesse J. Prinz’s central argument in his book *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 230.


15. This group would include Antonio D’Amasio, who has convincingly argued for the confluence of emotion and reason, confounding the distinction that he labels “Descartes’ Error.” His neurological research shows how fundamental emotion and sensation are to so-called cool rationality. See also Zeki, *Inner Vision*.


18. Though Marks does not itemize these areas as I have, this is essentially the same stylistic territory that she describes in *The Skin of the Film*. Her chosen directors utilize these appeals to find communication where a
language has been lost to diaspora. Similarly, Kieślowski sought to transcend his particular culture in this series, and this concern grew even greater in his later features. It is no accident that his synesthetic appeals really begin here, and become much more prominent in his features after *The Decalogue.*

19. In the same interview, he gives us an idea of what these questions are: “What is the true meaning of life? Why get up in the morning? Politics don’t answer that.” Krzysztof Kieślowski, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski,* ed. Danusia Stok (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 144. Further references to this work will be cited in the text using the abbreviation KK.


21. One might also consider the evocations of the sense of taste throughout the films of *The Decalogue,* a discussion beyond the scope of this essay, but synesthetically powerful all the same. Some examples include the importance of drinks like tea, milk, and vodka in episodes *One,* *Two,* *Three,* *Six,* *Eight,* *Nine,* and *Ten.*

22. As I have discussed in *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski,* the contortionist is the embodiment of some key themes, not as they are questions answered logically, but as perennial questions that must be simply lived through in hope (229).

23. The quotation here actually comes from Peter Schjeldahl’s discussion of folk art, which Sobchack applies to this scene. Peter Schjeldahl, “Folks,” *New Yorker,* January 14, 2002, 88.

24. Most interviews with Kieślowski show evidence of this, but a particularly compelling one, in which he spends a lot of time discussing the nature of human spiritual mysteries, may be found in *Lucid Dreams: The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski,* ed. Paul Coates (Trowbridge, UK: Flicks Books, 1999), 160–174.


26. Likewise, Wojtyła was a Polish hero because he became the head of a universal church out of an oppressive, atheistic government. He not only symbolized the potential and hope for the resistance to Communism, but he returned to communist Poland and subversively preached for the dignity of human beings in the midst of that oppression. A moving account of Wojtyła’s 1983 return is found in Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 47–60. This occurred just a few years before the filming of *The Decalogue.*

28. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books, 2006), 95, 303–307. Further references to this work will be cited in the text. This collection of reflections has been interpreted as a thoughtful defense of traditional Catholic teaching on marriage, and it largely is. However, for our purposes here, it can also be viewed as a larger theological approach to the problem of Cartesian dualism, which has historically led to the denigration of the body.


30. There is a long tradition in cultural studies of considering vision as a dissecting, objectifying sense, and so it would seem that Kiesłowski’s images may appeal to mastery, even if the Commandments resist it. However, I believe that vision is more complicated than that, and, in short, Kiesłowski’s images often place us in a state of suspense and awe—even submission—in the presence of the Other. For more on Kiesłowski’s visual strategies for confounding our sense of mastery, see Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kiesłowski*, 41–89.

31. For instance, in *One*, the command “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3 RSV), takes on no overt didactic presence, but rather creates the theme within which the characters try to live. In general, I view Kiesłowski’s approach to the Commandments as flowing from the Catholic ordering, and in terms of a flexible overlap between different commands (see Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kiesłowski*, 162–164).

32. T. J. Gorringe, *The Education of Desire: Towards a Theology of the Senses* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2001), 4. Gorringe highlights many of these occasions for embodied theology. He points out that, in the Christian scriptures, “God chooses embodiment, and not just in Christ. God chooses materiality in the first place, according to Genesis” (9). Likewise, the Scriptures are full of synesthetic metaphors that suggest something more than abstract intellect (e.g., “Taste and see that the Lord is good” [Ps. 34:8, Job 20:18], and Jesus is said to have “tasted death for all” [Hebrews 2:9]). Further references will be cited in the text.


34. Cytowic notes how synesthetic and religious experiences are similar in many respects. He writes: “In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James spoke of . . . [the] four qualities [of religious ecstasy] of ineffability, passivity, noesis, and transience. We should note that these are also qualities of synesthesia” (*Synesthesia*, 319). His case that religious experience and synesthesia emerge from a common fount (the limbic system) is inferential at best, but it does show a certain parallelism between the two, which, at least, suggests a common objective between aesthetic and religious experiences.