A young woman of twenty who lives alone with her father informs him one
day that she has found a secret envelope that he has been hiding from her
for years. The envelope contains a testamentary letter from her mother,
who had passed away a few days after giving birth to her. The father has
kept this letter, addressed to his daughter, inside another envelope contain-
ing, in turn, his own testament to her. On this envelope, the father, with
the conscious intention of delaying its dreaded opening and disclosure for
as long as possible, wrote these words: “To be opened after my death.”

In this way, the man, who had both evaded and feared the content of
the letter, has now learned, from the daughter’s provocative account, that
he is not her father. This revelation has upset him. The family system has
broken down. The relationship between them has blown up. The incest ta-
boo has wavered. The father and the daughter have now become ensnared
by desire.

It is only after a period of tumult between them that the young woman
admits that she totally fabricated the contents of the maternal letter, and
that she had, in fact, never opened it. This finally snuffs out the morbid
curiosity with which the two had guarded the mysterious message for
years. Their spirits thus soothed, they decide to burn the letter. Only a few scorched fragments remain to recall the message that is now permanently lost.

The Oedipal Trap

Between the father and the daughter lies, hidden, a mysterious yellowish envelope on which the father has written by hand, “To be opened after my death.” When the two are separated for a few days, the yellow envelope remains at the bottom of a common-use drawer. One day, the father, who is about to travel somewhere, appears to forget it there, careless in a way he has never been before. Thus the amnesia of the father, Michał (Janusz Gajos), puts the daughter, Anka (Adrianna Biedrzyńska), under pressure. She takes the initiative and arrives at a solution. She only has to cut the yellow envelope open to discover the truth of the father’s postmortem injunction.

She indeed executes that cut, thus breaking the enclosure of the paternal word. Within it, however, she finds no revelation other than yet another sealed envelope with the words, “For my daughter Anna,” written on it. This time, the writing belongs to the mother who died giving birth to her. Thus, Anka finds a secret within a secret, a cut following a cut. Meanwhile, Anka, holding a pair of scissors and the letter in her hands, vanishes from the film viewer’s field of vision against a brilliant white canoe that a man approaching from the water carries over his shoulders (Figure 6-1).

We see her again when she furiously recites her mother’s arcane message to the father: “My darling daughter . . . Michał is not your father.” There is a slap in the face, some broken glass, and the two find themselves

Figure 6-1. The mother’s letter within the father’s in *Decalogue Four.*
speaking of desire, jealousy, and love. What happens then is a sort of game of truth or dare, which follows all the conventions, mannerisms, and terrors of truth itself.

We see Anka cry hysterically, now undressing to seduce her father, now curling up on her own—adolescent—bed, while he quivers with unexpressed desires. And yet, neither knows what to do with such an outpouring of emotions, revelations, and accusations. In all of this, eros is only but a fragment of their truth. Exhausted, Michał leaves. Anka, upset, follows him. What ensues is another moment of half-truth. Anka confesses to her act of mise-en-scène. She has not opened the letter. She has plotted her deception and laid an Oedipal trap. She is a theater actress and has staged a truth . . . but only one of many possible truths.

Together they have always thought that the content of the mysterious letter—sanctioned by the dead mother, whom she never knew—would delegitimize their bond as father and daughter. Perhaps they have always suspected that they were victims of some sort of (male)diction by the mother, who disappeared too soon not to be jealous of the end of her own youth at the birth of the bond between her man and that little girl. But with time, their suspicion turns into a dark desire to know the Truth. And a similar desire leads them to invent ambiguous tricks to both reveal and conceal that letter. In any case, the letter always remains in the middle between them, like a mystery and a condemnation. Meanwhile, with the passing years, father and daughter work out, but do not communicate to each other, a form of shared knowledge rooted, day by day, in the mysterious origins of the relationship that binds them. For this reason, Anka cuts open the father’s sealed envelope, but confronted with the unknown of the mother’s white envelope does not cut it, preferring rather to unleash the obscure, infernal forces of incest.

Nevertheless, despite her jolts and agonizing recognitions, and despite pathetic moments of seduction by this frail and reckless girl, Michał does not give up his desire to be a father. At the same time, the daughter’s staging of this fiction is a fearless and absolute filial act. Actually, while the father looks fearfully at the presumed maternal verdict, which undermines and denies everything their father-daughter bond is based on, Anka elects to give up her mother’s truth, whatever it may be. In fact, she dares to uncover and provoke precisely the unknown aspect of that truth, a truth that had threatened them both until then, nailing them to each other not by filiation but by negation.

Anka thus decides to burn the letter that she had yearned for so long, in order to honor her father and her mother. The film ends by leaving the
truth of the matter unresolved. Perhaps the letter enclosed the truth that they had imagined; perhaps it did not.

The pure and simple knowledge of the facts (whether Anka was or was not Michal’s biological daughter) would not have triggered the dark and indomitable forces of their subjective truth so powerfully. These forces break out precisely because that type of knowledge had remained impossible. And this impossibility was always attested to by the presence/absence of the hermetically sealed envelope.

There is no truth without concealment, as there is no filial honor that has not somehow traversed the deceptions and pitfalls of truth. That sort of discovered truth, bequeathed as a legacy by the mother, needed to be, precisely, re-covered or covered again, not only by the husband through the yellow envelope and the lengthy deferral, but also by the daughter, by means of lies and by fire.

The Knowledge of Origins

Therefore: a letter that contains but another letter; a message that holds but another, mysterious, message. The first message is written in the father’s handwriting: “To be opened after my death.” A deferment, a threat, a desire. Anka has her first glimpse of the envelope, by chance, at fifteen. The other is the message the father imparts to her whenever he takes the envelope with him when he travels, so that the daughter would not be tempted to open it if she found it. An unknown, a seduction, a betrayal. But these messages fall apart when one day, the father leaves the letter in the drawer, not absentmindedly but rather intentionally. And so the father’s desire comes into the fore, in its duplicity as both the desire to be a father to this girl and the desire of the man-father for the girl-daughter.

Another mysterious message is the one from the dead mother who writes on the envelope: “For my daughter Anna.” This message alludes to at least two things: the desire for a direct contact with her, lost in childbirth, and the unveiling of a secret. All in all, the father seems unable to communicate to the daughter what only the mother can know and communicate to her, that is, the knowledge of her origin. It is knowledge that, according to an ancient biological hypothesis, only the mother is supposed to possess (mater certa, pater incertus).

If the father’s desire for the daughter is too intense and if his defenses against it are organized in a way that is too rigid or dismissive, the daughter runs the risk of forfeiting the knowledge of her origin, for she can no longer trace her ancestry if her mother is no longer there to at-
test to the generative act. Therefore, for a son or a daughter to be able to honor his or her father and mother as his or her parents, or procreators, it is necessary that the parents themselves also recognize their symbolic positions.

On the contrary, in this situation, Michał must fight against an initial disavowal—that which emanates from the sealed envelope of his woman, Anka’s mother. Apparently, just before dying, she had undermined the symbolic terms of Michał’s paternity, not only and not so much by deceiving him, but rather by implying on her deathbed that he is not her little girl’s father, while at the same time entrusting her to his fatherhood. This sets up an atmosphere of symbolic uncertainty that strikes a blow at the father’s heart as well as his paternal function.

Moreover, what certainty could there be about paternity and filiation? For that matter, is there such a thing as symbolic certainty about maternity? As Decalogue Two shows, these are open questions for everyone. But here Michał confesses to his daughter that he has always suspected, although he was never certain, that he was not her “real” father. Therefore, from the beginning, Michał has lived a paternity always threatened by doubt, which, for the duration of the more dangerous period of the Oedipal stage, he decided not to resolve. Instead, he essentially drew from it the symbolic energies to love Anka as a daughter, to protect her and to guide her in her life. It is only when she finds a boyfriend that Michał decides to “forget” the mysterious letter and to take the risk of clearing up his doubt.

Anka literally declares to her father that, in her teenage years, she was deeply alarmed when she found out that there could be something that would be revealed to her only after his death. Anka would have to learn something mysterious about her origin and her identity after the death of both of her parents. Michał’s “oversight” predisposes his daughter to and sets off in him a veritable syndrome of failure. Therefore, once the alleged recognition is staged, there follows, inevitably, Anka’s question to her father: “What shall I call you now?” “I don’t know,” Michał, the dishonored father, replies.

But the mother is also dishonored, as father and daughter throw themselves on her modest and fragile secrets, greedily rummaging through her papers in the cellar, blinded by the idea of finding the Truth there. Yet, in the end, the mother’s letter is put to flames. With it, the phantasms of delegitimization it was able to incite are also gone. But this resolution becomes possible only when Anka drops the deception inherent in her fiction. This is the only way she can honor the father again: by again recognizing the father’s symbolic function.
On the other hand, for this function to be recognized by the daughter, Michał in turn must succeed in resisting Anka’s explicit and implicit seductions and remain resolute in his paternal position, with regard to which the last words of his wife had weakened and disoriented him. In reality, by burning the letter Anka ends up, exactly, paying respect to her mother’s word, the word by which she had entrusted Anka’s paternity to Michał. In fact, the revelation of a presumed “biological truth” was perhaps nothing more but the dead woman’s revenge against her man, the man who would become a parent at very little cost of life or death, while she lost her parenthood in dying. And who knows? Perhaps that allusive, disquieting message was also an unconscious act of retaliation of the mother against her daughter, the daughter who, in being born, killed her.

Maternal envy does exist. It makes no sense to idealize things, and Kiešlowski does not idealize. With his film, the agnostic Polish director seems to suggest that the act of honoring one’s father and one’s mother must traverse a similar terrain of knowledge. It is the knowledge of the profound imperfection of those who have brought us into the world: not only of their imperfection as subjects and individuals, but first and foremost of the imperfection of love, upon which our utopias go up in smoke.

*The Dead Letter*

To burn the letter enclosing the mother’s secret appears, then, to be the most profound way to honor both the father and the mother. The mother’s secret can never be identical to the daughter’s secret. Instead, Michał enacted a morbid system of concealments and insinuations around that letter, and contributed to transforming what was a weak maternal message into a powerful Message from the Mother. But whatever the mother’s knowledge, which constitutes the secret of her identity as a woman, may be, it must remain a dead letter to the daughter. It is only upon this condition that a daughter can succeed in piecing her own story together, that is, the story of her desire and, ultimately, her own secret knowledge, in its uniqueness, peculiarity, and difference. In a sense, we could infer from this filmic narrative that in order to obey the fourth commandment, it is necessary to let go of the possession of the mother, or of the maternal Thing. And this can only happen if the Oedipal law functions well. But in order for this law to work, the father must identify both the limitation and the inadequacy of his position. And the film shows this masterfully.

In other words, the father is *incertus* and remains such. He can function as father only within a nuclear, symbolic nexus of this kind.
In conclusion, to *honor thy father and thy mother* means to live one’s life and one’s death fully, which one’s father and one’s mother have consented to inaugurate in the very act of birth. Therefore, the mysterious letter—which should be opened only after the mother’s death and, subsequently, only after the father’s death—materializes the spiritual *viaticum* whereby the subject of desire is allowed to experience the life of his or her life and the death of his or her death. For this reason, Anka rightly threw that letter into the fire. The material existence of this message made the peculiarity of its origins appear disturbing and mysterious because of the allusive power of a secret that would be sooner or later unveiled. But burning the unopened letter eliminated this illusion once and for all. There cannot be any unveiling of our destiny: It is only from its ashes that we are born to the mystery of our identity.

Like everyone else, Anka is destined to experience some ontological uncertainty and some psychological precariousness if she wants to achieve her own individuation or, better yet, to attain her sexual difference. This seems to be the only way she can truly honor her father and her mother.

*In the Form of an Enigma*

Elsewhere, I have pointed out the particular structural positioning of the title in each of the ten films of Kieślowski’s *Decalogue*. And, surely, we have had and will still have much to learn from their original articulation in relation to the story and the techniques of each film. The director’s words highlight the essential arbitrariness of each title with regard to the merit and content of the individual story each film is based on.

“To be honest,” Kieślowski asserts, “I did not follow any rules because I simply wanted to relate ten stories. Their connection with the Ten Commandments is not binding. . . . All good books can, in the end, be traced back to the Ten Commandments . . . . Essentially, any book about human or metaphysical nature can be related to one or more commandments. The same thing is true for theater and the figurative arts because these norms exist and, when we speak about our existence or human relationships, we end up implicating them.” There is no necessary relation between any given commandment and any given story, and there are alternative associations one can think of. Nevertheless, the director continues: “We [Kieślowski and Piesiewicz] wrote the screenplays in such a way that a link existed, however tacit or veiled, but we did not aim for a simple illustration at all” (“Perché siamo qui?” 29). Therefore, each film’s relation to the
relevant commandment does not implicate its content, nor does it have any prescriptive, summative or definitive function with regard to the story that is being told. Rather, it has a maieutic and productive function. Thus, the commandments do not so much embody the moral message of Kieślowski’s films as constitute a signifying trace within each of them. And as we speak of signifying traces, let us put to rest any hypothesis of moralistic decryption and make way for the subject of ethics. The latter, on account of its subjection to language and desire, acts and suffers from sin, guilt, pleasure, and sanction, and, on occasion, even happiness.

Having articulated this premise, we are now left with the task of validating it in the case of the fourth commandment: “Honor thy father and thy mother.” The film’s story, style, and language seem to assert the failure of this powerful ethical principle following a sequence of this kind: Dishonor the truth by means of Anka’s fiction; dishonor the father by seducing him; dishonor the mother by burning her letter.

A different reading is, however, possible, one that exfoliates the meta-psychological levels of narration and that seeks out the paradoxical knots within which the symbolic law is articulated. We already mentioned in the introduction that, according to the psychoanalyst and mathematician Daniel Sibony, the paradox of the symbolic law is that it pretends to offer a universal cohesion to human beings but entails the impossibility of conforming to it. And this reading allows for clarification and articulation of some semantic connections between the style in which the story is narrated and the antirhetoric that is also immanent in the fourth commandment.

Even according to theological exegesis, “Honor thy father and thy mother” does not accentuate the aspect of the child’s submission to his or her parents, but rather the opposite. From a more unconventional perspective, to honor the father and the mother becomes an act of differentiation and autonomy by means of which a child fulfills the most productive aspect of his or her parents’ desire of filiation. This desire comprises both a voracious and destructive maternal/paternal component that tends toward the absorption of the child into sameness and a strong aspiration toward the alterity and difference of their progeny.

However, we can observe something more in Four if we treat the title as a meaningful card laid on the table during the aesthetic and ethical game that we are playing with the author. It is almost by chance that the fourth commandment corresponds to this episode, rather than the sixth (“Thou shalt not commit adultery”), the eighth (“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor”), or the ninth (“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s
wife”). Yet, when you see the film through the prism of this card, its system of meanings coalesces around those signifiers—“Honor thy father and thy mother”—to offer some pathways to knowledge that is unfamiliar, perhaps, even to the author himself. All this makes Kieślowski’s entire film arbitrary like the Saussurean sign and allows the subject of the unconscious, rather than the moral or moralistic subject, to emerge. Whereas the moral subject has the function of filling the message with meaning, the subject of the unconscious adds meaning only in the form of an enigma.

How can Anka honor her father and her mother?

First of all, by freeing herself from the unconscious desire for her father’s death, which until that moment represented to her the necessary condition of opening the mysterious envelope. Only in this way can she liberate her mother’s letter from the paternal interdiction. This letter, once liberated from the yellow envelope that enclosed it, is capable of destroying, by its mere presence, the relative harmony between Michał and Anka, most likely because the prolonged state of repression, which it had been under until then, is suddenly lifted at that moment. Michał feared that the letter furnished evidence that he could not be the father: ultimately, his paternal dishonor. It was, therefore, necessary for the daughter to seize the “letter” of his message to escape this dead end. It was explicitly a matter of life or death: What was written on the envelope (“To be opened after my death”) set things up in these terms.

What could be done, then? One could put a stop to the agony of ambivalence and accept the enigma. At the same time, Anka also took her mother literally: “You are my daughter” is implicit in her mother’s exact words, “For my daughter.” This is enough of a signal for Anka to shift her mother’s position from that of an imaginary avenger to that of the symbolic mother who recognizes her. The very fact that the daughter could perform such a shift of register with regard to the subjective ethical value of the forbidden letter is sufficient to compel Michał to assume both the weight and the renunciations of his self-legitimation as a father.

All in all, the Maternal Message does not exist for the subject of the unconscious of “Honor thy father and thy mother.” However, if the father, by fearing it, brings the Message into being and gives it authority, he ends up being condemned to having to vacate his function as a father.

The Desire of/for the Cut

In the first part of the film, Michał and Anka perform a love game with water, in which there are clear echoes of an imaginary complicity, founded
on a phallic bond between them. The relation between father and daughter appears to be sustained by a mutual tension directed at the avoidance of limits and of lack, of that foundational lack by virtue of which the object of desire, between father and daughter, exists only in gaps and defects.

After all, by using the expedient of fiction and by exercising the more or less hidden pressures of mastery, Michał and Anka attempt to hide from each other the degree to which the questions of origin and acknowledgment dig a void and signal a mystery in the constitution of their respective identities. Thus, both maintain a relationship of omnipotent control with regard to that sealed envelope, which is, for each, both a condemnation and a chimera.

The second part of the film brings to light, as do all the episodes of Kieślowski’s *Decalogue*, the explosive power of the effort to make the impossible possible. The impossible is that dimension of the *real* around which the subject revolves and, around which it, for the most part, runs in circles. The term “the impossible” indicates, in this instance, that phantasm of revelation that ties around the fetish of the sealed letter like a knot. The phantasm of revelation, in turn, refers to the obscure auspices and prophetic expectations that envelop the unknown message, hidden as well as revealed, of the father and of the mother.

In any case—whether the powerful utopia about the truth of origins takes hold, eliminating any dimension of mystery; or the presumed dogma of the letter eradicates any enigmatic root of the subject; or the power of absence and death invades the living space of the two protagonists—we always deal with the maternal Thing, of which it is impossible to say or predicate anything.

And so, in this story, the confines of the impossible are trespassed in at least three different areas: in the field of Truth, in which minor vestiges of language and meaning remain; in the field of Dogma, where mysteries vanish and the intermittences of the heart dissolve; and, analogously, in the dizziness of Absence, where loss allows for a few flashes of bodily presence to persist. In this way, the maternal Thing predominates.

In other words, Anka decides, in the name of the Mother’s dead end, immediately to marry a man whom she does not love. She does so under the aegis of the maternal Dogma, which holds the key to annulling paternity at any moment. Michał, for his part, falls into the all-powerful hole of Absence, kicking and screaming like an automaton. The visual frame is then filled by the dazzling white shape of a canoe, carried by a featureless man, at the very moment when Anka is about to cut the mother’s envelope.
It is an asymmetrical diamond form that simply draws on the screen four enigmatic and disquieting polarities (Figure 6-2).

Only later do we find out that Anka, following this vision, in fact refrains from the act of unveiling as if she understood, right at that moment, its impossibility or its fundamental uselessness for her soul. For Anka to cut open the father’s envelope meant to undercut the extortion over origins and to weaken her imaginary complicity with him; on the contrary, to cut open the mother’s envelope would be equivalent to making the mother’s absence intrusive, thus filling in the void of her lack.

In the third phase of the film, father and daughter sink into anguish. Their situation effectively illustrates how the fantasy of touching the truth of the mother is, simultaneously, an irresistible temptation and an insufferable experience.

At this point, the fourth phase of the film begins. The imaginary triangulation, at first constructed around the phallic pole of the avoidance of lack, later develops, once it has suffered the cut inflicted by Anka, into another pole predicated on the symbolic components of insufficiency and void. This is the only mental space in which the inscription of desire and language is possible. In short, the triangulation of complicity closes ranks around the void that the maternal letter has created, once it is accepted that it always remains unknown.

The magic and the logic of absence now begin to exert an effect. And so Anka’s incestuous desire dissolves into the mystery of origins. Perhaps this mystery will permit her to find herself. The father’s incestuous desire—which initially overflowed, by identification with the much hoped for and much feared maternal verdict—now begins to flow within the embankments of an intense and difficult paternal desire. The squaring of these
Decalogue Four

triangles opens up the space of the lost object, the object that is lost precisely because it has never been possessed. This space opens up in the film at the moment when Anka admits that she did not open the letter and that she ignored the truth therein. Therefore, the truth that until then she had boasted to have held in her hands was nothing but a dose of that lost truth, never ever possessed.

At the very moment when Anka makes this admission to her father, the man with the canoe passes by again. But, for us, the image is no longer the same from a logical and metapsychological perspective. What has happened? It is now time for the white diamond of the canoe to be wounded (Figure 6-3).

Although its whiteness is untouched and its geometry unchanged, the absoluteness of its silhouette against the space is even more essential because it has sustained what I would like to define as a transversal cut through/of lack. This cut breaks the phallic bond and introduces an element of openness and contamination into the integrity and invulnerability of the original Object.

To Honor the Truth

In conclusion, Kieślowski’s Four ends with a signifier that burns. The unknown of the unconscious emerges in the very act of signifying itself.

“Honor thy father and thy mother” corresponds, for Michał, literally to a fire that still burns him: “The letter is burning (me).” In this way, Michał is surprised by his own enigma, with which, in the end, he will not be able to do anything but continue living: “Is he or is he not the father of that daughter?” In truth, there is a barrier that resists meaning and divides the
signifiers of the unconscious from the semantic body of signification. As for us, in the last frame we leave Michal before the fire, while he is incinerating, with that letter, that which still inflames him in vain.

“Honor thy father and thy mother” corresponds, for the dead woman, literally to a fire that goes beyond her own demise. It is a fire of love and hate, a flame that makes her soul migrate without giving her peace: “May the letter burn (you)!”. The echo of another enigma lights up in this message: the enigma of that which burns the heart of a mother.

“Honor thy father and thy mother” is, for Anka, the signifying materialization or, better, the letter of her desire to be: “I burn (for) the letter.” In other words: “I yearn for the letter that holds the secret of my identity.” In all truth, the letter of identity rises from the ashes of incestuous desire: an unreal desire that mutates, leaving in the hands of each individual only the unknown with which they honor both the progeny and the progenitors.

“Honor thy father and thy mother” is “the letter” of Four. What is written in it is that the symbolic weight of origins is our most immanent mystery. And, thus, all this talk about it only weaves our stories together (up) in smoke.

Translated by Eva Badowska and Francesca Parmeggiani

NOTES

This essay was first published in Italian as “Madre in fumo: Onora il padre e la madre,” in Gabriella Ripa di Meana, La morale dell’altro. Scritti sull’inconscio dal Decalogo di Kieślowski (Florence: Liberal Libri, 1998), 95–116.


2. [Ripa di Meana first addresses the relationship between the Commandments and Kieślowski’s cycle in the introduction to her volume on The Decalogue. She observes that the Commandments are present tacitly as numbers—rather than as moral laws—in the title of each episode. This as if obliterated presence of the Commandments in The Decalogue activates the plurality of meanings within each story. In other words, the Commandments, as The Decalogue’s missing titles, function as “signifying traits” that set off the working of interpretation rather than provide each story with content or moral meaning (La morale dell’altro, 15–16). —Trans.]

3. Małgorzata Furdal, interview with Krzysztof Kieślowski, “Perché siamo qui?,” in Kieślowski, ed. Małgorzata Furdal and Roberto Turigliatto
(Turin: Museo Nazionale del Cinema, 1989), 29. Further references will be cited in the text.
