Of Elephants and Toothaches
Eva Badowska, Francesca Parmeggiani

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Of Elephants and Toothaches: Ethics, Politics, and Religion in Krzysztof Kieslowski's 'Decalogue'.


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The eighth part of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Decalogue* begins with a brief flashback sequence where a child is led down a passageway. The scene, a liminal image of a missing child, is missing from the screenplay and not part of the initial conception of the film.

I want to begin by looking at these images more closely. The shots first encountered in the film privilege movement and touch as a handheld camera passes along a passageway to the echoing sound of footsteps. The camera appears to share the viewpoint, and embodied angle of vision, of a small child. This illusion is undone, however, as two hands, a child’s and an adult’s, move into the frame. The camera follows in fact just behind the figures it tracks, as it keeps their clasped hands its object of attention (Figure 10–1). Color has bled out of the images; the skin of the child’s hand is pallid against the gray of her gabardine sleeve. Colorless walls passed are scratched and pitted. The ground is scored with chalk. The visual quality of the images, and the somber setting, conjure the dust and decay of old photographs or film footage. The film creates a sense of fragility and intermittence, a sense of the shots as mirage, as they dissolve from time to time into the black screen that highlights the titles of the film. As the shots re-
turn, we see two figures silhouetted. The small child is a dark shape against
a blue-gray ground. Before the close of the sequence, there is a glimpse of
her spectral face, in a backward glance. The fleeting image of the face is
seen against darkness. Light highlights her cheeks, her nose, and her upper
lip, but her eyes appear only as shadowed sockets, and her open mouth is
shown as darkness. Her face, looking back, appears as an apparition or a
ghostly death mask in the alley (Figure 10–2).

The visual composition of the shot invites comparison with certain im-
ages from Christian Boltanski’s later installation, *Jewish School of Grosse
Hamburgerstrasse in Berlin in 1938* (Marian Goodman Gallery, New York,
1994). Using a found image of schoolgirls, a photo of Jewish children
in Berlin in 1938, Boltanski enlarged the shots of the girls’ laughing or
mouthing faces, reproducing them individually on separate screens. The
enlarged images have the same spectral presence and imprecision found in
the Kiesłowski frames. The blurring of the images, their reduction to an imprint of light and shadow, heightens their immediacy and visceral appeal to the spectator. As Didier Semin writes: “Boltanski places great importance on the patina of his works. The photographs he uses are by now ‘nth’ generation prints, reprints of reprints or photocopies of photocopies; the loss of focus and cleanness that results from mechanical reproduction adds mystery and aura rather than taking them away.”

From the particularity of the anecdotal school photograph, a quotidian item, Boltanski has retrieved and made visible emotive and anonymous images that look toward a future horror of child mortality. The images retain the original index of presence, showing real children, at a real Jewish school before the war, but, through photographic process and changes to scale and context, they project an intimate foreboding of the future that awaits these children. Although it is part of a feature film, and not found footage, in my invocation of Boltanski I want to suggest that the image of the child in Decalogue Eight looks forward to the aesthetic found in Boltanski’s installations and anticipates their memory work and reflections on the future perfect and the commemoration of the dead.

Kieślowski has several times allowed the opening of his films to be absorbed with animate images of mourned children. In Three Colors: Blue (1993), images of Julie’s (Juliette Binoche) daughter Anna, who dies in a car accident, are glimpsed in the film’s opening shots. The links between Eight and One are stronger still. In the opening of One, we see retrospective shots of the dead Paweł (Wojciech Klata), a child who drowns in the course of the film. He is glimpsed in footage playing in a shop window. As in Eight, and in the Boltanski installation, his face is shadowed and blurred. The footage is stilled at its close, so we see Paweł, like the child in Eight, as a spectral image. These points of comparison raise a question about the status of the images viewed at the start of Eight: Has the little girl we see here survived?

Eight is preoccupied, in various ways, with the question of the survival of the child. While the survival of children is a concern running through Kieślowski’s filmmaking, in Eight the concern is explored in interrelation with questions about the Shoah. This question is bound up with issues about whose story is told in this film and how the Shoah is approached. The representation of children, in film and photography, will be seen to open onto questions about the emotions and about remembered infant selves.

Eight is rare in Kieślowski’s corpus in treating the Shoah and in reflecting on this era in Polish history. Annette Insdorf cites the director:
He explained that the wartime context of 8 was indeed factual: “By chance, one of my friends told me the story of a [Jewish woman] to whom someone had promised help and who finally didn’t give it. I understood that the subject was close to me, and that it wasn’t bad to speak very naturally about Polish-Jewish relations in daily life without giving Polish or Jewish identity preponderant roles.”

Like the other films of The Decalogue, Eight is set in the present in Warsaw and apparently meditates on one of the Ten Commandments, in this instance: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16 RSV). Departing quickly from its opening shots of a child in the past, the film unfolds in the leafy surrounds of the housing estate that is the setting for the whole series. It follows Zofia (Maria Kościakowska), a philosophy professor, as she exercises in the morning and prepares for her day. There is a sense of calm, order, and levity as the film observes Zofia’s solitary routines. Her serenity is carried into the classroom, a privileged space in this film, and arguably for The Decalogue as a whole.

Like the courtroom in Kiesłowski’s trilogy, the classroom in Eight, like that in One, forms a type of metatextual space in which the narratives of the series may be opened up for debate. Zofia’s classes create a forum for the discussion of ethical questions. We witness a class about “ethical hell” in which Kiesłowski approaches questions about the Shoah. The class is visited by Elżbieta Loranz (Teresa Marczewska), a Polish-born American who works for an institute that researches the fate of Jewish war survivors.

The first example that is presented in class is effectively the narrative of Two. A young woman narrates the story of the wife of a dying man:

It turns out the woman [his wife] is pregnant. The father is another man and her husband doesn’t know about it. Furthermore, she has never been able to conceive before. The woman loves her developing child but she also loves her husband. If he is going to live, she must have an abortion. If he will die, she may have the baby. The doctor realizes, like it or not, he must decide on the baby’s life.

After the narrative and before discussion, Zofia adds: “To complicate your task, I can tell you that the child lives and probably this is what really counts in the story.” This meaning is offered with some trouble or disturbance as Elżbieta interrupts the class, getting up, as if to leave. But we see instead that she moves forward, to a place in the lecture theater from which she can record the teacher’s words. She causes Zofia to repeat herself and to state again: “It lives and I consider that the most important factor.” While, in this repeated interpretation, Zofia may offer tools for the under-
standing of *Two*, a more interesting connection is forged with the narrative that unfolds in *Eight*. The statement that the child lives affords a story that Elżbieta will seek permission to relate to the class.

Elżbieta’s story, which she relates dispassionately, is about a six-year-old Jewish girl. It is the winter of 1943. She has been temporarily sheltered in a Polish family’s cellar. She is found another hiding place, but her future guardians lay down the condition that she must have formal documentation proving she has been baptized. The girl’s protectors seek a couple to become the girl’s fictional godparents, and thus to claim she has been baptized. Everything is arranged for her, and she is taken to the place where her fictional godparents live. While Elżbieta has previously interrupted Zofia, at this point in her narrative she herself is interrupted by the arrival of an intruder in the classroom. His sudden eruptive presence breaks the attention of the class and intimates the disruptive emotion that Elżbieta has brought into this space. The containment and calm of the class are discomposed. Zofia regains order through questioning Elżbieta before encouraging her to continue. Elżbieta goes on:

As she is speaking, the camera, as if animate, pans sideways down the rows in the lecture hall. It has done this before, moving among the students, but now it moves in search of the figure of the angel (Artur Barciś), the silent witness who appears in all but one of the *Decalogue* films. Here he is a student in Zofia’s class. He looks out at his teacher as Elżbieta reaches her words about false witness. Zofia’s face, which we look on to, is framed as the object of his attention. By the end of Elżbieta’s account, the camera has slid back along the rows to rest again on her.

Elżbieta’s narrative invites discussion of the commandment at the center of the film. One student says: “The motivation seems impossible, if they were true Catholics. Such witnessing wouldn’t have been dishonest.” Another student suggests a different motivation: “Fear, if an hour earlier a Jewish child had been found in the house, its brains bashed out and the family which hid it shot in the courtyard.” While the camera is on Zofia, Elżbieta returns: “Do you think fear justifies it?” The student replies: “A motive, not a judgment.” Zofia curtails discussion, saying: “We are going too far.” She continues: “The ethical problems posed will be worked out
by all of you individually. Please try to present us with the woman’s point of view. Try to understand her.” Eight challenges us to understand this woman. And the short film moves further to explore implications of its embedded narrative of the Jewish child.

Elżbieta sits alone as the class empties out, and we hear the same music that played over the sequence with the child at the start. In telling her story in Zofia’s class, Elżbieta has chosen to confront another woman with a truth from their shared past. The editing of the shots in the classroom sequence and Zofia’s bodily reactions have made her connection to the story clear. The scene closes with the blurred shapes of students passing Elżbieta. The film cuts to similarly indistinct images, now net curtains in near darkness. The camera again pans to the left until it finds Zofia in lone reflection. As she later paces the corridors of the university, in shots that might only reflect her inner life, she finds Elżbieta waiting for her. “It’s you,” Zofia says. “You are alive. I’ve wondered all my life.” The shadow of the corridor here and the light glimpsed at its end offer an aura of unreality to the scene and the encounter it stages.

The rest of the film charts the awkward fascination between the two women as they confront the apparent fact of Elżbieta’s survival after Zofia’s refusal to act as her godparent. Zofia tells Elżbieta the truth which is hidden behind her lie about false witnessing: Her husband was in the counter-espionage section of Poland’s Home Army and they received information that the people who were due to hide the child were agents of the Gestapo. She acted to protect her husband’s resistance work. Her political choice brought affective consequences, as Zofia states: “I didn’t know you were alive. I left you alone. I sent you to an almost certain death.” She repeats again: “No ideal, nothing, is more important than the life of a child.”

Discussing this episode, Slavoj Žižek writes of the irony of the woman’s actions during the Second World War in contrast to her current beliefs; he suggests: “One can speculate that she became a professor of ethics, dedicating her life to philosophy, in order to clarify her mistake, i.e. to account for why and how, at a crucial moment, she made the wrong choice.” The film itself suggests that Zofia acted with courage at other times. Elżbieta remarks: “Your activities, even after me, are well known. Thanks to you, several people of my world are still alive.” But the film offers little sense that Zofia’s later actions have offered clarity or recompense. As the statement about the life of a child is repeated several times by Zofia, so the film finds different ways to show her conviction endorsed. While the survival of a child is made the matter of prime importance through the film, Eight
draws on the summoning and survival of the emotions of childhood to do justice to its subject.

In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions*, Martha Nussbaum argues that we should consider emotions as a deep-rooted part of the system of ethical reasoning. She ties one strand of her argument specifically to questions about childhood, suggesting that the upheavals of thought that “constitute the adult experience of emotion involve foundations laid down much earlier in life, experiences of attachment, need, delight, and anger.” For Nussbaum, “early memories shadow later perceptions of objects, adult attachment relations bear the traces of infantile love and hate” (6). She elaborates: “In a deep sense all human emotions are in part about the past, and bear the traces of a history that is at once commonly human, socially constructed, and idiosyncratic” (177). She argues particularly that emotions reveal us as vulnerable, and vulnerable to events and encounters that we do not control. Her thinking works to treat childhood emotion and attachment with due seriousness, and to refuse their detachment from the realm of the composed adult. In moments of vulnerability, the adult may be exposed to the discomfiting rush of emotion, bringing or responding to a loss of control over feelings and events. What is important for Nussbaum, the extremity of emotion does not remove it from the realm of thought. Rather, “the peculiar depth and the potentially terrifying character of the human emotions derives from the especially complicated thoughts that humans are likely to form about their own need for objects, and about their imperfect control over them” (16).

It is through its examination of childhood and the emotions that *Eight* draws out its possible meanings. Kieślowski uses two particular filmic tropes to conjure emotion and make it part of the system of thought of the film: movement and touch, both privileged already in the sequence at the start of the film. It is through returning to the features of these liminal images that Kieślowski draws childhood emotions forward into the present. This happens significantly in a scene that follows the initial encounter between Elżbieta and Zofia.

Having invited Elżbieta home for supper, Zofia drives her instead to the location where they met previously. Zofia invites this traversal of the past, yet quickly loses control of the returning scene. Elżbieta leaves the car and, echoing her childhood footsteps, walks through an external arch into a complex of tenements. The film shows her departing, watched from Zofia’s perspective. As Elżbieta moves on through the recognizable con-
fines of the alley, her emotions are not revealed. No attempt is made to tie the child experience we see at the start of the film to the adult perceptions we watch here. This act of association is withheld until Elżbieta herself withdraws, hiding near the entrance to the complex. Leaving the car to locate her missing guest, Zofia in turn now enters the building, witnessed by Elżbieta from the shadows. Zofia’s stature is slighter than Elżbieta’s and her movement through this dark space more timorous. It is Zofia, rather than Elżbieta, who retraces the footsteps and summons the emotions of the missing child. She goes further than Elżbieta, entering the tenements as she searches for the missing adult. She goes inside, and asks for her friend, but is met with hostility and mocked as a madwoman. A man she encounters tells her that there is no other exit, and that maybe her friend never entered the building. Zofia cries out Elżbieta’s name and finds her voice echoed by the returning taunts of a neighbor. Zofia’s bearings are lost, and her gravitas is diminished. She exits the space to find Elżbieta outside, sitting in her car. Zofia says: “I was afraid you were lost. You weren’t there.” Perhaps she speaks here both to the woman she has found and to the child she abandoned previously. Her loss of control over her environs, revealed through her violent emotion at the loss of Elżbieta, endorses the avowal that there is no cause or ideal more important than the life of a child. As Zofia is reminded of the speechless anguish of the child she had abandoned in this locale, as she traces the child’s path and momentarily shares her lack of control over her life, the film attaches emotional understanding, the shock of sensation, to ethical statements. Emotion is brought out through motion. As the film echoes its own opening, childhood sensations of loss and fear are brought from the past to govern the recognition and reparations the narrative will entreat.

Annette Insdorf argues that “Elżbieta’s vengeful hide-and-seek game has forced Zofia once again into the role of fearful protector” (112). This reading overlooks the different effect of Zofia’s infantilization. As the film continues, however, we do see Zofia seeking to play some protective role to Elżbieta. Before exploring this, its links to touch and the pursuit of the film’s engagement with the emotions and ethics, I want to raise here a further question about the memories of the Shoah the film conjures.

The sequence at the start, which appears the only literal figuration of the endangered Jewish child, and her fearful emotions, is never specifically placed or anchored. As Mroz writes of the opening shots: “There is not much to indicate that this scene is a flashback, it is just something that does not yet fit into the narrative” (175). Although it bears a relation to Elżbieta’s narrative—we see a child led along by her guardian—we do not
learn whether the scene figures the approach to Zofia’s house or the departure of the child and her guardian after the baptism has failed to take place. Elżbieta speaks of the place later as the witness, in bricks and mortar, to her humiliation. The returning music, after Elżbieta’s narration, may link the early shots to a memory now in her mind. But there is no further evidence to confirm this. Her seeming lack of emotion as she revisits the location creates a wedge between what might be remembered and what is relived now. Zofia’s more visceral reaction to the locale hints instead that these early shots may be her imagining of the scene, of the child’s arrival at her home or forlorn departure. Perhaps the shots are (as Gilles Deleuze has put it) a “memory for two” that the two women construct between them in their remembering? Or perhaps they are anchored in the subjective perception of neither protagonist, but merely hover like a screen memory for the film, implying, but yet concealing, the full horror of the event that has taken place.

Indeed the film is rife with concealment or doubt. Initially the opening shots appear to have no connection to the equanimity of the morning shots in the present. Zofia’s routine does not belie her emotional trouble (though a picture falls insistently aslant in her apartment). Her encounter with Elżbieta Loranz at the university is seemingly tranquil. It is only in the classroom, in the thick of her ethical statements about the life of a child, that connections between the opening and the ensuing narrative are felt. While the narrative of the woman deciding whether her unborn child will live or die summons the narrative Elżbieta offers, we may also wonder whether Elżbieta’s identity as (or confusion with) the child Zofia failed to save is a reparative fantasy fostered forth by the initial story.

The film offers no obvious indications that the drama we view is one of wish-fulfillment rather than one of supposed actuality. But some hesitation about this may add to a sense of the complexity, and ethical interest, of the story that unfolds. Consider the scene where Zofia enters the housing block where she has lived formerly. None of the other residents sees or hears Elżbieta. This may be entirely inconsequential. But the inexplicable absence of Elżbieta takes hold of the film for a few moments, compounded by comments that she may never have been there. At a loss, Zofia may imitate or recall the emotions of the missing child. Yet she also faces further the possibility that the child’s survival, and adult presence, is only a reparative fantasy. In the delusion of her moves through this enclosed space in search of Elżbieta, she may face the truth of her fears. Even though we have seen her hiding, the achievement of the scene is to make us wonder, for a few minutes, if Elżbieta was really there.
Zofia finds her again in her car and quickly takes her home to her apartment. Still, the scene seems marked by the wish to revisit a past event and play it differently, even with the mature adult the missing child has become. Zofia serves Elżbieta hot tea in an ornate cup. In the earlier narrative, Elżbieta has mentioned that the child was chilled and that hot tea was served, but she had no time to drink it. The encounter between the two women in Zofia’s apartment has the aura of a wish-fulfilling moment, a lapse in time when Zofia can show tenderness to Elżbieta. As they talk of the past, Zofia goes to stand behind Elżbieta. Elżbieta’s image is blurred in the foreground; Zofia, standing behind her, cannot look into her face. What she does instead is put her hands on Elżbieta’s shoulders, touching her, holding her, and feeling her presence. Elżbieta’s head is bowed and her eyes are closed, as they will be later when she prays. This moment of contact—conjuring the trope of touch mentioned above—comes as Zofia confesses that she sent the child to almost certain death. Elżbieta’s mouth quivers as Zofia states again the importance of the life of a child. She reaches up to touch Zofia’s hand. A train or siren is heard in the background, an occurrence that will become significant later.

In following scenes, in an uneasy composition where both actresses are shot within the same frame, Elżbieta questions Zofia about her teaching, about her works, and about how to lead a life. What is strange in the whole exchange, indeed in the film more broadly, is that Elżbieta’s emotions or thoughts are barely addressed. Her gesture, touching her, has brought comfort to Zofia. Zofia may have been conjured by Elżbieta as her accuser and confessor in the classroom, but in the privacy of the apartment, in this reparative fantasy of containment and tenderness, Elżbieta brings composure and absolution, facilitating the smooth continuation of Zofia’s orderly life. Elżbieta offers no account of her own past, of the loss of her parents, or of the status of her present work. She begins to seem like a surviving adult whom Zofia’s imagination has fostered forth for comfort.

Here, thinking about the primacy of touch in the film, in the shots at the start and in the contact between Zofia and Elżbieta, it may be useful to refer to Emmanuel Levinas on the caress. While Levinas apparently refers to the caress in an amorous context, he concedes: “The loving intention goes unto the Other, unto the friend, the child, the brother, the beloved, the parents.” One of his insights into love comes in the recognition: “To love is to fear for another, to come to the assistance of his frailty” (256). Extreme fragility and vulnerability are part of the tenderness of this encounter and part of its hesitance and difficulty. For Levinas:
The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it were not yet. It searches, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible. In a certain sense it expresses love, but suffers from an inability to tell it. (257–258)

The caress is not about capture, contact, or revelation. It is a feeling search in invisibility or darkness. In the touch between Zofia and Elżbieta, attendant doubts about Elżbieta’s presence or absence allow the film to intimate something of the impossible encounter with the other.

Zofia invites Elżbieta to stay in her apartment. Where the film has been interrupted previously by acts of intrusion, here it is marked by her hospitality. Elżbieta asks her if the room was her son’s, and Zofia replies that her son did not want to stay with her. Through this synoptic account of her affective relations, the film seems to hint at a possible failure in love, or failure in maternity, on Zofia’s part. Her refusal to shelter the child, to play the role of her godparent, is aligned with a possible failure to act as actual parent.

Eight approaches questions about the Shoah through a narrative of a missing child. The opening shots—the child’s small hand, the glimpse of her spectral face—are the visual tokens the film uses to signal threat and horror. That this sentient child should be endangered, and that an adult can, through error or lapse of judgment, fail to protect her from almost certain death, displays in magnified form the senseless horror and ethical hell of the Shoah. This is its point of contact with the later work by Boltanski. The narrative of Zofia and Elżbieta that Kiesłowski develops in Eight is one that pertains to the specificity of the Shoah and its atrocities (more so, I think, than he himself acknowledges in the lines quoted above). It is also aligned in his work with other narratives about the protection, or endangering, of children. As Insdorf notes: “The credit sequence of 8 . . . is continuous with 7: as they are walking, an adult takes a child’s hand in close-up” (107). Seven, a narrative about contested maternity, segues into Eight about a woman who fails to save a Jewish child. Meanings seep from sequence to sequence.

Boltanski likewise appears in his artistic practice, and in his statements about his art and himself, to endorse connections between regular life experiences and losses, and those unnatural tragedies of genocide. His art
encompasses images of children who died in the Shoah, images of children in Dijon who “seem to have died from unnatural (if unspecifiable) causes” (Semin 99), and images of himself and other children. Marianne Hirsch, suggesting that images with no indexical relation to the Shoah may yet carry its meanings, says of *The Children of Dijon*:

> Although the actual children depicted may well still be alive, their images form altarpieces, reminiscent of Byzantine icons, commemorating the dead. Through iconic and symbolic but not directly indexical implication, Boltanski connects these images of children to the mass murders of the Holocaust: the pictures themselves evoke and represent the actual victims, but neither we nor the artist has a way of knowing whether the individuals in the photos are Holocaust victims or enlarged faces of random schoolchildren.9

Boltanski also suggests no strict demarcation between images of the dead and images of now missing past selves; he has said, “I began to work as an artist when I began to be an adult, when I understood that my childhood was finished, and was dead. I think we all have somebody who is dead inside of us. A dead child. I remember the Little Christian that is dead inside me.”10 It seems disturbing to align past selves with literally dead others, children who have died before they have reached adulthood and indeed children who have died through genocide. Yet it is peculiarly the case that photographs—objects with which Boltanski works extensively in his installations—necessarily make no category distinction between a past self and missing others. As Jacek (Mirosław Baka), preoccupied by a photograph of his dead sister, asks in *Five*: “Can you tell from a photograph whether a person’s dead or alive?” Retrospective knowledge that a child imaged has died in infancy, childhood, or adolescence invests any image of him or her with the emotions attached to the future anterior (in Roland Barthes’s terms), the horrified knowledge that he or she is now dead, that the death was impending even as he or she was imaged alive. But this patina of emotion is laid over an image that might otherwise exist as any family relic. This lack of distinction raises questions of whether emotions that usually attach to family photography and to images of children have bearing in the exorbitant context of the Shoah.

Hirsch argues that “the Holocaust photograph is uniquely able to bring out this particular capacity of photographs to hover between life and death, to capture only that which no longer exists, to suggest both the desire and the necessity and, at the same time, the difficulty, the impossibility, of mourning” (20). She explains: “Holocaust photographs, as much as their
subjects, are themselves stubborn survivors of the intended destruction of an entire culture, its people as well as all their records, documents, and cultural artifacts” (23). She includes in her discussion “pictures which are connected for us to total death and to public mourning—pictures of horror and also ordinary snapshots and portraits, family pictures connected to the Holocaust by their context and not by their content” (20). Starting from a different place from Boltanski, and retaining an indexical link to the Shoah, she nevertheless correlates pictures of horror and family snapshots, implying contact between the affect of each. In writing about Boltanski, Hirsch refers in passing to “the transcendently painful figure of the dead child” (263), yet she does not otherwise separate images of children from other photographs.

In his memorial volume, French Children of the Holocaust, Serge Klarsfeld writes:

The eyes of 2,500 children gaze at us from across the years in these pages. They are among the more than 11,400 children whose lives are chronicled here[.] innocent children who were taken from their homes all over France to be deported and put to death in the Nazi camps . . . More than 50 years have passed since the murders of these beautiful children . . . perhaps it is time to share this with others so they may know how these terrible events happened and come to know some of the young victims, arrested in the streets you will find if you visit France.11

Klarsfeld states that the work was born out of his obsession that these children should not be forgotten. He describes the book as their collective gravestone. The volume holds images that offer a sign, an index, of the anterior presence of these several thousand children. While their images—family snapshots, studio portraits, occasional identification photos and even images from gravestones—are not distorted visually, like Boltanski’s, they are likewise overlaid with knowledge that their subjects have been murdered. So many of the images are tender, intimate, and disarming. A bid to resurrect the past lives here—“to come to know some of the young victims,” in Klarsfeld’s words—requires some desperate attempt to link the domestic or studio setting to a future situation of genocide, to separations, to physical suffering, and to almost certain death. Emotion here is bound with knowledge, as memories of our own attachments and losses, infinitely minor in this context, are hesitantly present in attempts to look at these children.

The images in Klarsfeld’s volume surely also resist such an appropriative gaze. Hesitation derives from the privacy of the images—these are images
for the family—yet also from the future vulnerability by which they are shadowed. We may long to protect these children, but they remain also untouchable, remote. With difficulty, one may imagine the moment in the studio or in the drawing room when the picture was taken. I imagine a child taking up the pose that has been captured immemorially in the image. In such imagining, I attempt to find animate and haptic images of the anterior presence of these missing children. But such virtual images, powered by the wish to see or know a child alive, are all too fleeting. Such hesitant imagining is what I think Kiesłowski tries to capture in the emotive shots at the start of Eight. Emerging out of darkness are shots conjured by an imagination attempting to feel and trace a child’s emotion.

Examining the Klarsfeld images may afford a further insight into the reparative and imaginative acts of Eight. A film such as Thomas Gilou’s Paroles d’étoiles (2002) shows interviews with adults who survived the Shoah and who speak about their childhood. As each adult reveals his or her age in 1942, he or she seems strangely aligned with the photographs of children murdered. The distance between the children in Klarsfeld’s volume and the present seems momentarily covered. We see and hear witnesses who conjure images of the adults the dead children might have become. Klarsfeld’s volume itself is seen at one point in Paroles d’étoiles, and its pages are turned as a woman speaks of her memories of children clinging to their mothers. The uncanny presence and youthfulness of the adults in the film, found too in the faces of the witnesses who speak in a documentary such as Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport (2000), makes the images of the murdered children and the horror of their missing destinies more immediate, more the matter of living memory and revived emotion, yet also incommensurable.

It is this possibility of viewing the adult the child might have become that is found in Eight. At stake in the emotions conjured is the wish to see the live adult avatar of the abandoned child. When the living adult seems to be found, or convincingly imagined, Zofia will seek some means of assuaging her guilt and grief through reparative acts of tenderness. Delicately evoked, the mother/child relation seems to be involved in the reparative moments, or fictions, of the film. This is particularly apparent in later sequences.

We see Zofia glimpse Elżbieta as she prays in the guest bedroom of the apartment and, like a parent checking on a child at night, she gently closes the door upon her. The room is closed in darkness, the tones and textures of the shot recalling the sequence of images at the start of the film. The train or siren heard as the women touched earlier is heard again here. The
scene has taken on the shade of memory rather than actuality. As before, Kieślowski cuts to external shots of the morning woodland and of Zofia running. Elżbieta is only found again when Zofia is back in the apartment. The guest has made breakfast and brought white peonies. Zofia holds the flowers carefully, touched by Elżbieta’s gesture. Here, together, they attend to each other. When Zofia later takes Elżbieta to meet the tailor who was due to hide her, she waits outside. Where Elżbieta was missing before, Zofia is now present. The two women talk in the street and their image is glimpsed from inside the building, and through a barred window. The film ends with a distanced image, through glass, of the renewed tenderness between the two women, of Zofia reaching again to touch, and protect Elżbieta.

Eight begins with shots that may be a memory, or an imagined image, of a child who may not have survived. While the surface narrative offers affirmation that this child has survived, there are moments where this seems less certain. This doubt, this returning uncertainty, plays a part in the meanings of the film. If we remain uncertain of Elżbieta’s status—as survivor or as specter—we can never fully reach her or grasp her experience. She remains at once vulnerable and untouchable, as, in the Levinasian image evoked above, touch itself is infested with failure. Where, in the film’s tenderness, Elżbieta is never finally fixed and held, also the film’s survivor memories, or the memories of the dead, are left untouched. The film approaches instead the pathos of another woman’s fascination with a specter from her past, a wish-fulfilling fantasy of the apparition, in her classroom, of a grown child she would have wished once to save.

The film offers insight into the emotions that insist in this relation to a child from the past, emotions that have their roots in past childhood experiences of loss and separation, of helplessness and lack of control. Speaking of child experience, Martha Nussbaum writes, “So the child is always inhabiting a world that is both safe and dangerous, aware of herself as both hard and terribly soft, both able and unable to rely on receiving nourishment and security from her caretakers. This intermittence of care, and the intermittence of safety that results, is an essential part of becoming able to live” (209).

The context of the Shoah offers a horrifically magnified vision of danger, insecurity, and the intermittence of care. In The Decalogue, Kieślowski explores connections between this exorbitant vision and other instances of love, abandonment, and grief between parents and children. The unspeakable emotions conjured have some relation, for protagonists and viewers
alike, to childhood attachments. As Nussbaum insists, intimacy, sensations of love and loss, are, and should be, bound into our ethical decisions. Emotions, summoned in Eight through a moving image of a missing child, summoned elsewhere in testimonies and visual culture through images of children who have died, here rarefy these memorial works.

NOTES

1. A beautiful account of the film and of this scene in particular is offered in Matilda Mroz, Temporality and Film Analysis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 175–176. I want to signal the importance of Mroz’s approach to The Decalogue in its analysis of the films’ affective and emotional force. Her reading of the relations between objects and memory in Eight (158–159) is extraordinarily precise and revelatory. Further reference to Mroz’s analysis will be cited in the text.

2. Didier Semin, Tamar Garb, and Donald Kuspit, Christian Boltanski (London: Phaidon, 1997), 88. Further references will be cited in the text.


