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


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Recalling his underlying assumptions and method in the Decalogue films, Krzysztof Kieślowski casts himself as a psychological and ethical detective: “I believe everybody’s life is worthy of scrutiny, has its secrets and dramas. People don’t talk about their lives because they’re embarrassed. They don’t want to open old wounds, or are afraid of appearing old-fashioned and sentimental. So we wanted to begin each film in a way which suggested that the main character had been picked by the camera as if at random.”

In setting the primary action of all ten films in and around an anonymous-looking Warsaw housing estate, Kieślowski provides a locus for the hidden lives of various characters whose paths briefly intersect, but whose “secrets” are known only to the filmmaker and his audience. Devoting himself to revealing “what’s going on inside” these characters’ lives, the director notes that he used the apartment complex’s “thousands of similar windows” as an establishing shot in each film, sometimes letting the camera slowly pan across these indistinguishable glass barriers (as at the start of Seven) before moving into a particular interior and penetrating one or more private lives (KK, 146). In framing the Decalogue films this way, Kieślowski draws intriguing connections between his cinematic enterprise,
which monitors individual lives “caught in a struggle” with circumstance, and various forms of surveillance.

Kieslowski’s underlying idea that “the camera should pick somebody out from a crowded street and then follow him or her throughout the rest of the film” (KK, 146) recalls Edgar Allan Poe’s story of “The Man in the Crowd,” which held such fascination for Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. However, the filmmaker’s roving camera is not confined to scrutinizing the outward behavior of individuals in the passing parade, the perceptual praxis of the flâneur with his hermeneutic gaze from the pavement. Kieslowski regards such external urban spectatorship not as the province of a specialized observer but as a collective habit, a symptom of communist Poland’s spiritual malaise in the mid-1980s: “You’re always watched by others . . . neighbours, family, loved ones, friends, acquaintances or even by strangers in the street” (KK, 149). In an atomized culture where “people are terribly afraid of loneliness,” each individual is the object of manifold scrutiny, yet these gazes—refractory, furtive, superficial—do nothing to alleviate the prevailing sense of “egotistic” estrangement and “hopelessness” (160). Kiesłowski describes a paradoxical epistemology in which those who desperately seek knowledge and connection through the gaze retreat from the eyes of others, fashioning an “outside” face “appropriate for strangers” and hurrying home to “lock the door on the inside and remain alone with themselves” (146, 160). In stressing both the omnipresence of observation and the oppressiveness of being observed, Kiesłowski inevitably alludes to the censorious eye of the state, under which he labored in creating The Decalogue, and to a monitory agency it controlled: “the newspapers” (149). Given Kiesłowski’s capacity for self-mockery and ironic self-awareness, one might be tempted to suppose that he regards his cinema camera as akin to the post-Enlightenment technologies of political surveillance and social control that Michel Foucault laments in Discipline and Punish. Indeed, Kiesłowski’s description of his cinematic method—infiltrating various lives sealed behind mortar and glass for presentation on Polish television screens—might suggest a more refined version of Bentham’s disciplinary panopticon, which brought the “captive shadows” of enclosed cells into “full lighting” and the “trap” of visibility. In his urgent observation of covert human conduct, Kieslowski’s confining lens seems to trap agonized protagonists in moments of ontological crisis, but it does so in the absence of any regulatory system of judgment or punishment. More important, in exploring the private experience of his characters, Kiesłowski is ultimately less concerned with their traceable actions than with the psychological tensions that produce them. Throughout the Decalogue films, he uses close-
ups to suggest complex processes of thought, conflicted feelings, unfulfilled desires for which there is no adequate human register within the world of the film. Ultimately, the comprehensive awareness behind these rich illuminations of interior life finds its appropriate analogue not in the gaze of the urban sociologist nor in the watchful perspective of the state, but, as Joseph G. Kickasola has suggested, in the omniscient eye of God.

In his reflections on the Decalogue project, Kieslowski specifically associates this divine optics with the God of Abraham and Moses, “the God of the Old Testament” who “leaves us a lot of freedom and responsibility, observes how we use it and then rewards or punishes” (KK, 149). While the director maintains that such a supernatural “authority does exist” and that His commandments provide an “absolute” ethical “point of reference,” the Decalogue films themselves persistently question the harsh judgment (and, at times, the existence) of this all-seeing, unforgiving God and probe the ambiguity of His moral imperatives (KK, 149, 150). Nowhere is this critique more urgent than in Decalogue Nine, a film that self-consciously utilizes cinema’s capacity for omniscient surveillance both to examine the immorality of the protagonist’s attempt to appropriate this invasive power and to question the justice of a God who monitors humankind’s inner life. Notwithstanding Kieslowski’s observation that the Decalogue films bear no simple or sequential correspondence to specific commandments and that one could exchange the sixth and ninth commandments, the aims and methods of the penultimate film in the series reveal a searching response to the unique and ambiguous injunction presented in Exodus 20 and repeated in Deuteronomy 5: “You shalt not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Exod. 20:17 RSV). Whereas the previous commandments all regulate forms of conduct or action, the ninth (as numbered in Catholic and Lutheran Poland) imposes an ethical restriction on thought and motive. While the sixth commandment forbids the commission of adultery, the ninth identifies the mere desire for unlawful possession as a transgression in the eyes of an all-perceiving deity who “ruthlessly demands obedience to his principles” (KK, 149). Far from constituting a redundancy or an admonitory afterthought, the ninth commandment is a stern, purposeful reminder that God’s inescapable vision detects even the briefest and most clandestine motions of the mind and heart.

If Kieslowski can aptly characterize the Old Testament Jehovah as “cruel” (KK, 149), the ninth commandment’s alignment of covetous desire with sin establishes the divine eye as an explicit instrument of investigative terror, punishment and control. At the same time, the commandment poses the kind of ambiguity that fascinates the filmmaker: Whereas the
tenth explicitly warns against coveting others’ material possessions (ox, donkey, “or any thing that is thy neighbor’s”), the ninth raises the question of what it means to covet another human being and fails to specify whether the unlawful desire for acquisition is sexual, legal or domestic. Jealous avarice for another’s goods is sinful because it may logically lead to theft, a violation of the seventh commandment, but in the ninth commandment the relationship between coveting another’s wife and the sin of adultery (sexual intercourse in violation of marriage bonds) remains sufficiently fluid and uncertain that Kieslowski has Roman (Piotr Machalica) covet not his neighbor’s wife but his own. Thus, in exploring the commandment, the film’s stress falls upon the psychology of covetous desire for another person and the immaterial forms that this urge to possession can take. Interrogating the unique demands and implications of this most troubling Mosaic injunction, Kieslowski offers in *Nine* a sustained meditation on the entwined concepts of divine omniscience and possessive desire that inhere in the ninth commandment. In an inspired act of cinematic compression, Kieslowski gives his male protagonist a double function within this ethical inquiry: Roman sins against the spirit of the commandment by coveting his wife Hanka (Ewa Błaszczyk), not as a sexual object but with a metaphysical longing to invade and possess her every thought and feeling, a drive for totalizing knowledge of her inner experience that mimics not only the filmmaker’s exposure of secret lives but God’s relentless omniscience. Thus, in Kieslowski’s elegant formulation, Roman embodies, at once, man’s putative sin against God and God’s inquisitory cruelty toward man.

Kieslowski establishes the film’s concern with the hidden details of his characters’ lives through an intercutting of intimate moments at the start. The opening shot is a brief close-up of Hanka as she sleeps and then suddenly wakes in a state of alarm. Already the camera has infiltrated the bedroom, the most private of domestic spaces, and it seems poised to enter the world of Hanka’s dreams. Cutting abruptly away, Kieslowski shifts from the Warsaw apartment to Cracow, where Roman is engaged in a pain-fully confidential conversation with his friend, a urologist who impassively informs him that he is permanently impotent. Unlike most of the *Deca-logue* films, which confine themselves to Warsaw and, in some cases, claustrophobically, to the area around the apartment complex, the ninth film immediately demonstrates the cinema camera’s godlike capacity to move freely across space and time in pursuing its disclosures. In his first words to his friend, Roman demands “the truth,” foreshadowing both his insistence that Hanka and he discuss their private lives “to the limit” and his desire to align his visual perspective with that of the penetrating camera. When he
returns home, the agonized Roman stands outside the apartment building exposing himself to the rain, as if to delay the humiliating disclosure to Hanka that truthfulness demands. In the intercutting of shots leading up to this conversation, Kieślowski and his cinematographer, Piotr Sobociński, repeatedly frame images of husband and wife and of their visual perspectives through blurred, dirty or refractory glass: As Hanka, anxious for Roman’s return, enters their apartment, we see her image distorted through a translucent vase, Roman appears through the car windshield as he drives back to Warsaw, and as he pulls into the dark parking lot we see the car from Hanka’s perspective through the rain-streaked kitchen windowpane. Upon arriving, Roman gazes at a lamp blurred by the wet car window and is himself glimpsed through the darkened glass entrance to the apartment building. A moment later, Hanka’s image appears in this angled door, converting a medium of supposed transparency into one of self-reflection and linking this homecoming to a host of other mirror shots of both characters that occur early in the film.

Cumulatively, this trope of visual distortion and indirection suggests the emotional barriers and lies that have separated Roman and Hanka and that the couple must overcome through open and honest conversation. At the same time, however, Kieślowski’s early inscription of window-framed views introduces the central theme of surveillance and the epistemic methods that Roman will employ in his surreptitious pursuit of Hanka’s secrets. Knowledge of another, Kieślowski suggests, finds its proper ethical place somewhere between Hanka’s evasive claim that “some things shouldn’t be discussed to the limit” and Roman’s obsessive need to appropriate her inner life. As the couple take the elevator up to their apartment, the director subtly reinforces the disturbing visual superintendence inherent in both divine omniscience and the filmic perspective: We catch intimate images of Hanka stroking Roman’s face and Roman touching her shoulder as the lift moves between floors, but the alternation of light and darkness has the disquieting effect of a zoetrope or of a film projector moving so slowly that we see the interstices between the frames. In this cinematic self-reference, Kieślowski suggests what Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz have long maintained: The experience of sharing a film’s revelatory perspective as we sit watchfully in the dark (as Roman later will) binds the viewer in complicit voyeurism. However, by appearing to slow down the moving frames in the elevator ride, Kieślowski deliberately fragments the diegesis to produce an unpleasurable visual sequence that forces the viewer to reflect upon the inherent perversity of such detection. At the same time, the filmmaker reflects upon the intrusive power of the cinema camera and invites his viewer to share in
this meditation. Kieslowski offers intimate and probing disclosures of multiple lives, rather than the fetishistic surveillance of a single individual, but by frequently aligning his camera angles with Roman’s voyeuristic detection, he acknowledges how easily this ethical distinction can be blurred.

Roman’s conversation with the urologist lays the groundwork for what becomes his compulsive drive to penetrate the secret domain of Hanka’s thought and feeling. The twin motors of this covetous obsession are his long-standing habit of desire and the added spur of jealousy. Asked how many women he has slept with, Roman replies “nine, ten . . . maybe fifteen” and implies that some of these affairs have occurred during the ten years of his marriage. Very likely, he has been guilty of coveting the wives of other men. As a successful surgeon, invited to Zagreb to give lectures and assist at difficult operations, Roman commands power and prestige, and his history of sexual conquests seems to parallel his professional development. Later, as he tells a beautiful young heart patient of his early desire to become a doctor, his lingering gaze of sexual interest and futility suggests that his subsequent life has been ruled by a succession of physical desires and fulfillments. Sexual dysfunction renders the act of phallic possession impossible and, in curtailing the pattern of desire and gratification that has shaped and sustained Roman’s life, it forces him to question whether life without sexual desire and possession is worth living. The urologist’s impertinent question, “Is your wife attractive?” crystallizes this existential dilemma, distilling Roman’s sense of powerlessness and loss, but providing a peculiar (and unintended) impetus to the renewal of desire. When Roman answers, “Very,” his friend offers a word of cynical advice: “Divorce.” Convinced that other men will inevitably crave Hanka—and that she will naturally seek sexual satisfaction outside marriage—the urologist suggests a pragmatic alternative to the humiliation of cuckoldry. Ironically, in doing so he not only plants the seeds of jealousy by insinuating the presence of rivals, but also makes Hanka more desirable in Roman’s eyes by stressing her appeal to others. Roland Barthes, in *A Lover’s Discourse*, refers to this familiar figure in the representation of desire as “induction”: “The loved one is desired because another or others have shown the subject that such a being is desirable.” It is this state of longing, predicated upon his wife’s transfigured desirability through the competitive interest of other men, that Roman needs to preserve even before he determines what new form his ardor will take. Thus, when he discloses his impotence to Hanka, he does not advise her to divorce him but urges her to take a lover, “if you haven’t taken one already.” What appears to be generous concern for his wife’s sexual needs is, in fact, a gesture intended, perhaps unconsciously,
to generate a rival (the more established the better) whose physical possession—or threat of possession—can arouse in Roman the drive for a more totalizing metaphysical possession. This new species of desire that Roman seeks to call into being through jealousy has no prior existence in his marriage: It is an appropriative compulsion for an all-pervasive command of Hanka’s hidden life that will serve as substitute for the missing sexual possession.

For all of the cruelty, perversity and egotism inherent in Roman’s visual and auditory prying, Kieślowski makes it clear that these acts are driven not by the sadism that Mulvey finds underlying male voyeurism, but by ontological necessity. In this respect, Roman’s behavior throughout *Nine* irresistibly suggests Freud’s eros/thanatos paradigm: Throughout his life, he has been torn between the promised and remembered gratifications of sexual desire and the more powerful “urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things” through death.\(^8\) In the face of this elemental urge to nonbeing, Roman has sustained life primarily through projections of desire, identifying and filling specific sources of lack. When impotence threatens to deprive Roman of this mode of being, the impulse to suicide becomes overwhelming. As he drives at high speed back to Warsaw from Cracow, he veers off the road and loses control of the spinning car. When the car stops, facing the wrong direction but still on the highway, he pounds the steering wheel in a gesture of rage and despair not simply at the loss of his manhood but at his failure to end his life. The glove compartment, which later plays a crucial part in his compulsive detection, uncannily opens at this moment, and Roman’s furious attempts to close it only underscore his feeling of helplessness. By the time he arrives home, he is so thoroughly unmanned and exhibits so little inclination to live that his wife coaxes him inside out of the rain, helps him unbutton his wet shirt, and begins to dry his hair as if he were a child.

Anticipating and fearing what Roman will tell her, Hanka asks him to delay the news until after dinner. She meets his disclosure first with tacit disbelief and then with kind but facile reassurances, which, though meant to comfort, provide Roman with no new foundation for a life built on desire. “The things we have are more important than the things we don’t have,” Hanka insists, but in view of their mutual infidelities, separate careers, and joint decision not to have children it is not readily apparent what they do share. Attempting to separate marital commitment from sex, she claims that “love is in one’s heart, not between one’s legs,” adding that it is not reducible to “biology” and involves much more than “panting in bed five minutes a week.” As a basis for marriage, she proposes a recipro-
cal, nonphysical devotion, but one that neither acknowledges the exigent pressures of physical desire, nor anticipates the rise of its metaphysical counterpart. Ironically, Hanka’s characterization of sex as a brief, physiological release seems drawn from her ongoing but unacknowledged affair with the young physics student, Mariusz (Jan Jankowski). Roman’s refusal to answer her repeated question, “Do you love me?” suggests that he regards her affirmation of love as friendship, affection, and spousal support as insufficient grounds for continuing to exist and that he dreads committing himself to such a life. Paradoxically, what begins to renew Roman’s tenuous interest in life is not Hanka’s solemn declaration of enduring love but rather her intriguing contradictions. A moment after quickly assuring Roman that she has not taken a lover, she adds that they should not look into such questions very closely. Then, as if to demonstrate the sustaining power of their sexless emotional bond, she asks Roman for “a cuddle.” The scene quickly becomes a moment of failed intimacy and frustrated longing that undermines Hanka’s dismissal of intercourse as a nonessential component in their marriage: As Roman holds her, Hanka curls her leg around him more tightly and writhes against him with desperate sexual hunger. During this sequence, Roman’s face reflects helpless desolation. Robbed of the capacity for phallic performance, he seems to hold himself back from the pain of unconsummated desire. However, his expression also suggests a strange surmise at his wife’s impassioned behavior, one that recalls the urologist’s lubricious innuendos about Hanka and that will lead Roman to initiate his detection the next morning.

During a sleepless night, Roman suggests that a child might make their life together “easier,” but the abrupt cut from the quiet, dimly lit bedroom to the harsh morning light and cacophony of traffic indicates that he will reconfigure his relationship with Hanka in a less conventional way. As a milky glass window opens, we share Hanka’s overhead view of Roman as she watches him prepare to drive to the hospital—and, we momentarily discover, as she scans the street for her lover’s imminent arrival. If this opening shot sequence establishes Hanka’s anxiety about her secret life, it also introduces the position of commanding surveillance that Roman will increasingly adopt in infiltrating it. The shift from turbid glass to transparency anticipates the revelations that he comes to associate with this lofty perspective. Roman’s first act of detection, however, is from below: He cranes his head at an awkward angle and looks up through the car’s passenger side to see if Hanka is standing at the apartment window. Although she has retreated to the margin of its frame, he waves at her before she closes the pane. As the day begins, husband and wife observe one another with
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mutual suspicion. Turning his head forward, Roman sees a blond young man (Mariusz) walking toward the apartment building and registers a look of acute suspicion even before the object of his gaze spots him, stops and moves clumsily in a different direction. By lowering the visor, the first of several literal and figurative covers, Roman seeks the invisibility that characterizes the visual perspectives of voyeurs, detectives, and divinities.

Roman is not only prepared for the appearance of his wife’s lover, but he also actually requires and welcomes this rival as the needed stimulus for the regeneration of his own desire to possess Hanka. Indeed, his behavior conforms closely to René Girard’s classic formulation of “triangular desire” wherein the vaniteux (desiring male subject) exaggerates the glamour, potency, and emotional claims of a challenger in order to make the coveted object “more infinitely desirable in his eyes.” Young, virile and sexually potent, Mariusz is the ideal “mediator” for Roman, “a veritable artificial sun [from whom] descends a mysterious ray which makes the object shine with a false brilliance” (Girard 18). So necessary is this figure, Girard suggests, that a disillusioned subject who desires to desire will even bring a rival into existence in order to heighten his own longing by imitating another man’s. All such lovers, according to this paradigm, become further complicit in their fevered unhappiness by acting in ways that preserve the mediator’s presence and the covetous jealousy that it generates. Roman’s behavior finds close corollaries in the self-tormented protagonists of Stendhal and Proust. After finding abundant evidence of Hanka’s poorly disguised affair, he violates his code of truth-telling by not directly confronting her with this knowledge, for to do so would bring both the liaison and his surveillance to an immediate end. Instead, Kieslowski provides a symbolic illustration of the extent to which Roman will indirectly assist in Hanka’s infidelity when he offers to help a colleague fill his gas tank in the hospital parking lot. Annette Insdorf has noted that the “blatantly phallic” shape of the funnel that Roman holds seems a rather unsubtle reminder of his lost manhood (117), but this short, transitional scene is richer in implication. Coming just after Roman’s first sighting of Mariusz has aroused suspicions, his act of holding the funnel to assist another man prefigures his facilitation of a sexually potent rival’s affair with Hanka.

Girard notes that the desiring subject unconsciously seeks interest and intensity in his life through a competitive relationship with an obstacle that is, at once, a source of fearful envy and intense hatred (7). In order for Mariusz to fulfill this doubly exalted mediatorial function, Roman must regard him as more than a naïve university student who satisfies Hanka’s biological needs. He needs to imagine (incorrectly) that his rival commands
Hanka’s love and thus has special access to aspects of her private life that she hides from Roman. Only such a Mariusz can pose a vivifying threat and stimulus to the emotional and psychological forms of possession to which Roman dedicates himself; and only through this artificial magnification of Mariusz’s “prestige” (13) in Hanka’s life can Roman summon the requisite jealousy to eavesdrop on her phone conversations, sift the contents of her purse as she sleeps, search her mother’s apartment for clues to the affair, and watch the couple’s final assignation from inside a closet. At the same time, however, Roman’s bitter hatred for his rival prompts him to denigrate the young man as his material antithesis, one whose leonine mane seems to mock his own receding hairline. Roman derisively refers to him as “that physicist,” as if to contradistinguish the young man’s study of mechanical laws from his own noncorporeal investigations. Finding Mariusz’s incriminating physics notebook in the glove compartment, Roman hurls it into a trash bin, where it is covered with decaying garbage. After a moment’s hesitation, he retrieves the soiled notebook, not as evidence with which to confront Hanka but as a fetish to spur and perpetuate his own anguished desiring. The gross materiality of this item reflects the rival’s physical possession of his wife and feeds Roman’s contempt, but it also aids in sharpening his own desire for metaphysical possession, the only ground on which he can wage a struggle. Kiesłowski’s camera frequently lingers on the golden plentitude of Hanka’s curly hair, but with the birth of metaphysical desire her erotic womanhood no longer conjures Roman’s fascination or longing. As Girard notes, a woman’s “physical qualities . . . can neither rouse metaphysical desire nor prolong it,” and her beauty “diminishes in importance” for the vaniteux as his drive for penetration and control of her inner being increases (88, 85). While a totalizing command of another’s thoughts and feelings is humanly impossible, this difficulty not only sustains Roman’s enterprise but increases its urgency.

Even after his first sighting of Mariusz, Roman’s suspicions might never have become a monstrous obsession were it not for an ill-timed phone call that he takes while his wife is out. Looming in the foreground, the magnified image of the ringing telephone provokes Roman’s jealousy, while also inaugurating his preoccupation with the phone as an instrument of auditory omniscience. At the same moment, Kiesłowski establishes the aerial subject position that comes to characterize Roman’s visual surveillance: Looking down unseen through window blinds, he sees Hanka walking toward the apartment building entrance. When she presents Roman with a new sports jacket, he models it awkwardly and self-consciously, seeming to view the garment as an absurd compensation for what she is giving to her
lover. As if to crown his humiliation, the foregrounded phone rings again, and, as Hanka hastily answers it and speaks to Mariusz, Roman strains to listen in the background. However, the next shot sequence reverses these relative positions and implies a correlative shift in the control of knowledge within their relationship: We now see Roman, in medium close-up, using a soldering iron to install a listening device inside the living room phone and then eavesdropping as Hanka talks to her mother on another phone in the bedroom.

In this moment, Roman commits himself to invisibility and psychic infiltration as nothing less than an all-consuming way of life, and Kiesłowski marks this existential turning point by framing the three telephone calls in the apartment between a pair of revealing conversations at the hospital. In both, Roman advises Ola (Jolanta Piętk-Góracka), a talented young singer with a heart condition that threatens her professional career. She seeks Roman's counsel on a risky operation that could repair the damage, allowing her to pursue the concert career for which she has long trained, but that could just as easily kill her. Her dilemma mirrors Roman's own and raises the central questions of being that torment him: What does one need in order to live? Is a life without passionate desire and conquest worth living? Pressed by her mother to have the operation, Ola hesitates. Although she has embraced challenges in the past, including the music of Van Den Budenmayer (“He’s difficult but I sing him”), she tells Roman that she will settle for a life of contentment: “I want to live. That’s enough for me. I don’t have to sing.” Holding her fingers an inch apart, she measures the small quantity of experience that will suffice: “That much.” Far from contradicting her, Roman supports her reluctance, noting that the surgery in question is normally used only when there are “no other possibilities.” As the young woman retreats down the hospital corridor in a provocatively short gown, he gazes after her, as if measuring how much he needs to live in the absence of sexual pursuit and satisfaction. Roman continues this self-evaluation in relation to Ola as he sits at home listening to a recording of the haunting vocal music of Van Den Budenmayer (the fictional name of Kiesłowski’s musical collaborator, Zbigniew Preisner). The ringing telephone and Hanka’s disquieting arrival interrupt this moment of meditation, as if demonstrating to Roman the impossibility of a life of domestic contentment and neutralized desire. In his next meeting with Ola, he listens to her rendition of the composer’s work and pronounces it “beautiful”—but now chides, “It’s a pity you don’t want to sing.” In implicitly urging a dangerous operation, Roman tempts Ola to a choice that could intensify her life or cause her death (as it does in the screenplay), but
he also reveals his collateral commitment to a perilous course of action that is meant to prolong his life but that nearly destroys him. Both as a consulting surgeon and as investigating husband, Roman assumes a godlike power over a woman’s life as a counterresponse to his powerful urge to extinction.  

Girard traces “the metaphysical roots of desire” to “a more or less conscious attempt at an apotheosis of the self,” which he regards as an underlying psychological component in the structure of romantic love in Western narrative (63). Roman’s pursuit of omniscient possession is, by contrast, a compensatory response to impotence. Yet, even as a survival strategy, his desire partakes of the exalted egotism that Girard describes, for it seeks the complete mastery of Hanka’s mind and soul through the simulation of transhuman visual and auditory perspectives. In this respect, Roman’s ultimate mediator is not Mariusz but the God of the ninth commandment, whose disembodied comprehension is the true model that he strives, but fails, to emulate. Kieslowski offers a comic distillation of this point when Roman goes to his mother-in-law’s apartment on the pretext of retrieving her scarf and umbrella, but really to search the unmade bed, coffee table, and mail for evidence that Hanka is conducting her affair there. His investigation turns up a love note that Mariusz had recently mailed: a postcard showing God’s representative on earth, the Polish pope John Paul II, playfully curling his fingers around his eyes, as if spying through binoculars. This papal parody of divine detection reveals the absurdity of Roman’s crude snooping—calling a number he finds in his wife’s purse, secretly purchasing a duplicate key—and the hopeless metaphysical compulsion that underlies it. As Roman pursues increasingly elaborate methods of surveillance, Kieslowski juxtaposes shots from his subject position with images of Hanka’s experience that he cannot see. When he follows her to an assignation at her mother’s apartment, for example, the camera cuts from a close-up of Hanka during sex, her face racked with anguish and guilt, to a shot of Roman sitting on a flight of stairs above the apartment door, hidden by shadows. We share his downward view as the buoyant Mariusz leaves, but we also recognize the insufficiency of his perspective: He does not know that his wife took no pleasure in the encounter inside. A moment later, Kieslowski reiterates Roman’s pursuit of an airborne perspective traditionally associated with a God’s-eye view. He watches from a balcony as Hanka walks to the parking lot, gets in the car, and slumps over the steering wheel as the vehicle’s alarm goes off. The headlights flashing in the darkness recall the elevator ride, again reminding viewers of their inscription in the voyeuristic economy of both the protagonist and the filmmaker. How-
ever, the shot selection here re-emphasizes the epistemic limits of Roman’s fixed point of view: Kieślowski cuts from the protagonist’s balcony angle to a closer view of Hanka directly through the windshield. Her body posture and face reveal a state of paralyzing remorse that Roman, obstructed by the car’s frame, cannot fully comprehend.

Roman is not only increasingly aware of the doomed nature of his hermeneutic enterprise but consumed with unbearable shame and self-disgust as he undertakes it. These feelings are so acute that the exercise of covetous desire meant to fend off the death wish sometimes increases its urgency. Shortly after beginning his surveillance, he rides his bicycle along an elevated highway that is still under construction in a rehearsal of the suicide he will later attempt. Stopping where the roadside slopes sharply down to a river, he seems to consider crashing into a concrete bridge pillar before steering the bicycle into the water and wetting his face with his hands. If, as Freud suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “each organism wishes to die only in its own fashion” (39), Roman craves death as a passive surrender to gravity that will relieve him of the arduous labor of metaphysical desire, as a plunge from some height in which the quest for transcendental knowledge is replaced by the physical laws of mass and momentum that Mariusz studies. His self-generated longing for possession fails as a stay against suicide, in part because spying brings him none of the conventional satisfactions of male voyeurism, which, according to Laura Mulvey, include not only scopophilia but the viewer’s imagined control of a female object upon whom he can project personal fantasies. Inherent in this “determining” aspect of the male gaze is the sadistic pleasure of “forcing a change in another person” (33, 35). Tomek’s voyeurism in the early stages of *Six* conforms to this erotic model: He views Magda as a source of masturbatory pleasure and enjoys controlling her movements with silent phone calls. While Kickasola is right in noting that both Roman and Tomek seek “unlimited observational power” (234), they are moved by very different epistemic aims. Tomek seeks, initially, to objectify Magda as a purely physical spectacle in order to shape his fantasies freely around her, but for Roman such objectification is antithetical to his craving to possess those immaterial qualities in Hanka that are most intimately and uniquely human. His sin is not, as Slavoj Žižek ingeniously proposes in his theory of Kieślowski’s “displaced” commandments, a covetous conversion of his wife into mere “goods,” but rather a desire for abstract appropriation beyond man’s ethical scope and cognitive powers. Roman seeks a nonsexual, immaterial mode of possession that eschews visual pleasure and controlling fantasy in the pursuit of psychological and moral penetration. Just as
his espionage brings him no sadistic satisfaction, so too Roman finds no masochistic enjoyment in the degradation of half-obstructed peeping on Hanka and her lover from a closet, and he suffers only unbearable shame when she uncovers him after breaking off her affair with Mariusz. Speaking gently at first and then forcefully, Hanka summons her husband out of the darkness as she had earlier drawn him in from the rain; but when the rejected Mariusz briefly returns, Roman retreats into the bathroom, overcome with weakness and nausea. Nor does this ordeal conform to Freud's moral masochism: Despite Roman's philandering, his suffering brings him no self-punishing relief for past sexual betrayals of his wife. Instead, spying becomes an intolerable addiction that yields no satisfactions, and the self-generated jealousy that drives it becomes a psychopathology from which he cannot free himself. Like several other characters in the Decalogue films, he is “imprisoned by [his] passions and feelings” (KK, 150).

The agonizing mutual exposure outside the closet marks a decisive turning point in Nine because Roman and Hanka, rather than casting blame, recognize the pain that their lies have inflicted on one another. Roman's admission, “I've no right to be jealous,” finds its complement in Hanka's compassionate apology, “I didn't think you'd be so hurt.” This scene of shared suffering and forgiveness produces a reconciliation in which the couple commit themselves to a future of complete transparency and, after a short period of separation, plan to adopt a child. Yet Kieslowski reveals the fragile and tentative nature of this accord through several details. Roman's insistence that Hanka be the one to go away suggests that he can overcome the compulsion to jealous spying only by removing the desired object from his sight. There is also a hint of anxious control in his purchase of skis for her weekend trip to Zakopane, as if he wishes to insure that she act out her plans for an innocent vacation. More notably, as he stands by the window of the departing train, Roman pointedly does not answer Hanka's fervent appeal, “Do you trust me?” While fear had kept him from responding to Hanka's earlier request that he acknowledge his love for her, honesty now accounts for Roman's silence. During Hanka's absence, we see Roman looking down from the apartment window at a little girl (Ania from Seven) playing with her doll. While the context of this image is the couple's plan for a family, the familiar elevated perspective dramatizes Roman's destabilizing struggle with the habit of surveillance. Ironically, it is not careful detection but a chance spotting of Mariusz loading skis onto his car that plunges Roman into suicidal despair. When the young man's mother confirms that he has gone to Zakopane, Roman is consumed by uncontrollable jealousy and a sense that he can neither trust Hanka nor ever know her
mind. Leaving a suicide note by the telephone, he sets off to die while it is still ringing. His refusal to answer this frantic call from Hanka is, at once, a denial of their future together, a renunciation of spousal trust, and a final rejection of metaphysical desire as a mode of life-sustaining interest (Figure 11–1).

The Hitchcockian intercutting of Roman, pedaling toward suicide, and Hanka desperately riding the bus back to Warsaw to reassure him, visually stresses the fracturing of their relationship, as do several images: the broken white lines, the abrupt end of the unfinished highway, and a bicycle wheel turning randomly after the fall (Figure 11–2). Kieślowski presents Roman's collision with the earth from below and in slow motion, but then, in an extraordinary gesture, he moves to a long, hovering overhead shot of the twitching body and battered bicycle, as if viewed from the divine perspective that Roman had sought. In rising upward from this shattered scene, the camera also initiates an unexpected movement toward visual and emotional integration that crowns the film: From the highway's edge the camera accelerates backward along the road Roman has traveled until it blends seamlessly with one where Hanka's bus is moving, linking the couple's lives and destinies in a moment of acute crisis. Given the film's previous association of aerial perspectives with the invasiveness of human egotism and divine cruelty, this introduction to Roman's nearly miraculous survival and final words of reconciliation with Hanka may seem mystifying.

The key to Kieślowski's intentions at the end of Nine may lie in a distinction he draws between “a God of the Old Testament and a God of the New” (KK, 150). While the filmmaker frames Roman's hypervigilance as
a version (or perversion) of the demanding, unforgiving vigilance of the God of the ninth commandment, he displaces this deity in the film’s final moments and tentatively suggests as an alternative a God who oversees human conduct not to judge and punish but to save and forgive. While this New Testament divinity has full access to individual consciousness, His true dwelling place is not above man but within him, for He is manifest in all forms of human love. We glimpse the potential presence of this God only fleetingly and ambiguously throughout the ten films, rather than in clear or consistent dialectical opposition to the God of Abraham and Moses. In One, Pawel’s Aunt Irena tells the boy that God resides in their love for one another, and in Eight, Zofia speaks of a God who dwells inside us. Such a deity, working through human feeling and action, may be manifest in Dorota’s painful devotion to her dying husband in Two, an unarticulated but saving love that only a compassionate God could knowingly reward.

Prior to Roman’s equally miraculous survival at the conclusion of Nine, Kieślowski insinuates the possibility of such a merciful God by encrypting two alternative forms of subliminal knowledge within the film’s visual texture. The first is suggested by the gaze of Kieślowski’s perpetual witness, the nameless young man (Artur Barcis) “who comes and watches” characters in crisis throughout The Decalogue (KK, 159), but whose appearances in the ninth film seem sufficiently rich in spiritual implication to justify Insdorf’s characterization of him as protective “angel” (74), an emissary or extension of a generous God, and to support Kickasola’s suggestion that in “his secret knowledge” he “bears the traits of God” (165). We first glimpse him passing on a bicycle when Roman drives off the road after learning his
impotence is incurable; later he appears in a long tracking shot as he rides parallel to Roman and watches with grave, prescient concern as he nears the edge of the road. Finding the fallen Roman beneath the overpass, the young man, shot through the foregrounded bicycle spokes, surveys the situation before riding off—quite possibly to call the ambulance that saves Roman’s life.

Kieślowski offers a still more intriguing and vital form of “secret knowledge” in Hanka’s seemingly telepathic comprehension of Roman in his moments of most acute pain. She wakes in sudden fear at the start of the film as he receives his medical diagnosis, wakes again in alarm at the instant when Roman rides his bicycle into the river, and reacts with panic on the slopes at Zakopane when Mariusz arrives, as if sensing that her husband must somehow know of his presence. These divinations, for all of their numinous implications, appear to be rooted in the loving concern that Hanka earlier told Roman is in her “heart”—a love in which the New Testament God makes His home and through which He bestows His grace.

Curiously, the couple’s most complete moment of unity comes through the more mundane circuitry of Roman’s telephone call from the emergency room. In the film’s final shot sequence, we see Hanka, having read Roman’s suicide note, reclining with her head near the phone as her blond hair fills the foreground like an aureole. A moment later, she answers the call from the bandaged Roman who has learned that she had tried to tell him of her immediate return. Their brief exchange converts a device heretofore used for adulterous appointments and eavesdropping into a cord of healing connection, and it also provides a kind of benediction: “You’re there, God, you’re there,” Hanka says, and Roman answers, “I am.” In this curious moment of inadvertent identification, Roman resembles something quite different from the punitive God of Mosaic Law whose investigatory cruelties he had tried to practice. Although Kieślowski may think most often of a God who offers “no appeal or forgiveness” (KK, 149), his cinematic gaze is sufficiently ambivalent and far-reaching to register, if only briefly, the immanence of a different deity in the secret lives of men and women. Such a God, if He is truly present within the Decalogue films, dwells in innuendo, ambiguity, and contradiction. Thus, despite the pagan associations of his name, Roman incongruously wears a cross around his neck throughout the film; and if the name recalls the power and privilege that the fallen man once enjoyed, it may also allude to the first of Paul’s epistles in which he urges his Roman readers to emulate God’s forgiveness and to “Let love be without dissimulation” (12:9). If Kieślowski is identifying his protagonist with divinity in the film’s final frames, it is not with the harsh monitor of
the ninth commandment but, poignantly and improbably, with the broken yet regenerate Christ.

NOTES

1. Krzysztof Kieślowski, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, ed. Danusia Stok (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 146. Further references to this work will be cited in the text using the abbreviation KK.


5. The commandments are divided and numbered differently in Jewish and Protestant denominations, excluding Lutheranism. In particular, these religious traditions combine the coveting of a neighbor’s wife and goods as a single commandment—the tenth. In all faiths, however, the injunction against coveting marks a departure from emphasis on outward behavior in the earlier (eighth or ninth) commandments: Six of these forbid certain forms of conduct (false worship, blasphemy, murder, theft, adultery, false witness) and two mandate virtuous actions (honoring the Sabbath and one’s parents).


10. Roman’s behavior bears comparison with that of two other figures in the *Decalogue* films. Like the suicidal Ewa of the third film, who seeks out a former lover to keep her alive on Christmas Eve, Roman generates and sustains desire in resistance to death. In his exercise of godlike authority over
the life of his patient, he willingly embraces the role that the consulting doc-
tor in Two initially refuses to enact for Dorota and accepts only to save the
life of her unborn child. Kieslowski illuminates Roman’s egocentric response
to Ola when he notes that this “fine,” intriguing singer appears only briefly in
the film because she functions as “a sort of window, as a contingency for the
main character” (KK, 177).

11. Slavoj Žižek, The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between
Theory and Post-Theory (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 114.

12. If Roman undergoes a moral transformation following his suicide
attempt, it is worth noting that Paul’s letters emerge from a conversion
experience that also featured a violent fall: A sudden, blinding vision of Christ
knocked him off his horse as he rode to persecute Christians in Damascus.