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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In Krzysztof Kieślowski’s Decalogue series, a cloistered apartment building in an alienated and shattered communist-ruled Poland serves as the backdrop for a sober examination of the significance of each of the commandments. The actions and attitudes of the characters (all tenants within these isolated, lonely quarters) drive each installment, as Kieślowski examines the weighty moral and ethical decisions each faces. The series is characterized by a grave treatment of the subject matter with precious few moments of levity, impressing upon the viewer the critical nature of choice. Although in the tenth and final film of The Decalogue the exploration of these everyday choices is no less earnest, Kieślowski treats the material in a distinctively different manner. Unlike the films that have preceded it, Ten contains several darkly comic elements.¹

This departure from the characteristically somber tone of The Decalogue for the final film suggests that there is something essential about comic perspective. In spite of Kieślowski’s claim that The Decalogue is a collection of ten individual films and not a series, that the final film revolves around the completion of a series seems undeniably self-referential and can be regarded as a reflection on The Decalogue as a whole.² In fact, the laughter
shared by the film’s protagonists, brothers Artur (Zbigniew Zamachowski) and Jerzy (Jerzy Stuhr), in the final scene is the key to not only the film itself but also the entire Decalogue series. It is the moment when they realize the absurdity of their fanatical and selfish obsession and laugh, along with the viewer, at their foolishness. In this way, laughter comes to aid individuals in moving beyond their private consciousness; the viewer, by laughing together with the characters, realizes her significance to the larger social context of which she is a part, an important motif that underlies The Decalogue. By examining the operation of comedy in Ten, the audience gains greater clarity about the issue of individual responsibility within a social context, which is at the center of the entire Decalogue series.

The series begins in One by introducing us to the apartment complex through a low-angle establishing shot that tilts up the side of the building. As we follow a pigeon’s flight to a nearby windowsill, we are left with the peculiar sense that it is by pure chance that we stumble upon Krzysztof and Pawel’s story. Indeed, Kieslowski affirmed that he wanted to “begin each film in a way that suggested that the main character had been chosen by the camera as if at random,” emphasizing that “everybody’s life is worthy of scrutiny” (KK, 146). In this manner, Kieslowski expresses the importance of each life, not only individually but also as a part of a social context. Using the apartment building with its connected yet isolated cells as a metaphor for the hermetic, self-focused, and often obsessive existence led by each of his characters, Kieslowski constructs The Decalogue as a series of films that examines the interconnectedness of human life and the necessity of recognizing the world beyond our own private consciousness.

In Ten, Kieslowski examines the nature of covetousness (the central injunction of the tenth commandment in the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions) by tracing specifically the effects wrought by the persistent and avaricious desire for acquisition. The central characters are consumed by the need to possess and to safeguard that which they have obtained. Interestingly, while such a theme could easily lend itself to the severe approach and grave tone that has characterized The Decalogue thus far, it is precisely this single-mindedness that makes the content and characters comedic fare. As Artur and Jerzy learn more about the value of their deceased father’s stamp collection and become increasingly single-minded, the world of their responsibilities and obligations recedes, giving rise to humorous situations (Figure 12–1).

This humorous single-mindedness takes the form of a fixation, a central element of Henri Bergson’s model of comedy, outlined in “Laughter” (1901). In Ten, we see what Bergson would term a “mechanical arrangement,” in
the way in which events unfold and characters behave. This mechanical arrangement in comedy takes the form of absent-mindedness on the part of the characters that results from their obsession with a fixed idea and distracts them from their obligations and responsibilities as social beings. Consequently, the normal progress of life is impeded. As Bergson points out, “life presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space. Regarded in time, it is the continuous evolution of a being ever growing older; it never goes backwards and it never repeats itself” (118). At the level of individual consciousness, life is a continuous flux in perception, thoughts, and responses. But the introduction of an overwhelming and fixed idea—in the case of Artur and Jerzy, the incipient desire for the acquisition of something of material value—makes events and the characters involved less “mindful of their own course,” thus leading life, as portrayed in comedy, to be filled with situations that repeat themselves (118). Life, in this fictive and comedic formulation, does not progress but instead finds itself subject to an almost mechanistic repetition of events.

Though theorists of the comedic mode frequently cite the Bergsonian model, it has had its share of detractors as well. In *The Idea of Comedy*, Jan Hokenson claims that “critics and theorists tend to dismiss ‘Laughter’ as a rather Victorian document,” one that “suffers in critical esteem primarily because it is read as moralistic, subordinating the comic to ‘social morality.’” Hokenson insists that this is a misinterpretation of “Laughter,” and she asserts that we “tend to view such dicta as ‘the purpose of laughter is to correct,’ through our own post-Auschwitz, post-1960s lenses, reading Bergson as a stern moralist although he says little about morality, and detecting didacticism and political conservatism where there is nothing of
the sort” (57). Clarifying Bergson’s thesis, Hokenson writes that “it does not incorporate the mean or norm of social behavior as a yardstick of value. There is no norm. There is only sociability and its temporary deficiency” (57). If one applies Hokenson’s reading of Bergson to the end of Ten, when Artur and Jerzy laugh at the absurdity of their behavior, it becomes clear that they are not, to use Hokenson’s words, “laughed back to a norm of conventional behavior” but are “laughed back to self-consciousness as . . . social being[s]” (57). Viewers can conclude that Artur and Jerzy’s reaction is not motivated by the imposition of a strict set of moral values but instead powered by the recognition of their vain, self-focused foolishness and a developing self-awareness. It is this self-consciousness that leads to a better understanding not only of one’s own nature but also of one’s place in relation to others and to one’s obligations.

Viewing Ten from this perspective, we can see that Kieslowski uses Artur and Jerzy’s absurd behavior to illustrate how laughter allows the individual to step outside of self-obsession, recognizing the harm his single-mindedness has caused. In allowing themselves to become consumed by the value of their father’s stamp collection, both Artur and Jerzy forget their duties as part of a larger society. Artur essentially abandons his bandmates while Jerzy ignores his family, and both fail to recognize their duty to each other as brothers. Bergson’s model seems particularly applicable in light of Kieslowski’s admission that The Decalogue is about people who “suddenly realize that they’re going round and round in circles, that they’re not achieving what they want.” He presses this point further: “We’ve become too egoistic, too much in love with ourselves and our needs, and it’s as if everybody else has disappeared into the background” (KK, 145). Familial and social duties are pushed aside in favor of egocentric, antisocial and ultimately meaningless conquest and possession.

The applicability of Bergson’s model to Ten becomes more readily apparent when Bergson distinguishes between the mechanistic process in comedy and life. He believes that “each living being is a closed system of phenomena” and further explains that “a continual change of aspect, the irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series: such then are the outward characteristics—whether real or apparent is of little moment—which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical” (118). The mechanical counterparts and hence the “methods of light comedy” are defined by Bergson as “repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series” (118). The absent-mindedness that results from the characters’ single-minded obsession not only stimulates this mechanization of life but also “expresses an
individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter” (117). For Bergson, this corrective has an essentially social character: The laughter occasioned by witnessing absent-mindedness functions as a corrective insofar as the viewer, through her laughter, implicitly renders a negative judgment of the character’s foolish behavior, disassociating herself from the character’s actions. This disassociation is a fundamentally social response for it keeps the viewer from engaging in similar behavior or, at the very least, produces an awareness of the need to resist such conduct, recognizing that the character’s behavior is fueled by a self-involved obsession.

The mechanization arising from this absent-minded conduct and its subsequent corrective of laughter are particularly evident in Ten. In the aftermath of their father’s death, Artur and Jerzy initially mock the old man’s paranoid need to protect his impressive stamp collection. Neither brother can understand the mad lengths to which their father has gone, from installing countless locks on his front door to nailing his windows shut, all for the sake of preserving a simple collection of stamps. However, only days later, they realize the monetary value of the stamps, and they repeat their father’s covetous actions. As soon as a local expert reveals that their father’s collection is worth tens of millions of zlotys, they no longer roll their eyes at their father’s eccentric behavior. Instead, Jerzy suggests placing bars on the window as a more effective way of guarding against intruders, without any sense of the Bergsonian irony that he is repeating his father’s obsessive and paranoid behavior.

This desire to protect the collection and the drive for new acquisition becomes so powerful that the exact object of their pursuit becomes unclear. While they are awed when the veteran stamp collector translates the stamp collection’s worth in terms of what can be bought if the stamps were sold, the brothers seem struck, not by the specific possessions they can acquire, but rather, perhaps even more perversely, by the abstract worth of the collection. At one point, Artur is asked very pointedly, “Do you want the stamps or the money?” to which he responds, “the stamps.” Although Artur ostensibly means that he wishes to acquire the stamps for their monetary value, both the question and his answer are very telling. They reflect the extent to which the desire to possess has taken root, indicating that the object itself (whether it is money or the stamp itself) is essentially irrelevant; its relevance lies partly in how much others desire it and, consequently, the extent to which it represents the abstract notion of fabulous wealth. This drive toward ownership becomes the sole aim of their quest.
Whether they decide to maintain their father’s collection or complete it only to sell it becomes a moot point; as they both agree that it is a “comfort” to possess things and that “if you don’t want [something], it ceases to exist,” the viewer learns that it is always covetousness that informs the brothers’ actions and insinuates itself into their lives. It also seems to imply that they have an understanding that value is a function of desire, and is also suggestive of a belief system that posits there is no objective value; it is only desire that is able to confer value, and this desire drives their avarice.

Thus, this single-minded obsession distracts both Artur and Jerzy from life. Jerzy neglects his family, forgetting about his son’s dentist appointment and spending a great deal of time away from both his wife and son. They are pushed to the margins of his life and, consequently, to the margins of the film. This is particularly evident when Jerzy admits that he “quite forgot” about his problems and is happy for this escape from his commitments. Much like Jerzy’s prior suggestion that they bar the windows to their father’s apartment, Jerzy’s neglect perfectly exemplifies Bergsonian repetition. Jerzy, in his drive to obtain something of material value, perhaps even in a misguided attempt to prevent his son from living the impoverished life he was forced to live as a result of his father’s obsession, ends up re-enacting the very negligence that was visited upon him. As Joseph G. Kickasola notes, Jerzy’s father “supplanted his own children as a material surrogate” with his stamp collection. The same can now be said of Jerzy, who, like his father, has begun to privilege something with greater material value over the value of family. While the situation, when laid out so plainly, may not strike one as humorous, it becomes comedic insofar as the viewer observes not only the repetition itself, but also the dark irony of Jerzy’s failure to recognize how he is becoming his father.

Similarly, Artur, also consumed by this foolish desire to possess something of worth, trades something that previously held some value for him (namely, his career) for the abstract idea of extravagant wealth. This sacrifice becomes even more poignant when a fellow band member asks if he is dropping out of the band’s tour schedule for “a bit of skirt,” since a romantic interest would at least lend some deeper meaning to his abandonment of music. There is an almost pathetic sadness to his assent to this question, since both he and the audience know that his sacrifice does not even possess that level of emotional or social significance, but is instead a crass, pecuniary trade-off for something that is only valuable to him in its abstractness. Much like Jerzy, Artur fails to realize how he is reinscribing the emotional deprivation experienced and enacted by his father in for-
feiting something that can possess profound personal meaning and social value (that is, his music) for merely the idea of tremendous value embodied in the stamp collection and in the acquisition of the Rose Mercury stamp.

Kieslowski emphasizes this notion of repetition in the trope of stamp collecting itself. Each series of stamps involves a repetition of images in order for the series to be complete. It is thus beautifully and poetically appropriate that the drive to collect stamps in order to complete a series is simultaneously a drive for and of repetition. Jerzy and Artur narrowly seek the repetition of images (stamps) that will complete their collection and in so doing, practice a kind of absent-minded, mechanical behavior that is almost fanatical in its narrowness; they are completely distracted by their obsession with the collection's value.

We again find the repetition essential to Bergson's notion of comedy, to a lesser extent, in Jerzy's and Artur's separate interactions with the police investigator. Here, Kieslowski mirrors the repetitive behavior of the characters in the plotting of the film. Both Jerzy and Artur are, in the wake of the robbery, suspicious of the other and proceed to set up a meeting with the investigator, engaging him in identical conversations, wherein each suggests that the other might have planned the robbery. This instance also illustrates the way Artur and Jerzy's single-mindedness has led them to transgress against the familial bond that they share as brothers.

On a greater scale, the climactic robbery of the stamp collection is actually a repetition of the earlier swindling of Jerzy's son. Further, the principal repetition is essentially all about different characters (Jerzy, Artur, the suspicious stamp trader, the teenage hooligan) put in the same situation: They are all, at different times, being deceived or swindled in some manner. We sense that, perhaps because Jerzy and Artur's father owed the first villain a large amount of money, their father has swindled the man. But the man seems suspicious and crafty, and viewers are left with the impression that he is attempting to dupe Artur and Jerzy. This is repeated throughout the film as the teenage hoodlum cheats Jerzy's son out of the prized Zeppelin stamp; the stamp trader nearly swindles Jerzy; and Artur blackmails the stamp trader into returning the stamp. Of course, the pivotal deception centers around the trickery involved in getting both Artur and Jerzy out of their father's apartment under the guise of a necessary operation so that another necessary operation, that of breaking into the apartment, can occur. It is necessary in an ironic sense, since Jerzy does not need to give up his kidney for the Rose Mercury stamp—he does so only out of avarice—and necessary in a nonironic way, insofar as the operation will allegedly save a life. There is perhaps a more profound irony that the ostensibly
selfless act of giving a kidney to a stranger is motivated only by selfishness and greed, not by a sense of social duty or obligation. In this juxtaposition, Kieslowski also plays with the notion of cutting, as he intersperses the surgical incisions into Jerzy with the cutting of the bars on the window, thus drawing a crucial ironic association between that which is truly, physically vital (Jerzy’s kidney) and that which only seems vital (the stamp collection and its abstract worth), in a cinematic conceit that Annette Insdorf has termed “visual rhyming.” The same situation, of contrivance built upon contrivance and lie built upon lie, is repeated throughout the film.

Bergson describes this repetition as “a series of imaginary events which affords a tolerably fair illusion of life, and within this ever-moving series . . . one and the same scene [is] reproduced either by the same characters or by different ones.” This repetition “contrasts with the changing stream of life,” illustrating how the fixation with one idea (in this instance, covetousness) causes a repetition of the same incident (that is, someone being tricked and defrauded), bringing the normal progression and evolution of life to a standstill (119). This is the central device of the film, where the humor arises from watching the characters trapped in this repetitive cycle. According to Bergson, the circumstances of the repetition “become more laughable in proportion as the scene repeated is more complex and more naturally introduced” (119). Similarly, in Ten, as the accumulation of recurrent deception and defrauding culminates in the juxtaposition of Jerzy’s operation (his sacrifice) with the robbery (the destruction of that for which he is making the sacrifice), the situation becomes more and more humorous, albeit in a darkly comic manner.

But it is not entirely this repetition of trickery that renders the situation laughable. In many of the repetitions of deception, the roles are constantly reversed, or as Bergson would term it, “inverted.” Inversion, the second method of mechanization in comedy, emerges when “you reverse the situation and invert the roles” in a kind of perfect symmetry (Bergson 121). Often in this film, the roles are reversed; the person who thought he was deceiving someone or getting the better end of a certain agreement ends up realizing that he was the one who was deceived. As Bergson notes, “not infrequently comedy sets before us a character who lays a trap in which he is the first to be caught. The plot of the villain who is the victim of his own villainy, or the cheat cheated, forms the stock-trade of a good many plays” (122). In this film, the relative strength of the characters’ positions in relation to others is consistently inverted or reversed. For example, the teenager cons Jerzy’s son out of the valuable Zeppelin stamp, leaving both Jerzy and Artur in a less powerful and more desperately avaricious position.
There is a brief reversal anddarkly comicalelement when Jerzy confronts
the teenage hoodlum who has deceived his son, twisting the hoodlum’s
nose until it bleeds. However, both Jerzy and Artur ultimately remain in a
vulnerable spot when Jerzy meets with the balding stamp trader. It is only
when Artur returns to the scene, armed with a tape recorder, that he places
himself in the position of power, once again inverting the roles by black-
mailing the trader, who believes that he has the upper hand. The humor
arises from the unexpectedness of the inversion that pleases and amuses
the viewer. Interestingly, the tape recorder itself functions as a symbol of
Bergsonian repetition, in its capacity to move backward and forward with
mechanical exactitude.

It is also interesting to note that, in another instance of inversion, the
only thing of significant monetary value that is not subject to commodifi-
cation is the signed City Death album that Artur gives to Jerzy as a gift for
Jerzy’s son. Obviously, since City Death appears to be a fairly popular, if
subpar, band (at least popular enough for Artur to be recognized and to re-
ceive sexual favors because of it), such a possession would have a certain, no
doubt significant, amount of economic worth. However, it is given freely,
as a gift, and none of the characters (neither Artur, nor Jerzy, nor Jerzy’s
son) ever think of selling the album for financial gain. Rather, for Jerzy’s
son, this object holds significance most likely beyond monetary value as
well as forms an emotional connection with an uncle he has not seen in
years. Not only is this a subtle inversion of the avariciousness that per-
meates the film, but also, from an optimistic perspective, it can function
as a foreshadowing of the eventual realization that both Jerzy and Artur
experience—namely that worth is relative and that the abstract concept of
wealth is perhaps less important than human interconnection.

Finally, after the shock of robbery has abated and both Jerzy and Artur
witness a meeting between the three suspicious figures (the man to whom
their father owned money, the teenage hoodlum, and the stamp trader)
on the street, accompanied by two large dogs that greatly resemble the
ultimately ineffectual guard dog Artur bought, the viewer realizes that this
scene is the greatest inversion of all. Jerzy and Artur began the film in
possession of a tremendously valuable collection of stamps without any
interest or knowledge of its worth, resentful of the impact that it had on
their childhood. Now, they possess more than a fair amount of knowledge
about stamp collecting and a significant interest in their father’s stamp col-
lection, but the collection has been stolen, having wreaked havoc on their
lives just as much in its absence as in its presence. All of the inversions and
reversals of power that have occurred thus far are possibly part of a greater
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stratagem, one that leads up to an inversion ending with the three villains benefiting.

It is this twist to the narrative, the notion that these three characters are not only acquainted, but also that they may have planned this scheme from the moment they heard of the old man’s death, that conforms to the third method of comic effect, which Bergson defines as the “reciprocal interference of series” (123). As Bergson states of this method, “a situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time” (123). The meeting of the three figures is inescapably comic because, as Bergson states, “we waver between the possible meaning and the real” (123). When the viewer sees these three figures meet with a friendly greeting, she is left to wonder: Is it possible that these three have planned this from the beginning? Could they have really anticipated how both Artur and Jerzy would behave in this situation? It is certainly possible since both Artur and Jerzy have a look of wonder on their faces that suggests that this is their conclusion—an interesting deduction since we have never seen Artur and the teenager on screen together. Did they have some off-screen acquaintance? It is not hard to imagine the teenager as a fan of City Death or as some sycophantic hanger-on. Could he have possibly been the friend who helpfully advised Artur to buy the exact same type of dog owned by the other two villains, thus allowing the robbery to run smoothly? This is speculative, but not without basis, since he is the only character with whom Artur is not (ostensibly) acquainted and yet Artur is still dumbstruck by the presence of all three characters. The possible meaning is that this has been an elaborate scheme, while the real meaning is ambiguous. We are tempted to believe that this has been planned, but we are only left to conjecture, since neither Jerzy nor Artur — nor Kieslowski himself — resolves the ambiguity of this scene. It is this coincidence (if it is indeed a coincidence) of the two independent series that produces the comic effect.

After all of the repetition, inversion, and finally this last interference of independent series, the viewer might wonder: Toward what is this comedic mode directed? What is the point? For both Bergson and Kieslowski, these situations produce laughter, not merely for its own sake, but to function as a necessary corrective of human behavior. As Jerzy and Artur’s absent-mindedness stimulates the mechanization so often involved in comedy, they grow less mindful of life. Consumed by the thought of owning (exemplified by the City Death lyric at the beginning of the film, “everything is yours,” which Artur himself enacts in his abandonment of his music for the
possibility of coarse, material gain) Artur and Jerzy invest all of their energy in this single pursuit. Life, in turn, stops its linear progress, and merely begins to unfold in repetitive ways. Inversion is simply a variation on this theme; the situation is the same, only the relative positions of the characters change. The interference of two independent series contains a sense of mechanism, almost as if certain events, like this possibly coincidental meeting of the three villains, are “due to the working of strings or springs” (Bergson 117). In this case, it is Kieślowski who purposely arranges this coincidence to produce the comic effect—the consequence of the mecha-nistic repetition occasioned by Jerzy and Artur’s absent-mindedness.

Comedy, by pointing out how life’s progress toward change and flux is hindered by such absent-mindedness, plays out what the viewer thinks of as absurd situations, but, in doing so, essentially provides its own corrective. Bergson believes that “actual life is comedy just so far as it produces, in a natural fashion, actions of the same kind,” and “the ludicrous in an individual character always results from some fundamental absent-mindedness in the person” (126–127). So the type of absent-mindedness that occurs in comedy could occur in life and could lead to the type of monomaniacal behavior that both Jerzy and Artur exhibit in this film. The viewer’s ability to laugh at their folly, their absent-mindedness and its effects, functions as a preemptive corrective to such behavior for the viewer in question. She is forced into a state of self-reflection, recognizing the imprudence and inhuman, mechanical nature of Artur and Jerzy’s behavior, implicitly agreeing that she would never engage in such behavior. This laughter is distinctly different from the laughter Artur and Jerzy enjoy at the beginning of the film, as they mock their father’s obsession. According to Hokenson, since “comedy mocks the unthinking and the unbecoming,” it is “intelligent, reflective laughter” that Bergson envisions as the optimal response to comedy. She then explains that, in Bergson’s view, “[laughter’s] bringing to consciousness is the only way comedy corrects manners” (57).

Kieślowski takes this Bergsonian corrective a step further, by actually allowing his characters to laugh at their own folly in a gesture of self-correction. They, along with the audience, benefit from this corrective and now, as they gaze over their identical randomly assembled series of stamps (random in that neither Jerzy nor Artur realized that the other bought the same stamps, though hardly random for Kieślowski), they realize how foolish they have been for prizing material worth over the greater social values of family and connection. As they laugh, their joined foreheads signify a new sense of emotional and psychic connection, which they perhaps
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Figure 12–2. Jerzy and Artur finally connect in Decalogue Ten.

have never had. Their laughter brings them back into self-consciousness as social beings, and they grasp that they have a duty greater than the pursuit of their own obsessions. They have not just literally completed a series by serendipitously buying the same stamps but also they themselves, as brothers, joined now by this touching and comic revelation, complete a series, having reversed their father’s perverse legacy of covetousness (Figure 12–2).

As the City Death song closes the film with “you are the only hope, the only light in your tunnel. Because all around you is in you. Everything is in you,” we discover that the corrective has worked—the song might remain the same, but the perspective of the characters has altered. A lyric such as “all around you is in you” suggests a deeper connection to the larger world, as we are not only a part of the world but the world is part of us. The song is no longer prescribing avaricious seizure of all desirable things or unapologetic hedonism; rather, it tells the viewer and the characters that a phrase such as “everything is yours” may be less about possession and more about connectedness between individuals. Artur and Jerzy laugh themselves back into self-consciousness, forging a new connection between them as they relinquish their foolish quest, clearing the path for each of them to connect more deeply with others.

It is this conclusion, the priority of human interconnectedness, present in Ten, which makes it a fitting end to The Decalogue, which is, like the stamps in the film and Jerzy and Artur themselves, a series. Accordingly, it is only fair to Kieslowski to attempt to understand his implementation of
the Bergsonian corrective of laughter as a corrective not only for the characters in Ten (as well as the audience) but also for the characters featured in the entire Decalogue.

The characters in the entire Decalogue are, as a whole, isolated from one another, closed off in their cell-like apartments, unaware of each other’s private dramas (the only possible exception being Zofia’s apparent knowledge, in Eight, of Dorota’s situation in Two). They are all ultimately distracted by a particular, fixed idea that prevents them from recognizing their roles in a larger context; for Krzysztof in One and Dorota in Two, it is the need for certainty that can only be provided by certain authorities (either empirical reasoning or a godlike figure); for Janusz in Three and Anka in Four, it is the weight of familial responsibility counterbalanced by the ambiguities of their own desires; for Jacek in Five, it is the chaotic violence of a cruel and random universe; for Tomek and Magda in Six, it is the voyeuristic and exhibitionistic avoidance of a real relationship; for Zofia and Elzbieta in Eight, it is the specter of a past that neither can continue to ignore; for Majka and Ewa in Seven, as well as Roman in Nine and both Jerzy and Artur in Ten, it is the possession of what is or what they feel should be theirs. All become so fixated on this one particular idea that, while only Ten explicitly enacts the theme of repetition, the entire Decalogue itself is an act of repetition as these narrow attitudes, these self-obsessions persist in each film, leaving the problem unresolved. It is only when Ten directly and self-referentially tackles the question of absent-minded behaviors that there can be a conclusion, an end to the series.

Ten, with its implicit critique of the negative (albeit humorous) effects of absent-minded behavior of its characters, thus also critiques the absent-minded (or single-minded) behavior of all of characters in The Decalogue. Just as Jerzy and Artur find themselves repeatedly experiencing the same situation, so too does the audience find that each film brings the same underlying conflict: An individual (or group of individuals) is sealed in his or her own subjectivity, isolated from others (illustrated beautifully by the sequestered nature of each individual apartment) and focused on one, single idea that drives their actions. Ten addresses this issue and offers a corrective—that of laughing at the folly of one’s behavior and the subsequent recognition of one’s foolishness. But in this metacommentary, not only are the characters (Jerzy and Artur) able to attain a level of connection and intersubjectivity, but additionally the audience, in laughing with Jerzy and Artur, also establishes a vital connection with them. The message of human connectedness transcends the text of The Decalogue, as the viewer
laughs herself into self-consciousness, and, one can hope, builds a richer and more expansive engagement with those around her.

NOTES


2. Krzysztof Kieslowski, Kieslowski on Kieslowski, ed. Danusia Stok (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 155. Further references to this work will be cited in the text using the abbreviation KK.


6. Annette Insdorf, commentary to The Double Life of Véronique, DVD, directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski (Irvington, N.Y.: Criterion Collection, 2006).