MAREK LIS

Theological Faculty
Opole University

Kieślowski, the mysteries of screens and God

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The computer seems like a privileged personage in *Decalogue 1* (*Dekalog, jeden*, 1987/88, prem. 1989, dir. K. Kieślowski): it is used by Paweł and his father to solve mathematical questions about Miss Piggy, to calculate the durability of the ice on the pond, to know what Mum is doing, and to control domestic devices. For Kieślowski the computer is not just a gadget: Krzysztof's lecture describes its potential and its possible autonomy. Independent from man (the computer switches itself on), it becomes his rival: Kieślowski proposes a critical interpretation of the computer as a new idol, promising unlimited memory and knowledge. A similar preoccupation can be found in the *Black Mirror* series, where new technologies, existing or as yet still fantastic, are becoming more and more intrusive in the lives of their human protagonists. The computer seems also to be a rival of God, present in symbols in *Decalogue 1*: a sign of him is not only the metaphysical man played by Artur Barciś, but also the biblical symbol of fire and the Madonna's tears.

KEYWORDS: Kieślowski – Decalogue – Dekalog – computer – God

A short description of *Decalogue 1* (*Dekalog, jeden*, 1988, prem. 1989) in the autobiography of Krzysztof Kieślowski underscores the role of the computer, and of the relationship between Paweł and his father:

> Krzysztof introduces his small son, Paweł, to the mysteries of the personal computer, a machine which he believes to be infallible. It is winter. Paweł, anxious to try out his new pair of skates, asks his father if he can go out to the local pond which has just frozen over. They consult the computer; the ice will hold the boy's weight; he can go. Paweł doesn't come home. There was a freak local thaw; the computer was wrong; Paweł drowned. Krzysztof runs to the church in protest and despair, falls against an altar. Candle wax splashes over the face of the Black Madonna and dries on her cheeks as tears.[1]

Mysteries of the computer

In that text, the computer seems a privileged personage, yet there are other protagonists in the first film in the *Decalogue* series: a young silent man (Artur Barciś), defined by Joseph G. Kickasola as Theophanes[2], and Paweł's aunt Irena (Maja Komorowska), who introduces the boy to the mysteries of life, not limited to mere physiological phenomena (as Krzysztof explains what death is), and to the mysteries of faith. The minimalism of the roles is characteristic of the whole of the *Decalogue*: two main characters, a third in the background, a fourth

[1] *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, ed. D. Stok, London 1993, p. 253.

[2] J.G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski. The Liminal Image*, New York 2004, p. 163ff.

Poster for Krzysztof Kieślowski's *A Short Film About Love* (designed by Iza Szewczyk)

hidden somewhere in the memory of the protagonists, and a silent man usually suffice to tell all the stories (except for the seventh, which is more complex). In *Decalogue 1* there are also two computers: both seem like protagonists, important in the characters' lives.

Shortly before the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989, Krzysztof Kieślowski imagined that these machines, though seemingly passive and silent like the personage played by Artur Barciś, could play a crucial role in the film, in opposition to Theophanes, who merely observes. But the act of observing really cannot influence those being observed?

The construction of *Decalogue 1* interweaves apparitions of Theophanes, the metaphysical symbol in the series with scenes where computers play a role. After an intense overture with Theophanes and Irena, we see the computer for the first time while Paweł (Wojciech Klata), immersed in the green light of the screen, solves a simple mathematical question using his computer to determine when Miss Piggy will catch Kermit the Frog (3'47"–4'30"). The computer seems to be just a calculator, with mathematical definitions built into it. But suddenly, during a walk to the shop, Paweł stops to look with compassion at a frozen dog near the new church, and then Theophanes appears (5'20"–5'33"). He cannot see the boy, since his fire is too distant, though his presence seems like a kind of *memento mori*. Afterwards, during breakfast, Paweł asks his father what death is.

Just before breakfast, we can see the father (Henryk Baranowski) in front of the computer (6'26"–6'46"), and for an instant, on the green screen, a list of files for ChiWriter, a text editor used at that time. His computer seems more serious: it's not only a calculator, but a machine to compose texts, dominate words and create meanings on the screen. It's not accidental that a copy of the *Oxford Dictionary of English* can be seen near the computer.

After school, Paweł presents his auntie with other abilities of his computer (11'50"–14'34"): it can shut and open the door and open or close the tap. The program also allows one to switch on or off the gas, radio and television set. The "Internet of Things" didn't exist in 1988, but Kieślowski imagined the computer as a machine able to control technical aspects of our lives: 30 years later, a computer (smartphone) really can control our intelligent homes (and lives)! But Paweł shows Irena a program he has created – it's his mum's schedule hour by hour. Thus the computer "knows" what Mum is doing. Encouraged by his aunt – "Ask it what she's dreaming about?"[3] – the boy keyboards the question (in Polish), but the computer answers in English "I do not know". Irena says she knows the answer: "She is dreaming about you". Without feelings, the computer cannot enter into the world of human emotions, sentiments and relationships. Paweł sighs: "I wish Dad allowed me to use his computer. It'd know Mum's dreams". If the

[3] I'm quoting the English dialogues from the Arrow Films DVD/BluRay edition of the *Decalogue* (2016).

boy had survived, as an adult he could offer his mum a smartwatch, capable of controlling if not dreams, at least the quality of sleep. In the following scene, after lunch during a conversation about Dad, his faith and God ("What is he?", Paweł asks), Irena explains to Paweł the differences between her and her brother: since childhood Krzysztof has been convinced that everything can be computed; she follows another way: the way of love, in which God is present. At the end of the sequence, we see Theophanes (19'21"–19'38"), and then the chess scene – playing with Death[4] – starts.

After the joy of the chess victory (but is it really possible to defeat the Death?), Kieślowski introduces an overtly religious motif: while Irena calls Krzysztof (22'10"–23'26") to inform him about signing Paweł up for religion courses in the new parish with a friendly young priest, a greenish light suddenly reflects on Paweł's face. The computer has somehow started[5] without being switched on. "Hey, pal! What do you want?", father asks. The only answer is a message on the green screen, "I am ready", and a blinking cursor. After switching the computer off, Paweł asks: "Suppose he really wanted something?"… "It was a joke, that's all". This is an echo of HAL 9000, the self-conscious computer from Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)? Moshe Gold notes that Kieślowski "underscores the revelatory resonance of the computer's 'ready' and the human responses by changing the usual computer prompt of 'ready' to include the biblical 'I am' in the English onscreen prompt 'I am ready' (thus echoing God's response to Moses in Exodus)".[6]

The most significant "computer" scene is situated in the middle of the film (23'59"–26'52"): physically, the computer is absent, but beyond doubt it (or even he) is the protagonist of Krzysztof's lecture at the university:

> Eliot said that poetry was what could not be translated. But must he be right? Imagine a translator who had acquired complete knowledge of a word or a language. One with unlimited memory which can be tapped into any moment. He can be replaced by a mathematical device used in an unconventional way. Seemingly capable only of telling one digit from another, the device has both intelligence and consciousness. It selects, which is an act of choosing. And perhaps even an act of will. I believe that a suitably programmed computer can have its own taste, aesthetic preferences, personality.

The computer as super-memory and intelligence, knowing all words, languages and cultures? In the 1980s, the power of computers, rarely connected in a network, was not sufficient to accomplish such an ambitious project: the speed of a home PC with an 8 – or 16 bit Intel

[4] Kieślowski quotes here the opening scene of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957).
[5] In the 1980s, a PC computer with MS DOS had a mechanical switch: it was impossible to program it to switch on or off electronically.

[6] M. Gold, "Decalogue One: Witnessing a Responsible Ethics of Response from a Jewish Perspective", [in:] *Of Elephants & Toothaches. Ethics, Politics, and Religion in Krzysztof Kieślowski's Decalogue*, eds. E. Badowska, F. Parmeggiani, New York 2016, p. 77.

8088 (or 8086) microprocessor arrived at 10 MHz, with RAM memory limited to 1 MB, and floppy disks (5,25 inch) containing only 360 kB! Today, the users of computers and smartphones connected to the systems of Google, Facebook, Microsoft or Apple have the possibilities described in Krzysztof's dream: machines suggest words and translate texts into numerous languages, they anticipate or predict our plans and desires, and corporations are continually collecting their users' data to construct an immense database of knowledge about almost everything (Big Data)! In 1989, the year of the first television screenings of the *Decalogue* series (produced in 1987–88), Tim Berners Lee invented the World Wide Web (and the HTTP protocol), the standard still used for online computer networking (the Internet), imagined then by his inventor "as an open platform that would allow everyone, everywhere to share information, access opportunities and collaborate across geographic and cultural boundaries". This dream has been accomplished only partially: as Berners Lee observes, "We've lost control of our personal data", and misinformation spreads easy and quickly on the web used and misused as a medium for political advertising online.[7]

The following (?) evening, Krzysztof and Paweł use the computer to calculate the durability of the ice on the frozen pond where Paweł would skate after school the next day (28'26"–30'40"): according to calculations, based upon meteorological data, the frozen surface should support much heavier people! But Krzysztof goes to the pond, walks over the ice to verify its strength, and then perceives the presence of a man in fur sitting near a small fire: they gaze briefly at one another (31'15"–31'36").

After the tragedy, the fire and Theophanes are still there among the crowd on the bank: for a fraction of a second the sleeve of the fur can be seen on the screen (42'27")[8], Krzysztof, alone at home, realizes that a greenish light is shining in the room: he turns, sees the green computer screen, approaches, and silently looks at the prompt "I am ready" (47'30"–48'39"). For the second time, his PC has switched on without a rational cause. A few days earlier, the PC had interrupted the talk about religion courses for Paweł; now, "when the father's god – science, reason – has failed him",[9] Krzysztof goes to the church, where he falls against an altar, and the candle wax drops on the Madonna icon look like tears on her cheeks.

Mystery of fire

Decalogue 1 opens and ends with strong religious symbols. Joseph G. Kickasola wonders: "Perhaps Madonna does cry, symmetrical with

[7] T. Berners-Lee, *Three challenges for the web, according to its inventor Sir Tim Berners-Lee*, 12.03.2017, http://webfoundation.org/2017/03/web-turns-28-letter/ [access 28.02.2018].
[8] In the original script, the silent man is present only three times: when Krzysztof checks the ice, during the research of the bodies in the pond, and when the corpse of Paweł is put on the shore (K. Kieślowski,

K. Piesiewicz, *Dekalog*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 19–30 [scenes 13, 24, 29]).
[9] J.G. Kickasola, "In the Wake of the Bible: Krzysztof Kieślowski and the Residual Divine in Contemporary Life", [in:] *The Bible in Motion. A Handbook of the Bible and Its Reception in Film*, Part 1, ed. R. Burnette-Bletsch, Berlin/Boston 2016, p. 678.

the tears of Theophanes: a film beginning and ending in divine grief".[10] Alongside the symmetrical tears of Theophanes over the fire (perhaps provoked by the smoke?), those of the Madonna in the church, and those of Irena in front of an image of Paweł immortalized on television and of Krzysztof in the church, the fire is also in a complex structure in the film, which is actually a long retrospection. The initial sequence (0'00"–2'24") with Theophanes sitting at the fire on the bank of the pond covered only partially with ice, and Irena looking at the television image of Paweł, is situated after the boy's death. The rest – till the final shot of Paweł disappearing on the TV screen – is a retrospection, and thus the beginning (of the film) is actually the end (of the story).

At the beginning (and in all the scenes with Theophanes), the silent man sits by a fire, day and night, and the fire burns constantly for days although we don't see any stock of wood. Kieślowski refers in the *Decalogue* series to the Bible, especially to the Old Testament, and its Ten Commandments.[11] If so, we should interpret the silent man in a different way than Michał Klinger does: he sees in the film's symbols (Black Woman, black hole in the ice) an "icon of darkness", but never examines the ever-burning fire, and is incorrect in his conviction that "the man in fur left the place".[12] If we consider that the story of Paweł, Krzysztof and Irena is a long retrospection, Theophanes didn't leave, but remains at the fire even after the tragedy!

It is obvious that the Bible is present in the cycle's title: "Decalogue" is the Greek word for the Ten Commandments, from the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy (Ex. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:6–22). Thus we should situate them in the proper context: before Moses received the commandments on the Mount Horeb the commandments, he had seen the Burning Bush. "Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up" (Ex. 3:2): in the fire, God appeared to Moses and revealed His Name: "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you" (Ex. 3:14). The gaze of man precedes the word of God.

In the *Decalogue* the silent man is a metaphysical figure: doubts can be allayed thanks to *Decalogue 8*, where he is visible only to the camera (and spectators), and to Zofia during her seminar. The place where Theophanes is sitting among other students, while he gazes at the camera (14'34"), is empty at the beginning (12'13") and at the end of the seminar (18'12")![13] He is more than a passive "guardian of the gate to the Law" (as Michał Klinger describes him[14]) or just a dramaturgical element necessary to unify film episodes.[15] Kieślowski rather figuratively situates on the pond's bank the Burning Bush and Mount Horeb, the place of Divine Revelation. All the protagonists in the *Decalogue* series disappear out

[10] J.G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski…*, op. cit., p. 173.

[11] *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, op. cit., p. 149.

[12] M. Klinger, "Strażnik wrót. Rzecz o *Dekalogu* Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego", [in:] *Kino Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, ed. T. Lubelski, Kraków 1997, p. 52f.

[13] M. Lis, *Figury Chrystusa w "Dekalogu" Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, Opole 2013, p. 177.

[14] M. Klinger, *Strażnik wrót…*, op. cit., p. 52f.

[15] M. Wach, *Krzysztof Kieślowski. Kino der moralischen Unruhe*, Köln 2000, p. 271.

of "their" episodes (with few exceptions), and only the character played by Artur Barciś returns in all the films (except the last one): he IS in the *Decalogue*! Numerous classical or recent Bible films propose often kitschy image of God, including *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2014), where God is a capricious boy. Kieślowski seems to know, like a good theologian, that it is impossible to portray God and to show Him; Jesus Christ as man "is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Perhaps in the visage of Artur Barciś, the silent man, and in his symbolic acts, we should see not only Moses, as Jennifer L. Koosed suggests,[16] but the presence of God who in the fire offers His commandments to mankind? Indeed, the image of the fire opens the whole *Decalogue* cycle, and the following films direct viewers' attention to the Ten Commandments.

The fire appears also in the finale of the film: in the empty church, on the evening after the tragedy, candles are burning over the icon of Madonna. When Krzysztof falls against the provisional altar, destroying it, the candles fall, but keep burning, and wax drops fall over Mary's cheeks. Fire, the symbol of God's presence, is there, and the drops falling from above can be interpreted as God's answer to a despairing man, realized in Jesus, present in the arms of the Virgin Mary in the icon. Antonio Spadaro sees in the first scenes of *A Short Film About Love* (*Krótki film o miłości*, 1988), in the window glass broken by Tomek, the break of the separation between God and man: "The Incarnation has exactly the meaning of a radical refusing of separation".[17] If the fire on the bank of the pond symbolizes the revelation of God to Moses in the Old Testament, the falling wax refers to the Gospel, to the descent of God (from above) who became man. Kieślowski introduces the motif of the Christmas gift (skates for Paweł), but a more important symbol is the icon: Mary with the Child, the Nativity scene, although at the same time, the Golgotha drama involves the protagonists.

The Old and New Testament meet in the *Decalogue* series. In the 8th film, in the words of Zofia ("Ten, który jest… w każdym z nas" – "The one who is… inside each of us") Elżbieta, surprised ("There's no reference to God in your works", 39'05"), recognizes the Name of God in the Old Testament: "The One who is" refers to the Burning Bush seen by Moses, while "inside each of us" refers to the words fulfilled in the Gospel "'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel', which means 'God is with us'" (Mt. 1:23).[18]

Christopher Garbowski asks: "Can God be a protagonist in a film series?".[19] The answer requires us to focus on several dimensions of

Where is God?

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[16] J.L. Koosed, "The Cinematic Moses", [in:] *The Bible in Motion…*, op. cit., p. 75.
[17] A. Spadaro, *Lo sguardo presente. Una lettura teologica di "Breve film sull'amore" di K. Kieslowski*, Rimini 1999, p. 40f.

[18] M. Lis, "*Dekalog, osiem* – Stary Testament spotyka Ewangelię", [in:] *Kieślowski czyta Dekalog*, eds. M. Lis, M. Legan, Opole 2014, p. 85.
[19] Ch. Garbowski, *Krzysztof Kieślowski's Decalogue Series. The Problem of the Protagonists and their Self-Transcendence*, Lublin 1997, p. 100.

the film. Kieślowski and his cameramen used colours and lens filters in a deliberate manner: Warsaw in *Decalogue 5* is so squalid thanks to the green filters used by Sławomir Idziak; in the *Three Colours* trilogy the colours (blue, white, and red) not only refer to the values represented by the French flag, but also communicate meanings. *Decalogue 1* introduces a colour opposition: the warm colour of the fire in the middle of grey winter days or at night, and the cold green of the computer screens. Before Moses heard the voice of God and his Name ("I AM", Ex. 3:14), he saw the fire, the place of Revelation; before Paweł and Krzysztof saw the command line on the self-switching computer ("I am ready"), they could see a greenish illumination in the room and on their faces. Is this a premonition for Krzysztof, who, as Patrick Piguet observes, broke the first commandment by making his computer an idol?[20]

But it's no accident that Krzysztof's computer switches itself on twice, becoming a rival to the discourse on God: the computer attracts the father's attention during Irena's call (and thus interrupts her invitation to the religion courses for Paweł), and after the boy's death. Moshe Gold suggests a change in the father's attitude: Paweł believed his mother was stored in the computer's memory, while Irena showed it was insufficient; in the end, "the computer may be 'ready' to store the son as well. From this perspective, the father's poignant response to the computer at the end includes a fundamental question of his beliefs in computers, memory and human identity".[21]

Krzysztof, disillusioned by the computer, goes to the church to rebel against God and receives an answer: tears of commiseration, "the empathy of the Lord for those who have lost someone dear to them".[22]

<p style="text-align:center">✻ ✻ ✻</p>

The first film in the *Decalogue* series proposes a critical interpretation of a new idol, the computer, which promises to offer unlimited memory and knowledge, the granting of access to human emotions or relationships; there is perhaps an echo here of the first temptation in Paradise: "you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Kieślowski's intuition has preceded the rapid development of information technologies: personal computers and the Internet, the invention of a system containing virtually all human knowledge (Google), and the constant presence of machines in the lives of billions of men and women equipped with smartphones, ever-connected to the Net. A similar critical approach to the dangers posed by computers is present in cinema[23]

[20] P. Piguet, "L'icône des outrages (Sur Décalogue I de Kieslowski)", "Communio. Revue catholique internationale" 1992, no. 1, p. 8of.

[21] M. Gold, *Decalogue One: Witnessing a Responsible Ethics*, op. cit., p. 77.

[22] Ch. Garbowski, *Krzysztof Kieślowski's Decalogue Series*, op. cit., p. 101.

[23] Cinema is not a privileged place for such reflections. Researchers are preoccupied with the influence of new media on human brains, and our intellectual and social capabilities; see: N. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, New York 2010, M. Spitzer, *Digitale Demenz: Wie wir uns und unsere Kinder um den Verstand bringen*, München

after Kieślowski: examples include *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1992), *The Matrix* (dir. Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999), *Transcendence* (dir. Wally Pfister, 2014), and *Chappie* (dir. Neill Blomkamp, 2015), as well as the Netflix series *Black Mirror* (2011-).

In *Decalogue 1* the green computer screen is reflected in the eyes and on the faces of the protagonists, but – as the initial scene of *Decalogue 6* suggests – the computers have been abandoned in a school repository. The black mirrors are the screens of electronic devices: smartphones, tablet PCs, computers, and TV sets reflecting the visages of their users, and mixing them with content on a limitless number of interconnected electronic memories. More than 20 years earlier, Krzysztof Kieślowski expressed preoccupations like those today of the authors of the *Black Mirror* series, where new technologies (not only PCs, but also the Internet and its applications, virtual reality, wearable technologies and electronic implants, both existing or for now still fantastic) are becoming more and more intrusive in the lives of their human protagonists, rivaling God.[24]

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2012, or J. Twenge, *iGen. Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, New York 2017.

[24] A more profound analysis of the first three seasons of the *Black Mirror* series can be found in: *Czarne lustro. Od wizji mediów do technologii przyszłości*, ed. M. Legan, Kraków 2017.

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