

KIEŚLOWSKI BEFORE KIEŚLOWSKI: THE MAKING OF A METAPHYSICAL FILM-MAKER by Tim Cawkwell

[details of books referred to can be found at the end of this essay]

1 Krzysztof Kieślowski has been dead for twenty years now, and since he had died during a heart by-pass operation, which he had fully expected to survive, he might well have still been alive in his 75th year [Insdorf, p.1]. I am not sure he would have been pleased at that. Do not his heroic levels of cigarette smoking constitute an unspoken wish to refuse living on? That is not to be confused with a desire for life, a desire he pursued to the full. When the operation went wrong it felt as if chance had played a hand in his end, an idea with which he would have been content: normally we talk of destiny as inescapable, but for Kieślowski it is chance that is inescapable.

Twenty years on, even though his reputation has entered that awkward post-death terrain stalked by questions – ‘Will it suffer?’ ‘Will it survive?’ ‘Will it flourish even?’ – it seems to be undimmed. The last four features are especially treasured in our current culture of feeling; the project that came before them, *Dekalog*, is regarded as incisive yet complex film-making, and the measure of its influence is the way the recent BBC six-part series *Ordinary Lies* (2015) explored in a Kieslowskian manner the lives of a group of people working in a car dealership to analyse the ethical messes that the characters got themselves into. It is often stated that the romantic drama *Sliding Doors* (1998) copied the structure of *Blind Chance*, albeit reducing the three versions of Witek’s life to Helen’s two versions. Plagiarism in the arts is widespread, indeed part of its creative dynamic, although the gulf between a drama about a woman’s love life and the existential questions posed in *Blind Chance* feels very wide. All the features, barring *The Calm* and *Short Working Day*, are now available on dvd, several studies of his work have been published, and articles on his films continue to appear.

A more rarified measure of how embedded Kieślowski has become in our notions of quality art-house cinema is the fact that the label ‘metaphysical’ is regularly stuck on him. How is this to be understood? Perhaps the answers to this are possibly as variable as the people who use the description, but any answer is likely to have something to do with the way they suggest that the human person contains a soul. The Book of Genesis contains an account of the creation of humans by God: “Then the Lord God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7). This is the translation of the Hebrew scholar, Robert Alter. The King James Version of 1611 is more resonant, more poetic, and therefore freer in its translation: “And the Lord God formed the man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” The two versions illustrate in a fascinating way the fault line between theism and atheism. If you put the role of God on one side, atheists would be happy with the Jewish version describing man as a living creature – or being – or organism. On the other hand, Christian theists would surely prefer the idea of the ‘living soul’ in the King James Version. To say that humans have a ‘soul’ is to suppose they have in them something spiritual and mysterious, a mystical quality even, and to suppose that is to take a step over the fault line to a theistic universe. In the words of the English 17th-century writer, Thomas Browne, which fit Kieślowski’s work perfectly, “There is something in us that can be without us, and will be after us.”

What would Kieślowski himself say? The answer would have to be a complex one. Characters do not speak for authors, but this is what the hospital consultant says in *Dekalog 2* (when asked by Dorota whether he

believes in God): "I have a God; there is only enough of him for me." Dorota interprets the words, probably accurately, as meaning that his God is a private one, nor is she is pleased with the answer, but it has a tone that Kieślowski was surely sympathetic to.

Perhaps Kieślowski's God is the same as the consultant's, although by the time he came to do the interview with Danusia Stok in 1993, he was prepared to say, "I think that an absolute point of reference does exist," [Stok 1993, p.149] and such tentative expressions of theism are among the grounds for bestowing the 'metaphysical' label on his films. Visible in his career is the way Kieślowski became more and more open to the world of the spirit, an idea that flowered fully in 1982 with *No End* (the widowed Urszula senses the presence of her dead husband watching over her), and which surfaced again, to give two examples, in *The Double Life of Véronique* (the French Véronique becomes aware of a link to her dead Polish double, Weronika), and in *Three Colours: Blue* (Patrice's musical composition, unfinished at his death, is completed by his widow Julie, as if the compositional process across the divide of death was binding the two of them). By 1993, he talked of "the realm of superstitions, fortune-telling, presentiments, intuitions, dreams . . . the inner life of the human being" [Stok 1993, p.194], and in his films expressed this belief in an original and compelling way.

'Metaphysical' therefore can be understood as meaning that he wants to get behind physical appearances so as to describe things as they really are. The film-maker and friend of Kieślowski, Agnieszka Holland, in an interview lends the term a similar precision: ". . . to look beyond the surface realism at something more personal, spiritual – I don't know what to call it . . ." [note: the interview is an extra on the *Artificial Eye* dvd of *Blind Chance*.] She is speaking of *Blind Chance* (1981), but the description fits well the films listed above. And it fits with Kieślowski's own statement that "the most metaphysical part" of *No End* are "the signs which emanate from the man who is not there any more towards all that he's left behind" [Stok 1993, p.131. By 1993 Kieślowski is using the word 'metaphysical' himself].

But besides this exploration of the personal and the spiritual, Kieślowski's films are metaphysical in another way, for they often make a God-like figure appear in the story. The most mysterious example of this is the unnamed bystander who plays a cameo role in eight of the episodes of *Dekalog* watching but never intervening, and the most fully explored example is the Judge (who like God is never particularised with a name) in *Three Colours Red*, an omniscient but far from omnipotent figure, i.e. with very limited power to get people to act ethically. [Note: for a fuller discussion of this idea see my book 'The New Filmgoer's Guide to God' c. 3.] When he first appears in the story and tells Valentin he is a judge, now retired, his role embodies Kieślowski's acid verdict: "When I think of God, it is more often the God of the Old Testament rather than the New. The God of the Old Testament is a demanding, cruel God; a God who doesn't forgive, who ruthlessly demands obedience to the principles which he has laid down. . . [He] leaves us a lot of freedom and responsibility, observes how we use it and then rewards or punishes, and there is no appeal for forgiveness." [Stok 1993, p.149] As a statement of belief – or of doubt as much as belief – it has an unequivocal ring, but it is striking how it only illuminates the films very partially, since they reveal Kieślowski's statement to be a very inadequate expression of his view of the world. The story of *Three Colours Red* is how the gulf between the world-weary, hard-bitten Judge and the young Samaritan-like Valentin is bridged, and instances of compassion in his films are multiple. Although his verdict on the God of the New Testament as a "merciful, kind-hearted old man with a white beard, who just forgives everything" [Stok 1993, p.149] suggests that his heart does not seem to be in it, yet he also manages a version of this compassionate God in the God figure already mentioned in *Dekalog 2*, the consultant (again unnamed) who is asked by the wife of a patient, Dorota, to predict who is to live: her husband, or her baby by another man. The consultant is required to exercise the wisdom of Solomon, and by the exquisite thread

of the narrative manages to do so, moved by a sense of fellow-feeling and withholding of full judgement so that he achieves a resolution in which both husband and baby survive. The rhetoric of doubt and despair is contradicted by the benign outcome, which is open to us to interpret as blind chance or as providential in some way, maybe miraculous, for which the consultant can take some indefinable credit.

2 So, the word metaphysical makes a useful catch-all for Kieślowski's work in the 1980s and 1990s. Does this mean that the films he made prior to this were only laying the ground for the mature Kieślowski? The truth is more surprising. Most of his work in film school and in the 1970s were documentaries. If these films are juxtaposed with events in Poland during this period, one might jump to the conclusion that the documentaries would be committed to revealing the awfulness of Polish society. In fact, Kieślowski brings off an impossible feat in a way (the wisdom of Solomon again): he both documents Polish people and Polish situations of various kinds, and yet strives to universalize them, to make them recognisable beyond their immediate time and place, and does this by suggesting that the special situations stand in for a larger universe.

This is a metaphysical trope, and in this context the word has a long history. It was first used by Dryden and taken up by Samuel Johnson in his 'Lives of the Poets' (1779-81) to designate certain 17th-century poets who used "the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together". Such poetry came into its own in the twentieth century with the 1921 anthology edited by Herbert Grierson, 'Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the 17th Century', the subject of a notable review by TS Eliot [[note: Times Literary Supplement, October 1921](#)]. "It is difficult to find any precise use of metaphor, simile, or other conceit which is common to all the poets at the same time important enough as an element of style to isolate these poets as a group." He singles out Donne and Cowley employing a device "which is sometimes considered characteristically 'metaphysical'; the elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it". If you like this poetry you admire the precision and complexity of the use of words and their meanings; if you do not you find them quaint or obscure. Eliot himself was firmly in the former camp and in homage to the idea the conceit of the earth as 'our hospital' surfaces in part IV of 'East Coker', his superlative pastiche of a metaphysical poem, in which the 'wounded surgeon' is Jesus, and the 'dripping blood' and 'bloody flesh' are the Eucharist.

The connection between Eliot and Kieślowski is fortuitous, not conscious – the compelling role of chance again – but Kieślowski too had a keen interest in ill-health as a metaphor and in doctors as healers. To the examples already mentioned above should be added Witek in *Blind Chance* (1981) who in the third version of his life becomes a doctor, perhaps his truest vocation, the role in which he can best contribute to society.

That interest in doctoring had been fostered by his early career in documentaries which reveal how fascinated he was by the idea of the hospital as a 'micro-universe' from which larger lessons about suffering and healing may be drawn. *I Was a Soldier* (1970) is about a group of soldiers blinded during the war. *Refrain* (1972) concerns the process of applying for graveyard plots by relatives of the deceased, i.e. it is about dead patients and their relatives. It ends with a shot of babies in a maternity ward, as if to say as one person dies, another is born. *X-Ray* (1974) is about patients in a TB sanatorium. In *Hospital* (1976) the focus this time is on doctors on a production line of operations. Indeed *Hospital* is Kieślowski's most 'committed' documentary, committed that is to the heroism of the doctors and nurses going about their daily work with humour and resource despite power failures, unsatisfactory tools and long, demanding hours.

The micro-universe of the hospital is a metaphor for the world, in effect a conceit, but in these documentaries Kieślowski found other metaphors as well, for example an office, a city (Łódź), a dance school, a railway station. Indeed, one of the points *Dekalog* makes is that by linking all of the stories to a modern block of flats in Warsaw, Kieślowski is saying that the block of flats 'is what it is' but that it also stands in for the whole of society: a micro-universe of individual stories is connected to a macro-universe of moral decisions and acts of chance or providence. The viewer is given the option of grasping this, if he or she so wishes, as in the words of the metaphysical poet George Herbert:

A man who looks on glass
on it may stay his eye
or if he pleaseth through it pass
and then the heaven espy.

3 Kieślowski's career as a documentarist dates from 1967 to 1980, and the documentaries number some twenty in all, although it is not a simple picture of documentaries first, narrative films after, since the making of the documentaries is interspersed with his initial (and fascinating) attempts at narrative. In fact, his very first film, *The Tram*, is a six-minute story of a boy encountering a girl on a tram and in the shabby, wordless darkness they make a connection with each other by looks, the male voyeur and the object of his gaze returning his gaze, a realm of "presentiments, intuitions, dreams", the "hardest thing to film" - although this did not stop him trying to do so from the very beginning.

The Tram has a *cinéma vérité* setting, very consonant with the Polish documentary tradition which was to absorb him for the next decade. One mentor at Łódź film school where Kieślowski was a student from 1966 to 1970 was Kazimierz Karabasz [Stok 1993, p. 40] and Annette Insdorf [Insdorf 1999, p. 13] writes that he was influenced by Karabasz's documentary *Sunday Musicians* of 1958. What is more when he was asked in the Sight & Sound poll of 1992 for his personal ten best films he included this on his list [note: Wikipedia s.v. Karabasz].

The film is nine minutes long [note: two identical versions of the film are available on YouTube, one dated 1958 and one 1960, both under the title *Muzykanci/The Musicians*], and begins with workers in a factory and hammering sounds. When the whistle blows to stop work, the hammering stops and the musicians gather. There is then a title reading: "This is a film about people who have given up many an evening. At one time the 'Brassers' were a vast army of amateur zealots. Today they are the last Mohicans." They embark on a rehearsal, and we are given close-ups of faces and hands on instruments. The conductor has a fine Elgarian moustache. They rehearse and then play a piece through. When the tempo picks up, the image dissolves into the factory interior at night while the music continues on the soundtrack, fading then coming to a halt.

You can see why Kieślowski was impressed. Firstly, Karabasz's focus on faces in close-up is a style that features regularly in Kieślowski's documentaries as a way of scrutinizing people, of letting the face speak for itself. The camera is an observer not a critic. Secondly, he would have liked the micro-universe that this group of musicians inhabit as a place of community. The authorities no doubt felt it was good propaganda for Poland, but the tone is not prescriptive in any way. Thirdly, it even has a metaphysical touch at the end: as the image shows the darkened empty factory in order to bring the film to a close, the sound is of the brass band playing on, in quick tempo but diminishing slowly in volume before coming to a halt, a ghostly present as if the people have passed on but their souls linger in the music.

As already mentioned, events in Poland during this period must have pressed themselves upon the young film-maker. The country was undergoing serious upheaval throughout Kieślowski's life as is best explained by [the timeline which can be accessed here](#). This puts side by side Kieślowski's biographical details, a list of his films and contemporary events in Poland.

During the 1970s Kieślowski was looked to by others for an oppositional stance. Judging by his comments in the Stok interview, he found this increasingly problematic, and matters came to a head with *Station* in 1980. The film expresses his antagonism with Poland most strongly, a micro-universe suggestive of the non-cooperative surveillance society that Soviet communism imposed on its citizens. During the making of it police, who were looking for a criminal, confiscated what he had filmed and at that point Kieślowski concluded that being a documentary film-maker risked turning him into an informer, and was to be shunned [Stok 1993, p. 81]. This rigorous self-criticism obscures the humanist conclusion of the film: we are shown a man looking at the screens linked to the surveillance cameras, but he is no demon, rather an early example of the figure that came to fascinate Kieślowski so deeply, someone omniscient but not omnipotent, in fact powerless in a way.

Kieślowski's questioning of the system in the documentaries is usually much subtler than that on display in *Station*. The hospital theme persists. *I was a Soldier* (1970, 16 min) strings together a sequence using seven blinded ex-soldiers and their comments about war. There is a striking lack of emotion, words are mostly spoken without animation, and this subdued quality is underpinned by the veiled style of filmmaking: several of the ex-soldiers wear dark glasses, or their faces are shot in chiaroscuro, so their eyes are largely invisible. Further, Kieślowski places the camera behind a shoulder or a head, or behind the leaves and branches of a pot plant, as if to move the camera closer would be to intrude on their grief. The film penetrates their feelings, while preserving their dignity, their human mystery.

The same tactics inform *X-Ray* (1974, 12 min). Six patients at a sanatorium for TB sufferers speak of their hopes. This time Kieślowski uses colour, giving the film a lighter texture, and the speakers are more exposed, although the camera is slightly placed to the side so that the patients do not speak directly into it. The film has a personal element too because his father had been afflicted with TB, and the film was made in the town where he had died. [note: interview with director of photography Jacek Petrycki, an extra on the dvd of *No End*.]

When he made *Hospital* (21 min) in 1977, Kieślowski not only was more ambitious but shifted the focus away from the patients to the doctors, and his humanist instincts came even further to the fore. If any blame is to be apportioned it is towards the system rather than the people in it, an idea that strongly informs two of his early features, *The Scar* and *Camera Buff*, made at around this time.

To gain some measure of the distance undergone by Kieślowski in those years it is worth comparing *The Office* made in 1967, his startling début in documentaries, and the masterpiece that crowns this period of his career, *Talking Heads* (1980).

He made *The Office* (*Urząd*) of 1966 at the age of 25, 'the office' being the first of his micro-universes. Office and hospital present two poles: one obstructive by definition, the other helpful and compassionate. Kieślowski's career therefore starts with a focus on the bureaucratic universe, a focus sustained in documentaries like *Factory* (1970), *Before the Rally* (1971), *Refrain* (1972) and *Curriculum Vitae* (1973) and morphs into his dramatized critiques of Polish Communism: *The Scar* (1976), *The Calm* (1976) and *Camera Buff* (1979).

The Office is only 5 minutes 19 seconds long but contains 54 shots giving an average shot length of 6 seconds. Many are short at 1, 2 or 3 seconds, but in some the camera finds a reason to pause for about 8 or 9 seconds. The longest one is 14 seconds. Repeated viewings reveal how economic is its editing strategy.

One important feature of the film is that images and voices are not synchronised. At first sight, you think that the cases being brought to *The Office* (which seems to be for pensioners) are all connected to the people shown, but the voice on the soundtrack, mostly a woman's firm, hectoring one, is never connected to a particular face. The heads in the queue outside the kiosk, or at the window when the camera is inside the kiosk, do not speak and are punctuated by several close-ups of hands clutching the scraps of paper that are crucial to their lives. The only face we see from inside the kiosk is of a pretty young woman filling in a form but never speaking. Otherwise we see a pencil being sharpened, tea being made, forms being stamped. The impression is of being in a labyrinth that requires patience and resignation. Kieślowski betrays a fascination with faces and hands.

Counterpointed to this is *The Voice* giving answers to timidly put questions. It provides such nuggets as 'You must bring a certificate to annul the other one', 'Hasn't the school got a round stamp of authority? It needs a round one' (i.e. a square stamp won't do), 'It's a pronouncement not a decision'. Particularly Kafkaesque is her saying, 'The Court pronounced in your favour, but we appealed to the Social Services Tribunal who overruled the Court, and your pension was stopped.' It is a picture of the tide of humanity coming up against the wall of authority.

Kieślowski ends the film with a small masterstroke by showing the office's archives stuffed full of files that are stuffed full of papers. On the soundtrack someone asks when she will get a pension, adding, 'I'm without means.' The reply is that she must complete a form giving dates of where she worked; all questions must be answered yes or no. 'State what you have done through your lifetime': this statement is then repeated several times on its own, like an echo, while we gaze at all the files. Human lives have been shrunk to forms completed in the proper manner. This is a protest by Kieślowski of a subtle kind, that makes a plea for humanity and the humane treatment of people.

Consciously or unconsciously it draws on Kafka's 'The Trial'. Kieślowski did not need to have read the book in order to make *The Office* because all he had to do was observe the world around him with his camera (in the way that Kafka used observation while working in his insurance office in order to write his book). 'The Trial' has a mythopoeic quality: it creates a new way of looking at the world. *The Office* is also metaphorical in its own way, and there is a symmetry between the two works in the way the title, The Office, echoes the definite article in Kafka's book, The Trial. But there is a divergence as well. Kafka's way of looking, while shockingly truthful, is crammed with a mocking despair. Kieślowski on the other hand is much less seeking to satirise the people in the office, and by the time he made *Talking Heads*, thirteen years later, he could be said to have come to terms with the variety of aspirations in Poland: everyone has their reasons and everyone should be entitled to express them. It is a series film, an unexplored format with great potential (see below). Kieślowski put to his interviewees three questions: What is your year of birth? Who are you? What do you want? This could have produced a mush but he cleverly orders his material by age, starting with the youngest – indeed his first interviewee is a one-year old baby who makes no answer – to an 100-year-old who tells Kieślowski that what she wants is to live longer. The first question is dealt with quickly by showing the year of birth at the bottom of the screen, and it becomes soon apparent that there are gaps as not every year is shown, and those gaps get longer as interviewees get older. Strictly there should be 100 people interviewed but Kieślowski, appreciating the risk of this becoming tedious, confines himself to thirty-eight interviews, in which answers are themselves constrained by focusing on three questions only,

and no two people of the same age are interviewed. Since the answers given are short, the film moves rapidly through the years and its fourteen minutes are quickly over.

It is a model of economic film-making, a style that was congenial to Kieślowski, and it may have reflected also constraints on the availability of film stock (unimaginable in our present-day digital abundance). Its tone may be illuminated by reference to something quite opposite, Andy Warhol's film portraits from the 1960s. With Warhol his camera stares at his subjects for several minutes: nothing is said as these films are proper silent film-making, but it is striking how his camera takes on a confrontational quality, intrusive certainly, threatening sometimes. Kieślowski's camera is the opposite: people give answers without duress, perhaps they have even been given time to prepare them; perhaps there are retakes. Warhol is celebrity faces, no words; Kieślowski is words, no celebrities. Yet his faces are important, since you are in effect given the picture of the ageing human being from one year to 100 years. This is cumulatively powerful.

What do they say? There are no rants. Communism is not referred to directly. Ideas lightly touched on are the importance of freedom, the need for more democracy, a desire for more neighbourliness, the importance of religious faith, the pain of unfulfilment. You think this is a Polish story, and you think of the country's history between 1880 and 1980: the rise of nationalism, a brief escape from an imperial yoke then its brutal re-imposition in 1939, then the rape of the country in the war (perhaps no country suffered more, not even the USSR), ending in rule by Soviet communism. This is a story of tentative optimism smashed by hammer blows – and yet Kieślowski's interviewees express hope, even cheerfulness. Through all this period, the value of the human is preserved. When the 100-year-old woman says that she wants to live longer, her secret turns out not to be just old age but the eternal optimism of youth.

Were there constraints? Did people censor themselves so as not to get into trouble? Did the production company censor them so as not to get into trouble? Did Kieślowski tend to have people speaking of hope or satisfaction because he preferred those qualities to despair, in other words is he the censor?

The truth is that were this exercise to have been done in any European country in 1980, east or west, the results would have been a similar expression of personal hopes, of aspirations, and of unrealised dreams. In other words there is a quality of universal humanism in Kieślowski's view of the world. His survey is of all types of people – male, female, intellectuals, workers, the anonymous middle class. It turns out that everyone has an idea to contribute. This was a powerful message in Poland of 1980 undergoing the birth pangs of Solidarity and aspirations for a non-Soviet future, but it goes well beyond the borders of time and place.

4 These short documentaries, alongside his short documentary dramas (*The Tram* 1966, *Concert of Requests* 1967, *Pedestrian Subway* 1973, *First Love* 1974, *Curriculum Vitae* 1975, *Personnel* 1975, *The Calm* 1976), were Kieślowski's means of finding a voice. Through them he learnt economy of narrative, that faces should be given priority over backgrounds, and how music should be used on film. Most striking of all is his use of structural techniques to resolve the formal questions of how to construct a film. *I was a Soldier* is punctuated – incisively – with harpsichord music accompanying a white screen on which brief quotes from the ex-soldiers are given. *Hospital* is structured by linking the scenes to each hour of a 24-hour day. *Seven Women of Different Ages* (1978, 16 min) transforms a documentary about a ballet school into a narrative of a woman's life by showing seven different girls/women at different stages of their lives, of learning to dance, of success, of ageing, of passing on skills to a new generation. Most formal of them all is *Talking Heads*, which as has been noted is structured year by year backwards from 1979 to 1880.

This structuralism can be seen straightaway as underpinning the formal approach to *Dekalog* and the *Three Colours* trilogy, although in these the structures seem to be much more flimsy. While each episode of *Dekalog* can be linked to one of the Ten Commandments, the link is usually a distraction: it is very clear in *Dekalog 5* (Thou shall not murder), but opaque in *Dekalog 3* (Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy) for example. This flimsiness is all the more apparent in the link between the triad of liberty, equality and fraternity and the actual films of *Three Colours*, a promotional tool rather than a connection of substance. Fortunately this is a weakness which does not detract by one iota from the quality of the films themselves.

This criticism does not apply to *Blind Chance*, whose formal structure is superlatively effective, and the film both looks back to the use of the idea in the documentaries and forward to the feature films of the 1980s and 1990s. It not only has the documentary quality which came so easily to him, and reveals a singular talent for eliciting the right performances from his actors, but also exploits a brilliant *coup de cinéma* by having the same Witek feature in all three parts in order to illustrate the point that we do not choose what happens to us, but we do choose what to make of what happens. Agnieszka Holland spoke of the metaphysical dimension to the film, “a look perhaps at the mechanics of human destiny, probing into a dimension other than the purely realistic one”. Without downgrading the work done up to that point, *Blind Chance* constitutes the moment when Kieślowski’s chrysalis turned into a butterfly.

5 The description ‘metaphysical’ is likely to stick to Kieślowski for some while yet. In ‘Ultimate Concerns’, a ground-breaking essay on Kieślowski’s progress to being a metaphysical story-teller, Tadeusz Sobolewski [in Paul Coates 1999] makes reference to Albert Camus’ idea of metaphysical rebellion as outlined in chapter two of ‘L’Homme révolté / The Rebel’ (1951). Camus had argued that revolt against the created order was a necessary blasphemy in order to “dispute the end of man and of creation”. For Camus the condition is a universal one, i.e. personal meaning is to be found in rebellion against existence, and when he writes of the created order, he seems to be thinking of all authority, religious, political, cultural, or whatever. Sobolewski is not suggesting that Kieślowski was steeped in Camus but his existential questioning was very much in the atmosphere which Kieślowski breathed. For many followers of Camus, his arguments were used to justify Marxizing revolt, but in Kieślowski’s Poland, the idea must have manifested itself differently. Some were certainly drawn to the dream of a more effective socialism than the Stalinist one oppressing the country, but Kieślowski’s career can be seen now to articulate a much more divergent train of thought that the created order of materialist and secularist society needed disruption through questioning, through making one’s own ethical choices, and through the discovery of a world of spirit beyond this world. His observing ‘from the wings’ as it were, in Sobolewski’s phrase, may be interpreted as a rebellion against the literal portrayal of life, indeed against the banalities of our secular world.

If a metaphysician “attempts to clarify the fundamental notions by which people understand the world” [note: Wikipedia s.v. [Metaphysics](#)] and if the metaphysical equates to the non-physical, then Kieślowski is the metaphysical film-maker par excellence, as much as Robert Bresson and Andrei Tarkovsky, perhaps even more so.

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Books

Cawkwell, Tim: ‘The New Filmgoer’s Guide to God’ *Matador* 2014

Coates, Paul (ed.): ‘Lucid Dreams: The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski’ *Flicks Books* 1999

Insdorf, Annette: ‘Double Lives, Second Chances’ *Talk Miramax Books* 1999

Stok, Danusia (ed.): ‘Kieślowski on Kieślowski’ *Faber and Faber* 1993