

Kieślowski's Decalogue Revisited

An Intensive Seminar in Opole

Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Decalogue* (1988) is a classic of Polish film arts, considered to be of peculiar value not just by film critics, but also by humanists and theologians. This was reaffirmed by the intensive seminar organized on 21st–25th November 2016 by the Institute of Family Studies of the Faculty of Theology of Opole University in cooperation with the Theological College of Pécs. The organizers of the event from the Polish side – Piotr Morciniec and Marek Lis (an author of several books and articles on Kieślowski), and teachers Gusztáv Kovács, Tamás Ragadics and PhD students from the Hungarian side – tried to bring close not just Polish film arts to the participants, but also its ethical, theological and family implications.

It already turns out to be hard to define the topic of the seminar, since the participants were confronted with very complex questions. The series filmed just a couple of years before the fall of communism tried not simply to reproduce the Ten Commandments as presented in the Bible, but to put them in the context of the Polish society in the 80's. This actualization was carried out in an exciting fashion. Those who expect a concrete translation of values presented by the biblical Decalogue will be disappointed. The episodes rather raise questions, offer insights into difficult situations of everyday lives and often create confusion.

In the initial lecture, Gusztáv Kovács outlined the theological background of the Decalogue as it is presented in the Bible and has been bequeathed by the Christian churches. For the man of the Old Testament the commandments were symbols of the covenant with God both in their individual and social lives. For the Jewish people the liberating power of God, the experience of the exodus from Egypt, and the covenant are of fundamental meaning. God saves the people from the Egyptian captivity and does not leave His people, but gives them His commandments. Why is this important and how are the commandments connected to the films?

It must seem a brave and risky undertaking to make a series about liberation and divine commandments. The film was born at a time, which was described by Kieślowski as follows: „Chaos and disorder ruled Poland in the mid-1980s –

everywhere everything, practically everybody's life. Tension, a feeling of hopelessness, and a fear of yet worse to come were obvious" (Kieślowski 1993, 143). The director recognized that politics are unable to give answers to the important questions of life: „Communist country or a prosperous capitalist one, as far as such questions are concerned, questions like, What is the true meaning of life? Why get up in the morning? Politics don't answer that" (Kieślowski 1993, 144). The films deal with universal questions as they present themselves in everyday lives and cry out for an answer. The protagonists are put in demanding situations, which could be real for anyone of us. As J.G. Kickasola remarks, "the themes of home and family persist in every episode" of the Decalogue (Kickasola 2004, 166): losing a child or family member, definition of family and threats to it, struggle over a child, bond between spouses or siblings. Kieślowski gives a diagnosis of selfishness, obsession with our own needs, self-centeredness, and the inability to face the problems depicted by the films (Kieślowski 1993, 145–146). He does not want to come up with political solutions, but holds a mirror for a society, which has lost its moral handholds, and poses questions without making value judgements. However, there is a parallel, which can be drawn between the two contexts: while the Jewish people were in the need of a new order after being liberated from Egyptian slavery, just like the people in the late communist era, since its system was unable to offer a solid and fundamental value system for the Polish society. Tamás Ragadics pointed out how stressful it is for a society to undergo a change, where it takes too long to establish a new system of values.

The most fascinating in Kieślowski's series is how the dilemmas in the films address the viewer and create tensions, which must be solved by an active search for answers. The tensions are induced by symbols, the music, and the right choice of colors – as it was pointed out by Marek Lis. While books leave it to the readers to determine the speed of reception, films already regulate it at their own pace. They target our ears, our eyes, our cognition and feelings simultaneously.

The series has a rich system of symbols, which evoke not just psychological, but also existential, philosophical and theological questions, as Marek Lis underlined (see also Lis 2013, 114–119). The picture already says something to its viewer before reaching the level of consciousness. *Decalogue, One* is centered on atheism, calculability and measurability, which are in tension with the sense and purpose of human life, the question of death and finally the existence and nature of God. We cannot assume God in a manner of mathematical certainties, but our experience of Him can be mediated through symbols, such as a warm and loving hug.

The symbolic figure of the Silent Man, who appears in all episodes but the last one, is a clue to the understanding of the series. He does not speak a word, only passes some of the protagonists, but his sight is full of meaning. As the enlarged eyes of Christ on orthodox icons express the importance of Christ's sight, the same significance is given to the eyes of the Silent Man as he looks at the protagonists or straight into the eyes of the viewer. His sight is never judging, but expresses a variety of attitudes: sometimes it is serious, sometimes happy, but mostly it seems to be filled with compassion. The Silent Man only appears for short moments, but his presence evokes a peculiar tension in the viewers, making them curious about his being.

After viewing the ten short episodes, it occurs as if the director aimed intentionally to bring the audience into play through the figure of the Silent Man. When he looks straight into the camera, he makes the viewer feel as if he was also standing on the ice or was listening to the lecture in the auditorium. These moments provide the film with a personal character.

With putting the viewer on the ice or into the auditorium, a bridge is built between the film and the common reality of the viewer: both situations are characterized by the same danger of the relativity, unjustifiability and meaninglessness of values. However, when watching the films we also get the sense of the need for certainties transcending our actual limits, which are valid even if we cannot get hold of them.

Works cited:

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Dániel Asztalos
University of Pécs