

## P R E F A C E

Born on 27 June 1941 in Warsaw, Krzysztof Kieślowski became the best-known contemporary Polish film-maker of the 1990s. His fame spread beyond national borders toward the end of the 1980s. *Dekalog* (*Decalogue*, 1988), a ten-part series of contemporary television films loosely inspired by the Ten Commandments, was hailed by Western European film critics as a great achievement and incontestably placed its director among the ranks of renowned European auteurs. In particular, extended feature versions of two parts of *Decalogue*, *Krótki film o zabijaniu* (*A Short Film About Killing*, 1988) and *Krótki film o miłości* (*A Short Film About Love*, 1988), were exceptionally well received in Europe. Kieślowski's international co-productions, *Podwójne życie Weroniki* (*La Double Vie de Véronique*, *The Double Life of Véronique*, 1991) and his filmic trilogy, *Trois couleurs: bleu, blanc, rouge* (*Three Colours: Blue, Red, White*, 1993–94), consolidated his position as a household name in European art cinema. His subsequent unexpected decision to give up film-making, for health reasons, was treated with disbelief by a number of critics. On 13 March 1996, Kieślowski died in Warsaw following heart bypass surgery. His premature death at the age of 54, and at the peak of his artistic powers, came as a profound shock for the world film-making community.

Scholars and critics often discuss Kieślowski's road to film-making. They stress his nomadic childhood that placed him in a succession of schools due to his father's tuberculosis which required treatment in different sanatoria. The same motif of unsettled childhood returns powerfully in interviews with Kieślowski including the best-known work in English, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, edited by Danusia Stok.<sup>1</sup> In 1962 Kieślowski graduated from the Warsaw College for Theatre Technicians (*Państwowe Liceum Techniki Teatralnej*) and worked for one year as a tailor at the Warsaw Contemporary Theatre (*Teatr Współczesny*). On his third attempt, in 1964, he was admitted to the famous Łódź Film School (*Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa, Telewizyjna i Teatralna*), completing his studies there in 1968. After a series

of documentary films, such as *Z miasta Łodzi* (*From the City of Łódź*, 1969) and *Pierwsza miłość* (*First Love*, 1974), Kieślowski established himself by the mid-1970s as a leading Polish documentary film-maker. A modest television drama, but a breakthrough film for Kieślowski, *Personel* (*Personnel*, 1975), marked his shift toward narrative cinema and a long-term working association with the Tor film studio in Warsaw. By the late 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, Kieślowski became one of the best-known representatives of the movement in Polish cinema known as the Cinema of Distrust, which explored the corrupted aspects of communism. (Like several scholars and film-makers, I object to the ill-fitted Polish term *Kino moralnego niepokoju*, which refers to realistic films made between 1976 and 1981. The term is translated by various English authors as the Cinema of Moral Concern, the Cinema of Moral Anxiety, the Cinema of Moral Unrest and the Cinema of Moral Dissent. Following Polish scholar Mariola Jankun-Dopartowa, I prefer the new label, which will be used throughout this book, the Cinema of Distrust – *Kino nieufności* – to describe films characterized by contemporary theme, realism and the social initiation of a young protagonist.)<sup>2</sup>

A closer look at Kieślowski's oeuvre and his artistic persona reveals that he does not fit the traditional image of a 'great Central European *auteur*', obsessed with politics and history. His films are also unique in the context of Polish cinema; for critics used to Polish film functioning for the most part as an expression of Polish history and political tensions, Kieślowski's films (especially his 1990s international co-productions) can be puzzling. His last films embrace several stylistic and thematic obsessions characteristic of European art cinema and, therefore, should be examined beyond their national context.

Given the complexity of Polish history, cinema (and, for that matter, all Polish art) has generally been regarded as more than just entertainment. The artist's 'mission' was that of a prophet and teacher bringing a message to society. During the communist period, film and other art forms performed the role of safety valves in the controlled, corrupt political system. Film-making was a platform, on which political debates were carried out sometimes openly, sometimes in Aesopian language. Politically active film-makers such as Andrzej Wajda were always at the foreground of Polish life. Artists felt an immense responsibility; they were also accustomed to a situation in which their voices were heard and analysed by the people and by the authorities.<sup>3</sup>

As opposed to some internationally known Polish film-makers, such as Wajda or Krzysztof Zanussi, Kieślowski was never directly involved in politics nor was he ever explicitly political in his films or in public appearances. Although persistently subjected to an Aesopian reading by Polish critics and

filmgoers alike, his early, still under-appreciated films, such as *Spokój* (*The Calm*, 1976), *Amator* (*Camera Buff*, 1979) and *Przypadek* (*Blind Chance*, 1981), do not demonise the communist system. Rather, they show the system as an obstacle to achieving happiness and, to use the title of Kieślowski's 1976 film, calm. Discussing Kieślowski's career, Tadeusz Sobolewski describes the problem that Kieślowski's 'apolitical' stand generated in Poland: 'None of the critics in Poland had the foresight to perceive the uniqueness and specificity of Kieślowski's films, except in terms of their being a function of social, political or religious aspirations. The Polish critic persistently forces the artist to answer the questions concerning social issues.'<sup>4</sup>

Unlike several internationally recognised Polish film-makers, Kieślowski never made a historical film or an adaptation of a well-known Polish novel. Almost all his works, with the exception of *Krótki dzień pracy* (*Short Working Day*, 1981) which deals with the workers' strikes of 1976, are set in the present, although they may have segments that venture into the past. Kieślowski's interest in the everyday aspect of Polish reality and commitment to uncover the 'unrepresented reality' makes him the leading proponent of the Cinema of Distrust. Although the Polish authorities shelved several of Kieślowski's films (*The Calm*, *Blind Chance*, *Short Working Day* and some documentaries), Kieślowski never used this fact to create an image of himself as an oppositional film-maker (as did, for example, Andrzej Wajda). Perpetually independent, Kieślowski operated outside mainstream Central European aesthetics. Within this highly politicised culture, where political choices were of greater importance than aesthetic ones, Kieślowski was clearly an outsider, not afraid of expressing unpopular views concerning, amongst other issues, religion and political commitment. Kieślowski frequently stressed his disillusionment with politics; in 1994, explaining his surprising decision to retire from film-making, he claimed that 'one of the reasons for my departure from the cinema is my dislike for fulfilling public roles, and a longing for privacy'.<sup>5</sup>

In film criticism, Kieślowski is not associated with one particular form of authorial expression. Critics, particularly Polish film critics, usually debate the distinction between the 'early' realist and 'mature' metaphysical Kieślowski, and the majority of them clearly favour 'Kieślowski the realist'. At the beginning of his career Kieślowski operated on a smaller scale ('In Depth Rather than Breadth', as he put it in the title of his 1981 statement),<sup>6</sup> believing in the power of faithful and detailed representation of reality. Later, Kieślowski moved from realistic, documentary-like observations of people and places to films grouped in series: ten films in *Decalogue*, three in his *Three Colours* trilogy, two films in one in *The Double Life of Véronique*, and three films in one in *Blind Chance*. He began to infuse his films with

false tropes, episodic plots, and often-enigmatic scenes of little consequence for the storyline.

Some Polish critics considered Kieślowski's move to international co-productions and his growing critical recognition as suspicious.<sup>7</sup> Kieślowski achieved his international *auteur* status without relying on the Polish romantic tradition, which, as Bolesław Michałek says, is characterized by its 'battle for social justice, and its preoccupation with gaining independence, the tradition in which dilemmas are solved by a single gesture. Kieślowski indicates that a dilemma is something you live with.'<sup>8</sup> Michałek's statement closely resembles Paul Schrader's distinction between American movies which are 'based on the assumption that life presents you with problems' and European films 'based on the conviction that life confronts you with dilemmas – and while problems are something you solve, dilemmas cannot be solved, they're merely probed or investigated'.<sup>9</sup> Kieślowski's films certainly deal with dilemmas.

In the manner of other great European *auteurs*, Kieślowski was in full control of every stage of the cinematic process; he not only directed but was also the scriptwriter or co-scriptwriter of all his films, and he worked closely with his editors in the cutting room. He usually worked with a small circle of collaborators; they included cinematographers such as Sławomir Idziak (since 1973), Jacek Petrycki (since 1971) and Witold Stok (since 1972), editors Lidia Zonn (early documentary films), Ewa Smal (*Decalogue*) and Jacques Witt (since *The Double Life of Véronique*), sound editor Michał Żarnecki, and scriptwriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz and composer Zbigniew Preisner since *Bez końca* (*No End*, 1985). Kieślowski also favoured certain actors, for example Jerzy Stuhr, who acted lead roles in *The Calm*, *Camera Buff*, *Decalogue 10*, and supporting roles in *Blizna* (*The Scar*, 1976), *Three Colours: White* and an episode in *Blind Chance*. 'Kieślowski's actors' also include Aleksander Bardini (lawyer Labrador in *No End*, medical doctor in *Decalogue 2*, choir and orchestra conductor in *The Double Life of Véronique*), Bogusław Linda (leading roles in *Blind Chance* and *Decalogue 7*), Zbigniew Zamachowski (leading roles in *Decalogue 10*, *Three Colours: White* and an episode in *Three Colours: Red*), Irène Jacob (main roles in *The Double Life of Véronique* and *Three Colours: Red*), Grażyna Szapołowska (leading roles in *No End* and *A Short Film About Love*), Artur Barciś (supporting role in *No End* and the supporting role of a mysterious young man in *Decalogue*) and Janusz Gajos (*Decalogue 4* and *Three Colours: White*), among others.

It is important to note, although this lies beyond the scope of this book, that Kieślowski also worked as a film lecturer in Poland at the Katowice Film School (1979–82) and Łódź Film School (1994–96), as well as abroad, in West Berlin (1984), Helsinki (1988) and Lausanne (1985, 1988). Despite

his often-voiced love for theatre (originally he wanted to become a theatre director), Kieślowski produced only a small number of theatrical plays. In 1978 he directed *Życiorys* (*Curriculum Vitae*, based on his 1975 film under the same title) at the prestigious *Teatr Stary* (Old Theatre) in Kraków. Kieślowski also produced two television theatrical plays for the popular and respected Polish Television Theatre: *Two for the Seesaw* (William Gibson) in 1977 and *Kartoteka* (*The Card Index*, Tadeusz Różewicz) in 1979. The latter, an absurdist social satire often described as ‘Poland’s *Waiting for Godot*’, belongs to the classic repertoire of Polish television theatre.<sup>10</sup> Unlike several important Polish directors who often alternated between film and theatre (including television theatre – popular in Poland) such as Andrzej Wajda, Kazimierz Kutz and Krzysztof Zanussi, Kieślowski devoted himself primarily to cinema.

My approach to Kieślowski’s films draws mostly on the critical concept of auteurism. Despite its shortcomings, and after years of being marginalised, this interpretative strategy is once again at the centre of Film Studies and in practice governs the way films are received and analysed. In my discussion on Kieślowski’s cinema I am not so much preoccupied with the director’s biography but with Kieślowski as a figure emerging from films authored by him. While I remain cognisant of the important contributions of Kieślowski’s collaborators, I share an opinion that Kieślowski’s work as a director combines various contributions into a structural whole and determines the final form of the film.

This book focuses exclusively on Kieślowski’s film-making career in the context of Polish documentary and narrative cinema. In this burgeoning field – studies of Kieślowski’s cinema published outside of Poland – there is sometimes little awareness of the relationship between his films and the Polish political, cultural and cinematic contexts. Therefore, chapter one, ‘Documenting the Unrepresented World’, situates Kieślowski’s documentary films within the context of Polish documentary cinema. Chapter two, ‘Film-Essays: Kieślowski and Polish Cinema in the 1970s and During the Solidarity Period’, looks at Kieślowski’s early narrative films in the context of the Cinema of Distrust and its attempts to look at the underside of communism, to portray the mechanisms of manipulation, corruption and other social maladies. Chapter three, ‘Choices, Chances and Politics’, discusses the implications of the imposition of martial law for Polish cinema and for Kieślowski’s career. Chapter four, ‘Entomological Observations and Metaphysics in *Decalogue*’, looks at Kieślowski’s epic ten-part series through the prism of the last years of communist rule in Poland. The final chapter, ‘The Double Life of Kieślowski: European Art Film and the Polish Context’, discusses not only

the 'art cinema' qualities of Kieślowski's international co-productions but also provides 'the Polish perspective', and acquaints non-Polish readers with some representative comments voiced by Polish film critics. The 'Afterword' briefly discusses films made in Poland and abroad after Kieślowski's death that are either based on, or referring to, his film-making ideas.