

## WHAT BORDERS IMAGES AND SOUNDS IN KRZYSZTOF KIESLOWSKI'S *THREE COLOURS*

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Iris Murdoch writes, "[t]he idea of a self-contained unity or limited whole is a fundamental instinctive concept. We see parts of things, we intuit whole things. We seem to know a great deal on the basis of very little. Oblivious of philosophical problems and paucity of evidence we grasp ourselves as unities, continuous bodies and continuous minds. We assume the continuity of time and space" (1).

Knowledge, history, perspective, data, the ever-changing and endless bustle of images and sounds unfolding on all sides of the structures and substances that surround us have relatively little meaning until a *life-waking* event. An unforeseen accident, sudden divorce or encounter strips us of all ideas of certainty, permanence and stability, however small or unyielding. It thus sends us spiraling helplessly into another kind of being, a different mode of existing—one familiar or attuned to the rhythm of a spinning tire, the pace of hasty footsteps or to the speed of sound. In other words: one becomes aware of the spontaneity and flightiness of *being* and of *life*.

Reminiscent of his characters' lives, Krzysztof Kieslowski's ideas about life, love, truth, and meaning seem affected by wariness and veiled in frailty. Their stories transcend the screen to settle in the realm of significance, familiarity and insight for the viewer because they are "full of feeling," just as their realities embody a projection into permanence and continuity because they are shaped by the tirelessly wavering dynamics of life. It is then, by savoring the abundance of movements, variations and transformations that one is brought close to an intuitive experience of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Blue*, *White*, and *Red*. And it is by searching for inspiration in unrequited questions, silences, and the scores of introspective interludes recorded in these three films that one is brought close to a *sensed* understanding of their meaning.

Therefore, to engage in a viewing of Kieslowski's films is to enter a realm of emotions and through one's sensitivity—a kind of spontaneous contemplation—measure and grasp the greater and ever-altering scope of what he has captured and framed. And what he has framed through the apparent interplay between the dynamic and the immobile is the obscure and barely graspable act of intuition as it appears in bouts of grey captured in the midst of layers of blue, white, and red.

One could point out the transitory, the ephemeral, the obscure, the uncontainable and the world-centered as opposed to a "self-interested" vision as main characteristics of Kieslowski's later films. Scholars have said, for instance, that "Kieslowski, as an auteur, seeks not so much to affirm his subjectivity and first-person stance as to question the distortions and particularities of subjective vision, and of personal cinema" (Wilson xvi). Or by writing that his cinematic quest reaches beyond the world we know because "[his] constant goal is to transcend beyond words and, ultimately, beyond image" (Kickasola 242). Kieslowski himself also suggested that all that is important and significant in his work is not to be established and found as much in the actual art of filmmaking, in the decors, the frame, and in the obvious as in the authenticity, the truth captured in moments of exploration, in the act of simulating, reproducing, and imitating real life. He thus implied that his role as a filmmaker was not so much that of a creator or architect but rather that of a witness or spectator:

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Film-making is the same all over the world [he said]: I'm given a corner on a small studio stage; there's a stray sofa there, a table, a chair. In this make-believe interior, my stern instructions sound grotesque: Silence! Camera! Action! Once again I'm tortured by the thought that I'm doing an insignificant job. As so often happens, when filming, something occurs, which [...] causes this feeling of idiocy to disappear. This time it's four young French actresses. In a chance place, in inappropriate clothes, pretending that they've got props and partners, they act so beautifully that everything becomes real. They speak some fragments of dialogue, they smile or worry, and at that moment I can understand what it is all for. (Kieslowski xxxiii)

And what it is for, it seems, is "[for that certain level of] ordinary-life-truth-seeking [which] is essential for survival, [and which consists of] a swift instinctive testing of innumerable kinds of coherence against innumerable kinds of *extra-linguistic* data" (Murdoch 195). Correspondingly, to cross the threshold into the realm of the *Three Colours* is to follow Kieslowski's footsteps into a world of incessant implying and insistent suggesting, a world composed with precision and meant to be seized through its great attention to detail, yet one in which all things remain free to fling into "breaths of life."

Among those, one firstly encounters a fleeting current, which seems to stretch through the compiled images of the films, a trace perhaps of an awakened destiny or one within reach. Its first evidence can be found at the outset of the film *Blue*, somewhere in the hidden core of an empty road with no end or beginning. On this uneven and soiled path a speeding car unsettles the dust, sending it whirling towards the clouded sky breathing into the air a powerful blow. It triggers as a result a wave

of caution, of threat, of prophesy, the movement, the passage of an invisible presence that speaks without words. Absorbed by the air stream, carried by the breeze, the dust then descends from the side of the road onto a feather, making it slowly merge to one side then the other, irregularly shifting as if to point towards an investigation of space, an examination of the hospital room in which it found shelter. That frail and fragile current of air later finds its purpose, it seems, delicately caressing Julie's visage as if to draw back an expression on a face that has lost all its revealing features, as if to wake a motionless body resting passively on a city bench, as if to bring back a soul who has abandoned the world, rejected the human touch, left behind the world of emotions, of feelings, of sensations. That traveling wind is therefore a trustworthy and reliable one, a wind of truth and fate.

At the speed of a dove flying out of confinement towards freedom and seeking grasps of air, that traveling aura is carried onto *White*, the second film of the trilogy, as much a promise of a new world as a struggle to regain what has been lost. Izabela Kalinowska wrote that "the images that follow the opening credits of Krzysztof Kieslowski's [...] *White* foreground the unmistakable attributes of displacement" (107). This displacement is not limited, however, to a cultural and historical space or context, but one allied with the barely definable sphere inhabited by the soul, situated somewhere between heaven and earth. Kieslowski's birds, which have as their domain the air element, mediate between the earthly realm and the heavenly world, perhaps symbolizing, among other things, a soul aspiring upwards, flying free of the restraints of the ground's brute, unrefined nature. They illustrate in a most graceful manner that Karol's spirit, heart, and body freed itself of any kind of physical constraints through the pursuit of an ideal, this being also his reward for providing the evidence that the feeling of boundless affection was, is, and can, indeed, be shared and real.

In these realms where faithfulness and truth subsist as achievable after being brusquely dismissed and where an individual has the skill to render profound aspirations real, an inquisitive undercurrent remains. In the context of the enlarged photograph of Valentine's face, it proclaims the need to translate, decode, and interpret the sense and importance of any captured state and situation; it indicates that there is more to be ignited in darkness, and that what is said to be absolute is likely to be only a small part of the Truth. Indeed, the unwrapping of *Red* reflects the world's pulse as it streams from the whirling mutation of colours and signals the anticipation of a connection, which has ultimately failed to be established. The circuit is brought to a halt and the information to be transmitted loiters, flashing in a state of emergency. One could understand these two momentary postponements of movement—Valentine's photographed expression suspended and framed in time along with a voice hovering in silence—as suggestions to depart from reality,<sup>1</sup> a call to move away from ordinary perceptions and experience and step closer to the hidden, covert, and innate being of objects, of all things.

Perhaps, this is an invitation, by means of our personal encounters with the three films, to “transcend beyond words and beyond image” and be carried ashore by the stillness of water, the lasting detonation of a gunshot or of a restful flare; to source out in the immobility of images moments of personal connectedness with the unfolding picture and to discover that their significance and meaning streams, in fact, from our own memories. The photographic image is, for one, a window into our own consciousness given that it holds much more than what it embodies. The grey tones symbolically layer the image with all the different ways in which a photograph can be translated, a particularity conveyed by Edgar Morin as one of its numerous strengths: “The richness of the photograph is in fact all that is not there, but that we project or fix onto it. [...] Everything tells us that the human mind, soul and heart are profoundly, naturally, unconsciously engaged in the photograph. It is as if this *material* image had a *mental* quality” (22). Any photograph taken from a particular point of view and giving a one-angled truth is reconstructed to its dimensional value

**342** primarily through our immediate perception, in other words through our intuitive involvement. As such, Valentine’s photograph falls upon a busy street like a shield against the expression of mindless haste. As Auguste stops in front of the photograph for a short moment, the expression on his face rests upon a smile, cultivating an intimate and unruffled contemplation, one suddenly erased by the impatience of a driver blaring the horn of the vehicle behind him. In Auguste’s response to Valentine’s photograph lies the quality of its subtle emotional power, of a non-mediated energy perceived by those who are passing by. Far more than foreshadowing and forewarning surges from Valentine’s photograph, for her photograph channels and drives the impulse of perception, the physical response and awareness we grant the elements that make the world, thus inciting us to consider how it is that we see what we see. Why is it that one and the same photograph can depict sadness for the photographer, delight for Auguste, and fright for the judge? These questions and doubts shadow the filmmaker’s attempt at directing us, viewers, towards self-awareness, the essence of our involvement with our surroundings as much as an alertness to all windows, mirrors, cameras, screens, frames that come between and shape our connections with each other and with the world.

This may be Kieslowski’s attempt to point toward what lies suppressed in silenced motion, image, and sound. Every gesture to make contact with someone, which concludes with a lack of response at the other end of a line, transmutes into an instant of quiet thoughtfulness, a moment of separation, and distance that seems to awaken the heart and the soul. Paul Coates wrote that “for Kieslowski, silence is *a part of speech*” (21). As such, Julie’s existence becomes wrapped in the stillness of sounds, Karol Karol’s calls to Dominique are short of a desired retort and the lovers’ final and sincere conversation is mimed; in due course Auguste’s calls to Karin are put off; in their only *observable* moment of physical connection Valentine’s hand and the Judge’s hand nearly meet in the absence of words. In these moments, unconditioned by an uttered perception or insight, hides the opportunity to go beyond the material and

the identified, beyond the finality of affirmation and of action. These are moments of internal candor and of delicate vulnerability in which hides the prospect of a sensed significance and verity because, as William Bronk writes, “[s]ilence is the world of potentialities and meanings beyond the actual and expressed, which the meanness of our actions and the interpretations put upon them threatens to conceal” (80). In silence, that is, in resistance against all weight and burden put upon us, emerge the rhythms and harmonies within us. It occurs when Julie dizzily and tensely scans notes on a music sheet and when she reaches the well of white silence written onto her husband’s last and unfinished score. From that silence she draws and *onto* it she composes a muted harmony, one that only she can hear; one that follows the rhythms of her own thoughts, feelings and of her heart’s pain-struck vibrations. She finds in the bareness of music—and of her present-day life—the resonance of her own natural hymn, the one that later projects her beyond silence and back into the world of sound. Therefore, Julie’s story functions both as a testimony and exposure of the dynamic dimension of silence and as an echo of our stirred emotions and thoughts as we read **343** into the unspoken and hidden meanings printed on the film stock that unrolls.

In the end, Kieslowski’s *Three Colours* are about the experience of personal sensibleness, wisdom, prudence and growth. The films’ relevance reaches beyond the drama, the sights, and the play, beyond the cinematography’s undeniable technical mastery, as it draws upon the unfurled awakening of dormant imagery and repeated silences to forge a fulfilling and dynamic exchange of complementary and reciprocal sparks between a spectator and a lifelike, life-delving display. Therefore what is most interesting in Kieslowski’s *Trilogy* is compiled in stretches of fleeting signs and underscores that primarily serve to emphasize that insight is an intimation and that it stretches beyond the realm of the coherent and perceptible, beyond what can ever be traced in the remains of the “said.” Therefore, these films are about experiencing the boundaries of our own perceptions and the evidence of the physical and, in particular, emotional limitations as well as the forcefulness brought about by such experiences. Hence, in *Blue*, *White* and *Red* Kieslowski captures what Henry Bergson expresses in the following passage:

[...] the close solidarity which binds all objects of the material universe, the reciprocal actions and reactions, is sufficient to prove that they have not the precise limits which we attribute to them. Our perception outlines, so to speak, the form of their nucleus, it terminates them at the point where our possible action upon them ceases, where consequently; they cease to interest our needs. Such is the primary and the most apparent operation of the perceiving mind: it marks out divisions in the continuity of the extended, simply following the suggestions of our requirement and the needs of practical life. (209)

That is the condition that Krzysztof Kieslowski imposes upon his characters and the sensation he propels onto his viewers.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 That is, of course, if one abides by Edgar Morin's idea that movement is the decisive force of reality. In *The Cinema, or, The Imaginary Man*, he writes: "Movement is the decisive power of reality: it is in it, through it, that time and space are real" (118).