

Krzysztof Kieślowski's *No End*

By Marek Haltof

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REQUIEM FOR SOLIDARITY: KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI'S *NO END*

This is a film about people with bowed heads.

Krzysztof Kieślowski⁽¹⁾

Immediately after martial law, it was not the best time to break with the artistic preferences of "moral concern." The country was again in need, the nation suffered, and the mothers shed tears.

Waldemar Krzystek⁽²⁾

THE first film that Kieślowski made after the implementation of martial law in December 1981, *Bez końca* (*No End*), avoids easy, generic classification. It contains elements of psychological drama, ghost story, romance, courtroom drama, as well as political and metaphysical film. With Agnieszka Holland's *Kobieta samotna* (*A Woman Alone*, 1981, released in 1988), *No End* is also among the bleakest films ever made in Poland.

Kieślowski's film was made in difficult times for ambitious, uncompromising political cinema. Although for a number of Western critics and viewers political films formed a "genre" virtually synonymous with Polish cinema, intimate psychological dramas, safe literary adaptations, and commercial films formed the canon of Polish cinema in the mid-1980s. The oppressive, highly politicised atmosphere of these years better suited films like the winner of the 1985 Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia, *Kobieta w kapeluszu* (*A Woman with a Hat*, 1985), scripted and directed by Stanisław Różewicz. Nevertheless, finished in 1984, but released on June 17, 1985, *No End* joined a small group of distinguished films that, due to political restrictions, got only a limited release in 1985. They include *Nadzór* (*Custody*) by Wiesław Saniewski and 1984 Venice Film Festival winner, *Rok spokojnego słońca* (*Year of the Quiet Sun*), by Krzysztof Zanussi.

No End is an unusual film set during the period following the events of December 13, 1981, which ended the brief period of the Solidarity movement. The first film that touched upon the political and psychological situation of that gloomy period in Polish history was Leszek Wosiewicz's medium-length *Wigilia'81* (*The Vigil of 1981*, 1982), which premiered as late as 1988. Wosiewicz's film was made during the martial law for the new experimental production collective, the Karol Irzykowski Film Studio in Łódź, later known for a series of significant films made by the younger generation filmmakers. The simple action of *The Vigil of 1981* is limited to an old apartment and its inhabitants, three women waiting in vain with the Christmas Eve Supper for the interned Witek - their grandson, son, and husband.

To reflect the reality of martial law in Poland, Kieślowski initially attempted to make a documentary film about political trials that were held after December 1981. Although this project never materialized, with the help of his new friend and scriptwriter, Krzysztof Piesiewicz, Kieślowski was able to record several court cases, held before the public and military courts. Being a respected defence lawyer, known for his involvement in several high profile political cases since 1982, Piesiewicz offered his first-hand knowledge about the mechanisms and abuses of law in post-1981 Poland. The appearance of Kieślowski's crew with a camera in court usually resulted in milder sentences for political prisoners. As Kieślowski recalls in his conversations with Danusia Stok,

The judges didn't want to be recorded at the moment of passing unjust sentences, because they knew that if I turned on the camera, then some time in the future, after three, ten or twenty years, somebody would find this film. And they'd see themselves [...] Just as at the beginning nobody wanted to let us in on any trials - the lawyers, in particular, defended against this, and the defendants, so later they were all begging us to film their cases. It got to the point where I had to hire a second camera in order to make it from one trial to another on time. When a camera was in the courtroom, the judges didn't pass prison sentences. So I didn't even load the second camera with film because there wasn't any need. They were simply dummy camera which were only there so that through plain human fear, the judges wouldn't pass sentences.⁽³⁾

Convinced about the impossibility of documentary means to aptly reflect the depressing state of affairs after the implementation of martial law, Kieślowski turned to narrative film. Co-scripted by Piesiewicz, *No End* reflects the disheartening reality of the martial law - the eighteen months of curfew and militarised administration in Poland. It does so, however, without portraying all the elements that form the external reality of that period in Polish history: riot militia (ZOMO) in full gear, violent street protests, people lining up for food, mass arrests, curfew, television news delivered by television personnel in military uniforms, general Jaruzelski in dark glasses announcing the implementation of martial law, and harsh living conditions, among others. Furthermore, the word "Solidarity" is absent from the screen due to the censorship practices of the day.

Instead of an overtly political film, Kieślowski tells the story of the death of a renowned lawyer, Antoni (diminutive Antek is used throughout the film) Zyro, who defended political prisoners immediately after the introduction of martial law. The lawyer dies untimely in 1982, apparently of a heart attack. He leaves behind his beautiful, confused and grieving wife of eleven years, Urszula (diminutive Ula is used in the film), played by Grażyna Szapołowska, and their young son Jacek. Antoni Zyro is played by Jerzy Radziwiłowicz (b. 1950), the symbol of "Solidarity cinema," known chiefly for his lead roles in Andrzej Wajda's seminal political films: *Człowiek z marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, 1977) and *Człowiek z żelaza* (*Man of Iron*, 1981). In *No End* Kieślowski consciously typecasts Radziwiłowicz in the role of a person who is "extremely clean, extremely pure, extremely clear."⁽⁴⁾

Although politics plays an important role in *No End*, the psychological reality is much more meaningful; it is not politics but a personal loss that really matters to Urszula. This is not to say, however, that *No End* is deprived of political and social observations. Kieślowski captures some aspects of the psychological reality of the post-martial law situation: illegal groupings, private calls monitored by the authorities (even a call to telephone time-giving service), candles burning in the apartment windows to commemorate the introduction of martial law, the specific language of the street associated with the time, certain physical types of young angry bearded underground activists (like the one nicknamed Rumcajs played by Adam Ferency), emblematic political songs by one of the bards of that period - Przemysław Gintrowski, Andrzej Czeczot's and Andrzej Mleczko's political cartoons, and the sharp political divisions within society and within families.

The metaphysical element, earlier present in Kieślowski's *Spokój* (*Calm*, 1976, released in 1980) - the intriguing, symbolic horses appearing on the television screen) and, more importantly, in *Przypadek* (*Blind Chance*, 1981, released in 1987) - the discourse on chance and destiny, governs the story of *No End* from its pre-credit scene. The opening scene offers a bird's eye view of a cemetery with flickering burning candles during the All Souls' Day on November 1 - a genuinely meaningful day in Poland. Zbigniew Preisner's intense, repetitive, and sombre musical score supports this image. The scene sets the dreary and melancholy tone of the film, and introduces its major themes of death, memory, and love.

After the credits, a man wearing a black suit appears on the screen. As the viewer learns later, this is the ghost of Antoni Zyro who wanders through his young son's room, looks at his own reflection in the window and the glass of a bookcase, and then in the family bedroom with his wife asleep behind him in the bed, he faces the camera and begins his dispassionate monologue. The lawyer introduces himself by saying "I died. Four days ago" and continues with details concerning the circumstances of his death. The simplicity of this introduction, which accounts for its great effectiveness, bears strong resemblance to the final scene of Kieślowski's earlier *Amator* (*Camera Buff*, 1979) when Jerzy Stuhr's character addresses the camera in the same immediate manner, this time talking about the birth of his child. After the short explanatory comments addressed directly to the camera (and the viewer), the ghost of the lawyer remains silent for the rest of the film. He quietly observes how his wife is coping with loneliness and tries to protect her. He also witnesses the development of "his" court case involving a young worker, a Solidarity member Dariusz (Darek) Stach (played by Artur Barciś), accused by the communist authorities of organizing a factory strike after the introduction of martial law.

The film portrays the outburst of Urszula's sadness and her gradual alienation from people and the outside world. She feels the ghost's presence. The more she learns about her deceased husband, the more she loves him. She discovers things from the past, for example, her husband's humility, and that he knew about nude pictures she had taken when she was young and desperate for money. Urszula also feels guilty about

certain aspects of their relationship, and she is jealous about his past friendships. At one point she makes love to a stranger, an English tourist met in a coffee shop, who mistakes her for a prostitute, and whose hands resemble those of her dead husband. After a graphic lovemaking scene Urszula explains her union with Antek in Polish (although she is a translator of George Orwell), so the stranger cannot understand her feelings, and then hurriedly leaves his hotel apartment.

To liberate herself from the past, Urszula attempts to erase Antek from memory. She visits a young hypnotist (Tadeusz Bradecki), and undertakes therapy without telling him that her husband is dead. During the session, however, she sees Antek, exchanges secret signs with him, and watches as he makes an eerie sound by moving his finger on an empty glass. Almost two months after the lawyer's death (we see the date of his death, 7 September, on his tombstone), Urszula and Jacek are portrayed among many fellow Poles during All Souls' Day at the Powązki cemetery in Warsaw. In a scene referring to the pre-credit images, Kieślowski captures the ocean of candles at the cemetery and people's faces. Shown in a close-up at Antek's grave, Urszula whispers, "I love you."

After several unsuccessful attempts to overcome her sadness and longing for Antek, Urszula leaves her son at the grandmother's and methodically prepares her suicide. It can be read as her will to be reunited with Antek. She dresses in black, brushes her teeth, tapes her mouth, symbolically cuts the link with the outside world (the phone cord), shuts all the vents, and turns on gas in the oven. She sits in front of the stove waiting for death, the camera behind her, as if representing her dead husband's point of view. The screen darkens as the camera pulls into the stove and then pulls back. The director then cuts to a close-up of Antek who greets and hugs Urszula. In an emotionally charged, yet bleak, final scene the couple walks away from the camera in a park-like setting.⁽⁵⁾ Preisner's music once again fills the screen with familiar sombre tones. The film's credits roll over a freeze frame of the reunited couple. Kieślowski comments on the nature of Urszula's suicide: "Only young people commit suicides because of love. To be sure, my female protagonist of *No End* dies such a death, but this happens because of a total defeat, because of the inability to navigate in the world. Perhaps love directs her emotions, but what is she supposed to do when her only link with the world was her husband, who, from the beginning of the film, is dead."⁽⁶⁾

Although Kieślowski's film invites an interpretation as a drama of mourning (with later *Three Colours: Blue* as its art-film continuation), it is also a courtroom drama set in the highly political climate of the early 1980s in Poland. That part of the film introduces a defence attorney Labrador, played by Aleksander Bardini, who is about to retire. He defended his countrymen in political trials during the Stalinist period in Poland. Later, eschewing politics, he deals exclusively with criminal cases. When Labrador learns from another lawyer about his mandatory retirement at the age of seventy, he changes his mind and decides to defend Darek. He attempts to convince Darek to be more pragmatic, in other words, to say what the judges want him to say. He tells the accused that "when one has decided to live, one has to be able to endure a lot." However, an honest and idealistic Darek (who represents the "naivety" of many of his contemporaries opting for similar desperate measures at that time) prefers a hunger strike, and he persists.

Labrador finally wins the case with the help of his assistant (Michał Bajor) by securing a letter of recommendation for Darek written by the pro-government new unions established in Darek's factory during his imprisonment. As a result, Darek gets only an eighteenth month sentence, which is suspended for two years. When the sentence is passed, however, nobody shows any signs of joy. The verdict is greeted with silence indicating a feeling of resignation on the part of the accused, his family, and the public gathered in the courtroom. The silence continues when Darek, his family and Labrador sit in an empty courtroom, with the ghost of Antoni Zyro among them. "The small victory seems insignificant when compared with the enormous quenched hopes ignited by Solidarity," writes Paul Coates.⁽⁷⁾ Is this really a small victory? As portrayed in the film, the scene rather signifies a defeat, especially for those who, wanting to see Darek as a Solidarity martyr, hastily leave the courtroom. Commenting on the whole situation in a meaningful gesture, Labrador puts a finger to his head as if he wants to shoot himself. Interestingly, Philip Strick compares this gesture with that of "the amateur movie-maker of Kieślowski's *Camera Buff*, once the naive documentarist, now a self-censoring manipulator of information [who] finally 'shoots' himself with his own camera."⁽⁸⁾ Labrador also provides an additional reflection when, after the trial, he reads to Urszula a poem by Ernest Bryll (unacknowledged on the screen): "I don't even know how it happened, that I changed from a young wolf to an old dog [...] maybe nobody had to put this dog-collar on me, nobody came after me and I, myself, went

serving humbly like a dog. Lord [...] assure me that I'm living free although I weep."⁽⁹⁾ Aleksander Bardini (1913-1995), known for his roles as professors, lawyers, and doctors in films by Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Zanussi, and Janusz Majewski, brings to this role the same screen persona that will later appear in films by Kieślowski, including *Decalogue 2* (doctor), *The Double Life of Véronique* (orchestra conductor), and *Three Colours: White* (lawyer).

The ghost of the lawyer appears seven times throughout the film, either silently observing Urszula or intervening in her daily matters. Although only a mysterious black dog that appears three times in the first part of the film seems to recognize his presence, a number of puzzling events in the film call attention to the presence of the supernatural. For example: Labrador's watch, a gift from his student Zyro, falls and stops during his conversation with Darek's wife Joanna (Maria Pakulnis), while a man in black (perhaps Zyro) passes by; the mysterious red question mark appears on the directory of attorneys next to Labrador's name; Urszula's Volkswagen car stops on the street for no visible reason saving her, in all likelihood, from a deadly accident; a newspaper disappears which is important in the context of the worker's trial. In another scene, when Darek awakens in his prison cell during the hunger strike, the ghost is there and quietly looks at him. As a result of this visit, Darek changes his mind and ends this suicidal action.

What is the role performed by the ghost in *No End*? It is tempting to say that unlike several "active ghosts" in mainstream cinema (and one can list a myriad of examples among romantic melodramas especially), the ghost in *No End* serves clearly as the symbol of the suppressed (as if dead) Solidarity movement, the symbol of pacified resistance, physically absent from political life, yet whose spirit is still present and felt by the majority of Poles. At the film's opening Zyro's ghost tells the viewer about his sudden death (resembling the abrupt termination of the Solidarity movement on December 13, 1981) and, although he is no longer able to defend the young worker, he helps to assign his mentor Labrador to the case. The ghost functions as the spirit that cannot be erased from memory, as evidenced by the widow's failed hypnotic session. The ghost of Solidarity is "alive" and impossible to forget even by those who openly do not share his convictions (like Labrador). Furthermore, Labrador's unusual name (at least in the Polish context) reinforces the issue of fidelity to the cause ("faithful as a dog"). Urszula's fidelity to her husband also extends beyond the grave.

Another question is equally puzzling. What is the title of the film referring to? No end to what? There are several possible answers. On a personal level, the title of Kieślowski's film refers to the relationship between Urszula and Antoni. On the political level, the "no end" refers to the issue of fidelity to the spirit of Solidarity. It may be, however, also a reference to the political and economic misery and other problems experienced by Poles at the beginning of the 1980s (not portrayed on the screen).

Tadeusz Sobolewski writes that the film is a "sometimes risky attempt to look at social drama exclusively from an individual perspective."⁽¹⁰⁾ Indeed, Kieślowski does little to go beyond one individual case to portray, for example, a national or generational experience. The scriptwriter Piesiewicz, however, defends this approach: "In the years 1982-1983 we lived in Poland in a somewhat unreal atmosphere. Seeking a refuge in religion or in spiritualism, as in this film, became a kind of escape from reality."⁽¹¹⁾

When *No End*, released in a limited number of prints several months after its production, finally reached the divided and highly politicised Polish society, the critics, regardless of their political stand, attacked the film and as a consequence it received no prize at the 1985 Festival of Polish Films.⁽¹²⁾ This can be attributed to the film's complex poetics, its mood of despair and defeat, its prominent metaphysical component, and its retreat from a paradocumentary realism that had been much praised by Polish critics in Kieślowski's earlier productions. Kieślowski remarked that his film "was terribly received in Poland. Terribly. I've never had such unpleasantness over any other film as I had over this one. It was received terribly by the authorities; it was received terribly by the opposition, and it was received terribly by the Church. Meaning, by the three powers that be in Poland."⁽¹³⁾ The harsh criticism of *No End*, and the sense of being ostracised, will certainly later contribute to Kieślowski's reluctant and bitter attitude toward Polish critics, his aversion to politics, and his move to international co-productions.

A penetrating observer of the new Polish cinema, critic Tadeusz Sobolewski, comments: "The experiences of martial law developed ritual reactions within the Polish culture: poetry was composed to commemorate particular occasions, along with paintings depicting the martyrdom of victims of the regime, Romantic Messianism came back to life, or rather the parody of it."⁽¹⁴⁾ It is not difficult in this context to understand

why the film was so disliked by the three powers in Poland. The Polish Roman Catholic Church despised this film's aura of hopelessness, the graphic portrayal of casual sex, the protagonist's suicide, and the depiction of love for a dead husband being stronger than maternal love. *No End*, obviously, did not meet the expectations of the communist authorities either, and was criticised by the pro-communist party critics because it portrayed martial law as the defeat of the communist regime.

The Solidarity activists and critics associated with this political formation also found it impossible to embrace *No End*. The film has nothing to do with previous "oppositional" films made in Poland because it portrays no clear conflicts between political factions. Instead, an atmosphere of death and despair permeates it. Solidarity activists expected a film more in the spirit of Wajda's propagandist *Man of Iron* that encourages the suppressed union members to maintain their struggle. Instead of characters taken from a Solidarity poster, and a simplified representation of the political life in Poland, they were offered images of powerlessness, protagonists unable to overcome the mood of defeat, living with a sense of loss. In the oppositional journals published underground, Kieślowski was accused of painting a stereotypical picture of the post-1981 situation, psychological improbabilities and, what was probably extremely painful for the director, of collaborating with the communist regime. Equally harsh comments were expressed in prestigious official journals such as *Kultura* and *Odra*.⁽¹⁵⁾ According to a number of Polish critics, Kieślowski, like the ghost in the film, only observes his fellow countrymen's misery and suffering without attempting to change it. Kieślowski's almost entomological, "un-Polish" treatment of explosive political issues, his rejection of traditional romantic and revolutionary heroes, and his metaphysical bias prompted such a response. It has to be stressed, however, that supernatural phenomena are present in some canonical examples of Polish national drama, for example Adam Mickiewicz's Romantic *Dziady* (*The Story of Forefathers*), and Stanisław Wyspiański's fin-de-siècle *Wesele* (*The Wedding*), both adapted for the screen. Equally political in nature, *No End* deals with the impossibility of overcoming the burden of the past. The dead lawyer, one of many phantoms from the nation's intricate history, serves as a reminder of the past. His very presence brings some hope for the future.

I saw the film when it was released first in Poland. It left me indifferent due to its inability to depict my own experience of the martial law and, what I perceived then as its psychological incongruities. In the course of time, and with repeating viewings, Kieślowski's film has become for me synonymous with one aspect of that experience, the atmosphere of despair, and fitting in its rendering of the martial law spirit. Two other aspects that I associate with that period however, pathos and "laughter through tears," are captured in the films made by Kazimierz Kutz in 1994: *Zawrócony* (*The Turned Back*) and *Śmierć jak kromka chleba* (*Death as a Slice of Bread*). The tragedy and pathos of the sit-in strike at the coal mine Wujek in *Death as a Slice of Bread* contrasts with the almost farcical and grotesque representation of events in *The Turned Back*. Interestingly, with the exception of the critically acclaimed and generally popular *The Turned Back*, *No End* and *Death as a Slice of Bread* worked against the trend and alienated Polish viewers with their refusal to introduce easily identifiable characters, and typical "revolutionary," Wajda-like (pro-Solidarity) narratives. Also both films, the first made during the suppression of the Solidarity movement and the latter during the period characterized by the depreciation of its myth, may serve as a powerful farewell to the epoch of Solidarity.

Despite its important subject and the presence of popular Polish actors,⁽¹⁶⁾ *No End* has never achieved the popularity it deserves. It is, however, an important work in Kieślowski's *oeuvre* and in the context of Polish cinema. With *No End* Kieślowski begins his collaboration with composer Zbigniew Preisner (b. 1955) and scriptwriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz (b. 1945) who will both help to define the style of "mature Kieślowski."

Notes

1. Maria Marszałek, "O mnie, o tobie, o wszystkich" [interview with Krzysztof Kieślowski], *Kino* 8 (1987): 9.
2. Waldemar Krzystek, "Było sobie kino," *Kino* 12 (1995): 8.
3. Danusia Stok (ed.), *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 127.
4. *Ibid.*, 134.
5. Due to this ending, the film's original title was Happy End, which may serve as an example of Kieślowski's bitter sense of humour. See Stok, 134.
6. Marszałek, "O mnie, o tobie, o wszystkich," 8.
7. Paul Coates, "Politics of Memory, Ghosts of Defeat: Kieślowski's No End," *The Polish Review* 33, No. 3 (1988): 345.
8. Philip Strick, "Bez końca (No End)," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 55, No. 650 (1988): 77.
9. Fragments of Ernest Bryll's poem in my translation.
10. Tadeusz Sobolewski, "W samotności," *Kino* 12 (1985): 12.
11. Michel Ciment's interview with Krzysztof Piesiewicz published in *Positif* (Oct. 1989). Quoted from the Polish translation: "Wyzbyć się polocentryzmu. Z Krzysztofem Piesiewiczem rozmawia Michel Ciment," *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 3/4 (1992): 23.
12. Mirosław Przyłipiak gives a detailed account of the reception of *No End* in his "Filmy fabularne Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego w zwierniadle polskiej krytyki filmowej," in Tadeusz Lubelski, *Kino Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego* (Kraków: Universitas, 1997), 213-247. Przyłipiak himself wrote a critical review of *No End* in a leading Polish monthly on cinema, *Kino*, pointing out that Kieślowski artificially mixes genres and talks "not on the topic." Mirosław Przyłipiak, "Nie na temat," *Kino* 2 (1986): 8. *No End*, however, received the Polish Federation of Cine Clubs (DKF) Award, "Don Quixote 1985."
13. Stok, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, 136.
14. Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Peace and Rebellion," in Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska and Zbigniew Batko (eds.), *Polish Cinema in Ten Takes* (Łódź: Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 1995), 133.
15. Maciej Chrzanowski, "Bez końca," *Kultura* 9 (1985): 12; Mirosław Ratajczak, "Bez znaczenia," *Odra* 10 (1985): 81-82. For example, Chrzanowski claims that *No End* is a "one-dimensional picture, black-and-white, closely resembling simplified schematas of socialist realist films." He accuses Kieślowski of "incoherent poetics and narration" in a "primitive film on a cognitive level, and placing itself on the border of paranoia on the intellectual level."
16. Apart from the presence of an actor-symbol, Jerzy Radziwiłowicz, the film relies on the performance of Grażyna Szapołowska (b. 1953), voted Best Polish Actress in 1985 and 1986 by readers of the popular weekly *Film*.

Author Information

Marek HALTOF teaches film at Northern Michigan University. His publications include *Polish National Cinema* (New York: Berghahn, 2002), *Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide* (New York: Twayne, 1996), and three books on cinema in Polish. His newest book is *Variations on Destiny and Chance: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004).