

An Extraordinary Confession

By Jan Uhde

Spring 1995 Issue of KINEMA

THE Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski is known to the world mainly through his films. Now, at the zenith of his professional career, he has added to his work a captivating autobiography. In this document, the artist offers valuable insights into his life, work and mind. He discusses metaphysical questions, reveals something about his philosophy, opinions, artistic concerns, and idiosyncrasies. Frequently, he turns his attention towards mundane practical problems and dilemmas encountered on the set, and their repercussions.

Kieślowski on Kieślowski is largely based on interviews recorded and translated in Paris in December 1991, May 1992, and Summer 1993, by the England-based writer Danusia Stok. The text also includes quotations from Kieślowski's *Guardian* lecture in London (April 1990) and his reflections published in the Swiss cultural monthly *Du*.

The introductory part of the autobiography casts light upon the author's childhood and youth, particularly on the consuming sickness (TB) of the artist's father which caused his premature death, and on young Krzysztof's childhood in postwar Poland. Yet it quickly becomes obvious that the author's attention will be focused chiefly on his films; indeed, their actual titles furnish the blueprint for the book's structure.

One reveals no secret in saying that Kieślowski has never been a conforming citizen, a professional ready to take up a lucrative assignment from any investor or sponsor. On the contrary; in the 1970s and 1980s, the director and his films stood at the forefront of a vigorous artistic protest movement in his native country. Kieślowski's films helped to establish the well-known "cinema of moral anxiety," which cast an uncompromisingly critical gaze upon that country's corrupt pre-1989 regime; in fact, they helped to bring down the communist reign in Poland.

Kieślowski's characteristic moral imperative is well illustrated through an example in the book's chapter called *Station* (also the title of one of his films). In it, the director -- then working as a documentarist -- recounts a haunting story about the communist police confiscating the candid footage he had just shot at the Warsaw train station; they were looking for some unspecified evidence. Kieślowski was anxious about a testimony his film might unwittingly provide. "And what would have happened? I'd have become a police collaborator. And that was the moment I realized that I didn't want to make any more documentaries..." Fortunately, there was nothing for the police in that footage. But, following this incident, the artist abandoned his career as a documentary director and turned to fiction.

Kieślowski's preoccupation with ethical dilemmas and the question of moral choice (abundant examples can be found in his *Decalogue* and other films) is rooted in his cultural and political background. But by no means is it confined to Poland or Eastern Europe, nor has he abandoned this subject after the demise of Communism. Kieślowski demystifies with keen insight the popular Western myth about the omnipotence of Communist censorship offering an eloquent comparison between the restrictions in the totalitarian Poland and the present situation in the western world: "[I]t was easier to make films there than it is under the economic censorship here in the West. Economic censorship means censorship imposed by people who think that they know what the audience wants."

Throughout the book, the reader finds many modest yet revealing remarks which shed light on some of the underpinnings of the extraordinary artistic accomplishment of Kieślowski's filmic oeuvre: "I always think on a small scale, and I certainly don't want to make a film about things on a macro scale, on a global scale. That doesn't interest me in the least because I don't believe societies exist, I don't believe nations exist. I think that there simply are, I don't know, 60 million individual French or 40 million individual Poles or 65 million individual British. That's what counts."

One of the pleasant surprises of Kieślowski's autobiography is the unpretentiousness of the artist's style; but this is a deceptive simplicity which, hides an insightful reflectivity and penetrating thought. The director does not shy away from statements proposed by very few people these days; he simply admits that he is a pessimist. But he also expresses more confidence in the television audience than many a fashionable media

critic: "[T]elevision in most countries -- including America -- is as idiotic as it is because the editors think people are idiots." Kieślowski is a master of understated wit which he reveals in a splendid recount of an incident worthy of a slapstick short. Once in New York, he suddenly found himself being chased through Central Park by baseball-bat-wielding Manhattan taxi-drivers who thought he had mugged one of their pals. In fact, caught in a gigantic traffic jam, the filmmaker simply had paid his fare, jumped out of the cab and ran, so as not to miss his film's first New York Festival screening at the Lincoln Center.

Kieślowski on Kieślowski, published as part of the respected *Faber Film* collection of monographs, is well annotated; this includes an introduction by Danusia Stok, Notes, an Index, filmography, and 87 monochrome photographs.

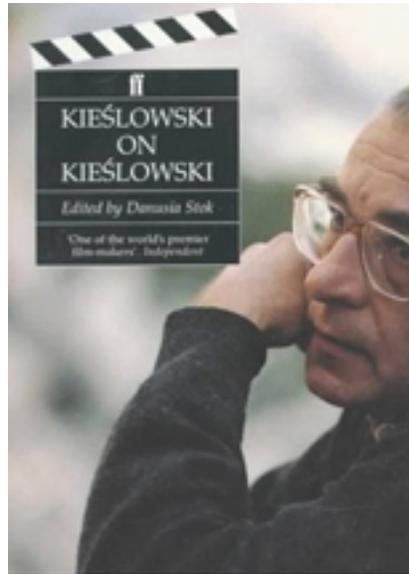


Figure 1: **BY:** Danusia Stok ¶ **PUBLISHER:** London: Faber and Faber ¶ **YEAR:** 1993 ¶ **PAGES:** 268pp

Author Information

Jan UHDE is Professor Emer. (Film Studies) at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Born in Brno, Czech Republic. Graduated (MA) from the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno; PhD received at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He taught at the University of Waterloo (1970-2012) where he founded a General and Honours BA program in Film Studies at the Department of Fine Arts.

Publications: *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* Second edition, with Yvonne Ng Uhde (Ridge Books, National University Press of Singapore, 2010); *Latent Images: Film in Singapore*, with Yvonne Ng Uhde (Oxford University Press, 2000); *Latent Images: Film in Singapore CD-ROM* (2003, co-author); *Vision and Persistence: Twenty Years of the Ontario Film Institute* (University of Waterloo Press, 1990) and *Ontario Film Institute Programming Activities Index 1969-1989* (Toronto: Ontario Science Centre, 1990). He co-edited the *Place in Space: Human Culture in Landscape* (Proceedings from the Second International Conference of the Working Group "Culture and Landscape" of the International Association of Landscape Ecology, Pudoc Scientific Publishers, Wageningen, Holland, 1993). Jan Uhde has published articles and reviews in several countries (including Canada, USA, Germany, Italy), participated in international juries at film festivals and presented papers at international conferences in North America and Europe. In 1998/99, he was a visiting researcher at the School for Film and Media Studies, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore.

His professional and research interests focus on Singapore cinema; the identification and distancing mechanisms of the film viewer; the non-authored modifications and manipulation of films; and specific aspects of

film history, including the Central European cinema.
He founded KINEMA in 1993.