

Kieślowski's "Trois Couleurs" Trilogy

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Krzysztof Kieślowski's "Trois Couleurs" Trilogy: The Auteur's Preoccupation with (missed) chances and (missed) connections

When the first two films of Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski's "Trois Couleurs" trilogy, *Blue* (1993) and *White* (1994) were chosen to open and close the distinguished 18th Hong Kong International Film Festival, festival buffs and critics were delighted. The great director was himself in attendance at the opening, albeit in a sling with an injured arm on the night of 25th March 1994. Then he left the British Colony and returned to close the festival with *White* on 9th April 1994.

Kieślowski later confirmed in an interview that *Red*, the third film of "Trois Couleurs" would also be his last, after which he would "retire." One finds it hard to believe that a great auteur whose oeuvre includes the famed *Decalogue* (10 films made for television, inspired by the Ten Commandments) and *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), a film whose cinematic depiction of chance, coincidence, and fate has no parallel in modern cinema, would simply fade into retirement or obscurity.

The stature of the trilogy was so big that even the usually sedate commercial art film-houses in Singapore took a chance and screened the three films in staccato succession between late 1994 and mid-1995. For its part, the Singapore Film Society continued to screen the trilogy in a repeat series from January till February 1996, in recognition of the quality and importance of the films.

Why such a spate of interest in this unassuming Polish filmmaker's later works when the earlier and critically acclaimed *A Short Film About Killing* and *A Short Film About Love* (reworked longer versions of *Decalogue 5* and *6*) had never been screened commercially except at film festivals? Perhaps the fascination is due to Kieślowski's unique vision of characters whose fates are obliquely intertwined on a physical and metaphysical level; characters who sometimes cross each other's paths for only a brief moment, sometimes more profoundly involved. In his film universe, every character counts, as does every chance encounter and rendezvous. In the involving "Trois Couleurs," each film is powerfully complete and self-contained; seen as a continuous whole; the trilogy is a hallucinatory, cumulative sensory experience that uplifts, informs and delights.

Kieślowski's thematic trilogy is inspired by the French national colours: *Blue* signifies liberty, *White*, equality and *Red*, fraternity. In *Blue*, Juliette Binoche (*Unbearable Lightness of Being, Damage*) plays Julie, the widow of a late music composer who has died in a car accident with their daughter, leaving her as the sole survivor. Binoche won the best actress award at the 1993 Venice Film Festival and also at the 1994 French César Awards for her expressive performance as a woman who reinvents herself after the demise of her family. The colour blue bathes this sublime film about self-redemption, the motif suggesting the "cool" solitude of a woman coming to terms with herself, her personal catastrophe and its reverberations.

If one cares to look for a parallel to this film, Kieślowski's *The Double Life of Veronique* comes to mind. In this brilliant film about the crossed parallel lives of two young women, one living in Poland (Weronika) and the other in France (Véronique), both roles are played by the delightful Irène Jacob. Like Véronique, Julie searches for her own identity and a new life, rejecting her once generous, naive nature for a stronger, hardier one. Her reward is in finding liberty in being alone. She comes to terms with the fact that she may or may not have been scoring her husband's compositions and also deals with the sudden discovery that her late husband had kept a mistress-lawyer who is now pregnant with his child.

The music by composer Zbigniew Preisner follows the spiritual, metaphysical and creative progress of Julie's character - the music seeming to emanate from deep inside her mind. Like her trying search for independence and solitude, the tension in the music strives for liberation. Towards the finale of the film, Julie's recreation of her husband's music which is continuously playing in her head becomes like an erotic release: when her hands touch the musical score, the music rises and drowns the audience in a wave of climaxes and anti-climaxes. That is Kieślowski's world -- what the Buddhists call fate or destiny at work -- which sweeps us

mere mortals off our feet.

The next film, *White* is more difficult and complex but it is even better. The moments of great comic farce result from the inherent black humour of the film. A diminutive Polish hairdresser, Karol Karol (played by Zbigniew Zamachowski of *Decalogue 10* fame) falls for a calculating French model Dominique (Julie Delpy) at a hairdressing competition. He sells all his worldly goods and moves with her to Paris. Uncouth, inarticulate in French, and poor as a church-mouse, he discovers that he is impotent and is unable to consummate their marriage. Dominique sues for divorce. With just two francs in Paris, he manages to fly back to Poland hidden in a suitcase, courtesy of his Polish friend in exchange for a favour.

From here onwards, *White* is set up as a marital revenge-cum-sex-farce. Once in Poland, Karol plots to get even with Dominique. He hoards money, builds up a lucrative trade and "earns" his equality - or so he thinks. Meanwhile back in Paris, Dominique, who thinks she has freed herself by getting rid of her husband, winds up the loser - on the physical and spiritual level. Still, Karol plots an ultimate revenge by faking his own death; Julie falls for it and is accused of his murder. Seeing her behind bars, Karol realises that he still loves her; thus his revenge is painfully frustrated. *White* won the Silver Bear at the 1994 Berlin Film Festival.

The third part of the trilogy -- *Red* -- is the most sumptuous, celebrated and acclaimed of all the three films. Once again, the film evokes the similar themes of parallel lives, chance and coincidence in *The Double Life of Veronique*. Central to the film is the retired judge (Jean-Louis Trintignant) whose life is set to repeat itself in a karmic pattern. Once betrayed by the woman he loved, the same fate now falls on a romantically-frustrated young law-school graduate.

Irène Jacob, the winner of the Cannes Festival's 1991 Best Actress for *The Double Life of Veronique*, plays Valentine, a Geneva fashion model who has reached the tethers of a failed love affair. The film opens brilliantly on the mediation of human communication or rather, the lack of it. As the camera tracks swiftly from England through to Switzerland vis-a-vis the telephone lines across vast distances, the signal travels at the speed of light to reach Valentine at the other end, where she tries to connect with her boyfriend.

What pulls one into *Red* is the great veteran French actor Jean-Louis Trintignant who plays Joseph. A bitter, retired judge in late middle age, Joseph has become a reclusive misanthrope who passes his time by tapping the telephones of his unsuspecting neighbours and eavesdropping on their lives. The lives of Valentine and the judge intertwine when her car knocks down his dog and she traces its ownership to the indifferent former judge. Valentine is at first shocked by Joseph's coldness and even more so later when she comes to know of his wire-tapping activities. Unperturbed by her reaction, he challenges her to inform on him. As she comes to know him better, Valentine finds in him a soul-mate but the forty-year gap between them rules out romance.

Kieślowski's powerful portrayal of a brooding and cynical retired judge who has never loved again after having been betrayed by the girl he once loved lends the film a primal sense of loss and affirmation.

The element of coincidence or chance comes in the form of an aspiring young lawyer who is leading the reincarnated life of Joseph forty years ago. Similarly betrayed in love as was the former judge, the lawyer is Valentine's counterpart. Although he lives just around the corner from Valentine, their paths crisscross, but never quite connect. As such, they remain unaware of each other's existence. In bringing the young lawyer together with Valentine, Joseph gives the young man another chance at love, a chance which he had denied himself. In this way he redeems himself from his embittered past. In all the three films, there is a recurring image of a bent old lady trying valiantly to put a bottle into a recycling bin - that existential act is observed by all the three main characters in each film. At the end of *Red*, The viewer meets all three female protagonists of Kieślowski's "Trois couleurs" as they are rescued from a sinking ferry.

In this scene, we also observe the relief and delight in Joseph's eyes when he sees on the television screen Valentine together with his young charge rescued and alive among the survivors.

The latest news is that if his health permits, Kieślowski would be embarking on another trilogy titled *Heaven, Hell and Purgatory*. Whatever his chosen path, Kieślowski will continue to resonate in us every time we see his films. In his universe, all human connections, even the ones that are missed, matter. In short, you and I

matter.

Notes

Editor's note: This contribution was written in December 1995 when Krzysztof Kieslowski was still alive. He died following a heart operation in March 1996. We share the sadness of all who feel the loss of this great director. He made films that mattered.

Author Information

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