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Slavic Review

SLAVIC

REVIEW

AMERICAN QUARTERLY OF RUSSIAN, EURASIAN AND
EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES

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Kieslowski on Kieslowski. Ed. Danusia Stok. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993. 268 pp. Illustrations. Index. Filmography. \$22.95, hard bound.

Back in 1991, Faber and Faber published the complete script of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue*, a book of interest to screenwriters exclusively. The 1993 autobiographical *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, based on a number of interviews with writer and filmmaker Danusia Stok, addresses wider audiences. Because it is distributed through the network of academic bookstores, however, it will reach mostly students of film. It will be an important addition to their bookshelves—the way Andrzej Wajda's *Double Vision* (1989) has been.

Kieslowski on Kieslowski is a timely publication, appearing at a moment of booming interest in Kieslowski's work. All his later features—Polish-made *Decalogue* (1988), as well as the French productions, *Double Life of Veronique* (1991) and *Three Colors (Blue,*

White, Red (1993/94)—enjoyed wide international acclaim. Also earlier films like *Camera Buff* (1979), *Blind Chance* (1981) and *No End* (1984) were recently released and are available in American video distribution.

In his book, Kieslowski claims that in 1988, the year of a crucial shift in his work, he observed “a general uncertainty in the world at large” and “mutual indifference behind polite smiles.” He realized that many people “didn’t really know why they were living.” Ever since then he has been concerned about the “powers which meddle with our fate, which push us one way or another,” and he is trying to understand “the commanding dictums” of morality and destiny. And since then he has been trying to film what is hardest to film: “the realm of superstitions, fortune-telling, presentiments, intuition, dreams.”

His explorations of this realm bear attractive and fascinating subtlety. Working lately in a firmly set team that includes co-script writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz, cameraman Slawomir Idziak and composer Zbigniew Preisner, Kieslowski is the most successful survivor of the troubled Polish film industry during times of market transitions. He knows how to secure foreign funding and wider exposure for his films, and refers to his absence from Poland as a “transit.” His book reveals how he succeeds: by soberly estimating the legacy of existence under communism and by mastering the art of compromise without renouncing his core credo.

Realizing that Americans do not understand the ending of *Veronique*, he reshot a special version for them, a clearer one. He confesses also to other, smaller or bigger, compromises, and he does so with dignity and pragmatism. The fact that he does not succumb to a cheap temptation to glorify himself as an unyielding fighter of repressiveness and ignorance is to be appreciated. He chooses to reflect on things in their complexity and ambiguity.

Born in Warsaw in 1941, Kieslowski tells the story of his childhood, of his years of apprenticeship at the Lodz film school, of his extensive experience in documentaries—a path followed by a great many Polish filmmakers and one which directly influenced his later approach to feature film. His *Workers '71* (1971) and *From a Night Porter's Point of View* (1978) document his well balanced antitotalitarianism. He acknowledges his even-tempered attitude to his teacher Zanussi, who let him run the TOR film unit, and to others belonging to the cinema of moral anxiety: Agnieszka Holland, Felix Flak, Janus Kijowski.

It is difficult not to be a dissident without gradually turning into a conformist. Kieslowski, however, has not become one. He is not inclined to overestimate his resistance to censorship and he is cautious about making strong statements regarding his political commitment. Rather he is preoccupied with the difficulties people experience in adjusting to postcommunist reality. Under communism, “choices were pretty simple.” Today, however, censorship has been transformed from a clearly identifiable mechanism of repression into a vague and overwhelming device with a missing operator: “We’re allowed to say everything now but people have stopped caring what we’re allowed to say.”

Kieslowski began as another member of that fine Polish school of filmmaking committed to exploring the fragile boundary between morality and politics. After 1988 he ascended to abstract and painfully beautiful enigmatic depictions of the most profound conundrums of humanity—identity, love, death, destiny. *Kieslowski on Kieslowski* reflects the important presence of the director in humanity’s discourse in these times of uncertainty and anxiety.

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