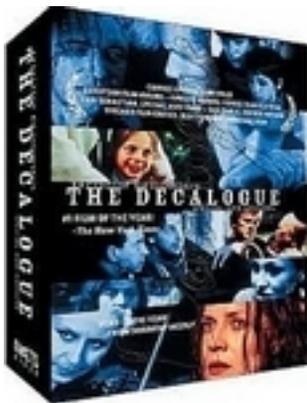


What Should We Do?

A review of the film



The Decalogue: 1 to 5

(1988)

Krzysztof Kieslowski (Director)



Reviewed by
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In *The Decalogue*, written by Krzysztof Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz, and directed by Kieslowski, the Ten Commandments act as starting points for 10 one-hour films about the effects of human actions on other people. The films were made originally as a miniseries for Polish television and are now available as a boxed set of three DVDs with English subtitles.

The First Commandment is: “I am the Lord thy God... Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2–3, King James version). *Decalogue I*, the film associated with it, is about a university professor (Henryk Baranowski) for whom the computer has become the new God. He is constantly making calculations. It is winter. Ice covers the lake near where he and his 10-year-old son (Wojciech Klata) live in a relationship of tender

affection. The father asks his son to phone the weather bureau to find what the temperature has been on each of the last few days. He takes the data, makes a calculation on his home computer, and tells the boy that the ice will bear a person three times his weight. The father has just given his son a new pair of skates. A surprise thaw occurs, and the ice does not support the boy's weight.

The theme of this story is that of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818/1985). The moral question is whether, with our knowledge and technologies, we humans might overreach ourselves. It is not that technology is bad: Every human society is based on it, from the stone tools of our ancestors to the inventions of building, transport, medicine, and communication of our modern age. But changes in the Earth's climate, larger versions perhaps of the thaw on the lake in *Decalogue 1*, indicate that we face hard decisions about the uses of our technologies.

In his introduction to the screenplays of *The Decalogue* (Kieslowski & Piesiewicz, 1991), Kieslowski said that the mid-1980s, when these films were made, was a difficult time in Poland. Dissatisfaction contributed to the Solidarity movement. Martial law was imposed. Socially, everyone suffered hardships, shortages, and constant problems with the bureaucracy. The bleakness of the times comes through, but the writers of these films wanted to treat neither politics nor the daily grind. They wanted something universal: to make films about “extraordinary situations for [their] characters, ones in which they would face difficult choices and make decisions that could not be taken lightly” (pp. xii–xiii).

In *Decalogue 1*, the professor may not have thought that his devotion to the computer had a moral dimension. In the other *Decalogue* films, characters are more aware of the decisions they face. At the same time the relation of these other films to the Ten Commandments is oblique. *Decalogue 2* is prompted by the Second Commandment: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” (Exodus 20:7). It is about a woman violinist whose husband is gravely ill. (Music is important in the films: The scores are haunting music by Zbigniew Preisner.) The violinist (Krystyna Janda) is pregnant by another man. If her husband were to live, she would stay with him and have an abortion. If her husband were about to die, she would have the baby and raise it with her lover. She loves both her husband and the father of her unborn child. She tells her husband's doctor (Aleksander Bardini) of her predicament and asks about her husband's chances. Should the doctor make a prediction and influence the woman's decision about an abortion? And what should the woman do?

The domain of difficult choices has been visited by psychologists such as Lawrence Kohlberg (1969). In his studies of moral development, he gave subjects vignettes like this. Heinz's wife is dying. A drug that might save her is being sold by the town druggist for \$2,000, 10 times what it should cost, but Heinz has no money and cannot borrow any. Should he steal the drug? In philosophical ethics, Philippa Foot (1967/1978) used vignettes such as this: Imagine “the driver of a runaway tram which he can only steer from one narrow track on to another; five men are working on one track and one man on the other” (p. 23).

What should the driver do? Trolley problems of this kind have reached *The New York Times Magazine* in, for example, Steven Pinker's (2008) article "The Moral Instinct."

Vignettes are convenient. But how much better for understanding questions of right action would be fiction films in which the viewer could enter into situations in their complexity and uncertainty, to identify with characters as they face difficult decisions. This is what the films of *The Decalogue* accomplish.

Decalogue 3 ("Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy"; Exodus 20:8) is about Janusz (Daniel Olbrychski), a Warsaw taxi driver. His former lover (Maria Pakulnis) inveigles him away from his wife and family on the evening of Christmas Eve by asking him to help find her husband, Edward, who has not come home. It was Edward for whom she left Janusz.

"Do you know the game where if a man appears around a corner, it's good luck, and if it's a woman it's bad luck?" the woman asks Janusz after she has kept him out until seven o'clock on Christmas Morning. Now she tells him that Edward left her long ago, and for the past three years he has been living in Krakow with his new wife. The woman has been playing a game in which, if she manages to keep Janusz out until morning, she would continue living alone as she has been; the implication is that she would now be able to accept this kind of life. Should Janusz have let himself be drawn in? Did the woman act out of longing in an unconscious fantasy, or out of resentment? Or did she play the game to test out Janusz's attachment to his present wife?

Decalogue 4 (prompted by "Honor thy father and thy mother"; Exodus 20:12) is about Michal (Janusz Gajos) and his very appealing 20-year-old daughter, Anna (Adrianna Biedrzynska). Anna finds an envelope on which is written, in her father's handwriting, "Not to be opened before my death." Should she open it? While Michal is away on a trip, Anna opens the envelope, and finds another inside it, with different handwriting that says: "For my daughter, Anna."

Anna goes to the airport to meet Michal on his return and confronts him. She starts reciting, apparently from the letter her mother wrote to her before she died, when Anna was only five days old: "My darling daughter, I do not know what you will look like... Michal is not your father." Michal and Anna have been extremely close and affectionate. Anna hints at her sexual feelings for Michal. Now, partly in anger that he is not her father, she tempts him toward sexualizing their relationship. What should they do?

Decalogue 5 is about "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13). A lawyer at the beginning of his career (Krzysztof Globisz) is appointed to defend a young psychopath, Jacek (Miroslaw Baka), who has murdered a taxi driver (not Janusz, of *Decalogue 3*, though protagonists from earlier films in the series sometimes have walk-on parts in later films). Jacek committed the murder for no reason other than that being a taxi passenger put him in a position to garrote the driver. The lawyer is unsuccessful in trying to dissuade the court from the death penalty. Miroslaw Baka, who plays Jacek, depicts a psychopath—not the Hollywood kind who is supercool, highly skilled, and without emotions but the ordinary

kind who violently victimizes others. The film does not mention childhood physical abuse, which is a typical precursor of psychopathic violence in young males (Caspi et al., 2002), but Jacek's nihilism, anger, and contempt are superbly portrayed. Are people who behave like this really human? Do they deserve to live?

The *Decalogue* films are poignant, with brilliant directing and acting in intense stories that all have unexpected twists. One could imagine a story in which a professor of psychology teaching a course in moral development, instead of using vignettes asks students each week to watch one of these films and discuss it in class to understand themselves better in their doing good and doing harm to others. *Decalogue 8* is about a professor of ethics who uses pieces of biography in exactly this way. The second review of *The Decalogue* will review it, along with the other films of *The Decalogue: 6 to 10*.

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