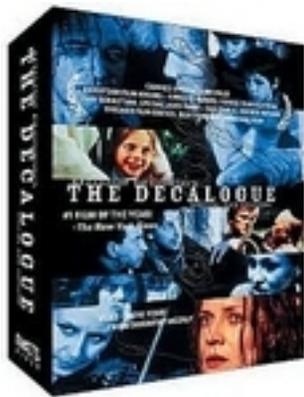


## Rules We Live By

A review of the film



### **The Decalogue: 6 to 10**

(1988)

Krzysztof Kieslowski (Director)



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Reviewed by  
[Keith Oatley](#)

Any understanding of social psychology must take account of the rules of society and the inner rules of our genetics and upbringing. It was, perhaps, an insight of heads of societies long ago that, with the invention of writing, rules that were written down could be promulgated so that they might override individual inclinations. Among the oldest such laws are those of the Code of Hammurabi, a king of Babylon who ruled nearly 4,000 years ago. The code consisted of 282 laws written in stone in the Semitic language Akkadian (Richardson, 2000).

Hebrew society derived many customs from Babylonian culture, and Moses, too, produced laws written in stone: the Ten Commandments (Decalogue), which have given rise

to 10 one-hour films directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski about the rules we follow as we make difficult decisions. In Part 1, I reviewed the first 5 of these films. Here I review the last 5.

*Decalogue 6* is prompted by the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14, King James version). It is about two people who are not married, so technically they cannot commit adultery together. But they can indulge in forbidden sexual behavior. For a year, Tomek (Olaf Lubaszenko) has spied on a 30-year-old woman (Grazyna Szapolowska) who lives in an apartment opposite him. She has had a number of boyfriends, and through his telescope trained on her window Tomek has seen her comings and her goings. Tomek merits a psychiatric diagnosis of voyeurism (Mann, Ainsworth, Al-Attar, & Davies, 2008). In everyday terms, he has fallen in love with the woman.

He works at the post office and sends her notices that say she has money to collect. There is no money: Tomek has sent the notices so the woman will visit the post office. He tells her he has been watching her. Now comes the film's first surprise. The woman is annoyed, but not very annoyed. She becomes interested in Tomek: a sweet 19-year-old virgin, brought up in an orphanage. The two become closer.

“Do you want to kiss me?” she asks.

“No.”

“Do you want to make love to me?”

“No.”

The woman accepts an invitation to coffee, and Tomek is overjoyed. He says he loves her, but she says there is no such thing as love. We come to see that for him, loving her is enough. But it's not enough for her. She invites him to her apartment and seduces him. He is ashamed, goes back to his apartment, slits his wrists, but is saved and is sent to the hospital. Now the woman starts yearning for Tomek. Is she starting to believe in love? Sexual love seems necessarily to involve projection (Djikic & Oatley, 2004). This film is remarkable in its portrayal of two people each caught up in a projective fantasy that is so solipsistic that their real difficulty—the real problem for love—is whether they can engage with each other at all. What can they do?

The protagonists in all 10 films in this series live in a large apartment complex. It's the apartment buildings that make Tomek's snooping possible. But the complex has a wider significance. It is a means of saying to us viewers as we watch first one resident and then another that these people caught in these situations are every one of us. They could be you or me.

*Decalogue 7* is based on “Thou shalt not steal” (Exodus 20:15). It's the sad story of Majke (Maja Barelkowska) who, at the age of 16, had a baby fathered by a teacher at her school at which her mother (Anna Polony) was the principal. The mother takes the infant as her own so that her daughter can continue her education. But is this the reason, or does Majke's mother take the child because she wants it? When the child is six, Majke kidnaps her daughter. She's not stealing, of course, because the child is hers. This is a story about a power struggle and about the power of motherhood. It's a story that tears at us.

*Decalogue 8* (“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor”; Exodus 20:16) is about Zofia (Maria Koscialkowska), a senior professor of ethics. A researcher, Elzbieta (Teresa Marczevska), visiting from New York, wants to sit in on her class. A student in the class poses a problem: she gives a synopsis of the plot of *Decalogue 2*, of the pregnant woman who wants to know whether her sick husband will die so that she can decide whether to abort the child of her lover.

Now Elzbieta poses a problem to the class: A six-year-old Jewish girl in Warsaw in 1943 is taken to a family who have said they will be godparents so that the girl can be christened and adopted rather than be deported as prescribed by Nazi law. But the putative godmother has changed her mind. She cannot be a godmother: Her religion forbids the bearing of false witness. It looks as if the six-year-old is being condemned to death. Did the woman refuse for the reason she gave? It turns out that another family saves the six-year-old, who grows up to be Elzbieta, the researcher. Zofia, the professor, is the woman who was expected to be her godmother. Why did Zofia act as she did? Is there anything that would satisfy Elzbieta now as she confronts Zofia?

Along with *Decalogue 2*, this film has a theme close to that of the trolley problems discussed in the previous review: problems posed as vignettes in which one has to choose between something bad happening to one person or to several. Vignettes have become useful in psychology, as they tap moral intuitions, such as the one discovered by Waldemann and Dieterich (2007) that most people think it is right to affect the path of an inanimate agent such as the trolley so that it kills one rather than five people but wrong to act on people themselves, for instance by pushing them under the trolley or in some way that directly condemns them to death.

This conclusion bears on the events of *Decalogue 8*. By refusing to act as a godmother, Zofia seems to condemn the six-year-old Elzbieta to death. Suddenly, in this film, we see the shortcomings of vignettes. They are schematic puzzles, whereas fiction films can allow us to experience the social world in relation to our fears and our yearnings to do the right thing. *Decalogue 8* is extremely moving, and one feels oneself immediately into the positions of the people who must make the decisions.

In *Decalogue 9*, based on “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife” (Exodus 20:17), a sensitive man (Piotr Machalica) who is successful in his career has become sexually impotent. His condition cannot be cured. He tells his wife (Ewa Blaszczyk) that perhaps she should have an affair. Then he discovers that she is already having one. He becomes

suicidal. When he finds that his wife has ended her affair, she says she loves him and that his condition is mere biology. But can he trust her? Can he accept her love when he feels he is no longer lovable?

The final film, based on “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods” (Exodus 20:17), concerns two brothers (Jerzy Stuhr and Zbigniew Zamachowski) whose father dies. They discover that their father has left a stamp collection known to stamp dealers as worth hundreds of millions of zlotys. With a dishonest stamp dealer, they enter a pact that involves one brother donating a kidney to obtain a rare stamp. Then each brother starts to suspect the other of dishonesty. What is this urge to own things, even small things like stamps?

I hope I have described enough of each film of *The Decalogue* for you to get a sense of the issues. These films, by the finest filmmakers, are somewhat austere. Some are harrowing, as one might expect with people facing terrible choices. Most are superb. They take moral reasoning beyond the psychology laboratory or classroom. If you feel like discussing the inner laws of our being, then you could scarcely do better than choosing one of these films and watching it with a friend or partner.

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