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## *Decalogue Five: A Short Film about Killing, Sin, and Community*

*Michael Baur*

*Decalogue Five* tells the story of Waldemar Rekowski (Jan Tesarz), a jaded taxi driver, Piotr Balicki (Krzysztof Globisz), an idealistic, newly-licensed attorney, and Jacek Lazar (Mirosław Baka), a young and troubled drifter, whose lives intersect with one another as a result of fate, or contingent circumstance, or some combination of both. With brutal detail and detachment, the film depicts Jacek's seemingly aimless wanderings through Warsaw, his senseless killing of Waldemar, his interactions with Piotr (his court-appointed attorney), and his eventual execution after a failed defense in court. Like other films within the *Decalogue* series, *Five* illustrates what happens when human beings are forced to confront ethical dilemmas (and thus are forced to confront themselves as responsible moral decision makers) in a world that seems to offer little in the way of moral direction, meaning, purpose, and community with others. Discussing the overarching aim of the *Decalogue* series as a whole, Krzysztof Kiesłowski refers to the sense of alienation, aimlessness, and loneliness that often describes the human condition:

*Decalogue* is an attempt to narrate ten stories about ten or twenty individuals, who—caught in a struggle precisely because of these and

not other circumstances, circumstances which are fictitious but which could occur in everyday life—suddenly realize that they're going round and round in circles, that they're not achieving what they want.<sup>1</sup>

Of the three main characters in *Five*, two in particular—Jacek and Waldemar—seem to illustrate the directionless, alienated form of existence that constitutes the subject matter of the *Decalogue* series as a whole. Paul Coates describes Jacek's aimless and menacing wanderings throughout the city as the wanderings of someone who “stalks Warsaw like an edgy, existential angel of doom.”<sup>2</sup> While Waldemar appears to be better off in some respects—he is married and employed, after all—it is apparent that he does not share much affection with his fellow citizens. When we first meet Waldemar, we see him walking around the housing complex where he lives and narrowly escaping being hit by a clump of wet, dirty rags thrown down at him from a resident above.

In general, Jacek and Waldemar seem not to care much about the world that surrounds them, and the world, in turn, seems to care little about them. Neither Jacek nor Waldemar is especially likable, and both are seen to be capable of violence and callousness as they interact—or fail to interact—with their fellow citizens. For example, we see Jacek attack another young man in a public restroom and throw him violently into a urinal, all for no apparent reason. Also for no apparent reason, Jacek runs into a crowd of pigeons being fed in a public square, scaring the pigeons away from the woman who had been trying to feed them. While on a highway overpass, Jacek places a rock on the overpass ledge and nudges it until it falls off into traffic below, causing what sounds like a serious and perhaps even fatal accident. After finishing his coffee and cake in a local café, Jacek leaves a large dollop of spit in his empty coffee cup; then, before leaving the café, he flings a large spoonful of leftover food at the café's window, where two little girls had been standing and looking in on him.

Although Waldemar is a more established and gainfully employed member of society, he also has his moments of callousness and cruelty. While washing his taxicab, Waldemar takes his time and shows no sympathy or concern for the couple (Dorota and her husband from *Two*), who, after asking for a ride, waits patiently for him at the taxi stand. Once he is finished washing his taxi, he drives off without saying a word to the couple, leaving them stranded in the cold. While driving his taxi, Waldemar honks his horn at a man and his two dogs as they pass by, for no reason other than to witness the frightened reaction of the man and his dogs. In another scene, while Waldemar waits near the taxi stand, we see him ogling the

young girl at the nearby vegetable kiosk and trying to look up her skirt as she reaches to receive vegetables from a delivery truck. And in a selfish act that will indirectly lead to his demise, Waldemar quickly drives off rather than giving a ride to an obviously inebriated man being helped by a friend to the taxi stand. In so doing, Waldemar keeps himself available to pick up Jacek as his next and—as it turns out—final passenger.

While both Jacek and Waldemar are unlikable in many respects, they display at least a few redeeming qualities. For example, Jacek shows genuine affection for others, especially for young girls, as is evident from the way he pensively observes the images of young girls being displayed in the window of the photography shop, and by the way he thoughtfully looks on as the street artist draws a portrait of the young girl sitting for him. There is at least a hint of genuine humanity and kindness in Waldemar when he decides to share half of his sandwich with a hungry stray dog. However, we should not think that these better and worse impulses reside in Jacek and Waldemar alongside one another as two entirely distinct and separable sides of their characters. It is an undeniable fact of human nature and psychology that some of our cruelest and most antisocial impulses are intimately bound up with our impulses toward genuine affection and community with others. Thus, Jacek's flinging of food in the direction of the little girls at the café window may certainly be understood as a sign of aggression, but just as plausibly it may also be understood as an attempt—though perhaps an awkward one—at sharing a laugh with them. The dual character of Jacek's act is clearly indicated by the ambivalent reaction of the little girls. As they turn to run away from the café window, the girls laugh, but their laugh is not an entirely comfortable one; while they laugh, their faces also show the uneasy awareness that Jacek's act of flinging food in their direction was not just (potentially) funny, but menacing and aggressive as well. A similar duality can be seen in Waldemar's act of sharing half of his sandwich with the stray dog. On the one hand, Waldemar's act may be understood as a sign of genuine kindness and concern for another needy, living being. On the other hand, as the film makes clear, the sandwich that Waldemar shares with the stray dog is a sandwich that had been prepared for him by his wife; and so, this very act of sharing might equally be understood as a sign of disdain for the wife, as if Waldemar were telling himself that the sandwich prepared for him by his own wife is really only fit for a dog.

Of course, we cannot be entirely sure what to make of these acts by Jacek and Waldemar. They are acts that seemingly and inextricably bind together cruelty and kindness. But this seems to be one of the points that Kieślowski wishes to make about the human state. Given our alienated and warped

condition, it is often the case that we humans simply do not know how to actualize our better impulses without also giving reign to our worse impulses. That is, we simply do not know how to reach out to others and seek community with them, without also introducing into our actions certain elements of callousness, cruelty, or aggression.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one of the overriding lessons that emerges in *Five* and in the rest of the *Decalogue* series is that the systems or institutions which we humans have created for ourselves—systems that are supposed to enable us to achieve our better aspirations and goals—often conspire to frustrate our better strivings and to convince us that our strivings are in vain. In *Five*, the problematic systems within which we live—including our political systems, our systems of modern science and technology, the system of incentives and punishments known as the law, and the system of organized religion—are visually hinted at through Warsaw's Inflancka housing complex, which is the setting for much of the action in the *Decalogue* series as a whole. Like the housing complex, these systems often give people shelter for living, but not for living well; like the housing complex, they allow large numbers of people to live together, but they often frustrate our strivings for genuine togetherness and community. And so we often find ourselves trying to actualize our better impulses precisely in ways that seem destined to fail; and thus in ways that lead to a sense of frustration, aggression, and lack of direction. Just as Kieślowski said of the characters in *The Decalogue*, we too find ourselves “going round and round in circles” and “not achieving what we want” (KK, 145).

The Roman Catholic tradition (including the tradition that is very much part of Kieślowski's native Poland) has a name for the mechanism by which systems of our own making regularly frustrate, stunt, and warp our better aspirations toward genuine sharing and community with others. The tradition's name for this mechanism is original sin. Of course, we should be very careful about attributing to Kieślowski a theological outlook that is foreign to his own. It is well known that Kieślowski did not feel great attachment to the Roman Catholic Church, and—as one critic has observed—he did not have “much use for institutional Christianity” in general.<sup>4</sup> But in spite of his own critical self-distancing from institutional religion in general and from the Roman Catholic Church in particular, it is possible that Kieślowski's view of the human condition does indeed reflect certain views espoused, though in some cases also misunderstood, by proponents of institutionalized religion.

The point of original sin—as opposed to sin that is not original—is that it affects us in our very beginnings, our very origins, our very coming-into-being. It is not the kind of sin that arises out of misjudgments or bad

choices by the individual alone. It is original in the sense that it characterizes the human condition through which we have our very being. But what is this human condition? Significantly, the human condition is a condition of interpersonal interdependence and socialization. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has described the human condition as the condition of “dependent rational animals”:<sup>5</sup> We depend on others not only because our biological needs have to be met (though that is certainly the case), but also, and more important, because we need others in order to acquire the virtues without which we could not be the rational, human agents that we aspire to be. The human being is by nature a social animal, and thus we humans need others in order to become what we truly are as human beings. When we do not have the help and support of others, we quite literally do not have ourselves. I have my being and my humanity by virtue of the communication, mutual support, and sharing that I have with others, but because of this, if there is any failing, perversion, or distortion in the means and mechanisms of my sharing and communicating with others, there is equally a failing, perversion, or distortion in my very own being. This is what original sin refers to: the perversion or distortion that is inscribed in my very being, insofar as my very being depends on systems of communication and sharing that are themselves perverted or distorted.

Furthermore, original sin cannot be eradicated through the initiative of individuals (even if this initiative were widespread or even universal among individuals) to treat each other better and more humanely. The point of original sin is that the failed, alienating systems within which we live will always persist at disguising themselves, justifying themselves, and co-opting for their own ends the very weapons that we might fashion in order to oppose them. The problem of original sin is helpfully explained by Herbert McCabe, one of the twentieth century’s most refreshingly creative and yet reliable expositors of the Roman Catholic faith. As McCabe writes,

The point is that we are born into a society which in various ways fails us as we stand in need of love. And for this reason we are born crippled (using the word “born” in a more extended sense). And our society does not fail us simply because of the ill will of individual members but because of the structures it represents, because of the role it assigns these members. You could be born and brought up in a group who were all individually saints and you would still be subject to the deprivation we call the Sin of the World.<sup>6</sup>

We depend on others for our own humanity, and yet the systems that we create for our own humanity systematically fail us, not because of any

particular shortcoming on the part of individuals, but because of the distortions and perversions embedded within the systems and media through which we relate to each other and communicate with each other. These systems cannot be corrected by better, kinder decisions by individuals, because the distorting powers embedded in these systems exceed our ability, individually and collectively, to control them. They will always co-opt our best efforts to counteract them, since each of us (dependent on such systems of communication and socialization for our very humanity) cannot escape operating from within the means provided by these systems themselves.

The problem is illustrated by the change in Piotr's thinking over the course of *Five*. Near the beginning of the film, Piotr suggests that the law (or "the application of justice") might "correct the mistakes" of "a giant machine" which tends to dominate our lives. By the end of the film, however, Piotr has grown to realize that the law itself has been co-opted by and made to do the bidding of this giant, anonymous, and ineluctable machine.

It is worthwhile to say more at this point about the connection between original sin and our need to live within systems of socialization and communication with others. On one level or another, all material beings in the universe interact with their environments, which is to say that they exist in community or in communication with other material beings. But the character of such interaction and communication varies, depending on the degree of excellence represented by the kind of being in question. In general, the higher or more excellent kinds of material beings are capable of more excellent kinds of communication (more complete and more intimate kinds of sharing) with other beings. But it is precisely because of their more excellent and higher degrees of communication with others that such higher beings also face greater risks, greater vulnerabilities, and greater chances for failure and perversion than lower beings do. One might say that there is a dialectical relationship between degrees of excellence and degrees of risk within the universe of material beings, and it is this dialectical relationship that helps us to better understand what original sin is, and how it is shown to manifest itself in *Five*.

Consider, for example, the ways in which animate beings are more excellent than inanimate beings and thus capable of greater degrees of communication and sharing with other beings. Unlike inanimate things, living beings maintain themselves in existence (*qua* living) precisely by not limiting themselves to being determined by the material components that happen to constitute them at any given moment, but instead by actively

engaging in the process of metabolism, or the ongoing exchange or sharing of energy and matter with beings in the surrounding environment. Compared with nonliving things, living beings display a greater degree of excellence or a greater degree of immateriality, that is, a greater degree of freedom from being determined by their underlying material conditions. It is by virtue of this greater degree of excellence and immateriality that living beings are capable of sharing and communicating with other beings more fully and intimately. Thus, living beings maintain their existence, not by insulating themselves against the physical and chemical intrusions of other beings, but precisely by inviting such intrusions, or by making themselves relatively permeable and by participating in an ongoing process of material and caloric exchange with the environment. But because of their greater degree of excellence and immateriality (and thus because of their greater capacity for communication and sharing), living beings also face greater risks, greater vulnerabilities, and greater chances of failure or perversion than nonliving beings do. Simply stated, there are more things that can go wrong with the living being; the living being can fail in many more ways than nonliving beings can. Thus if the living being should cease to engage in the active exchange of energy and matter with its environment, it will die, which is to say that it will fail at being a living being. By contrast, nonliving beings maintain themselves as what they are, precisely by being inert, by not engaging in the exchange of matter and energy with their environments. The difference between living and nonliving beings helps to illustrate why a greater degree of excellence and immateriality entails a greater capacity for communication and sharing with other beings, but also a greater degree of vulnerability and a more daunting set of challenges for succeeding at being the kind of being that one is.

The same general observation can be made about the contrast between sentient living beings (animals) and nonsentient living beings (plants). When compared with plants, animals display a greater degree of excellence and immateriality, and thus a greater capacity for communication and sharing with other beings. Unlike plants, animals are capable of acquiring sensory knowledge about other beings in their environment. This sensory knowledge, in turn, allows animals to direct themselves toward sources of nourishment and away from sources of danger. On account of such motility, animals are not limited to nourishing themselves (they are not limited to engaging in metabolic exchanges) with material resources that happen to be contiguous with their own bodies. Because they are sentient, animals can also be motile, which is to say that they can move under their own power away from the spatial regions in which they imme-



diately find themselves, and into regions where the ongoing availability of nourishment will depend not just on what the environment provides, but also on the animal's riskier and less assured performance of several higher-order, sensory-based interactions with the environment. Thus, in order to survive, the animal must be attentive at the right times, it must be able to move about in its surroundings with relative ease, it must be able to find food and evade predators; notice that the success of the animal's interactions with the environment will depend, crucially, on what other animals do as well. To extend an observation made earlier: There are simply more, and more varied, ways in which the animal can fail at being an animal than there are ways in which the plant can fail at being a plant. Because of its greater degree of excellence and immateriality, the animal communicates and interacts with its environment in a more excellent way than plants do, but also, on account of its greater degree of excellence, it also faces greater risks and dangers. Animals purchase greater freedom, greater self-determination, and a greater capacity for interacting with other beings, but only by exposing themselves to the possibility of failing more miserably, and in more ways, at being the kinds of beings that they are.

The preceding set of observations can now be extended to illustrate the difference between nonrational (nonhuman) animals and rational (human) animals, and to explain the significance of this distinction for the notion of original sin. When compared to nonhuman animals, humans display a greater degree of excellence and immateriality, and this, in turn, entails a greater capacity for communication and sharing with other beings. Thus, it is on account of their rational (i.e., their conceptual or linguistic) capacities that human beings can understand and share in meanings and perspectives that would be entirely closed off to them if left to their own devices as merely sentient beings. Human beings become genuinely rational and free, that is, they become capable of apprehending the nonparticularized meanings of particular things or events, only because of their capacity to communicate with others conceptually and linguistically.<sup>7</sup>

Now we saw above that living beings succeed at being what they are (they remain alive) only by maintaining themselves as active sites for the processing of material and caloric resources that are drawn from environments that are not of their own making and not subject to their exclusive control as individuals; hence the unavoidable risk and vulnerability attendant upon all animate beings. In a similar fashion, we can say that human beings succeed at what they are (they are rational and free) only by maintaining themselves as active sites for the processing of conceptual and linguistic resources which are drawn from traditions and communities that

are not of their own making and not subject to their exclusive control as individuals. A mind that is not open to the give-and-take of such engagement with other minds is a mind that is not fully rational or free. But it is precisely because of the human being's greater degree of excellence and immateriality—the human being's openness to sharing in the narratives, meanings, thoughts, and theories of others—that the human being is also subject to greater risks and dangers. We have seen that the animal's own heightened degree of freedom and self-determination (its ability to move itself) made the animal more vulnerable to the workings of its environment and to the potentially destructive activities of other animals. We can now see that, in a similar way, the human being's own heightened degree of freedom and self-determination (its ability to share and participate in the meanings and narratives afforded by other human beings) also makes the human being more vulnerable to the potentially perverting and destructive effects of those meanings and narratives that he or she unavoidably shares with others. As human beings, we depend intimately and inescapably on the thoughts and narratives of others for our own rationality and our own self-understanding. But it is this more intimate and more complete kind of sharing and communication, which makes us truly free and rational in the first place, that also makes us vulnerable to being co-opted by the distorting, demeaning, and alienating systems of meaning within which we find ourselves and which we as finite rational individuals can neither control nor altogether abandon. The condition of being dependent and vulnerable in this way is the condition of being tainted by original sin. The sin is original because it is an infirmity that penetrates to the core of our being as rational and free beings; but it is still a sin, because it is not something that happens to us apart from our own agency, but rather something that we bring upon ourselves as the dependent, rational beings that we are.

*Five* indirectly addresses the problem of original sin—though without the off-putting doctrinal label—when the film raises the question of how seemingly random and insignificant events can play such an important role in determining the trajectory of a person's life. In a scene that follows Jacek's conviction and death-sentence, Jacek sits down with Piotr and speculates about why he has become the destructive, self-loathing person that he is. Five years earlier, Jacek and a friend had been drinking together. While drunk, the friend climbed into a tractor and ended up killing Jacek's younger sister as a result of his reckless drunken driving. Jacek clearly feels that he is at least partly to blame for the death of his sister, and openly wonders whether things might have been different for him if the fatal accident had not occurred. On the face of it, it may seem silly to wonder whether

such a random accident could have turned Jacek into the directionless, nihilistic, murderous person that he has become. But that is not the point of Jacek's rueful musings about the accident; these are not the musings of a detached scientist or philosopher wishing to know more about how one random event might bring about a chain of other, seemingly unrelated events in our causally ordered world. Rather, the point of Jacek's speculations is that seemingly random and insignificant events in our lives (such as the act of getting drunk with a friend) can engender unbearable meanings for us, meanings that exceed our capacity for coping and for making sense of things. Such meanings can exceed our capacity for coping and for making sense of things, not because of the intrinsic character of the events out of which they arise, but rather because the events take place within systems of socialization and communication which are distorted and inadequate, and thus incapable of helping us to actualize our proper strivings as human beings. When those strivings are frustrated or distorted, they do not cease to exist altogether; rather, they become strivings for the wrong sorts of things: domination, destruction, and self-aggrandizement at the expense of others.

One of the systems of socialization and communication that has a regular tendency to frustrate and distort our true strivings is the legal system, which is ostensibly the primary subject matter of *Five*. The film opens with an image of Piotr as he prepares for his final law-licensing exam, accompanied by a voiceover of Piotr discoursing on the nature and purpose of law. In the voiceover, Piotr argues,

The law should not imitate nature, the law should improve nature.  
 People invented the law to govern their relationships. The law determined who we are and how we live. We either observe it, or break it.  
 People are free; their freedom is limited only by the freedom of others.  
 Punishment means revenge, in particular when it aims to harm, but it does not prevent crime. For whom does the law avenge? In the name of the innocent? Do the innocent make the rules?

Like the other systems within which we must live, the legal system also has a tendency to pervert and distort our proper strivings as human beings. The law does not make people better as it should (it does not "improve nature"), but in fact makes people worse by reinforcing their destructive, antisocial behaviors (it "imitates nature," and in particular the human being's baser nature). Since punishment—and in particular, the death penalty—does nothing to prevent or deter crime, the only justification for it can be retribution. But retribution, Piotr suggests, amounts to little

more than revenge, which is destructive of human beings and their nobler aspirations toward love and community.

After Jacek's trial, conviction, and sentencing, we can see how the retributive, vengeful character of the law harms Jacek and destroys the last remaining shreds of humanity that he is trying to salvage in himself. In response to his being convicted and sentenced to death, Jacek rightly infers that the overriding message of the law is that he is altogether worthless and thus unworthy of continued existence as a human being. Piotr tries to correct Jacek by distinguishing between the crime and the criminal, but Jacek will have none of it:

**JACEK:** They were all against me.

**PIOTR:** Against what you did.

**JACEK:** Same thing.

Rather than help Jacek to be the human being that he ought to be, the legal system—like so many other systems that mediate our socialization and communication with one another—only serves to reinforce Jacek's self-loathing and self-destructive behavior.

Jacek is not the only victim of the legal system. *Five* shows us how the legal system can begin to take its toll on people, like Piotr, whose calling is ostensibly to dedicate themselves to the law itself. At the beginning of the film, we get to know Piotr as someone whose sense of meaning and direction seems to make him very different from Jacek and Waldemar. Piotr, after all, is an idealistic lawyer who believes in the higher goals that the law apparently professes for itself; and, as we learn a bit later in the film, he is a proud new father. As the film progresses, however, we begin to wonder whether the legal system is not also conspiring to undermine Piotr's idealism and sense of purpose. After Jacek's trial, conviction, and sentencing, Piotr realizes that he has failed to save a human life from the death penalty, even after he had given what, according to the judge, was "the best argument" against the death penalty that had been presented in a long time. At the very end of the film, we see Piotr sitting in his car in a grassy field and shouting in anger and desperation, "I abhor it!"—apparently referring to the legal system that has failed him and failed Jacek. But while the legal system has failed him, Piotr feels that he too has failed. Thus he asks the judge whether Jacek's case might have turned out differently, if he had made a stronger case for Jacek or if the case had been assigned to another defense lawyer. When Piotr learns that he was dining in the café precisely at the time that Jacek was in the same café planning his crime, he begins

to wonder whether he himself could have acted differently then in order to help Jacek. Like Jacek, Piotr has come to show the beginning signs of self-doubt and self-loathing, wondering whether things could have turned out better if he had only acted differently. Once again, Piotr's musings about what might have been are not the detached, speculative thoughts of someone wishing to know about how the causal laws of our universe operate; they are the musings of someone whose idealism and sense of direction are being slowly warped and crushed by our ever-distorted and distorting systems of interpersonal communication and socialization.

It was suggested earlier that original sin refers to the perversion or distortion inscribed in our very being as individuals, insofar as our being as individuals depends on systems of interpersonal communication and socialization which are themselves perverted or distorted. The odd thing about original sin is that it reverses our otherwise healthy strivings toward communication and community, and turns them into their virtual opposite; thus, original sin has the tendency to isolate us and drive us away from each other. But insofar as we are alone and isolated, we are deprived of community and the nurturing support of others, and thus ultimately deprived of what we need to be our true selves. It is altogether appropriate that one of the Christian tradition's greatest representations of hell—Dante's *Comedy*—portrays the most forlorn in the inferno (Lucifer) as entirely silent and cold, chest-deep in ice and possessing three mouths which are stuffed with the bodies of other sinners (Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius).<sup>8</sup> In the inferno, Lucifer appears to be in the presence of others, but he is utterly unable to enjoy any real community or communication with them. For the Catholic tradition, hell is not other people (as Jean-Paul Sartre would have it) but rather, complete separation from other people, the complete failure of community with others.

But when we are alone, when we fail to achieve genuine community with others, we also fail to achieve ourselves; we fail to be who we are. Thus, there is an intimate connection between sin and self-loathing; and in turn, there is an intimate connection between self-loathing and self-deception. McCabe makes the point nicely:

The root of all sin is fear: the very deep fear that we are nothing; the compulsion, therefore, to make something of ourselves, to construct a self-flattering image of ourselves we can worship, to believe in ourselves—our fantasy selves. I think that all sins are failures in being realistic; even the simple everyday sins of the flesh, that seem to come from mere childish greed for pleasure, have their deepest origin

in anxiety about whether we really matter, the anxiety that makes us desperate for self-reassurance. To sin is always to construct an illusory self that we can admire, instead of the real self we can only love. It is because we fail in realistic self-love that we fail in love for others. So sin, too, means being terrified of admitting that we have failed.<sup>9</sup>

It might be added here that if sin is rooted in the fear of being alone, it is equally rooted in the fear of not being with others and not being loved and accepted by others for who we really are. This fear of not being loved for who we are is what leads us to manufacture false selves that we try to sell to others. Even if we succeed in winning the attention and affection of others through such false selves, we nevertheless remain fundamentally alone—and we are often obliquely aware of this aloneness—because what we have offered to others for their love and acceptance is not our true self, but rather an idol or image that allows us to remain fundamentally hidden, isolated, and alone.

It follows from this that sin or sinfulness represents a kind of slavery or thralldom. In our sinfulness, we enslave ourselves to false images, and, correspondingly, to false gods that we manufacture for the sake of covering up our nakedness, our fear and our need. The discovery of the genuine God, the God who stands opposed to all forms of idolatry, is the discovery of a God who calls us out of such thralldom and invites us to the freedom of accepting ourselves and others for who we and they are, even in our and their neediness and failure. As McCabe explains:

The only true God is the God of freedom. The other gods make you feel at home in a place, they have to do with the quiet cycle of the seasons, with the familiar mountains and the country you grew up in and love; with them you know where you are. But the harsh God of freedom calls you out of all this into a desert where all the old familiar landmarks are gone, where you cannot rely on the safe workings of nature, on springtime and harvest, where you must wander over the wilderness waiting for what God will bring. This God of freedom will allow you none of the comforts of religion. Not only does he tear you away from the old traditional shrines and temples of your native place, but he will not even allow you to worship him in the old way. You are forbidden to make an image of him by which you might wield numinous power, you are forbidden to invoke his name in magical rites. You must deny the other gods and you must not treat Yahweh as a god, as a power you could use against your enemies or to help you succeed in life. Yahweh is not a god, there are no gods, they are all delusions and slavery.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 7–1. Saying prayers before the execution in *Decalogue Five*.

At this stage, another word of caution is in order. For we need to be careful about attributing to Kieślowski any theological views or metanarratives that are foreign to his way of thinking. As noted above, Kieślowski maintained a critical distance from institutional religion in general and from the Roman Catholic Church in particular. He believed that the systems within which we live and have our being, including the system of institutionalized religion, are often the problem rather than the solution. For Kieślowski, institutionalized religion, like the other systems within which we have our being, has a tendency to distort and frustrate our longings for meaning and community with others, and so it is not surprising that the only priest we encounter in *Five* says prayers just before Jacek’s execution and thus lends an air of divine approbation to the heinous act of killing (Figure 7–1).

Furthermore, through Jacek’s final conversation with Piotr, the film reminds us about the Church’s traditional policy of denying Catholic burial rites to certain people, thus suggesting that Jacek’s praiseworthy yearning for community with his deceased sister (i.e., his desire to be buried near her) might well be thwarted, in the end, by the requirements of institutionalized religion. This is not to say that Kieślowski denied that there may be some system or metanarrative (religious or otherwise) within which we might find some genuine meaning and liberation. But even if there is such an overarching system or metanarrative, Kieślowski seems to hold that the meaning provided by any such system or metanarrative, whatever it might be, remains just beyond our grasp.

The existence of an overarching yet ever-elusive meaning-providing metanarrative is suggested by the recurring appearance of a character identified in the script only as “the young man” (Artur Barciś). At decisive moments in eight of the ten *Decalogue* films (he is absent only from *Seven*

and *Ten*), “the young man” appears as a silent, detached witness who seemingly observes or understands the purpose that mysteriously escapes the comprehension of those who are being portrayed in the film, and us who are watching the film. In *One*, “the young man” sits at a campfire near the pond where a young boy will later drown; in *Two*, he is a worker in a hospital where the film’s protagonists are confronted with issues of birth, life, love, fidelity and death; in *Three*, he drives a city tram that narrowly misses colliding with and killing the protagonist; in *Four*, he is seen kayaking on the Vistula River and then later carrying the kayak on his back shortly before the protagonist makes her fateful decision about whether or not to open a mysterious letter; in *Five*, “the young man” is seen first as an inspector surveying the road that Waldemar traverses on the way to being killed by Jacek, and then later as a ladder-carrying painter in the prison where Jacek is to be executed; in *Six*, he appears first when the protagonist is joyously running home after learning about an upcoming date, and then a second time when the protagonist runs home after he has been humiliated by the date; in *Eight*, he is a student who listens as the protagonist presents a lecture; and in *Nine*, he is a cyclist who witnesses the attempt by the film’s protagonist to commit suicide.

The regular appearance of “the young man” at decisive moments throughout the *Decalogue* series serves to convey the important message that there may indeed be an overriding (theological) purpose at work in our fallen and alienated world. But his mysterious expression and strange silence also convey the sense that any such metanarrative or purpose—assuming that one is discernible at all—may inescapably remain beyond the scope of all possible comprehension by us. Furthermore, *Five* adds a sinister and unique complement to this character who silently witnesses events as if from a God’s-eye perspective. In the episode, the appearance of “the young man” is echoed and perhaps undermined by the appearance of another silent witness: the hideous ornament—a disembodied head with a toothy grin—dangling from the windshield of Waldemar’s taxi. At key moments in the film, the camera’s perspective calls our attention to the presence of this small, silent witness, as if to suggest that the purpose to be observed or the metanarrative to be told about the event taking place is not a benevolent one at all. As we observers view the regular, silent presence of Waldemar’s windshield ornament, we are led to wonder, as Robert Frost wonders in his poem, “Design,” whether the purpose behind the seemingly random confluence of events, if there is any such purpose at all, might not be malevolent rather than benevolent: “What but design of darkness to appall?—/If design govern in a thing so small?”<sup>11</sup>





Figure 7–2. Waldemar’s Christlike bloody face in *Decalogue Five*.

In spite of the ambiguity confronting us in regard to the overarching system or metanarrative that might give *Five* its meaning, there is no doubt that Kieślowski makes use of overt religious imagery and wants us to think about the possibility of an overarching religious system or metanarrative. Thus, when Jacek is in the midst of carrying out his murderous deed, Waldemar’s bleeding, upturned face presents us with an undeniable image of the crucified Christ (Figure 7–2).

As Christopher Garbowski observes:

In the face of the cabdriver victim, who has been strangled and clubbed on the head with an iron bar, we seem to see the face of the crucified Jesus with blood streaming down his face as if from a crown of thorns. The victim appears to look at the murderer as if to forgive him. After the deed, the slayer eats the victim’s food, just as the soldiers cast lots for Christ’s clothes.<sup>12</sup>

In response to the Christ imagery that is present in Waldemar’s face, Jacek utters the words, “Oh, Jesus” in amazement and in apparent recognition of the terribleness of his deed. But instead of halting his deed, Jacek reacts with renewed violence and uses a large stone to finish off what he started. In response to the unconditional love and acceptance represented by the Christ figure, Jacek tenaciously holds on to the false gods and false, antisocial sense of purpose that he has created for himself. In this respect, he is like the rest of us. As McCabe writes:

As a matter of history one of the peculiar things about man is that when he is left to do exactly what he likes he straight away looks around for someone to enslave himself to, and if he cannot find a master nearby, he will invent one. The Hebrew discovery of God (or God’s revelation of

himself to them) begins in their recognition that man historically is a slave, and enslaved by his own preference. The true God reveals himself as he who summons man out of this degradation that he clings to, who summons him to the painful business of being free. (*Law*, 115–116)

For Kieślowski, as for the Judeo-Christian tradition, the only remedy for our sinful condition is the saving grace of a God, but not one who would save us by giving us the falsely comforting shelter of a security blanket. The true God is the God who liberates us to face the appalling fearfulness of our neediness and our finitude head-on. Kieślowski seems to be saying—as Martin Heidegger says in his famous aphorism—“only a God can save us.”<sup>13</sup> But also like Heidegger, Kieślowski does not have the metaphysical confidence to assert that such a God actually exists. His reticence about making any such theological pronouncements is rightly motivated, for religious talk about God can all too easily devolve into the idolatrously comforting talk about gods. If there is to be salvation for us, it is to be had—Kieślowski seems to be saying—only if we undertake the frightful but fulfilling activity of entering into genuine community with others. For what is the kingdom of God, announced so often in the gospels through the image of a wedding party, other than such community with others?

In *Five*, Jacek’s thoughtful yearnings for his deceased sister convey a similar message. Jacek’s desire to have an enlarged photograph of his deceased sister implies the desire to bring her back to life (to see her grow again), and thus to be in community with her once again. Other moments in the film similarly illustrate Jacek’s desire to resurrect his sister and reestablish the only form of community that he ever knew. As we viewers watch the film, we, like Jacek, are forced to confront the challenges and possibilities of genuine community. We are forced to ask ourselves whether Jacek, in spite of his terrible crime, is someone in whom we can recognize our own humanity, and thus someone with whom we might see ourselves in community. In asking these questions, we are in effect asking whether Jacek Lazar is alive or dead to us, or, perhaps better, whether his seemingly lost humanity, like that of his namesake Lazarus, can be resurrected for us. Like the photograph that Jacek wishes to have enlarged, Kieślowski’s film depicts the outward manifestations of a human individual who may be alive or dead to us. And just as Jacek suggests with regard to the photo, it is impossible to discern from the film alone whether the individual depicted is alive or dead; everything depends on how we view the film, and how we allow ourselves to be affected by it.

## NOTES

1. Krzysztof Kiesłowski, *Kiesłowski on Kiesłowski*, ed. Danusia Stok (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 145. Further references will be cited in the text using the abbreviation *KK*.

2. Paul Coates, "Anatomy of a Murder: *A Short Film about Killing*," *Sight and Sound* 58, no. 1 (1989): 63.

3. This feature of the human condition is illustrated especially well in *Six*, in which Tomek seeks to connect with Magda but does not know how to do so except by peeping at her through a telescope.

4. See Christopher Garbowski, *Krzysztof Kiesłowski's Decalogue Series: The Problem of the Protagonists and Their Self-Transcendence* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs; New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 7.

5. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), especially 8–9.

6. Herbert McCabe, "Original Sin" in *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Continuum, 2002), 171–172.

7. On the account being presented here, to say that the intellect apprehends the universal is to say that the intellect apprehends what is in principle shareable and thus communicable; by contrast, the sensory faculties apprehend what is particular, which is to say that they apprehend what is isolated and not shareable except in an indirect way (i.e., what is sensed is shareable indirectly, and not through the sensory faculties themselves, insofar as we can talk about what we sense).

8. See Canto XXXIV of Dante's *Inferno*, for example, in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1980).

9. Herbert McCabe, *God, Christ and Us* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 17–18.

10. Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 118–119. Further references to this text will be cited using the abbreviation *Law*.

11. Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt, 1975), 302.

12. Christopher Garbowski, "Krzysztof Kiesłowski's *Decalogue*: Presenting Religious Topics on Television," *The Polish Review* 37, no. 3 (1992): 330.

13. It was during an interview that Heidegger made his now-famous observation, "*Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten.*" The interview was published shortly after Heidegger's death, in the May 31, 1976, issue of *Der Spiegel*.