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Ben Welton
West Virginia University

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GHOSTS IN THE FILM: EXAMINING THE SUPERNATURAL IN KIEŚŁOWSKI'S *BLIND CHANCE, NO END, AND DECALOGUE I*

Ben Welton

"The spirits of the dead who stood
In life before thee are again
In death around thee—and their will
Shall overshadow thee: be still."

Edgar Allen Poe, *Spirits of the Dead* (1827)

For centuries, authors, poets, and filmmakers have used ghosts for a myriad of purposes. In terms of the cultural history of Poland, ghosts and revenants have appeared throughout several works of literature. Beloved Polish poet and playwright Adam Mickiewicz used the motif of the supernatural in his Romantic poetic drama *Dziady* (*Forefather's Eve* 1823-1832) to propagate the Romantic notion that Poland was a messianic nation doomed to suffer constant martyrdom for the sake of Christian Europe. Likewise, another famous Polish man of letters, Stanisław Wyspiański, wrote his 1901 drama *Wesele* (*The Wedding*) using the motif of the supernatural to comment upon the perils associated with Polish independence movements following the November Uprising (1830-1831) and the January Uprising (1863), both of which ended in abject failure. As scholar and author Marek Haltof (2004, 74) points out, Poland has many "phantoms from the nation's intricate history." It is therefore not surprising that the motif of the supernatural, and especially the use of ghosts as characters, should appear within the oeuvre of Krzysztof Kieślowski, arguably Poland's finest film director. In his films *Blind Chance* (*Przypadek* 1987), *No End* (*Bez końca* 1985), and *Decalogue I* (*Dekalog I* 1988), ghosts play important roles not only as observers and watchers, but main characters. In *Blind Chance*, the main character, Witek Długosz (Bogusław Linda) is first shown to the audience during a flashforward sequence in which he perishes aboard an airplane, rendering him a doomed individual throughout the rest of the movie. In a sense, after the first scene of *Blind Chance*, Witek is a ghost of sorts. Throughout the rest of *Blind Chance*, the audience watches as Witek looks "back at his life at the moment of his death" (Haltof 2004, 56). In essence, the

audience of *Blind Chance* gets to indulge in playing the role of Saint Peter by observing and weighing Witek's various life choices and consequences. In *No End*, the first character introduced to the audience is the recently deceased lawyer and political activist Antek Zyro (Jerzy Radziwiłowicz). The character of Antek, while not necessarily a principal character insofar as the film's action is concerned, nevertheless affects the decisions of the people around him, especially those of his grieving wife, Urszula (Grażyna Szapołowska). The film's portrayal of "Urszula's sadness and her gradual alienation from people and the outside world" is linked with her attempts "to erase Antek from her memory" (Haltof 2004, 67). In *Decalogue I*, death plays the central role in a story about the tragic death of Paweł (Wojciech Klata), the ten-year-old son of university professor Krzysztof (Henryk Baranowski). In the film, both death and a spiritual "God" are present in the character of the so-called Watcher/Angel (Artur Barciś), who, throughout the entire *Decalogue* series, performs the role of a harbinger in the context of any given film.

Examining these three films on the basis of their metaphysical and supernatural motifs, it becomes clear that, within Kieślowski's oeuvre, they are undoubtedly his most spiritual. While Kieślowski did not consider himself a practicing Christian, let alone a devout Roman Catholic, these films attest to an underlying belief in "fate and predestination" (Di Bartolomeo 2000, 48). Furthermore, these films, which are intellectually-stimulating and deeply philosophical, create a discourse upon the ever-present nature of death. In a sense, these films are moral tales that are united not only by the presence of ghosts, but also by the presence of death as the answer to all moral quandaries. Essentially, these films highlight and enforce the reality of death as the eventual end for all living beings. I will examine this philosophical assertion by Kieślowski and his co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz through the prism of the three types of ghosts that appear in *Blind Chance*, *No End*, and *Decalogue I*: the ghost of fate, the domestic spirit, and the supernatural entity, respectively.

Fate and the belief in chance are the central themes of *Blind Chance* (hence the title). Originally writ-

ten before the Solidarity period in 1981, *Blind Chance* “was immediately shelved by the authorities after 13 December of that year” (Haltof 2004, 55) due to General Wojciech Jaruzelski’s declaration of martial law. Only in 1987 was *Blind Chance* “quietly released with a group of other distinguished banned films” (Haltof 2004, 55). Of course, by 1987, *Blind Chance* did not inspire a widespread intellectual discussion among Polish viewers, because, as Polish film critic Tadeusz Sobolewski put it, *Blind Chance* was seen as “a souvenir of the past” (Haltof 2004, 63). Regardless of its unfortunate (very) late release, *Blind Chance* still presents a “pessimistic philosophical parable on human destiny shaped by occurrences beyond individual control” (Haltof 2004, 62), which was an undoubtedly relatable concept for those still behind the Iron Curtain.

This theme of destiny revolves around Witek’s ability to catch a Warsaw-bound train leaving Łódź Central Station. In three segments, we see Witek as a “young party apparatchik manipulated by old party functionaries, a dissident activist involved in underground publishing and a person isolated from others by his desire for privacy” (Haltof 2004, 56). Despite the fact that *Blind Chance* was made in a Poland that was severely divided by politics, Witek, in all three segments, is basically the same man: “sincere, honest, decent, passionate, eager to act and trying to do his best given the circumstances” (Haltof 2004, 61). Witek’s ability to remain a decent human being regardless of his politics, all the while his story eventually ends in his untimely death aboard a plane bound for Libya suggests the belief that no matter the choices we make in life, death is inescapable. As Kieślowski himself said, “the third ending is the one which means the most to me—the one where the aeroplane explodes—because one way or another, that’s going to be our fate” (Stok 1993, 113). But *Blind Chance* is not simply a nihilistic parable about the inescapability of death; it clearly depicts the importance of making good, moral, and ethical choices throughout life. Accordingly, the third section of *Blind Chance* is the most important for several reasons. First, the third section of the film not only refutes the messages of the earlier two sections, it in fact refutes the dictum that a person must take a stand in life. This notion that a person must never tread a middle path is a strong current within Slavic culture; from the works of Russian authors such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy to the Romantic Polish tradition of glorifying national martyrs, the idea that an ethical and moral life could be achieved without attachment to a greater cause would seem ludicrous. Furthermore, Witek’s third decision not to involve himself in politics and instead to focus on his wife and children seems even more preposterous, considering that Witek’s background marks him as heir to the mantle of a distinctly Polish hero:

The protagonist (Witek) is born on 27 June 1956 in Poznań. The opening scene in a hospital, filled with the dying and wounded, blood on the floor, refers to the violent workers’ protest in Poznań in June 1956...During the strike, which concerned working conditions, reduction of work loads and salary increases, riots broke out and the army and security forces intervened and opened fire on the protesters...Witek reveals to his girlfriend Werka that both his great grandparents participated in the 1863 uprising... against the tsarist regime, that his grandfather took part in the ‘Miracle on the Vistula’—the decisive battle on the outskirts of Warsaw during the 1920 Polish-Soviet War, and that his father participated in the September 1939 campaign against the advancing German troops and in 1956 took part in the Poznań strikes (Haltof 2004, 57).

Witek’s final decision to pursue a life devoid of politics or Polish national causes presents a unique moral question specific to Kieślowski’s Polish audience: what if a potential Polish hero just simply decided not to be a hero?

Blind Chance showcases in the first two segments what happens when Witek decides to pursue each of two opposite paths—the first as a functionary in the Communist Party, the second as a member of the anti-Communist movement. In both instances, Witek ends disillusioned, heartbroken, and dissatisfied over his choices. In the third segment, Witek’s choice to lead a moral and ethical life devoid of politics does not prevent him from dying an unfortunate death aboard an airplane. Taken as a whole, *Blind Chance* is a film about a man whose life is completely encircled by death. In the sequence introducing Witek’s unified past, after the flashforward prologue, Witek’s mother perishes, along with Witek’s twin brother, during childbirth. In the film’s final sequence, the audience sees the image of Witek’s plane exploding only seconds after take-off. This tragic ending seems odd considering that Witek does not board the doomed airplane in either segments one or two, and the third segment clearly portrays Witek as being content with his decision to remain outside of politics. In this regard, Witek suffers moral and spiritual deaths in segments one and two. Although not physical deaths, the symbolic deaths in segments one and two are depicted as being more damaging to Witek, while his death in the third segment is only repugnant because it is so unexpected and tragic in the way that any unfortunate passing is.

Witek, as the film’s Everyman, showcases the reality that all human choices lead to death. Especially considering the film’s title, *Blind Chance*, death is shown as an extension of fate and destiny; the entire film’s premise of the consequences of choice and chance are rendered moot by the film’s climax. The basic under-

lying thesis of *Blind Chance* is that we, like Witek, will be rendered ghosts someday because we cannot avoid death as our ultimate fate. Fate and death are interlinked in *Blind Chance*, and as such the physical act of death is composed of fate and chance. Rather than seeing this reality as the foundation for a nihilistic outlook, *Blind Chance* presents a narrative that explicitly shows death as neither a reward nor a punishment, but only as an unexpected facet of daily life. Witek is therefore a “ghost of fate,” or rather a victim of fate, as we all are.

Much like *Blind Chance*, *No End* begins with the recognition of a death and ends with the actual death of one of the main characters. While the film itself follows the emotional turmoil of Urszula Zyro after the death of her husband Antek, the opening scene of *No End* foreshadows the motif of death and spirituality. As Haltof (2004, 66-67) describes it, the “opening scene offers a bird’s-eye view of a cemetery with flickering, burning candles during the All Souls’ Day on 1 November—a genuinely meaningful day in Poland.” This opening scene, combined with Zbigniew Preisner’s somber and ominous musical score, “sets the dreary and melancholy tone of the film and introduces its major themes of death, memory, and love” (Haltof 2004, 67). The death at the center of *No End* is that of activist lawyer Antek Zyro. It is important to notice that the second sequence has the ghost of Antek explaining to the viewer that his death was abrupt and sudden. Haltof (2004, 71) sees a connection between Antek Zyro’s sudden death and “the abrupt termination of the Solidarity movement on 13 December 1981.” While Haltof’s reading is a bit too facile only because the link between Solidarity and the death of Antek seems too convenient, “*No End* serves clearly as the symbol of the suppressed” (Haltof 2004, 71). Much has been written about *No End* and its presentation of the post-Solidarity, martial law era mindset, and undoubtedly the film takes a pessimistic view of the state of Polish politics and society in the early 1980s. This pessimistic outlook is embodied in the presence of the ghost of Antek; for, he, much like Witek in *Blind Chance*, represents a failed Polish hero, mainly because he is dead. For the rest of the characters in *No End* and especially so for Urszula and the defense lawyer Labrador (Aleksander Bardini), the ghostly residue of Antek’s idealism, legal abilities, and his seemingly overall goodness of character prove hard to overcome. In fact, one could argue that Urszula’s suicide at the end of the film was due to her inability to escape the emotional vacuum left by her husband.

The ghost of Antek, much like the character of Count Dracula in Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*, is sensed more than he is actually seen. The ghost of Antek “appears seven times throughout the film, either silently observing Urszula or intervening in her daily matters”

(Haltof 2004, 70), and, furthermore, the presence of the ghost of Antek is mainly felt through a series of puzzling occurrences throughout the film:

Labrador’s watch, a gift from his student [Antek] Zyro, falls and stops during his conversation with Darek’s [an imprisoned Solidarity activist who was formerly a client of Antek] wife Joanna (Maria Pakulnis), while a man in black (perhaps Zyro) passes by; the mysterious red question mark appears on the directory of attorneys next to Labrador’s name; Urszula’s Volkswagon car stops on the street for no visible reason, saving her, in all likelihood, from a deadly accident; a newspaper disappears which is important in the context of the worker’s trial. In another scene, when Darek awakens in his prison cell during the hunger strike, the ghost is there and quietly looks at him. As a result of this visit, Darek changes his mind and ends this suicidal action (Haltof 2004, 71).

Although the ghost of Antek affects all the principal characters within *No End*, his presence is most strongly felt by his wife Urszula, and that is why I have termed him a “domestic spirit.” For the most part, *No End* focuses upon the impact of Antek’s death upon Urszula. Urszula’s grief over Antek’s death is only further heightened by the fact that Urszula is the only character who can both directly see and interact with the ghost. In one important scene, Urszula is unable to be hypnotized into forgetting about Antek because Antek’s ghost in the room with her. Even in the scenes where Antek is not physically present, his spirit remains as a force throughout the film’s entirety. This sense is heightened by the fact that the audience actually takes on Antek’s role as watchers and observers in the scenes where the ghost of Antek is not directly portrayed. The audience therefore is closely linked with the character of Antek, which can stem from the process of movie-going, with audience members acting like watching spirits amidst the action of characters who are unaware of their presence. In the final sequences of the film, the camera is positioned behind Urszula as she goes about the process of suicide via a gas-filled, open stove. This specific camera angle represents the point of view of the ghost of Antek, which is also the point of view of *No End*’s ghost-like audience. Once again, much like in *Blind Chance*, the audience is placed in the position of the ghost, this time the ghost of Antek.

No End and *Blind Chance* also share the motif of a central philosophical discussion surrounded by the reality of death. The central discourse at the heart of *No End* is the extent to which a person can truly overcome the memory of a lost loved one. Urszula, because she commits suicide at the film’s conclusion, answers this question with the assertion that some things are

insurmountable. While one can argue about her moral character or the rightness of her final decision to commit suicide, none can argue that Urszula is the character that the audience is supposed to empathize with most. Since *No End* details the many emotional hardships that Urszula is forced to deal with, her suicide at the end is somewhat justified by the film's previous one hundred and four minutes. In this sense, *No End* de-vilifies Urszula's suicide much in the same way that *Blind Chance* de-vilifies Witek's multiple decisions. The charge that Urszula's suicide is selfish because it leaves her son, Jacek (Krzysztof Krzeminski), without parents, is slightly neutralized by the fact that Jacek seems to be aware not only of his mother's decision but also of her deep emotional pain. Lastly, Urszula's suicide is depicted as leading to a reunion with her husband in a somewhat bleak final scene, which depicts the couple walking away from the camera into a brightly-lit, park-like setting. Death, which is also present in the first scene in *No End*, bookends the film with a somewhat happy ending (*Happy Ending* was initially the proposed title for *No End*). As in *Blind Chance*, the central concepts and philosophical questions of *No End* are answered by death. Even more so than *Blind Chance*, *No End* is intrinsically a meditation on death and its presence in our lives. As Kieślowski stated in an interview with Danusia Stok (1993, 134), "there's a need within us—not only a need but also a fundamental kind of feeling—to believe that those who have gone and whom we dearly loved, who were important to us, are constantly within or around us." Urszula's suicide at the end of *No End* is not only a recognition of her inability to continue on living, but it is also the recognition that some people must "give-up the ghost" because that is simply their destiny.

In *Decalogue I*, the first installment of Kieślowski and Piesiewicz's ten-part series continues much in the same vein as *Blind Chance* and *No End* with its ostensible central motif concerning the death of Paweł. But unlike *Blind Chance* or *No End*, the spiritual and the supernatural are far more potent in *Decalogue I*. The entire *Decalogue* series deals with how the Ten Commandments are followed and practiced in our everyday life, and *Decalogue I* corresponds with the First Commandment in the Roman Catholic enumeration—Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me. The presence of spirituality and indeed the presence of a "God" are best exemplified in the character of the Watcher/Angel who appears in the majority of the *Decalogue* films. *Decalogue I* is no exception; the Watcher/Angel is first introduced as the mysterious man warming himself by the fire on the fateful pond in the opening scene. The Watcher/Angel character in *Decalogue I* is symbolic of a seemingly divine force that acts as a harbinger for the ensuing events in the film. Therefore, because Paweł dies after falling through

the pond's ice while skating, the Watcher/Angel's presence on the icy pond can only be taken as foreshadowing the film's ultimate tragedy. The Watcher/Angel character, as a manifestation of the supernatural, also points to other strange premonitions throughout the film: "a dead dog, probably frozen to death, found by Paweł; a frozen bottle of milk, and milk that turns sour; and a computer that switches itself on inexplicably" (Haltorf 2004, 82). But even more important than the Watcher/Angel character, who represents the supernatural, is the use of color, specifically blue and green, in *Decalogue I*.

Kieślowski scholar Dr. Lisa Di Bartolomeo writes in her 2000 article "No Other Gods: Blue and Green in Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog I*" that "blue lighting effects" are used "repeatedly to evoke loss and sadness, and also to suggest the enduring presence of the transcendent, the spiritual" (47). In this sense, the color blue in *Decalogue I* represents and often foreshadows the death of Paweł. In one of the earliest scenes in the film, Paweł's grieving aunt Irena (Maja Komorowska) watches television footage of Paweł as he runs with several classmates through his school. This shot of Paweł is "swathed in blue," which coincides with a medium close-up shot of Irena that is "heavily blue-tinged" (Di Bartolomeo 2000, 50). This presence of blue foreshadows the death of Paweł, and furthermore, this blue-heavy shot is a flashforward much in the same vein as *Blind Chance*. Both films use the motif of the flashforward to enhance a sense of mystery in their films, and both flashforwards display the later deaths of their respective characters, Witek and Paweł.

But blue is not the only color present in *Decalogue I*; Di Bartolomeo (2000, 47) also points out that the color green points to "a spiritual void, philosophical error, or moral quandary." Green, within the context of *Decalogue I*, is most associated with the computer, which, as many scholars have pointed out, is the "false god" associated with the First Commandment. Paweł's father, the university professor Krzysztof, believes in the "supremacy of calculation and reason, and in the pronouncements of science" (Di Bartolomeo 2000, 49). Krzysztof's belief in the "false god" of logic, reason, and the computer "seems to incur the wrath of the divine" (Di Bartolomeo 2000, 49), which inevitably leads to his son's death. In this reading, Paweł's death is a manifestation of divine anger over the worship of another god, i.e., Krzysztof's computer. Divinity, in the context of *Decalogue I*, is ultimately associated with death.

The presence of the divine within *Decalogue I* is represented by three factors, all of which are associated with the tragedy at the center of the film. First, the Watcher/Angel character is the physical manifestation of the divine or supernatural, and within the context of *Decalogue I*, the Watcher/Angel character foreshad-

ows the death of Paweł. Second, as already stated by Di Bartolomeo, the presence of the color blue within various scenes of the film invokes not only sadness, but also “fate and predestination” (Di Bartolomeo 2000, 48). Finally, the divine is powerfully portrayed in the scene where a distraught Krzysztof encounters a “makeshift altar with the icon of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa (*Matka Boska Częstochowska*) in the centre” (Haltorf 2004, 83). Krzysztof, unable to control his grief, upends this replica of the foremost Polish religious symbol. Of great symbolic importance, wax from overturned candles dribbles upon “Mary’s face, and the icon now appears to be crying, grieving with the bereft father” (Di Bartolomeo 2000, 55). As with *Blind Chance* and *No End*, death is once again at the forefront of not only the symbolism of *Decalogue I*, but also as the element that ties the entire narrative together.

In accordance with the mode previously established by *Blind Chance*, *Decalogue I* presents a non-linear format, with Paweł being already dead by the first frames of the film. Also, much like the aforementioned film, *Decalogue I* ends with the depiction of Paweł’s death, thus mirroring the Ouroboros-like nature of *Blind Chance*’s plot. Also, chance plays an enormous role within *Decalogue I*. The film suggests that Krzysztof’s mortal error is that he trusts his calculations concerning the density of the ice, calculations that suffer because they do not measure or consider the existence of chance. *Decalogue I* and *No End* also share plots full of abject misery, arguably making these movies among Kieślowski’s most depressing. Much like the emotional strain endured by Urszula in *No End*, the final scenes of *Decalogue I* depict how the death of Paweł leads the previously atheistic Krzysztof to throw himself upon the altar in a makeshift church. Noticeably, Krzysztof’s grieving leads him to commit sacrilege somewhat similar to but by no means comparable to Urszula’s suicide (which is often considered a sin punishable by eternal damnation).

But the truly uniting factor among these three films is their ruminations upon death. All three films strive to show that no matter the given situation or given moral quandary, death is the one constant in our lives. While Witek and Paweł die at the hands of fate, Urszula takes it upon herself to end her own life. In the guise of these three films, death is presented as, on the one hand unknowable and beyond rational logic, while on the other hand allowing for much-desired closure. It must be noted that not only do all of these films offer dialogues upon the nature and presence of death, but that they all also use the motif of the ghost to create and further along this dialogue. Witek in *Blind Chance*, Antek in *No End*, and Paweł and the Watcher/Angel in *Decalogue I* are all ghosts in their representative narratives. Witek and Paweł are ghosts because they are already dead by

the first scenes in their representative films, and therefore they are ghosts in all ensuing scenes because the audience already knows their fate. And yet it should be recognized that Witek and Paweł are not necessarily supernatural or traditional ghosts similar to Antek. Witek and Paweł are only ghosts throughout their representative film because both films use the motif of the flash-forward to hint at their eventual deaths in some early shots.

Antek, much like Witek and Paweł, is already dead by the beginning of the film. Antek’s ghost is also highly influential regarding the other characters in *No End*, with his presence being able to both prevent death (ending Darek’s hunger strike) and provide the catalyst for death (Urszula’s suicide). The Watcher/Angel in *Decalogue I* is a ghostly entity who foreshadows the death of Paweł by his mere presence. The Watcher/Angel character is also the most supernatural figure in regards to these three films, for his origins and even his humanity can be questioned.

By focusing so much attention upon the inevitability of death, these three films are in fact preparing their audiences for their own deaths. Much scholarship and questionable psychoanalysis (I cannot hide my scorn) has been done on the theory that reading and film audiences are drawn to horror, war, and other genres of violence because these artistic renderings of death aid humans in their search to become comfortable with death. To put more bluntly, by reading and watching the process of death, humans become more desensitized to the reality of death in their own lives. *Blind Chance*, *No End*, and *Decalogue I*, by presenting philosophical and moral tales about how death exists within our everyday lives, act similarly to horror films in that they allow any given audience member to indulge in his or her fears of death through the films themselves. But we must recognize that these films are not horror films; they do not attempt to either glamorize or fetishize death as many horror films do. These films should instead be seen as continuing the uniquely Kieślowskian theme of depicting the everyday facets of life. Death in these films is devoid of horror or any trace of romance; it is depicted realistically and with great emotional performances from the actors. Underlying this depiction of death as part and parcel of our human existence is the presence of the otherworldly. The appearance of chance, destiny, fate, and the Watcher/Angel character all point to the subtle theme of a spiritual presence throughout these three films.

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