

A Review of Krzysztof Kieslowski's Dekalog

Richard Watkins (2021)

Made in Poland in the late 1980s by Krzysztof Kieslowski, *Dekalog* consists of ten one-hour episodes.

It is available on DVD and Blue-ray disks; the Blue-ray set having additional material. These boxed sets are produced by TVP, Television Poland. The film images have been digitally reconstructed and the sound remastered.

Most of the reviews of *Dekalog* that I have read are vague. They point out that the episodes are loosely based on the ten commandments and that the director did not intend them to be viewed in that light. As one reviewer puts it “it’s not so much about each specific commandment—in fact, some episodes are about multiple ones and it’s never explicitly stated which one is which.” And some reviews comment on individual scenes, seeing them as vital, but without interpreting them.

I disagree. *Dekalog*, which means “the ten commandments,” is tightly based on the commandments and interprets them in a modern setting.

First, each episode of *Dekalog* examines the consequences of breaking one of the ten commandments. The Bible can be interpreted in different ways, and *Dekalog* uses the ten commandments from the Catholic Church in the order specified by the Church.

The Bible does not specify punishments for their violation and the precise meaning of each commandment has to be worked out in the specific context. And so in each episode the punishment is different.

The episodes often include references other commandments, but these are incidental to the story which should be interpreted in the light of only the main commandment.

Second, in all but episodes eight and ten, the punishments are indirect. Instead of the person breaking the commandment being punished, someone that he or she knows is punished. That person, the victim, may be innocent in that he or she has not broken the particular commandment that is the focus of the episode; the victim may have broken another commandment but that is irrelevant in the context of the story, although it does point out that humans and their motives are complex.

Third, in the first nine of the ten episodes there is a mysterious observer (played by Artur Barciś). He does not speak but he watches. In the first episode I think it is clear that the observer is God rather than an emissary sent by God, but it does not matter. That is, God is in plain sight, but no one can see him. It is not clear whether God interferes in human lives or simply observes events. Either way, God is all knowing and is aware of the consequences that breaking the commandments inevitably lead to.

Finally, the stories, the characters and the filming are very precise. The director and script-writers, Kieslowski and Piesiewicz, are meticulous, leaving nothing to chance, and every scene is essential.

The following is a brief summary of the episodes and omits much of the subtlety in the films, concentrating on the first three point above. (For example, I omit mention of the recurring theme of milk, perhaps reflecting the suckling of babies?) The episodes have to be watched several times, first to understand the stories and then to interpret them.

Dekalog One: Thou shalt have no other gods but me.

Fundamentally this episode is very direct, in that the other god worshiped by the father in preference to God, his computer, is clear, and the punishment is dealt out to his son.

The episode opens with the observer, God, sitting in front of a fire by the edge of a frozen lake. He wipes a tear from his face, a theme echoed later in the episode, because he knows that an innocent boy will be punished for the sins of his father. There is deliberate ambiguity because we are meant to ask whether or not God's fire had a direct influence on the events that unfold. At the end the fire is shown without God. The father buys his son ice-skates for Christmas, but his son wants to use them now. The father gets his son to ring the meteorology department and find out the temperatures for the last three days. Then he uses his computer to calculate that the ice is thick enough to hold 257 kg per square centimetre, more than enough for it to be safe. The son goes skating on the lake, a hole opens up and the son is drowned. And so God punishes the son for his father breaking the commandment.

Kieslowski reinforces his message in a chess game (with strong echoes of Bergman's 1957 film "The Seventh Seal") where the players are gods toying with their human pieces.

Dekalog Two: Thou shalt not take God's name in vain.

This is the most ambiguous of the commandments. Kieslowski's interpretation is that of a person, the doctor, acting as God and, in effect, usurping God.

A man is in hospital and he is hallucinating and dying. His wife meets the doctor and tells him that she is pregnant by another man. If her husband dies she will keep the child, but if he lives she will have an abortion. However, she is three months gone and has booked her termination, so she must decide immediately. The doctor, who has lost his family during the war, says her husband will die and, when pressed, swears it, thus acting as God. (The Bible says in Job 14:5 "God has decided the length of our lives. He alone knows how many months we will live, and we are not given a minute longer." This is reinforced by a scene where a bee manages to escape from a glass full of liquid.) God, as a hospital orderly, witnesses the events and allows the husband to live, thus putting his wife in the impossible situation of loving her husband but bearing another man's child. In the last scene, where the recovered husband speaks with the doctor, he very ambiguously says that he will have a child. Whether this is a desire, not knowing that his wife is pregnant, or acceptance of her pregnancy is not clarified, but I think the former. We learn from *Dekalog Eight* that the wife's child lives.

It is tempting to say that the wife has broken the sixth commandment, and the doctor has prevented her from breaking the fifth commandment, but that is incidental to the story.

Dekalog Three: Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.

Some religions consider a day to start in the evening and go to the next evening, and the events in the episode follow this pattern, starting in the evening and going to about 8 am. Christmas day in 1988 fell on a Sunday and so the episode starts on Christmas eve.

Janusz is married with children and Eva's partner is Edward, but they have no children. Janusz and Eva had been lovers in the past. At midnight Mass, Janusz looks around and sees Eva, but when he looks again he sees his wife, a subtle hint of what is to follow.

At home Janusz is contacted by Eva and she says Edward is missing and pleads with Janusz to help find him. Under the pretext that his car has been stolen and he must go out looking for it, Janusz and Eva spend the night together in his car looking, and as a result Janusz breaks the third commandment. At one point, driving recklessly without seat belts, they pass a tram being driven by God. Slowly, throughout the episode, we learn that Eva is lying in order to be with Janusz at Christmas, concocting stories involving hospitals and emergency services, and setting up her unit to suggest Edward is living there. Eventually she tells Janusz that Edward left her many years ago and lives in another city with his wife and children. At this, Janusz leaves Eva and returns to his home, leaving Eva alone and lonely, and

so Eva is punished for Janusz breaking the commandment. At home he tells his wife that he will not be home late again, implying that he will not see Eva again.

Dekalog Four: Honour thy father and mother.

This commandment obliges the faithful to show respect for their parents.

Anka and her father clearly love each other. Her father flies off and Anka discovers a letter with “Open after my death” written on it. She vacillates for a while and then, on the shore of a lake, she opens the letter, to discover another envelope inside it with “For my daughter, Anna” written on it. God rows furiously across the lake and arrives just as Anka is about to cut it open. She sees God, who looks at her, and stops. Later she finds a bag that had belonged to her mother with a photograph of Anna and two men, and a blank envelope. So she forges “For my daughter, Anna” in her mother’s handwriting on the envelope.

When her father returns, Anka meets him at the airport and recites that her mother has written that he is not his father. He slaps her, for the first time, and walks off angrily. Anka and her father’s relationship deteriorates, as she accuses him of lying and he comes to grips with knowing she is not his daughter, something that he had suspected. She also dishonours him by not asking his permission to marry. After many confrontations, in which Anka tries to seduce him as he is not her father, she sees him apparently going away. Running after him she says that she forged the letter with the implication that she knows that he is her father. They return home and burn the original letter, but a fragment remains that intimates that Anka’s recitation at the airport is in fact correct. But is it the original or the copy? However the father is damaged by her dishonouring him.

Dekalog Five: Thou shalt not kill.

The Catholic Church distinguishes between unjustified killing, murder, and killing an aggressor, which is not a sin. But there are grey areas when killing might or might not be justified. In the previous episodes Kieslowski is ambiguous and perhaps God takes an active part in events. But this episode most clearly states God has given humans the ability to choose, and it is implied that God can only observe as people break his commandments. Thus the tears in *Dekalog One* take on a new meaning.

A lawyer takes an oral examination to become a barrister, which he passes. In it and his preparation, he states that law should not imitate nature but correct it, suggesting that nature is impartial and the law shouldn’t be. And he believes that punishment is a form of vengeance, especially when it does injury, and the death penalty is state-sanctioned murder. A young man, Jasek, and a taxi driver are shown. Both are human and so they can decide whether to be cruel or kind to others. Jasek decides to kill a taxi driver and he gets into a taxi as God, with a theodolite measuring stick, looks on. The murder is random, vicious and cruel and, before the taxi driver dies, God rides past on a bicycle with his measuring stick. The taxi driver pleads for his life but he is ignored before he is bludgeoned to death with a rock. The lawyer is the defence barrister in Jasek’s trial and, not surprisingly, the death penalty is handed down. Before he is hung, shown in graphic detail, the lawyer talks with Jasek and he apparently shows remorse. But it is remorse for his sister who died as a child and not for killing the taxi driver. After Jasek is hung, the lawyer says vehemently “It is utterly revolting, intolerable, intolerable!” even though Jasek has committed a callous crime. So the lawyer has to live with his ideals even though the murder committed by Jasek is utterly revolting, intolerable, intolerable!

Dekalog Six: Thou shalt not commit adultery.

This commandment forbids the actual, physical act of having immoral sexual activity. It includes fornication, which is sex between unmarried people, and masturbation.

Tomek, a 19 years old post office clerk, breaks into a school and steals a small telescope with which he looks at a woman in a flat opposite. He sees two men come to her unit and have sex with her. He also forges notifications so that the woman will have to visit the post office and he can look at her, and he steals letters addressed to her. He makes a bogus call to the gas board so that they interrupt the woman when she is having sex. And he starts delivering milk to the units, also so that he can see her. One day Tomek follows her from the post office and admits that he spies on her and forged the notifications. So she moves her bed, so that he can have a better view of it and when she has sex with a man she points out to him that Tomek watches. Her lover confronts Tomek and says "It's bad for you at your age." Tomek meets the woman again and says that he loves her, but she says that there is no such thing as love. She discovers that he has no desire for her body and does not want to kiss her or have sex with her, and she says that there is no such thing as love. But she goes to a cafe with him and tells him that he can come to her unit.

The next morning he is filled with joy at the prospect of visiting her and, while delivering the milk he passes God, a man in a white coat carrying a suitcase and a white bag, who half smiles at him. Tomek visits her and she finds that he is totally inept with women. She deliberately excites him so that he ejaculates in his trousers, and says "that's it, all there is to love." (It must be noted that Tomek does not masturbate, in which case he would have broken the commandment, but the woman commits adultery with him.) Tomek runs out of her unit and goes home, passing God, where he slashes his wrists, but he does not die. The woman admits that she has harmed Tomek and admits that he is right and there is something called love. But it is too late and Tomek is punished for her breaching the commandment and will be destined, perhaps forever, to be without love.

Dekalog Seven: Thou shalt not steal.

This commandment forbids the act of taking someone else's property.

There are three generations; the grand parents Eva and Stefan, the parents Majka and Wojtek, and their daughter Ania. Majka was 16 years old when she had Ania, and her mother Eva registers the baby as her child, thus stealing Ania from Majka. Majka plans to go to Canada with her daughter, but she needs the registered mother Eva's consent for Ania to travel with her. Majka surreptitiously takes Ania from the stage of a childrens' pantomime and Eva frantically looks for Ania. Majka and Ania go to Ania's father's house in the country and, on the way, Majka tells Ania that she is her mother and not Eva. Majka asks Wojtek "how can you steal what is yours?" and we learn that Eva was the principal at a school where Wojtek was a teacher and Majka his student. Eva tells Wojtek "shut up if you want to stay out trouble for seducing a minor and go on teaching." At the house Majka tells Wojtek that she had seen Eva breastfeeding Ania. She telephones Eva and says that "you stole my child," and if she wants to see Ania again then she must give her consent. Back at the father's house Majka sobs because Ania calls Majka "Majka" and refuses to call her "Mum." Majka runs away with Ania and goes to a train station where she rings Eva again and says "I have learned today that I only have her, no one else". Eva and Stefan go to the station where Ania runs to Eva smiling. Majka, knowing she has lost Ania, catches the train by herself and so Eva's breach of the commandment has punished Majka and she is totally alone. As she boards the train to go far away God, a man on crutches, gets off in the distance and goes away.

According to Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dekalog>) God does not appear in this episode and "Barciś was meant to be a man at the railway station, but Kieślowski experienced technical difficulties to include him in this episode." However, the DVD box set not only shows a man on crutches getting off the train, but also includes Artur Barciś in the credits at the end. And I cannot see any "technical difficulties" in the filming. So, if Wikipedia is correct, then there must be two different versions of Dekalog, the original and the digitised. That seems to me to be unlikely.

Dekalog Eight: Thou shalt not bear false witness.

The Eighth Commandment condemns lying. Because God is regarded as the author of all truth, the Church believes that humans are obligated to honour the truth.

This episode is different because the events take place in 1943, about 45 years earlier. In the present time, a professor holds a class on the subject “ethical hell” and one student recounts the basic story of Dekalog Two. The professor responds, saying that the child is alive and that is the most important point. Then Elizabeth Loranz tells her story. As a 6 years old Jewish girl (born in 1937) she was taken across the city to a Catholic couple, because they have arranged to take her to a priest and get her baptised. The couple renege on their promise because they will not break the eighth commandment and Elizabeth has to go away to an almost certain death. God is present for part of the story as a student, but not at the end of the discussion. During this story the professor realises that Elizabeth is the young girl she reneged on. Later, the professor tells Elizabeth that her reason was not to lead the Gestapo to her resistance group but, although the purpose of the lie was good, they could not lie. And she has always remembered the meeting with remorse, saying “I turned my back on you,” but a great weight has been taken off her shoulders knowing that Elizabeth is alive. The implication is that God has punished her for 45 years, and that is enough.

Dekalog Nine: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife.

This commandment forbids the intentional desire and longing for immoral sexuality.

Roman goes to a doctor and is told that his condition (probably erectile dysfunction) is incurable and he advises Roman to get a divorce. Driving home he stops and God, on a bicycle rides past and looks at him.

Roman is angry because the glove box door will not close. Back home, he tells his wife Hanka to find someone if she hasn’t already, but she says “love is in the heart, not between the legs.” Roman hears a part of a phone call where Hanka is talking to a man, and he modifies the telephone so that he can eavesdrop. He gets back in his car and finds, in the glove box, a notebook belonging to Mariusz Zawidzki and he throws it into a rubbish bin, but then retrieves it. At home, Roman goes through Hanka’s handbag and finds a telephone number. He goes on an errand to Hanka’s mother’s house and the glove box opens, but it is empty. He goes into the house and finds the notebook! He rings the number in Hanka’s bag and speaks to Mariusz Zawidzki, thus verifying Hanka’s infidelity and he knows that Mariusz has broken the ninth commandment. He gets on his bicycle and rides, and God is riding another bicycle and looking at him. Roman deliberately rides off the end of the road and falls about 20 metres. God on his bicycle comes up to him. But Roman doesn’t die because he must live with his wife’s unfaithfulness while nothing happens to Mariusz.

Dekalog Ten: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s goods.

The Tenth Commandment forbids the wanting to, or actually taking someone else’s property. This commandment condemns theft and the feelings of envy, greed, and jealousy in reaction to what other people have.

God does not appear in this episode.

Arthur is a singer with a pop group and the episode starts with him yelling, rather than singing, “kill, fornicate, covet, kill, fornicate, covet, ...” illustrating his total disdain for God and his rejection of the commandments. He and his brother Jurek attend their father’s funeral and then go to his fortified unit (with an alarm system) and find a large stamp collection. Arthur goes to a stamp fair where he is told

that they are very valuable; one stamp is worth the price of an apartment. A grandson is given the “polar flight” stamps (mentioned in episode eight) and he sells them to a stamp dealer for 40,000, but they are worth 240,000. (At that time, the Polish zloty was worth about a third of a US dollar; see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tables_of_historical_exchange_rates_to_the_United_States_dollar.) Arthur and Jurek don't want to sell the stamp collection and get a guard dog and put bars on the French doors. They have two of a set of three Austrian Mercury stamps and the stamp dealer knows where the third stamp is, but he will only give it to the brothers if Jurek donates a kidney to his 16 years old daughter. Jurek complies and the transfer happens successfully. But during his stay in hospital, with Arthur present, someone gets into their father's unit by cutting the bars; the alarm system has been disabled by Jurek because it was always going off. The robber, probably the stamp dealer, pats the friendly guard dog, and carefully examines some of the stamps before stealing everything. Arthur gets the third Austrian Mercury stamp, apparently worth 2,000,000, which is all they have of the collection. Back in the empty unit Jurek picks up and throws away a piece of the bars shaped like a cross. Arthur and Jurek put sets of cheap, modern stamps on the table between them and they laugh at their misfortune and the episode ends in happiness!

So the absence of God and the ten commandments changes everything. The brothers are not punished for coveting the stamp collection and at the end they do not covet it; after all, stamps are little oblongs of printed paper and, seen in this light, one stamp is as good as another, although modern stamps are much prettier than old ones. The robber is not punished for coveting and stealing the stamp collection. And the stamp dealer is not punished for coveting Jurek's kidney.

It is the belief in God, or his presence, that results in the outcomes of the first nine episodes. Perhaps beliefs and the ten commandments are just stories, and one story, or even the absence of a story, is as good as any other story? And perhaps, because of our beliefs, we punish ourselves? And perhaps Artur Barciś plays an innocent outsider and not God?