

The Three Colors Trilogy

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Director – Krzysztof Kieslowski

Early life

Kieślowski was born in [Warsaw](#) and grew up in several small towns, moving wherever his engineer father, a [tuberculosis](#) patient, could find treatment. At sixteen, he briefly attended a [firefighters'](#) training school, but dropped out after three months. Without any career goals, he then entered the College for Theatre Technicians in Warsaw in 1957 because it was run by a relative. He decided to become a [theatre director](#), but at the time there was no specific training program for directors, so he chose to study film as an intermediate step. He was raised [Roman Catholic](#) and retained what he called a "personal and private" relationship with [God](#).

Career - After leaving college and working as a theatrical tailor, Kieślowski applied to the [Łódź Film School](#), the famed Polish film school which also has [Roman Polanski](#) and [Andrzej Wajda](#) among its alumni. He was rejected twice. To avoid [compulsory military service](#) during this time, he briefly became an art student, and also went on a drastic diet in an attempt to make himself medically unfit for service. After several months of successfully avoiding the draft, he was accepted to the Łódź Film School on his third attempt.

He attended from 1964 to 1968, during a period in which the government allowed a relatively high degree of artistic freedom at the school. Kieślowski quickly lost his interest in theatre and decided to make [documentary films](#). Kieślowski also married his lifelong love, Maria (Marysia) Cautillo, during his final year in school (m. January 21, 1967 to his death), and they had a daughter, Marta (b. January 8, 1972).

Kieślowski retired from film making with a public announcement after the premiere of his last film [Red](#) at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival. Just under two years after announcing his retirement, Krzysztof Kieślowski died on March 13, 1996 at age 54 during open-heart surgery following a heart attack, and was interred in [Powązki Cemetery](#) in Warsaw. His grave is located within the prestigious plot 23 and has a sculpture of the thumb and forefingers of two hands forming an oblong space—the classic view as if through a movie camera. The small sculpture is in black marble on a pedestal slightly over a meter tall. The slab with Kieślowski's name and dates lies below. He was survived by his wife Maria and daughter Marta.

Documentaries

Kieślowski's early documentaries focused on the everyday lives of city dwellers, workers, and soldiers. Though he was not an overtly political filmmaker, he soon found that attempting to depict Polish life accurately brought him into conflict with the authorities. His television film *Workers '71*, which showed workers discussing the reasons for the mass strikes of 1970, was only shown in a drastically censored form. After *Workers '71*, he turned his eye on the authorities themselves in *Curriculum Vitae*, a film that combined documentary footage of [Politburo](#) meetings with a fictional story about a man under scrutiny by the officials. Though Kieślowski believed the film's message was anti-authoritarian, he was criticized by his colleagues for cooperating with the government in its production.

Kieślowski later said that he abandoned documentary filmmaking due to two experiences: the

ensorship of *Workers '71*, which caused him to doubt whether truth could be told literally under an authoritarian regime, and an incident during the filming of *Station* (1981) in which some of his footage was nearly used as evidence in a criminal case. He decided that fiction not only allowed more artistic freedom, but could portray everyday life more truthfully.

Polish feature films

His first non-documentary feature, *Personnel* (1975), was made for television and won him first prize at the [Mannheim Film Festival](#). Both *Personnel* and his next feature, *The Scar* (*Blizna*), were works of [social realism](#) with large casts: *Personnel* was about technicians working on a stage production, based on his early college experience, and *The Scar* showed the upheaval of a small town by a poorly-planned industrial project. These films were shot in a documentary style with many nonprofessional actors; like his earlier films, they portrayed everyday life under the weight of an oppressive system, but without overt commentary. *Camera Buff* (*Amator*, 1979) (which won the grand prize at the [Moscow International Film Festival](#)) and *Blind Chance* (*Przypadek*, 1981) continued along similar lines, but focused more on the ethical choices faced by a single character rather than a community. During this period, Kieślowski was considered part of a loose movement with other Polish directors of the time, including [Janusz Kijowski](#), [Andrzej Wajda](#), and [Agnieszka Holland](#), called the Cinema of Moral Anxiety. His links with these directors (Holland in particular) caused some raised eyebrows within the Polish government, and each of his early films was subjected to censorship and enforced re-shooting/re-editing, if not banned outright (*Blind Chance* was not released domestically until 1987, almost six years after it was completed).

No End (*Bez końca*, 1984) was perhaps his most clearly political film, depicting political trials in Poland during martial law, from the unusual point of view of a lawyer's ghost and his widow. It was harshly criticized by both the government and dissidents. Starting with *No End*, Kieślowski's career was closely associated with two regular collaborators, the screenwriter [Krzysztof Piesiewicz](#) and the composer [Zbigniew Preisner](#). Piesiewicz was a trial lawyer whom Kieślowski met while researching political trials under martial law for a planned documentary on the subject; Piesiewicz co-wrote the screenplays for all of Kieślowski's subsequent films. Preisner provided the musical score for *No End* and most of the subsequent films; the score often plays a prominent part in Kieślowski's films and many of Preisner's pieces are referred to within the films themselves. In these cases, they are usually discussed by the films' characters as being the work of the (fictional) Dutch composer Van den Budenmayer. *The Decalogue* (1988), a series of ten short films set in a Warsaw tower block, each nominally based on one of the [Ten Commandments](#), was created for Polish [television](#) with funding from [West Germany](#); it is now one of the most critically acclaimed film cycles of all time. Co-written by Kieślowski and Piesiewicz, the ten one-hour-long episodes had originally been intended for ten different directors, but Kieślowski found himself unable to relinquish control over the project; in the end, each episode featured a different [director of photography](#). Episodes five and six were released internationally in a longer form as *A Short Film About Killing* and *A Short Film About Love* respectively. Kieślowski had also planned to shoot a full-length version of Episode 9 under the title *A Short Film About Jealousy*, but exhaustion eventually prevented him from making what would have been his thirteenth film in less than a year.

Foreign productions

Kieślowski's last four films were foreign co-productions, made mainly with money from [France](#) and in particular Romanian-born producer [Marin Karmitz](#). These focused on moral and metaphysical issues along similar lines to *The Decalogue* and *Blind Chance* but on a more abstract level, with smaller casts, more internal stories, and less interest in communities. Poland appeared in these films mostly through the eyes of European outsiders. The four films were his most commercially successful by some distance.

The first of these was *The Double Life of Véronique* (*La double vie de Véronique*, 1990), which

starred [Irène Jacob](#). The relative commercial success of this film gave Kieślowski the funding for his ambitious final films, the trilogy *Three Colors* (*Blue*, *White*, *Red*), which explores the virtues symbolized by the French flag. The three films together garnered a host of prestigious international awards, including the [Golden Lion](#) for Best Film at the [Venice Film Festival](#) and the Silver Bear for Best Director at the [Berlin Film Festival](#), in addition to receiving three [Academy Award](#) nominations.

Legacy

Kieślowski remains one of Europe's most influential directors, his works included in the study of film classes at universities throughout the world. The 1993 book *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* describes his life and work in his own words, based on interviews by Danusia Stok. He is also the subject of a biographical film, *Krzysztof Kieślowski: I'm So-So* (1995), directed by Krzysztof Wierzbicki. After Kieślowski's death, [Harvey Weinstein](#) (then head of Miramax Films, which distributed the last four Kieślowski films in the US) wrote a eulogy for him in *Premiere* magazine. In it he said that [Quentin Tarantino](#) saw *The Double Life of Véronique* at the [1991 Cannes Film Festival](#) and took note of its star, [Irène Jacob](#). He apparently wrote the part of [Bruce Willis](#)'s wife in *Pulp Fiction* for her, but she was unavailable for the shoot. She was working on Kieślowski's *Three Colors: Red* at the time. According to the same article, Tarantino saw *Red* at Cannes and declared that it would win the [Palme d'Or](#). Instead his own *Pulp Fiction* received the top prize at the festival.

Though he had claimed to be retiring after *Three Colors*, at the time of his death Kieślowski was working on a new trilogy co-written with Piesiewicz, consisting of *Heaven*, *Hell*, and *Purgatory* and inspired by [Dante's](#) *The Divine Comedy*. As was originally intended for the *Decalogue*, the scripts were ostensibly intended to be given to other directors for filming, but Kieślowski's untimely death means it is unknown whether he might have broken his self-imposed retirement to direct the trilogy himself. The only completed screenplay, *Heaven*, was filmed by [Tom Tykwer](#) and released in 2002 at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#). The other two scripts existed only as thirty-page treatments at the time of Kieślowski's death; Piesiewicz has since completed these screenplays, with *Hell* — directed by Bosnian director [Danis Tanović](#) and starring [Emmanuelle Béart](#) — released in 2005, whilst *Purgatory*, which is about a photographer killed in the Bosnian war, remains unproduced. The 2007, Ibo Kurdo and Stanislaw Mucha directed *Nadzieja* (Hope), also scripted by Piesiewicz, has been incorrectly identified as the third part of the trilogy, but is in fact, an unrelated project. [Jerzy Stuhr](#), who starred in several Kieślowski films and co-wrote the script for *Camera Buff*, filmed his own adaptation of an unfilmed Kieślowski script as *Big Animal* (*Duże zwierzę*) in 2000.

Kieślowski said the following in an interview:

“ It comes from a deep-rooted conviction that if there is anything worthwhile doing for the sake of culture, then it is touching on subject matters and situations which link people, and not those that divide people. There are too many things in the world which divide people, such as religion, politics, history, and nationalism. If culture is capable of anything, then it is finding that which unites us all. And there are so many things which unite people. It doesn't matter who you are or who I am, if your tooth aches or mine, it's still the same pain. Feelings are what link people together, because the word 'love' has the same meaning for everybody. Or 'fear', or 'suffering'. We all fear the same way and the same things. And we all love in the same way. That's why I tell about these things, because in all other things I immediately find division.

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The Three Colours Trilogy ([Polish](#): *Trzy kolory*) is the collective title of three [films](#) – a [trilogy](#) – directed by [Krzysztof Kieślowski](#), two made in [French](#) and one primarily in [Polish](#): *Trois couleurs: Bleu* (*Three Colours: Blue*) (1993), *Trzy kolory: Biały* (*Three Colours: White*) (in French: *Blanc*) (1994), and *Trois couleurs: Rouge* (*Three Colours: Red*) (1994). All three were co-written by

Kieślowski and [Krzysztof Piesiewicz](#) (with story consultants [Agnieszka Holland](#) and [Sławomir Idziak](#)) and have musical scores by [Zbigniew Preisner](#).

The films were Kieślowski's first major successes outside of Poland, and are his most acclaimed works after [The Decalogue](#).

themes

Blue, white, and red are the colours of the [French flag](#) in left-to-right order, and the story of each film is loosely based on one of the three political ideals in the motto of the French Republic: - [liberty, equality, fraternity](#). As with the treatment of the [Ten Commandments](#) in *The Decalogue*, the illustration of these principles is often ambiguous and ironic. As Kieślowski noted in an interview with an Oxford University student newspaper, “The words [liberté, égalité, fraternité] are French because the money [to fund the films] is French. If the money had been of a different nationality we would have titled the films differently, or they might have had a different cultural connotation. But the films would probably have been the same.”

The trilogy are also interpreted respectively as an anti-tragedy, an anti-comedy, and an anti-romance.

Kieslowski's last three films, presented as a loose trilogy based on the colors and corresponding ideals of the French flag are resolutely interpreted within the framework of the interior life (*Blue*: freedom, *White*: equality, *Red*: fraternity). In many ways, the series is an artful summation of his career: an emphasis on the individual's life and his or her relationship to an ideal, a nuanced and even playful approach to narrative, the paradoxes of chance and fate, the interconnectiveness of lives, and a central importance given to art and performance (both public and private). Although *Red* (1994) initially received the most acclaim of the three films, *Blue* is a magnificent achievement that has steadily developed its share of vocal proponents over the years.

The subject of *Blue* is every bit as metaphysical as *Double Life*, but it is rooted in a more accessible narrative concerning Julie (Juliet Binoche), who survives an automobile accident in which her husband, a famous composer, and their daughter are killed. The film details Julie's subsequent desire to free herself of all emotional attachments and manages to clarify her perspective with a vivid representation of interior life. Flashes of creative reveries coincide with screen fades and bursts of suppressed music, stylised subjective shots (sunlight traversing a Paris cafe table, the world reflected through a spoon, the gradual absorption of coffee through a sugar cube) include the viewer in Julie's private world. Through Kieslowski's subtle plotting, however, like tentative roots from a sapling, Julie slowly reconnects to life through a developing compassion for others and her growing artistic compulsions. It's a graceful evocation of the inescapable force of love and art upon the soul and the paradoxical joys to be found in sacrifice, boundaries, and emotional commitment.



White is a return to the dark humor and irony reminiscent of *Decalogue: Ten* with its story of Karol (Zbigniew Zamachowski), an impotent Polish man whose French wife, Dominique (Julie Delphy), divorces him. This sets in motion Karol's elaborate plot to regain equality in their relationship, though the scheme he hatches verges on revenge and thus ensures a tragic combination of love and separation. (Quoting a Polish proverb, Kieslowski remarked, "There are those who are equal and those who are more equal," suggesting equality is a fleeting and imperfect ideal.) (17) However, the film suffers in comparison to *Blue* and *Red*—the cool machinations of its protagonist (as well as its storytelling) often seem manipulative and superficial, but Kieslowski's pessimistic wit shines throughout.

In contrast, a large aspect of the beauty of *Red* is its generosity of spirit and apparent self-critique of Kieslowski's own temperament and preoccupations. A genuinely kind and hopeful model, Valentine (Irène Jacob), accidentally injures the dog of a disillusioned, retired judge named Joseph (Jean-Louis Trintignant) who sits in his Geneva home and coolly monitors the telephone conversations of his neighbors. The clash of world views between the two characters—illustrated through a series of sensitively wrought conversations which begin confrontationally and end compassionately—illustrate a potent dialectic between cynicism and idealism, the rational deconstruction of Kieslowski's films versus the uplift of his late sensitive humanism. The film delights in a labyrinth of double lives and chance occurrences which threads a connective line between Joseph and a younger law student, whose tragic romantic life simultaneously mirror's Joseph's past and projects Valentine's possible future.

After Kieslowski completed *Red*, he announced his retirement at the age of 52. He was exhausted from having completed the trilogy in a staggered, accelerated time frame (at one point, he was editing *Blue*, shooting *White*, and writing *Red* concurrently) and claimed frustration at the film medium for its inability to portray the inner life. ("Literature can achieve this, cinema can't," he said, "It's not intelligent enough. Consequently, it's not equivocal enough. Yet, at the same time, while being too explicit, it's also too equivocal.") (18) Claiming to be content with doing nothing, yet continuing to lecture and beginning to write a new trilogy of films with Piesiewicz (Tom Tykwer filmed the first of these, *Heaven*, released in 2002), Kieslowski died unexpectedly after bypass surgery in a Warsaw hospital. It was a sudden and tragic event, yet one fraught with the sort of coincidence and mystery Kieslowski himself may have appreciated