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Dagmara Pięta

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Poland

The Idea of Theology of Film Based on Krzysztof Kiesłowski's Works

VISUAL THEOLOGY NOWADAYS

Contemporary culture seems to favor eyesight as a model of discovering reality and visual experience as an expression of characteristic value system. Experts say that over 80 per cent of stimuli and impressions concerning the world around comes to a man from his sight. That, what is visual comes always before that, which is verbal. The aesthetic experience is more original than any reflection of word (Kawecki 2013, 44).

The task for contemporary theology is to find such a form of expression of the absolute Truth which is accurate to Tradition and opened to the dialogue with contemporary culture which confronts with people and their lack of faith (Kawecki 2011, 9). Nowadays, *via pulchritudinis* appears as the privileged way of evangelization, especially for those, who have problems with accepting moral teaching of the Church. The way of beauty, starting from the simple experience of facing beauty that stirs up admiration for the Beauty of the Incarnate Holiness, leads towards the source of all beauty, namely, to God. It exists in relation to truth and good. Therefore we can formulate the task of visual theology which is to communicate with other people and God through the Beauty of art, especially of the image (Kawecki 2013, 57–58).

FILM AS A VEHICLE OF DIALOGUE

Film becomes more and more important part of our life. It exerts a strong influence on education, knowledge, culture and leisure. The artists find in film a very effective means for expressing their interpretation of life and one that well suits their times (*Communio et progressio*, 142). It has an important role in the dialogue on the need and shape of religious experience and on the place of the Church in social life. To people it can serve as a mirror in which they can see a reflection of their worries, anxieties and passions. On the other hand, it can offer support and hope that the strife of life will not be lost, since what matters is the itinerary, the pilgrimage towards what makes the human being human (Sochoń 2007, 448). The role of the cinema as being a kind of a human's conscience is also one of the basic functions in religion – it presents, analyses and criticizes the whole world and human as well as their values and virtues. According to John Paul II, the cinema can help to bring distant people together and, what is more to promote a more respectful and fruitful dialogue between different cultures. If art, including that of the cinema, relates to life in a way that fully respects its values, it cannot fail to be a source of brotherhood and dialogue (John Paul II 1999).

The cinema is the place for reflection and for recalling values, making use of the wealth of languages of expression, talking in various ways about life, the cinema is able to represent different dimensions of human being, making the contribution to a greater closeness of people, initiating the intercultural dialogue, increasing solidarity and acting for peace (John Paul II 1999, in: Kawecki 2013, 80–81).

THEOLOGY OF FILM

The Church moves with the movement of man. She therefore has to adapt herself to the special circumstances that arise out of time and place. She has to consider how the truths of the faith may be explained in different times and cultures (*Communio et progressio*, 117). Moreover, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, she is “to read the signs of the times.” This is another reason why the Church needs to know contemporary reactions to ideas and events, whether they be Catholic or not (*Communio et progressio*, 122).

The cinema can become the interpreter of our lives and worries. However, man in his complex and mysterious reality must become the reference-point for a quality cinema that offers culture and universal values (John Paul II 1999). Art is the experience of universality. It is the knowledge changed into words, images and sounds, into the symbols, in which human thought is able to see leaning towards the mystery of life, beyond the boundary that the thought itself can't cross: they (these words, images, sounds and symbols) are like windows opened towards that which is deep, high and inexpressible in existence (John Paul II Venice, 1985 in: Kawecki 2013, 37).

These beautiful words introduce us into the issue of theology of art, here theology of film. The question is about sources of theological cognition in cinema. It means, and this is essential for understanding the theology of art, to take up not only direct religious issues but also moral and existential which concern our world. Theology of film confronts the language of theology with of art to find common matters, such as general truth about the world and human being. It studies relations between the world of values and art (Sochoń 2007, 448). Film can be treated as a vehicle of transcendence not only because of its religious topics but also due to its specific language. It is a common mistake to equate film with its verbal narrations without considering the whole communicative dimension of film. Theology of film should quest for both religious and ethical or moral issues which are undertaken in film's narration (Lis 2011, 179).

I would like to hold that even the cinema of absurd and cruelty, can still be considered as a medium of an artistic expression of human life, demonstrating reference to a broader European culture tradition that involves the Christian outlook upon the world. Cinema reflected everyday struggles and in the fullest possible way expressed the sense of the word "person." It offered a hope for spiritual transformation, for a return to life that follow conscience and socially accepted practices (Sochoń 2007, 448).

KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI

John Paul II noticed that the genuine art and outstanding literature always contain existential questions. The authentic art is always connected with the world of faith to such a great extent that even when culture gets split from the Church, art is kind of a bridge directed towards religious hope.

Each kind of art should serve knowing a human being and care about “ecology of spirit,” as pope calls it (John Paul II Milan, 1983); and while leading to greater consciousness, it should make a human become more human. Art is supposed to be a school of humanity (John Paul II Venice, 1985). Art is supposed to help a man to interpret the world and his life by pointing to the depth of existence (Kawecki 2013, 43).

As the Holy Church teaches: Many films have compellingly treated subjects that concern human progress or spiritual values. It will be recalled that among films which have been widely accepted as classics, many have dealt with specifically religious themes. This not only proves that the cinema is a proper vehicle for such noble themes, but it is a strong encouragement to produce films of this kind (*Communio et progressio*, 144).

Considering this issue, the attention should be definitely drawn to Krzysztof Kieślowski’s films. He was a Polish director and screenwriter, lived in 1941–1996, who created many psychological films with moral and existential issues received numerous awards throughout his career. His early works were documentaries focused on the everyday people’s lives. In 1975 he created his first non-documentary feature, “Personel” which was a work of social realism. During that period (70s and 80s), Kieślowski was considered as a part of a loose movement with other Polish directors of the time, including Andrzej Wajda, and Agnieszka Holland, called the Cinema of Moral Anxiety.

I would like to focus on few of his works. These would be 10 episodes of 1 TV series “The Decalogue”. It is an attempt of telling 10 different stories that could happen in everyone’s lives. He tried to show a single person in their hard situations (Kieślowski 1997, 113). Looking deeply into a human soul was more important to Kieślowski than to show the outside world.

From the very beginning, we knew the films would be contemporary. We knew then that we had to find extreme, extraordinary situations for our characters, ones in which they would face difficult choices and make decisions which could not be taken lightly. They had to be credible and recognizable to the extent that the viewer would be able to think: “I’ve been in that position. I know exactly how they feel,” or: “Something very similar occurred to me once”. (Kieślowski 1991, xii-xiii)

It consists of ten one-hour films, inspired by the Ten Commandments. Each short film explores one or several moral or ethical issues faced by characters living in Poland in the late 80s.

It very quickly became clear that these would be films about feeling and passions, because we knew that love, or the fear of death, or the pain caused by a needle-prick, are common to all people. The most important problem still remained – how to adapt the action of each film to illustrate the relevant Commandment. We didn't want to adopt the tone of those who praise or condemn, handing out a reward here for doing of Good and a punishment there for the doing of Evil. Rather, we wished to say: We know more than you. But maybe it is worth investigating the unknown, if only because the very feeling of not knowing is a painful one. Once this approach had been decided, we found it easier to solve the problem of the relationship between the films and the individual Commandments: a tentative one. The films should be influenced by the individual Commandments during their several thousand years of existence, yet they are nevertheless transgressed on a routine basis. (Kieślowski 1991, xiii-xiv)

Though each film is independent, most of them share the same setting (a large housing project in Warsaw), and some of the characters are acquainted with each other. Creating *The Decalogue* Kieślowski asked himself what the goodness and the evil are, what is the Truth? (Kieślowski 1997, 114–115).

We endeavored to construct the plot of this film so that the viewer would leave the film with the same questions in mind which we had asked ourselves when the screenplay was only an empty page fed into the typewriter. (Kieślowski 1991, xiv)

Most of the episodes consider the lack of dialogue between people. Kieślowski said that because of the development of modern and easy ways of life the most important thing between people – a contact with others – has faded to black. He also wanted to show that love is always connected with suffering. We can see it in almost every episode.

1. The first one is a story of a university professor who is bringing up his young son in the use of reason and the scientific method. It is clearly seen when the boy asks his father what death is and the answer that he gets it is just when the heart stops pumping blood. Unfortunately he is confronted with the unpredictability of fate and the reason of it, is defied with tragic results.

2. The second episode is about Dorota and her dying husband. Dorota is pregnant with another man and she's having a dilemma if she should keep the child or not. Her husband's doctor, who believes in God, swore about her husband's death in vain asking her to keep the baby.

3. Nobody wants to be alone on Christmas Eve. Ewa does everything to spend this evening with her ex-lover. This film is about loneliness and the need of people to be with someone.

4. 20 years old Anna finds a letter which was written by her died mother. The relationship between her and her loving father changes immediately.

5. A brutal and seemingly motiveless murder. This is the only one of the films with an explicit political stance, reflecting Kieślowski's opposition to the death penalty. A cinema version of this episode was released as *A Short Film About Killing*.

6. A naive young man, Tomek, spies on a woman, Magda, and falls in love with her. She is trying to explain him that there is nothing such as real love, there is only a physical act. This episode was also created into a cinema version called *A Short Film About Love*.

7. A young woman abducts her own child, who has been raised by her parents as her sister.

8. A Holocaust survivor confronts an ethics professor who once refused to help her on the basis of this commandment. She is wondering, why do some rescue others, why others can only be rescued?

9. A man who has become impotent discovers that his wife has a lover. His wife tells him, that the things we have are more important than the things we do not have. Is it true? Can sinful people deal with this kind of existential clue?

10. Two brothers inherit a valuable stamp collection from their deceased father and soon become consumed and obsessed with their windfall. They ask themselves a question: Where does it come from? This urge to have something?

We can find in these films the authentic human values, the concept of the world and the vision of life, probably not directly religious, yet open to transcendence and, most importantly, acceptable to various cultures. This is how the cinema performs an important educational role, because it helps a man to learn universal values. It is capable of outlining mysteries of the world and of a man in an incredible way. The director, through the art of image, dialogues with the audience, conveys his own reflections, confronts the spectator with the concrete challenges and choices, becoming an educator for present and future generations. That's why we can say that cinematography is a very sensitive instrument, capable of decoding signs of time (Kawecki 2013, 80–81). Stanley Kubrick wrote:

They have the very rare ability to dramatize their ideas rather than just talking about a theme. By making their points through the dramatic action of the story they gain

the added power of allowing the audience to discover what's really going on rather than being told. They do this with such dazzling skill, you never see the ideas coming and don't realize until much later how profoundly they have reached your heart (Kieślowski 1991, 7).

The film should transfer the truth as a moral value which a spectator could interiorize and refer it to his own life. Kieślowski said that his aim in making films was always to touch the spectator. To give him just for the moment the feeling of beauty and happiness. He wanted people to find, to see themselves in his works. Human world considers good and evil. This is why we can't avoid difficult topics in films talking about human being.

The narration, description or portrayal of moral evil, can indeed serve to bring about a deeper knowledge and study of humanity and, with the aid of appropriately heightened dramatic effects, can reveal and glorify the grand dimensions of truth and goodness (*Inter mirifica*, 7).

SUMMARY

Let the cinema be at the service of truth in such a way that the bonds between peoples may become yet closer; that they may have a more respectful understanding of each other (Miranda Prorusus). Being at the service of truth means not only to avoid issues full of errors and lies and pretend they don't exist. It means also to take up such a manner of living and acting in movies that can show the spectator the good way.

When the conflict with evil, not excluding cases when evil prevails for a while, is treated within the context of a work as a whole, in an effort to understand life better, to see how it should be ordered, or to show how man should conduct himself, how he should think and act with more consistency, then, in such cases, such matter can be chosen as an integral part of the development of the whole film. (*Communio et progressio*, 57)

Such a work would contribute to a moral progress. Even though they are quite distinct, genuine artistic values do not clash with moral standards. Each in fact confirms the validity of the other. Moral problems may occur when the audience is too young or undeveloped to grasp, as it should, the full implications of evil. The artist is faced with life in its entirety, with

its good as well as its bad aspects. Good sense and judgment are therefore called for when a work is destined for a large audience with different backgrounds. This is especially true when the subject is man confronted by evil (*Communio et progressio*, 57–58).

Hidden-religious works are an interesting issue as their analysis point at longing to authentic spiritual or metaphysical experience (Lis 2011, 179–180). In the contemporary culture, we can find various sources of theological cognition which are not only the traditional and well-known ones but some of them are really surprising as they are situated more in the *profanum* than in the *sacrum*. It should be noted that often, they can be really secular epiphanies, in which “a grain of truth” can be seen, also by non-believers (Kawecki 2013, 129).

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Uniwersytet Papieski
Jana Pawła II
w Krakowie