Ikshu’s paper is about two episodes in the ten-part 1989 Dekalog (Decalogue) television series by the Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941-1996). Each episode in the series is named after one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:4-21). Decalogue I considers the prohibition against idolatry (“you shall have no other Gods before me”), while Decalogue 5 centers around the prohibition against murder. Ikshu analyzes how Kieślowski reinterprets these two commandments in particular and, in turn, how the director constructs the meaning of the biblical Decalogue more broadly. For the final assignment of the course, we had asked students to choose a work of art that “retells” one of the biblical stories studied in “Ultimate Meanings: Decoding Religious Stories from around the World” and to analyze its way of reinterpreting the Bible.

Deciding to work on the Decalogue by Kieślowski, who is best known in the West for his Three Colors Trilogy (Blue, White, and Red, 1994-1995), was a brave choice to begin with, as the director’s oeuvre is not easy. Ikshu handled the challenge admirably. His paper is exquisitely crafted and reflects the sophistication as a reader of texts and films that he displayed over two quarters of section discussion. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Ikshu’s analysis is his analysis of the aesthetic choices in Kieślowski’s films. Examining the “gaze” of the camera lens and of persons in the film, Ikshu argues that the Decalogue deliberately estranges viewers from characters, compelling us to “ask whether the relationship between God and the world is similar to that of the viewer and film.” In so doing, Ikshu applies ideas and interpretive techniques mastered in study of other course materials (from readings of Genesis to stories by Jorge Luis Borges) to a difficult medium and work of his own choosing.

— Amos Bitzan
psychological and emotional relationship of the individual with the Commandments. The centrality of the characters in *Decalogue I* and *V* brings to fore the main issue of the films: How can people so profoundly alienated from God find meaning in the Commandments? It is this alienation that provides the thematic unity for the series. The director’s treatment of the subject of alienation revolves around the difficulty of belief in a world seemingly governed by unforgiving chance. His portrait of the desolate landscape of late-1980s Warsaw seems like the least likely of places to find God, and his protagonists struggle in this very search. In reference to this dreary vision, film critic Annette Insdorf writes, “These compositions relate to the overarching visual strategy…which stresses alienation” (92). It is this alienation that occupies the heart of Kieślowski’s drama. The cinematic motifs and techniques used in the films reinforce this “distance” between the characters, God, and even the viewer in an environment devoid of divine presence and design.

The role of alienation in the films is two-fold: there is the estrangement of the protagonist from God as well as the distancing of the viewer from the characters. The first of these arises from a consideration of the intra-diegetic gaze, while the second is a manifestation of the spectator’s or camera’s gaze. In *Decalogue I*, the opening sequence includes a shot of Paweł running happily on the TV screen (Kieślowski 1’45”). At the end of the film, after the boy’s death, the sequence is repeated, presumably as the aunt watches (51’8”). The second time, the footage bears much more weight. The gaze of the characters upon this TV footage demonstrates their insurmountable separation from the dead child. The screen has an eerie blue tinge, evoking the blueness of the ice under which the boy died. Insdorf explains this connection: “The first shot—a frozen lake—can be likened to the TV screen in the second scene: we don’t know what lies under the surface. But by the end, the lake has been shown to contain death by keeping the child within its melted water; the television is no longer a simple screen but maintains the child “alive” within it” (72-73). This interpretation highlights the importance of separation in the gaze since the father and aunt must look upon the boy through a screen, whether it is the TV or a layer of ice. The gaze of the characters upon this TV footage demonstrates their disconnected placements of the same actor, several critics have advanced the view that he is a supernatural being. According to author Marek Haltof, Kieślowski and the cinematographer, Wiesław Zdort, initially labeled the character as “the Angel of Fate” (81). A counter-interpretation instead claims, “His [the witness’] presence is like that attributed to God in Job: ‘Should he come near me, I see him not; should he pass by, I am not aware of him’ (J 9,11)” (Garbowski 102). In both readings, the witness serves as a possible link between the grim realism of the characters’ lives and God. The second interpretation also pays special attention to the fact that the watcher is largely defined by his inability to intervene in reality, thereby reinforcing the theme of God’s remoteness from the world.

Just as the gaze of the characters upon each other is important for understanding the role of God in the two movies, the gaze of the viewer on the characters is characterized by a similar alienating effect. While the distancing of the audience from the characters here is quite different from the “Verfremdungseffekt” of Bertolt Brecht, Kieślowski’s use of the camera to manipulate the fourth wall has similar consequences in the films. As Haltof observes, in *V*, “the television version introduces the main characters in the manner characteristic of several of Kieślowski’s films—through their reflections in mirrors or glass” (90). We first see Pietr’s face in a mirror, and we only recognize that the shot is not directly of his face once the camera has zoomed out sufficiently (Kieślowski 0’57”). Similarly, the cab driver is first seen through the panel of a door that also reflects the gray housing complex outside (1’25”). Jacek is shown in a mirror behind metal bars, foreshadowing his
later imprisonment (2’23”). The motifs of indirect vision and the lens are repeated throughout the film. Several shots utilize internal framing to present the subject through an extra lens beyond that of the camera. In one scene, Jacek looks through a small opening made by his bent arm (7’28”). Also, when he drags the taxi driver’s body to the water, the camera remains inside the door, causing the car door to act as a secondary lens (26’02”). In the hanging, we are offered one of the film’s most haunting shots when our vantage point is placed beneath the trap door, looking up to Jacek’s limp, dangling feet (54’0”). By adding a “secondary lens” between the viewer and the subject in each of these scenes, Kieślowski creates the illusion of distance. One theory holds that “glass is used to distance the audience, to help it retain its objectivity, to aid it to observe and judge” (Maurer 52). Since the film completely leaves out Jacek’s trial, one can see the entire episode as a type of trial in which the audience plays judge and capital punishment itself is put on trial. In this case, the cinematic distancing of the audience allows the viewer to assume the role of dispassionate arbiter. However, comparison to I suggests a different reading.

In I, Pawel watches his father give a lecture at the university. Pawel crouches by a slide projector, closing one eye so that he can look through a small hole at Krzysztof (Kieślowski 25’8”). As the father lectures, the son’s gaze drifts, at times looking at the father’s face but at other times focusing only on his hands. Since Pawel, and by extension, the audience, looks through a secondary lens, one can never see all of Krzysztof’s body at once. This visual constriction of the secondary lens adds to the “thickness” of the fourth wall. The parallel between the alienation of God from the characters and the distancing of audience and character indicates a natural connection between the deity and the viewer. The films force one to ask whether the relationship between God and the world is similar to that of the viewer and the film.

Despite its meta-cinematic formulation, this question has implications beyond just the medium of film. The first theological concern to which it gives rise is the problem of belief. Indeed, if God is nothing more than an observer, then what just the medium of film. The first theological concern to which it gives rise is the problem of belief. Indeed, if God is nothing more than an observer, then what

symbols point either to the death of God or to the death of Krzysztof’s personal God of reason. If we accept the first interpretation, then we are left with the problem of resolving why the ice actually broke. Although Kieslowski offers no answer to this question, the fact that the witness character sits by the frozen lake opens the possibility that God’s hand was responsible for the breaking of the ice. Thus, it seems as if the second reading, that something inside of the father has died, is the more defensible of the two. Again, we find that despite their theological aspirations, the films are firmly planted in the realm of the personal rather than the metaphysical. The turn away from God is also brought out in one of the central motifs of the entire Decalogue series – milk. In I, Pawel complains that the milk is sour, and he later lets the milk freeze and crack its bottle (9’20” and 28’2”). Certainly, the characters do not live in the “land of milk and honey.” Considering the religious connotation of milk, the souring of the milk is a souring of God’s promise.

The fifth installment also includes a story of lost faith. Piotr is first depicted as an idealistic law student passing his exam by giving a speech on how “the law should not imitate nature, the law should improve nature” (Kieślowski 0’3”). By the end of the film, he has borne witness to both the horror of nature and the horror of the law. After the execution, he sits in his car by a forest and a meadow, perhaps the same meadow where Jacek’s sister was killed, and screams “I abhor it!” (55’04”). This destruction of faith is a loss of faith in himself and in his profession. After the trial, he asks the judge if an older, more experienced lawyer could have made a difference, to which the judge replies with a no (32’07”). The inevitably of the situation reflects a vacuum of hope and therefore a lack of the godly. Jacek’s drifting through Warsaw bears a similar, hopeless quality. In the early scene of Jacek at the movie theater, we find, “[t]he murderer-to-be is a young man in a state of constant expectation, and these expectations are usually unfulfilled—also for the film which he was to watch that afternoon, but which the cashier advised him against seeing,” as the critic Christopher Garbowski describes (93). Jacek’s wandering is rife with such instances of unfulfilled expectations. For Jacek, these expectations take the place of hope. The let-downs he experiences are each small crises of faith. In light of this, his completely unmotivated murder can be understood as a final act of agency – for once, he is able to get the result he expects. Jacek thereby becomes a perverse reflection of the tragic hero. Lacking faith in a world that seems to reject the very notion of faith itself, he turns to murder. Hence, the murderer and the man who defends him lose not only the case but also the last vestiges of their faith.
The question of faith is closely related to another problem—the role of fate as against chance. In their existential wrestling with their isolation from God, Kieślowski’s characters find another problem in their world: their universe is seemingly governed by cruel chance. No matter where they turn, they can find none of the grand design that a world touched by God should inherit. At the beginning of I, Krzysztof believes that the world obeys a natural, rational order decipherable by his computer. The breaking of the ice occurs against all odds, thereby demonstrating the inadequacy of reason to fully know the world. Thus we have another answer to the question of why the ice broke; in addition to the explanation of divine intervention, there is also the possibility that it was completely random. The role of chance in Pawel’s death becomes evident in the moments leading up to the father’s realization of his son’s death. From the minute when Krzysztof realizes something might be wrong up to the point when he watches the firemen pull his son out of the ice, he is beset by signs of the arbitrary nature of the world. The first such symbol is the breaking of his bottle of ink, in which “a cracking ink bottle intimates disaster, the ink’s spread picturing the uncontrollable, and the water below the ice” (Coates 95). The salient part of this parallel between the image of the ink bottle and the breaking ice is that both events signify unexpected disorder (Kieślowski 34’14”). After the bottle breaks, Krzysztof finds his life governed by coincidence and malignant improbability. For instance, he finds that Pawel’s English lesson was cancelled because his teacher suddenly fell ill. As Krzysztof runs about to try to find Pawel, he is surrounded by images of his trapped position. Doors close in his face and the grille over the stairwell window frames him in the bars of a jail cell (37’45,” 38’46,” 45’7”). Ultimately, the father’s loss of faith in reason stems from the apparent randomness of his son’s death. If Job curses his just God for permitting injustice, then Krzysztof rails against his rational God for allowing the unreasonable.

The characters in V feel a similarly overbearing presence of chance in their lives. The taxi driver is shown rejecting several other customers before picking up Jacek. Had he decided to pick up just one of those people, his fate would have been radically altered. Similarly, Jacek’s wandering is governed by the laws of the random. In one scene, he pushes a rock off a bridge onto the traffic below (Kieślowski 8’07”). He walks away, leaving it up to chance if the rock hits a car. Even Jacek’s act of murder, which defines his character, is random violence. When he speaks to Piotr before the execution, he reveals a shaping moment of his childhood when his sister was run over by a tractor. Jacek wonders if things would have turned out differently had his sister not been killed (45’57”). Jacek was transformed by the unpredictable, random death of his sister. When we first meet him on the streets of Warsaw, he has already accepted the supremacy of fortuity and lives without regard for the possibility of divine design. Jacek’s speculation on what his life could have been had his sister not died paralleled another such speculation in the film. Piotr recalls that he was in the same café as Jacek on the day the murder took place. Piotr also wonders if he could have done something to change the course of events (33’31”). For Piotr, this incredible coincidence is a manifestation of the possibility of meaningful action to effect change. Yet by the end of the movie, Piotr has been forced to recognize his powerlessness in the face of a larger system. With this discovery, the coincidence of the café is reduced to mere happenstance, lacking any greater meaning or hope of possibility.

The Ten Commandments are perhaps some of the greatest “answers” in human history; they form a definite answer to the question of how one must live one’s life. It is a bit surprising, then, that a series of films based around the Commandments works so hard to avoid answers altogether. While the director carefully sets the stage for his characters to play out their crises, he offers little in the way of a theological resolution. Krzysztof and Piotr are both left as broken men in a seemingly hostile world, without even their old gods of reason or law to turn to. The psychological drama of their alienation from God is clear, but how they are meant to deal with it is not. Through his control of the cinematic dimension of the films, Kieślowski is able to direct not only the gaze of his characters but also the gaze of his audience. Yet after this gaze has passed over the wintry Polish cityscape and the fragile lives therein, we are left staring into the void. This emptiness is the director’s final image. It serves as a reminder that the films do not constitute a theological framework or biblical exegesis but are simply stories of individuals who have lost both themselves and their gods. Through this intensely personal reading of the Commandments, Kieślowski breathes new life into a text once set in stone.
WORKS CITED


