

Kieslowski's Unlikely Comedy

Fiction

In mid-February 1996, the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski called Krzysztof Piesiewicz, the Solidarity-era lawyer who had been his co-scriptwriter for more than a decade. Kieslowski insisted that they meet immediately to talk about an idea that he had for a film. "I am in the café across the square from the courthouse," Kieslowski said. "I have been here working on this idea all of the morning."

"And I have much work ahead of me this afternoon," Piesiewicz said, meaning that he was to review evidence put forth by the defence in the case he was prosecuting at the time.

"We both have much work ahead of us. That is why we must meet now. To begin."

"No," Piesiewicz pleaded. "I have a case before the courts. I have no time for talk of films."

Kieslowski fell silent as he often did when something was not going as he expected. Piesiewicz had collaborated with Kieslowski on his two greatest projects, the celebrated *Three Colours Trilogy* and the lesser-known, but no less significant, *Decalogue*. More recently they had been working on a new trilogy inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy* and while they had already completed the script for *Heaven*, the remaining films existed only as treatments, and Piesiewicz knew that if this new idea of Kieslowski's took hold it would be years before they would return to *Hell* and *Purgatory*.

Piesiewicz leaned back in his chair until he could see out across the square to the café where Kieslowski was calling from. He imagined Kieslowski there, growing

cantankerous: his eyes narrowing behind his horn-rimmed glasses; his forehead deeply creased over his thick eyebrows. Having worked with Kieslowski long enough to know that he always got this way Piesiewicz relented. "We will meet this afternoon, then," he said, holding the telephone under his chin as he slid a wad of documents inside a manilla envelope. He picked up his black leather briefcase off the floor beside his desk and placed the envelope inside. He would review the evidence after he'd finished with Kieslowski. "We will meet this afternoon," he said again, to himself as much as to Kieslowski. "But you are on your own tonight."

Kieslowski said nothing. It was not in his manner to express gratitude. Piesiewicz hung up, his hand resting heavily on the receiver, the creases of his knuckles forming an audience of frowns.

Kieslowski was recognisable from the doorway of the café. He was sitting across the room with his back turned toward the door. He was smoking, as usual, and the smoke settled heavily about him like a dense fog of which the day had yet to relieve itself. Piesiewicz moved between the crowded tables, holding his briefcase to his chest. He reached Kieslowski's table and placed a hand on his shoulder. Kieslowski flinched and stood abruptly, his hip catching the corner of the table causing a smouldering cigarette to fall clear of the glass ashtray and roll across the table, leaving a trail of dark ash.

Piesiewicz sat opposite Kieslowski. Three empty cups sat in the centre of the small wooden table and in each lay the dark remnants of coffee. Beneath the cups a dozen or more broad sheets of paper were fanned out over the table. Piesiewicz had first seen such a rush of creation twelve years before when they first collaborated on the screenplay

fact.

fact.

for *No End*, their 1984 film which follows the ghost of a young lawyer observing the life his wife goes on to lead after his death. The sheets of paper on the table were covered with Kieslowski's distinctive handwriting: outlines of scenes, and sketches of sets with a series of detailed notes for direction. Piesiewicz held the edge of one of the pages and rotated it so that he could see something of what Kieslowski had done. He picked up more and more of the sheets of paper until he held them all in his hands. "All of this just this morning?"

Kieslowski nodded enthusiastically. Piesiewicz shuffled the paper, found something he recognised a portion of the scene. "What is this?" he asked. Kieslowski leaned forward in his chair. Piesiewicz held the paper out in the space between them.

"That," Kieslowski said emphatically, thrusting his forefinger on the topmost sheet of paper so that all the sheets slipped from Piesiewicz's grip. "That is what I need to talk to you about."

Piesiewicz picked up the page again to look more closely. He recognised the scene. It was from *Blue* and it began with Olivier and the lawyer entering the drawing-room of Julie's house. After a brief discussion between the three, Olivier leaves and Julie then pours two glasses of wine. She hands one glass to the lawyer who opens his black leather briefcase and removes a wad of documents. The lawyer has come to discuss financial matters following the death of Julie's husband and begins describing what actions have already been taken but Julie stops him. She then asks how many digits there are in her bank account number and when the lawyer indicates that there are nine Julie sets about composing a nine digit number from a series of random numbers. The lawyer's date of birth gives the first six digits, the age of his own daughter provides two. They

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interpretation
of a script.

have an eight-digit number. "How many teeth have you got missing?" Julie asks. "Five," the lawyer says but, worried and surprised, he continues to count, moving his time in around inside his mouth, probing the voids. "Sorry, six," he says. "I've got six teeth missing."

Julie has what she is after. A nine-digit number - 270641196 - into which she asks the lawyer to pay all of the money from all of her bank accounts. The lawyer is gob smacked. He searches for but is unable to find any logical argument with which to challenge Julie's request. He notes that he would need to know the owner's name to pay money into the account but Julie says simply, "You'll find out." She continues, indicating that all of their shares, her house and car, all of her possessions are to be sold and the money is to go into that same account. "That's millions," the lawyer says with disbelief.

** Direct quotes from script.*

CUT TO:

EXT. EIFFEL TOWER. AFTERNOON

A young woman sits bored inside a booth selling postcards. We can see her behind the glass. Her only link to the outside world is a small hole in the glass through which customers make their requests and hand their money. People come and go and the young woman smiles thinly during the exchanges. When customers depart the young woman's face appears suspended behind glass, overlaid with the reflection of the Eiffel Tower.

CUT TO:

INT. LOUNEROOM OF TINY PARIS FLAT. EARLY EVENING

A young man lies across a couch watching a television in a darkened room.

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He stares at a television screen and a glowing white light illuminates his face. On the screen, a man digs in the snow with a small, brightly coloured plastic scraper used to remove ice from the windshield of a car. The man buries a large black case full of money and sticks the ice scraper into the snow to mark the spot.

A key is heard in a lock. The young man pauses the film and lifts his head to look toward the door. The door opens and the young woman from the ticket booth steps in. She slams the door and storms into the lounge room. She slaps the young man across the face as he rises from the lounge.

YOUNG WOMAN

(In English)

What the fuck have you done?

YOUNG MAN

(Pleading, in French)

What? What? What have I done?

YOUNG WOMAN

(In French also)

You tell me.

(Then in English)

You fucking tell me what you've done?

YOUNG MAN

(Voice over in French)

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I knew she was angry. She was speaking English again. She only ever swears in English. Never in French. Never. It is, after all (he speaks now in English with an exaggerated French accent) *the language of love.*

YOUNG WOMAN

(In French again)

Look at this.

(She holds out a slip of paper)

What's this?

(He looks at her confused)

This is our bank account.

He takes the slip of paper and reads the account number. He nods.

Fuck!

YOUNG MAN

(In French)

It is. It is...

YOUNG WOMAN

(In French)

But...

(She gestures at the balance of the account)

YOUNG MAN

(Young man sees the balance. It is millions.)

(In English)

Fuck!

CUT TO:

Piesiewicz looked up from the page. Kieslowski was sitting with an unlit cigarette between his lips. He was about to light the cigarette but, when he saw that Piesiewicz had stopped reading. Kieslowski leaned back into his chair and raised his eyebrows inquisitively.

“What the fuck is this?” Piesiewicz said loudly, drawing the attention of everyone in the café, less for what he’d said than the fact that he said it in English. In an instant people recognised Kieslowski and turned away.

“This is my new idea,” Kieslowski said, as though the term ‘new idea’ itself was somehow worthy of absolute trust. “You know I hate being stuck in a drawer and labelled.”

Piesiewicz nodded slowly, considering.

“I know people consider me an, how do they put it - austere filmmaker?”

Piesiewicz nodded again with increasing certainty.

“Or, as one might say, *cold* and *controlling*.”

Piesiewicz laughed awkwardly and averted his eyes from meeting Kieslowski’s own gaze.

“I have had reason to think again of how I would like to be remembered. When I was at the film school in Lodz,” Kieslowski said. “We had privileges, access to films normal Poles could never imagine existed. Films from Western Europe. Asia. America. Last night I went back to the school to speak with students. To talk about my films and such. But, when I get to the school I am met by the Head of the school and he apologises to me that they had not been able to contact me earlier. He says that I will no longer be able to speak. Instead the school was holding a screening, a preview, of an American

film. The Head of the school apologised again and again, saying that he hoped I would be able to return some other time. He invited me then to stay and watch the film with the students and perhaps speak with the directors of the film.”

“More than one?”

“Two,” Kieslowski said. “They were brothers.”

“What was the film?”

Kieslowski shook his head. “I do not know what it was called. I went late into the theatre. I was outside with a young woman who also wished to smoke and we shared her cigarettes and some of my thoughts. When we got in to the theatre the film was already going. It is to be released next month in America. There were no subtitles so we all had to rely on our own English and even though it was in English there was something difficult about the way the character spoke. ‘Yah,’ they would say. ‘Yah. Yah.’”

“Anyhow, in this film a man has some kind of trouble with money and he plans to have his wife kidnapped. He will pay the kidnappers - I don’t think he knows them, someone else he knows has assisted in the arrangement. Anyhow his plan is that his wife’s rich father would put up the money for ransom, more than the kidnappers are asking for, and the husband will deliver the money himself, paying the kidnappers some of it, but keeping the remainder for himself. But - this is American - so it all, how do they say? Turns to shit?”

“So this film is not a comedy but it is very funny. People laughed at the most horrible things. One of the kidnappers feeds the other into a woodchipping machine and all of the surrounding snow is turned pink with blood.”

“It was an unusual film. There is a shifting protagonist: at first it seems to be the

car dealer then it seems to be the policewoman, and she is pregnant. And the criminals are not usual. One is big and seems all the time sleepy and the other one, the smaller one is,” Kieslowski paused while he sought out the words. “Funny looking.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t know,” Kieslowski shrugged. “Just funny looking.”

“Can you be any more specific?”

Kieslowski shook his head. “No,” he said. “I couldn’t really say. But,” Kieslowski went on. “The thing that got me thinking is that at the end of the film there is a large sum of money left buried in the snow. It is a loose end just like the money in *Blue*. And it made me think of this scene,” Kieslowski gestured at the sheet of paper in front of Piesiewicz’s hands. “I couldn’t help but wonder, ‘What did happen to the money?’”

Piesiewicz held up his hands. “Nothing happened to the money. There is no money. It is just a film. Fiction.”

“Maybe so,” Kieslowski said. “But it is a loose end. I cannot believe we missed it. We did so much to tie up all of our loose ends from all of the films. At the end of *Red* we have all of the characters - Julie and Olivier, Karol and Dominique, August and Valentine - coming out of the water after the sinking of the ferry. There are no loose ends from the trilogy *except*,” Kieslowski held out his hands as though to wrap his arms around the logic he was following. “The money?”

Piesiewicz shook his head and looked around the room as though he hoped to find a jury prepared to convict Kieslowski or else to find himself the victim of an American-style comedic stunt. What do they call that television program? Candid Camera?

“This film,” Kieslowski declared. “Is the one I will be remembered for.” People in

the café turned toward the noise again. He went on undaunted. "I must make this film."

"Why?" Piesiewicz asked, his voice carrying signs of exhaustion.

Kieslowski admitted that he was still seething at a review of *Blue*, the first film of the *Three Colours Trilogy*. The review suggested that that particular film, more than any other of his earlier films, demonstrated the almost fatal humourlessness that would always limit Kieslowski's audience to people who themselves were unfeeling. Kieslowski wanted to now demonstrate, "What Americans call 'range'. I want to show the full scope of my humanity - humour and," Kieslowski struggled to articulate his meaning. "Humourlessness."

Piesiewicz stared at Kieslowski as though he was trying to put a name to his face.

"I have seen the way people watch my films. Some people cry. Some show no expression at all. But no one laughs. No one!"

That's because you do not make comedy films," Piesiewicz said.

"But now I will," Kieslowski insisted. "I must."

Piesiewicz shook his head.

"What?" Kieslowski shrugged. "Even I have had enough of my own moral anxieties."

Piesiewicz leaned right forward over the table. He began his right of reply. He reminded Kieslowski of his previous commitment to his art "You are a director who spent a week finding a sugar cube that would absorb coffee in seven seconds..."

"Five."

"What?"

"It was five seconds. For that shot of Julie to be right the cube had to absorb

coffee in five seconds.”

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters,” Kieslowski said. “It does. It had to be five. That’s as much…”

“I know, I know,” Piesiewicz said, holding his palms up for Kieslowski to stop right there. “That’s as much as the audience can tolerate in a single shot’. I know that, I have heard that all before. That’s not what I’m talking about. *That* doesn’t matter right now. What matters is that the film your thinking of will undoubtedly be the biggest mistake of your career.”

Kieslowski thumped his fist down on the table. “I will make this film, even if it is the last one I make.”

“And I think if you do make this film,” Piesiewicz said. “It will in fact be the last one you will ever make.”

“Do you really think so?”

Piesiewicz looked across at his good friend. He thought about all of the work that they had already done together, all they still had planned to do, and everything Kieslowski was capable of.

Kieslowski’s gaze dropped to the sheets of paper on the table. “Really?” he asked again, less certain now.

Piesiewicz nodded. “Yah.”

Three weeks after calling Piesiewicz to the café to tell him about this plans for his unlikely comedy, Kieslowski went in for surgery to repair heart disease resulting from decades of heavy smoking. Having declined the opportunity to have his surgery

fatal

Yadval

completed in any number of hospitals in Paris or New York, Kieslowski instead declared his confidence in his local Warsaw Hospital.

Kieslowski never came out of the anaesthesia. It was rumoured, though never confirmed, that staff were not familiar with newly imported equipment used in the operation. Simple errors of judgment may have been made.

FAZNA

The Coen brother's *Fargo* was released in America on the 8th of March, five days before Kieslowski's death. A year later, *Dialog* magazine printed the script for *Heaven*, the first film in Kieslowski's planned new trilogy. The Coen brothers immediately pitched themselves as directors. They went to meet the producers, telling them how they had always wanted to work with him and how they'd even discussed the possibility when they met Kieslowski at the Lodz film school, where Kieslowski himself had studied. There they had an opportunity to ask him about why he was not able to attend the screening of his film *No End* at the New York Festival.

"I think it was 1984 or 1985," Joel said to Kieslowski with slow deliberation. My brother and I had tickets passed on to us by a friend with whom I had studied film at the New York University back in the seventies. Ethan and I had already seen..."

"...And liked," Ethan added.

"Yes," Joel went on. "We had already seen and liked *Blind Chance* and we were hoping we might to get an opportunity to work with you at some point."

Kieslowski was pleased by their enthusiasm for his work.

"But you never made it to the screening of your own film," Ethan added.

~~THE~~ Based on *THE*. Kieslowski
was chased by taxi drivers on that night for this reason!

"No," Kieslowski said. "You are wrong. I was just late," he said sheepishly, drawing heavily on his cigarette. "But there is certainly a story behind that."

Ethan fidgeted. "So, what's the story?"

"Well I had every intention of attending. It was my first screening in New York. I was hurrying to get there. I took a taxi from my hotel. The streets were thick with cars. It was raining. My taxi went through Central Park and the taxi-driver hit a cyclist."

"No way," Ethan said.

"It is true," Kieslowski nodded. "All true. It was dusk, almost dark. And the taxi hit the cyclist who fell and the taxi-driver ran over the bike. He had nowhere to go the road is narrow there and your cars in America are terribly big and wide. But he did get out to help the cyclist. I got out too. We tried to help the cyclist up but he was in too much pain. His leg was bleeding. Broken, probably. Cars started sounding their horns. You could see a mile of cars lined up behind us, their headlights rippling in the rain. It was an enormous river of cars."

Joel laughed his deep-throated laugh.

"No way," Ethan said.

"It gets worse," Kieslowski said. "I had to be at the Lincoln Center in about five minutes. We were almost there. I asked the driver how much further and in which direction and he pointed down the road ahead. So I gave him the money I owed him, more even, and began running through the rain. And you might already be thinking what happened next. The taxi drivers coming up in the opposite direction saw a taxi standing and a man running quickly away from it."

The Coen brothers groaned with the realisation. "No way," Ethan said again.

The Coen brothers link is purely
fictional!

Kieslowski nodded. "Of course they did. They thought I'd maybe killed the driver or something. I was dressed in my suit. It was raining. I was going to be late and wet if I did not run. So I ran. But all of these taxis were stopping and these guys with baseball bats were jumping out so I run away from them. They chased me through Central Park with these great big baseball bats. You know," Kieslowski held his cigarette between his lips and gripped an imaginary bat. "Those huge, long sticks."

"Yeah. Yeah," Ethan said. "We know baseball."

"Yah. Yah," Kieslowski said and they all laughed.

FACT
A young German director, Tom Tywyker, was chosen to direct *Heaven*. Tywyker's first film *Run, Lola, Run*, bore some resemblance to Kieslowski's own *Blind Chance*, which had posed three possible outcomes for a young man running after a train. When they

fiction
found out that they missed out on directing *Heaven*, the Coen brothers set about writing a script based on Kieslowski's life. Their film was to be called *So-So* (the title was taken from Kieslowski's usual response to the question, "How are you?" "So-so," he would respond with characteristic pessimism, indicating that he was, at least, still alive.)

FACT: Kieslowski did use to say this.
Rumour has it, from those who have read the complete script or talked at length with the Coen brothers about the film, which it is likely to be the Coen's first and last film without any laughs. It, like Kieslowski's final trilogy, has a structure inspired by

FACT:
Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The three canticas - *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise) - which represent Kieslowski's three films, represent the three acts of the Coen brother's film. The film is set to be narrated in a corrupted version of Dante's original *terza rima* with the Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky, whom Kieslowski admired

fiction (essentially, the Coens are fictional)

greatly, performing Virgil's role of leading Kieslowski through Hell and Purgatory.

Juliette Binoche, playing Beatrice, Dante's ideal woman, would lead Kieslowski through Heaven. The film ends with Kieslowski's death:

100. INT. OPERATING THEATRE. WARSAW HOSPITAL

In a brightly lit, white-tiled room, a half dozen theatre staff in dark green gowns stand at the head of an operating table. Behind them a piece of equipment continues to alarm and, on the floor, in the corner of the frame, an electrical cord from another, newer machine, lays unplugged. The lead was inadvertently pulled free of the socket by a theatre nurse whose younger, idealistic sister had weeks before shared cigarettes with Kieslowski at the Lodz film school [66] and then called her older sister after midnight to tell her about it [67].

JULIETTE BINOCHE

(Voice Over in English)

They stand about like gridlocked cars,
caught there in some foreign land

The theatre staff are gathered around a manual and it is clear that they are struggling to make sense of it. Someone reaches out to turn off the alarming machine. On the table a man lies with his chest cut open. One of the nurses breaks away from the group and stands alongside the body. [In 67 the nurse's younger sister has described Kieslowski as "A warm and funny man at heart," but the nurse did not share her younger sister's enthusiasm. "Kieslowski's films leave me cold," the elder sister had said that night. "I do not imagine that man has any kind of heart.]

fiction

JULIETTE BINOCHE

(Voice Over in English)

Until a lone woman moves to the body,
touches a hand, finds it still warm
and therein sensing the tragedy,

The nurse leans over and looks into the open chest of the man on the table.

JULIETTE BINOCHE

(Voice Over in English)

Seeks out the heart of a man, finds it there still,
and as deeply moving, as unfathomable,
as profound and immeasurable

As a whole galaxy of distant stars

CLOSE UP ON black, shining pupil of nurse. FIND Kieslowski's face, the lids of his eyes are taped shut
and a tube runs from his mouth. HOLD for one... two... three... four...

Fade to Black