

To Save the World

Kieślowski's THREE COLORS Trilogy

By Dave Kehr



When *Red*, the concluding episode in Krzysztof Kieślowski's "Three Colors" trilogy, was screened at this May's Cannes Film Festival, the 53-year-old Polish filmmaker took the opportunity to announce his retirement. He now had enough money to keep himself in cigarettes, he told a group of American journalists through an interpreter, and rather than subject himself to the strain and bother of making films, he would prefer to sit quietly in a room by himself and smoke. Perhaps he would watch a little television, but never, never would he go to the movies.

Like most of Kieślowski's public statements, his proclamation of retirement should be taken with a grain of salt. He has long hidden his creative passions behind a mask of sardonic detachment—as did Alfred Hitchcock, a director with whom Kieślowski's career intersects in a number of interesting ways. But while it's hard to imagine an artist of Kieślowski's gifts retiring at the height of his powers, there is something in the image he uses that rings true. Retired or not, Kieślowski will always be that solitary smoker, an artist who sits at a reflective remove from mankind, contemplating the paradoxes and savoring the ironies of human existence.

It's an unusual position for a maker of movies—the most gregarious of mediums, the one artform that is both created and consumed in the midst of crowds—yet Kieślowski is devoted to solitude as a subject and isolation as a point of view. As a Pole, born in 1941 in an occupied country, Kieślowski comes from an entire history of separation and exclusion. Caught between Russia and Germany, Poland is the traditional battleground between East and West, belonging fully to neither tradition, neither culture. Under Communism, Kieślowski was too much of a quirky individualist to please the Party, and too much of a moody aesthetist to please the firebrands of Solidarity. Even now, he is a reluctant capitalist, protesting the "economic censorship" of the West, while preserving a distinct nostalgia for the state subsidized film industry of the past, free of box-office constraints.

In the 1979 *Camera Buff*, the first of Kieślowski's films to attract international attention, a factory worker (Jerzy Stuhr) buys an 8mm camera to film his new baby, but soon begins shooting his family, friends, and workplace. Eventually, he finds that his elevated position as a dispassionate recorder of reality has set him fatally apart from others, costing him his job and his wife. In *No End*, made in 1984 during the darkest days of martial law, the widow (Grazyna Szapolowska) of a Solidarity lawyer tries to find a place for herself in a world that has lost all value and meaning.

A *Short Film About Killing* ('88, an expansion of part of the TV series *The Decalogue*) is centered on an alienated, virtually wordless young man (Miroslaw Baka) who murders a taxi driver and is himself killed by the Polish state. In *A Short Film About Love* (also from *The Decalogue*), a postal clerk (Olaf Lubaszenko) falls in love with a woman he knows only through his telescope. *The Double Life of Veronique* ('91, the first of Kieślowski's films financed with Western money) tells of two identical young women (Irène Jacob, in both roles) who lead parallel lives in Paris and Warsaw; they affect each other's lives in mysterious ways but never meet.

Each of the ten stories in *The Decalogue*, Kieślowski's massive television series based on the Ten Commandments, takes place in or passes through same housing project in Warsaw*. Though the characters occasionally cross one another's paths, they never come together in a significant way, never realize how much they have in common with the others, how closely intertwined their lives, in fact, are.

The "Three Colors" trilogy—*Blue* (first shown at the Venice Film Festival in September '93), *White* (premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in February '94), and *Red* (shown in Cannes in May '94)—also takes isolation as its subject, though this time Kieślowski is able to move to another level. Taken as a whole—which is the only way the three, closely intertwined episodes should be taken—the trilogy charts a movement from a deep sense of solitude to an

*"It's the most beautiful housing estate in Warsaw, which is why I chose it. It looks pretty awful, so you can imagine what the others are like." All quotations from *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, edited by Danusia Stok (Faber and Faber, 1993).

understanding and acceptance of community, to a sense of shared values and mutual interdependence. "Three Colors" is an epic of reconciliation, in which fragmented parts come together to make a whole, just as the three colors of the title create the French flag, and the three films in the series constitute one continuous gesture.

The structure of the trilogy follows the traditional pattern of the three-act play: an opening statement of themes and images (*Blue*), a reversal of those themes (*White*), and finally a synthesis and resolution (*Red*) that moves the themes to a different level. In spite of Kieślowski's declaration†, the three films play best in the sequence in which they were written, filmed, and premiered; they contain an infinite number of inner correspondences, some playful and some quite essential.

In *Blue*, a chic Parisian woman, Julie (Juliette Binoche), loses her young daughter Anna and her husband Patrice (Claude Denton), a celebrated composer, in a car accident. Determined to forget the past and start a new life without emotional attachments, she takes an apartment in a working-class neighborhood and tries to lose herself in the anonymous life of the city. But she is drawn irresistibly into the lives of others: first by Olivier (Benoit Regent), her husband's assistant, who wants her help in completing his final score; next by Lucille (Charlotte Véry), a prostitute who is in danger of being expelled from Julie's building; then by Sandrine (Florence Pernel), a lawyer whom Julie discovers was her husband's lover, and who is carrying his child.

White begins in Paris, where Karol (Zbigniew Zamachowski), a hard-working Polish hairdresser, is being sued for divorce by his coldblooded French wife, Dominique (Julie Delpy). Having lost his wife, his shop and his self-respect, Karol takes to playing Polish folk songs on a comb in the subway, until he is rescued by a fellow Pole, Mikolaj (Janusz Gajosi), a professional

†"Blue, White, and Red are three individual films, three separate films. Of course they were made to be shown in this order, but that doesn't mean that you can't watch them the other way round. There were a lot of connections between the films of *The Decalogue*. There are far fewer connections here and they're far less important."

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bridge player who smuggles him back to Warsaw in a trunk. Once back in the modest home he shares with his brother Jurek (Jerzy Stuhr), Karol vows never to be humiliated again, and sets about amassing a fortune in Warsaw's unscrupulous new currency and real estate markets. To lure Dominique back to Poland, he fakes his own death, then frames her for his murder. But when he sees her in prison, he realizes that he still loves her; she sees him and begins to cry.

The action of *Red* takes place in Geneva, where Valentine (Irène Jacob), a student and part-time model, has come to an impasse with her fiancé, off on an eternally extended voyage. Driving through the city at night, she accidentally strikes a German shepherd with her car, and, after a visit to the animal hospital, takes the wounded dog to its owner, a retired judge (Jean-Louis Trintignant) who lives in misanthropic isolation in a suburban house. Valentine is horrified to discover the judge's hobby—listening in to the phone conversations of his neighbors—but becomes fascinated by this man who is apparently able to live without love. Meanwhile, a young law student, Auguste (Jean-Pierre Lorit), continually crosses Valentine's path; he is in the process of discovering the infidelity of his fiancée, Karin (Frédérique Feder), while studying for his exams, an episode that precisely mirrors a decisive moment in the judge's past, forty years before. In desperation, Valentine takes the ferry to England, hoping to confront her elusive lover; Auguste is on the same ship, which encounters a violent storm and sinks. Watching television, the judge sees the faces of the six individuals who (along with an unknown ship's waiter) have survived the disaster: they are Julie and Olivier, Dominique and Karol, and Valentine and Auguste.

"Three Colors" was co-written by Krzysztof Piesiewicz, Kieslowski's collaborator on *The Decalogue*, and a lawyer formerly active in the opposition to martial law. Says Kieslowski: "Blue, white, red: liberty, equality, fraternity. It was Piesio's idea that having tried to film *The Decalogue*, why shouldn't we try liberty, equality, and fraternity? Why not try to make a film where the commanding dictums of *The Decalogue* are understood in a wider context? . . . The West has implemented these three con-



Blue is a film of an intense subjectivity, wherein the camera sometimes occupies the body of the actor.

cepts on a political or social plane, but it's an entirely different matter on the personal plane. And that's why we thought of these films."

In *Blue*, liberty becomes a tragic notion. Julie is free because she has been violently separated from her past and from her family. With no emotional ties, and wealthy enough to do what she wants, she steps off into a void. Kieslowski returns several times to the tomblike image of a huge, deserted indoor swimming pool, where Julie goes to wear herself out and neutralize her senses. At the same time, there are moments of penetratingly sharp, physical pain, as when Julie, returning from her perfunctory lovemaking session with Olivier, scrapes her knuckles along a wall. Pain is its own escape from pain. Intense feeling is the same as no feeling.

Blue is a film of an intense subjectivity, where the camera sometimes occupies the body of the actor (Julie, lying in her hospital bed after the accident, sees the world at an angle) and even swoons when the character does (the periodic fades to black, which represent sudden, unwelcome recoveries of memory for Julie). Cinematographer Slawomir Idziak, whom Kieslowski calls upon for his most expressionistic work (*A Short Film About Killing*, *The Double Life of*

Veronique), shoots with a depth of field so shallow, a focus so precise, that his lens can barely hold a single, small object in clear view. The cut glass hanging that Julie takes from her husband's studio, or the metallic candy wrapper that her daughter held in the wind just before the accident—these and other emotionally charged objects are allowed to dissolve into shapeless impressions and free-floating clouds of color (blue, of course), hanging over Julie's world like strange spiritual effusions.

The sound mix of the early part of the film renders the dialogue almost inaudible, with only the sudden, sharp passages of music—from the deceased husband's unfinished concerto—cutting through the perceptual fog, involuntary memories that bring back all that Julie has tried to forget. Time stops, and becomes meaningless: it's impossible to know how many days, weeks, or months the action occupies, when there are no external events to mark their passing. Julie is intrigued, though just barely, by a flute player she sees in the street. At first he is playing for coins (anticipating Karol's occupation in *White*); later he is seen descending from a limousine; still later, found lying unconscious. Another story is unfolding alongside her, though its episodes seem out of order, scrambled, unaccountable.

Julie's journey back from this frightening, too perfect freedom begins when Lucille, the prostitute, forces her way into Julie's apartment, where she notices the blue chandelier—she had one, too, she says, suggesting to Julie that there are tragedies other than hers in the world. (Lucille's trauma, though it is never dramatized, seems to be linked to her father. He shows up at the sordid Pigalle nightclub where she dances nude, in a scene that looks forward to *Red*, when the judge attends Valentine's fashion show.) Julie's discovery of sympathy for Lucille is her first opening to the world. The tight framing relaxes, swelling to the possibility of a two-shot that allows Julie and Lucille, two lonely souls, to share the same image.

Like the deceased lawyer in *No End*, Julie's husband has left some unfinished business behind—a concerto to honor the unification of Europe—which it is left to the widow to complete. Julie may, in fact, be the actual author of her husband's music (a possibility Kieslowski leaves tantalizingly open), but she is

Juliette Binoche in *BLUE*.
Directing RED, with Trintignant and Jacob.



certainly his most gifted interpreter, bringing the dead score back to life after Olivier nearly buries it with a trite orchestration. And she participates in another resurrection when she shares in the birth of Sandrine's baby, giving the child full rights to the father's name and property. When the unification concert is finally heard, it occasions an extraordinary burst of imagery—a collective epiphany, in which Kiesłowski's camera pans through space, catching each of the characters who has been involved in Julie's tale (including the farm boy who ran to the scene of the accident, and Julie's stern, silent mother, played by

BLUE.



Emmanuelle Riva of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*) as it sweeps along in one continuous movement, ending with the unborn baby outlined in the blue waves of an ultrasound image.

BLUE TAKES PLACE in a Paris that could only be imagined by an Eastern outsider (Julie lives an improbably chic life for the widow of a contemporary composer of serious music). *White* takes place in an insider's Warsaw, a city that reeks of failure, betrayal, and disillusionment. Kiesłowski says it all in the visual comparison between Karol's handsome hairdressing salon on a grand boulevard in Paris and the tacky storefront on a muddy back street in Warsaw to which the defeated Karol returns. (Karol's goodhearted brother has tried to brighten it up with a flickering electric sign, explaining, "We're part of the West, now.")

In Paris, there is voluptuous sorrow, leisurely pain; in Poland, there is a kind of frenetic, financial slapstick, a primitive market economy as grotesquely speeded up as the action in a Keystone short. ("For *White*," Kiesłowski says in the press kit, "I named the hero Karol—Charlie in Polish—as a tribute to Chaplin.") Rejected by the West, and betrayed by his Western wife (Julie Delpy, whose coldness for once is perfectly used, and perfectly transferred to the porcelain bust Karol brings back

from Paris as a motivating souvenir), Karol is reduced to a state of comic impotence, Kiesłowski's clear metaphor for a county of no use to anyone.

The theme of *White*, then, is equality—as reflected in Karol's grim determination to become more equal than anyone else. The whiteness of *White*—snow, subway tiles, sheets, statuary—suggests an emptiness that is also a new beginning, a void that might be filled. And so, the film's emphasis on mock resurrections: Karol unexpectedly climbing from the coffinlike trunk in which he has been smuggled back into Poland; Mikolaj's revival in the subway, when he realizes that Karol has shot him with a blank; and the elaborate scheme (including the purchase of a Russian corpse) that produces Karol's return from the dead for Julie, a resurrection that includes his sexual powers (Dominique's orgasm is accompanied by a fade to white). And white is finally the color of marriage, which haunts Karol in his flashbacks to his wedding day, and which gracefully recurs at the end of the film, when Karol and Dominique see each other through the bars of the prison where she has been sent, and she signifies, with a gesture of her ring finger, her willingness to remarry the man who has so completely, and so perversely, devoted his life to her.

In discussing *The Double Life of Véronique*, Kiesłowski makes a distinc-





WHITE: at left, Zbigniew Zamachowski; below, Julie Delpy with Zamachowski.



tion between the "synthetic" narrative style of the first, Polish half of the film—by which he means a narrative that goes from episode to episode, covering a year or so of the heroine's life in half an hour of screen time—and the "analytic" style of the French part, which focuses on Véronique's state of mind as reflected in the nonnarrative elements of the mise-en-scène: camera placement, color, and so on.

The same distinction applies to the French and Polish components of "Three Colors": Julie lives in a subjective, inwardly focused, visually oriented environment, Karol in an objective, aggressive, action-oriented world. *White* was photographed by Edward Klosinski, a cameraman who worked previously with Kiesłowski only on the second episode of *The Decalogue*, but who has done extensive work for Andrzej Wajda (including *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*). And *White* does have the visual sweep and social orientation of a Wajda film—wide framing, eye-level camera placement, a number of characters interacting in a shot, in a way that creates a subtle sense of theater. *White* is the most public of the three films, the most overtly political, the most readily accessible.

IF *BLUE* IS PSYCHOLOGICAL drama and *White* is social comedy, *Red* is something else again—an exchange

between two characters that is at once emotional, philosophical, and symbolic. With *Red*, Kiesłowski takes a step toward a thematic abstraction, and a concentration on entirely cinematic means of expression, that occurs no place else in his work. To find anything like it, it's necessary to go back to Griffith's *Intolerance*, with its grand vision of historical synthesis, played out in the pure and beautiful mechanics of montage.

The final chapter in this trilogy of isolation is set in the most isolated of countries, studiously neutral Switzerland, and more specifically in Geneva, a city of coolness and suspicion, of lonely, individual houses (as Kiesłowski films them) clinging to a vertiginous hillside.

Red begins with an image of mechanical process, as does *Blue* (the undercarriage of an automobile, leaking brake fluid) and *White* (the trunk containing Karol, bumping along an airport conveyor belt). In *Red*, through a breathless rush of forward movement, we follow an electronic impulse as it travels from a telephone in England through a snarl of switches and wires under the sea, and surfaces in a Geneva telephone exchange, where it encounters a flashing red busy signal.

Red is the most insistent of Kiesłowski's three colors, the color of blood, danger, embarrassment, violence, and love. It fills the screen in the

first few minutes of *Red*—a red signal, a red car, a red awning, a red blanket, a red jacket, a red stoplight. As in *Blue*, the action is set in motion by a car accident, though this time it is not fatal, and the victim is a dog—Rita, a sad eyed German shepherd. Valentine (played by Véronique's Irène Jacob, here enjoying her third life) takes the bandaged animal to its owner, who callously refuses it.

Kiesłowski's films, like Hitchcock's, are full of watchers, from the politically naïve camera buff who doesn't know what he's seeing to the young man in *A Short Film About Love* who spies on the sexually active woman living across the courtyard. But there are also those watchers who come from someplace else, such as the ghost of the lawyer in *No End*, who stays near his wife but is unable to help her, and the mysterious young man who appears in eight of the ten episodes of *The Decalogue*, balefully looking on from a perch in the background. "I don't know who he is—just a guy who comes and watches," Kiesłowski says. "He watches us, our lives. He's not very pleased with us. He comes, he watches, and walks on."

The Judge, played by Jean-Louis Trintignant in a fierce, bitter, tremendously moving valedictory performance, is clearly one of these figures, though if he has any supernatural powers, he himself seems to be unaware of them. And yet, there is the strange affinity he

has for light: One conversation with Valentine is illuminated by a sunburst and another, nighttime visit by a bulb that burns out and is swiftly replaced.

The Judge, compulsively eavesdropping on his neighbors' telephone conversations through his home stereo system, knows everything but does nothing. Valentine is appalled by his voyeurism, but finds herself unable to denounce him. In a neighboring house, a good, Swiss *père de famille* is having a conversation with his male lover on the upstairs phone; when Valentine runs next door to warn him that the Judge is listening, she finds a loving wife whose complacency she cannot break and (far more disturbingly) a little girl listening in, with no visible reaction, on the downstairs line.

This shared knowledge creates a powerful bond between Valentine and the Judge; Kieslowski films them in densely composed, space-collapsing two-shots that seem to press them together, in a clutter of doorways and window frames, into some special, private dimension. Within the heart of the city, they are living a life above life, Valentine as she waits for her lover to return, the Judge as he waits to die. Theirs is a shared isolation, and within it, something important passes between them—a sense of fraternity, perhaps.

In each of the three films of the trilogy, a betrayal leads to a sense of larger understanding. In *Blue*, Julie's discovery of her husband's infidelity allows her to forgive him and recover him, in the form of Sandrine's child; in *White*, Dominique's sexual athletics with her unseen lover cause Karol, who has been spying on them through an open window, to finally renounce his claims, and set about the process of reinventing himself.

There are two stories of betrayal in *Red*, though they are both the same story. As she moves through Geneva, Valentine is constantly crossing paths with Auguste, the young law student who lives in an apartment across from hers. His story becomes *Red*'s subplot, as Kieslowski weaves in glimpses of his life as a student, preparing for the big exam that will qualify him to be a judge, and his relationship with Karin, a young woman who operates a personalized weather service out of her apartment. Auguste passes his exam, thanks to a trick of fate (a book he dropped fell open to the exact answer he needed for

the test the next day), but Karin has fallen out of love with him. She has a new friend, a sailor, and as Auguste peeps through yet another window, he sees them having sex.

Later, as the Judge sits in an empty theater, trying to account for the emptiness of his life to Valentine, he tells the same story, down to the same magical detail of the book. It happened to him, and it is happening again: Auguste is the Judge as a young man, with the opportunity of living his life over again. If Valentine, in her freshness and openness, has come too late for the tired old

One shouldn't be surprised to find Biblical allusions in the work of a man who has filmed the Ten Commandments.

man, she has come just in time to rescue the younger. They will find themselves on the same ferry to England, caught in the same storm—a circumstance that the Judge has arranged.

IT SEEMS ALL BUT IMPOSSIBLE to account for the emotional impact of the last two reels of *Red*, an impact that reaches far beyond the narrative events depicted. One has the sense of an immense formal structure, one that extends not only across the three films of the trilogy but back to the beginnings of Kieslowski's career, coming to a moment of crisis and resolution. Throughout the trilogy, Kieslowski uses quick, enigmatic flash-forward: (such as the shots of Dominique entering an unknown hotel room in *White*) to give a fatefulness to the proceedings. Whether or not we consciously register these images (and many people do not), they create a feeling of resonance and fulfillment when they recur in the course of the narrative (it's the room Dominique checks into when Karol succeeds in luring her back to Warsaw). Though these moments, Kieslowski makes it seem as

if the entire work were moving toward a single point of convergence, toward one grand climax. It's the narrative equivalent of a planetary alignment.

Some of the elements are purely whimsical, such as the shared taste of the trilogy's characters for the symphonic works of Van der Brudenmajer, the fictional musician invented by Kieslowski and his greatly gifted composer, Zbigniew Preisner, for *The Double Life of Véronique*. Other of the repeated elements carry a tremendous moral weight, acquired over time: a tiny, bent old woman, first glimpsed by Weronika hobbling down a street in Poland and later by Véronique in Paris, reappears in *Blue*, struggling to deposit a glass bottle in the too-high opening of a recycling bin. Wrapped up in her own grief, Julie doesn't notice her, but when she reappears to Karol (as a man this time? the image is ambiguous), he watches her and smiles a rather cruel smile, as if her problems were only a comic distraction from his. Only when the old woman turns up in Geneva is there an act of recognition and intervention. Valentine, as she leaves the theater near the end of *Red*, sees the old woman struggling and stops to help her, reaching up to drop the bottle in its slot. In a sense, that single, simple act of kindness is the climax of the entire trilogy, the gesture that saves the world.

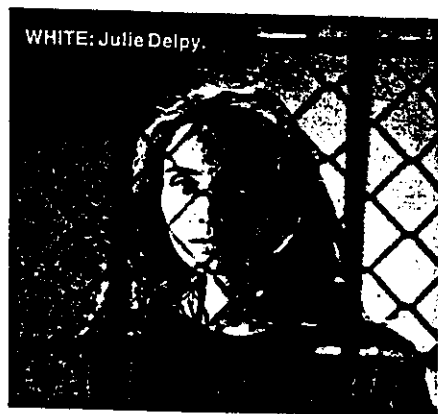
One shouldn't be surprised to find Biblical allusions in the work of a man who has filmed the Ten Commandments; they are in the background of "Three Colors," but they are there—the references to Mary, the *mater dolorosa* whose iconographic color is blue, in Julie's story; the mock resurrections that accompany Karol Karol on his journey. *Red* has its roots in the Old Testament, with its prickly, cranky, jealous God who keeps close tabs on his creations, judging them harshly and sending down rains and floods when they fail to perform to His expectations.

Trintignant is that Old Testament God, but a pathetically diminished one, whose power extends to light bulbs but not lightning, and whose apparent control over the winds and seas may be explained by the fact that he knows a good number to call for a personalized weather forecast. He may not be a god at all, but merely a man who takes himself for one—like filmmakers do, when they create their little worlds and send their characters scurrying through



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WHITE: Julie Delpy.



them. Trintignant invests the Judge with much of Kieślowski's own flinty contrariness, and it isn't hard to imagine the solitary smoker of Kieślowski's retirement occupying a house just like the judge's, sitting just as quietly amid the clutter of a lifetime.

"Who are you?" asks Valentine during the conversation in the theater, and his answer—"a retired judge"—marks the moment of recognition. The empty theater, where Valentine has just performed in a celestial fashion show (the flashbulbs providing more miniature thunderbolts), has a cathedral-like stillness and grandeur; a storm suddenly blows up outside and Valentine rushes to shut the windows against the rain. The camerawork in this scene, as in much of *Red*, is defined by the emphatic crane work of cinematographer Piotr Sobocinski; the sudden, rapid shifts in point of view, from high to low and low to high, mirror the film's continuous movement between a cosmic overview and the tiniest of personal details.

The defining characteristic of Kieślowski's style may be this double vision,

the ability to balance an immense, rigid, carefully worked out formal structure with an improvisational openness to nuances of feeling. If everything in "Three Colors" feels predestined, from the dominant hues of every scene to the ritual recurrence of objects, characters, and situations, Kieślowski's attentiveness to his actors allows him to preserve a sense of spontaneity and surprise. He allows himself to be influenced and astonished by the contributions of his performers (one feels his great respect for the work of Binoche and Trintignant, and his fatherly affection for the more limited work of Irène Jacob), thus establishing a protected reserve of chance and free will within the sleek predetermination of his narrative.

There is no more beautiful example of Kieślowski's balance of structure and spontaneity than the climax of *Red*, in which the immense image of Valentine that has brooded over Geneva since the film's beginning—a huge banner advertising, of all things, Hollywood brand chewing gum—is revealed to be a precise prophecy of a singular event. All of the streams and rivers of "Three Colors" suddenly run together at this moment, with an irresistible plastic and emotional force. Three films that seemed to have been carefully distinguished by tone, content and appearance turn out to be the same film, telling the same story of alienation overcome, loneliness dissolved in human warmth, isolation subsumed by a sense of infinite interdependence.

Both *Blue* and *White* end with tight closeups of their protagonists. Julie

stands at a window, crying for the first time since her husband's death, but as the blue light of dawn becomes to come up, a smile plays at the corners of her mouth. Karol cries as he watches Dominique, behind a barred window, mime out her offer to remarry him if he can get her out of prison; then he smiles, too.

At the end of *Red*, the Judge looks out his window, toward the storm that has just passed; there's a tear in his eye, though his face is otherwise expressionless. But then there is another shot—the banner image of Valentine, now recreated in real life like a promise fulfilled, a covenant kept. The judge is the first of the trilogy's characters to see someone beyond himself; for Kieślowski, all the hope for the world resides in that fact. ●

Dave Kehr is film critic of New York Daily News.



RED: Jean-Louis Trintignant.