

Chance and Repetition in Kieslowski's Films

Dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Wright

Krzysztof Kieslowski's interest in the role of chance in determining the multiple possible outcomes of a dramatic situation (exemplarily in his *Blind Chance*, but also in *Veronique* and *Red*), offers yet another example of the well-known phenomenon of the old artistic forms pushing against their own boundaries by way of mobilizing procedures which, at least from our retroactive view, seem to point towards a new technology that will be able to serve as a more 'natural' and appropriate 'objective correlative' to the life-experience the old forms endeavoured to render with their excessive experimentations.¹ It can thus be claimed that a whole series of narrative procedures in nineteenth-century novels announce not only the standard narrative cinema (recall the intricate use of 'flashback' in Emily Brontë or of 'cross-cutting' and 'close-ups' in Dickens), but sometimes even the modernist cinema (recall the use of 'off-space' in *Madame Bovary*) — as if a new perception of life was already here, but was still struggling to find its proper means of articulation, until it finally found it in cinema.

It can be claimed that today, we are approaching a homologous threshold: a new 'life experience' is in the air, a perception of life that explodes the form of the linear-centred narrative and renders life as a multiform flow; up to the domain of the 'hard' sciences (quantum physics and its Multiple-Reality interpretation; neo-Darwinism) we seem to be haunted by the chanciness of life and the alternate versions of reality — to quote Stephen Jay Gould's blunt formulation which uses precisely the cinema metaphor: 'Wind back the film of life and play it again. The history of evolution will be totally different'.²

Either life is experienced as a series of multiple parallel destinies that interact and are crucially affected by meaningless contingent encounters, the points at which one series intersects with and intervenes into another (see Altman's *Shortcuts*), or different versions/outcomes of the same plot are repeatedly enacted (the 'parallel universes' or 'alternative possible worlds' scenarios — even 'serious' historians themselves recently produced a volume of *Virtual Histories*, reading crucial events, from Cromwell's victory over the Stuarts and the American War of Independence to the disintegration of Communism, as hinging

on unpredictable and sometimes even improbable chances). These perceptions of our reality as one of the possible, often even not the most probable, outcomes of an 'open' situation, this notion that other possible outcomes are not simply cancelled out but continue to haunt our 'true' reality as a spectre of what might have happened, conferring on our reality the status of extreme fragility and contingency, implicitly clash with the predominant 'linear' narrative forms of our literature and cinema — they seem to call for a new artistic medium in which they would not be an eccentric excess, but its 'proper' mode of functioning. One can argue that the cyberspace hypertext is such a new medium in which this life experience will find its 'natural,' more appropriate objective correlative,³ and that Kieslowski's seemingly 'obscurantist' dealing with the topic of the role of chance and of parallel alternative histories is to be perceived as yet another endeavour to articulate the new life experience in the old cinematic medium that promotes linear narrative. We find in Kieslowski three versions of alternative histories: direct presentation of three possible outcomes in *Blind Chance*, the presentation of two outcomes through the theme of the double in *The Double Life of Veronique*, and the presentation of two outcomes through the 'flashback in present' in *Red*. What interests Kieslowski in the motif of alternative histories is the notion of *ethical choice*, ultimately the choice between 'calm life' and 'mission'.

Is, however, this awareness of multiple universes really as liberating as it appears? The (false) ordinary perception that we live in one 'true' reality, far from containing us to a closed universe, relieves us from the unbearable awareness of the multitude of alternate universes which envelop us. That is to say, the fact that there is only one reality leaves the space open for other possibilities, i.e. for a choice: it might have been different. If, however, these different possibilities are all in a way realized, we get a claustrophobic universe in which there is no freedom of choice precisely because ALL choices are already realized. Perhaps, it is the horrifying awareness of this absolute closure that is expressed by the desperate cry that opens *Blind Chance*. Here is the film's storyline: Witek runs after a train. Three variations follow on how such a seemingly banal incident could influence the rest of his life. One: he catches the train, meets an honest Communist and himself becomes a Party activist. Two: while running for the train he bumps into a railway guard, is arrested, brought to trial and sent to unpaid labour in a park where he meets someone from the opposition. He, in turn, becomes a militant dissident. Three: he simply misses the train, returns to his interrupted studies, marries a fellow student

and leads a peaceful life as a doctor unwilling to get mixed up in politics. He is sent abroad to a symposium; in mid-air the plane he is on explodes.

How do these three alternative narrative lines relate to each other? The film opens with the 'primal scream' shot: a terrified male face looks into the camera and utters a cry of pure horror—is this not Witek moments before his death, while the plane which was to take him to a medical symposium in the West is crashing minutes after its take off from the Warsaw airport (we learn this in the last shot of the film, at the end of the *third* narrative)? Is, then, the entire film not the flashback of a person who, aware that he is close to his death, quickly runs not only through his life (as is usually reported that people do when they know they will die shortly), but through his THREE possible lives? The scream that opens the film — the desperate 'Nooo!' of Witek falling down to his certain death — is thus the zero level exempted from the three virtual universes. One is tempted to follow here the hypothesis⁴ according to which these three alternative versions are intertwined, so that the hero escapes from each one into the next one: the deadlock of the socialist apparatchik's career pushes him into dissidence, and the non-satisfaction with dissidence into private profession. Each version involves a reflexive stance towards the previous one, like the second Veronique who seems to be aware of the experience of the first one. It is only the third version which is 'real': just before dying, Witek runs through the two alternative life-stories in which he would not die ('what would have happened if I were to catch the train; if, while running for it, I were to hit a policeman. . .'), but they both end up in a deadlock which pushes him to the next story.

Tom Tykwer's *Run, Lola, Run* (Germany, 1998) is a kind of postmodern frenetic remake of *Blind Chance*. Lola, a Berlin punk girl (Franka Potente), has 20 minutes to collect by any means 100.000 German Marks to save her boyfriend from certain death, and what follows are the three alternate outcomes. (1) her boyfriends gets killed; (2) she gets killed; (3) she succeeds, AND her boyfriend finds the lost money, so they end up happy together with the 100.000 DM profit. Here, also, a whole series of features signals that not only the heroine, but even other people somehow mysteriously remember what happened in the preceding version(s). Although, in its tone (the frenetic, adrenalin-charged pace, life-asserting energy, the happy end), *Lola* is the very opposite of *Blind Chance*, the formal matrix is the same: in both cases, one can interpret the film as if only the third

story is the 'real' one, the other two staging the fantasmatic price the subject has to pay for the 'real' outcome.

The interest of *Lola* resides in its tonality: not only in the fast rhythm, the rapid-fire montage, the use of stills (frozen images), the pulsating exuberance and vitality of the heroine, but, above all, in the way these visual features are embedded in the soundtrack — the constant, uninterrupted, techno-music soundscape whose rhythm renders Lola's — and, by extension, ours, the spectators' — heartbeat. One should always bear in mind that, notwithstanding all the dazzling visual brilliance of the film, its images are subordinated to the musical soundscape, to its frenetic compulsive rhythm which goes on forever and cannot be suspended even for a minute — it can only explode in an outburst of exuberant vitality, in the guise of Lola's uninhibited scream which occurs in each of the three versions of the story. This is why a film like *Lola* can only appear against the background of the Music TV-channel culture. One could accomplish here the same reversal Fredric Jameson proposed apropos Hemingway's style: it is not that *Lola's* formal properties adequately express the narrative; it is rather that the film's narrative itself was invented in order to be able to practise the style. The first words of the film ('the game lasts 90 minutes, everything else is just theory') provide the proper co-ordinates of a video game: as in the usual survival video game, Lola is given three lives. 'Real life' itself is thus rendered as a fictional video-game experience — and what one should resist here is precisely the temptation to oppose *Lola* and Kieslowski's *Blind Chance* along the lines of the opposition between low and high culture (Tykwer's video games techno rock MTV universe versus Kieslowski's existential pondering stance). Although this is in a way true — or, rather, a truism, the more important point is that *Lola* is much more adequate to the basic matrix of alternative spins of the narrative: it is *Blind Chance* which ultimately appears clumsy, artificial, as if the film tries to tell its story in an inadequate form, while *Lola's* form perfectly fits its narrative content.⁵

Kieslowski himself alludes to the virtualization of reality in his claim that '[t]he theme of *Red* is in the conditional mood. (...) what would have happened if the Judge had been born forty years later. (...) It would be lovely if we could go back to the age of twenty. How many better, wiser things we could have done! But it's impossible. That's why I made this film — that maybe life can be lived better than we do'.⁶ The theme of the 'double life' clearly resonates not only in *Red*, but also in *Blue* and *White*: in *Blue*, Julie desperately endeavours

to (re)create an alternative life after the traumatic accident, while in *White*, Karol tries to reinvent a new career and life after his humiliating reduction to a social drop-out. There are traces of the alternate reality approach even in *Decalogue 4*, which was planned initially as three variations, on the model of *Blind Chance* (the father's story; the daughter's story; what really happened); Kieslowski wisely adopted a more complex procedure in which the three stories coexist in a kind of palimpsest: 'the variants are not successive (as in *Blind Chance* or *The Double Life of Veronique*), but present themselves simultaneously through the work's self-referential meditation on acting'.⁷ The 'same' narrative shifts between different fantasmatic supports: sometimes, Anka acts as if there are no obstacles to her incestuous fantasy; at other times, father acts as if he and Anka are of the same age; at yet other times, the oppressive social reality makes itself felt.

Red presents us with a unique case of 'contemporary flashback': the Judge's alternate *past*, his missed opportunity, is staged as the *present* of another person (Auguste) — Auguste's predicament is the exact repetition of the Judge's predicament thirty years before. Auguste and the Judge are thus not two persons, but two versions of one and the same person — no wonder they never meet, since this meeting would function as the uncanny encounter of a double. The parallels in their respective lives are numerous: the Judge, like Auguste, was betrayed by a blonde woman two years older than him; his book also fell open to a particular page the night before his exam, where he was asked the very question answered on that page. No wonder, then, that the Judge says to Valentine: 'Maybe you're the woman I never met' — meeting her decades ago would save him the way Valentine will NOW save Auguste. One should approach in the same way *The Double Life of Veronique*: the image of two Veroniques should not deceive us — as the title says, we have the double life of (one) Veronique, i.e. the same person is allowed to redeem (or lose?) herself by being given another chance and repeating the fatal choice. All the mystique of being spiritually connected with another being is thoroughly misplaced.

The idea of the time-space continuum (time as the fourth dimension of space) in modern physics means, among other things, that a certain event (the encounter of multiple particles) can be much more elegantly and convincingly explained if we posit that only one particle travels forward and backward in time. Let's take Richard Feynmann's classic space-time diagram of the collision between *two* photons in a certain point of time: this collision produces an electron-positron pair, each of the two going its separate way. The positron then meets another

electron; they annihilate each other and create again *two* photons which depart in the opposite direction. What Feynmann proposes is that, if we introduce the space-time continuum, i.e. the notion of time as the fourth dimension of space which can also be traversed in two directions, forward and backwards, we can explain the same process in a much simpler way: there is **ONLY ONE** particle, an electron, which emits two photons; this causes it to reverse its direction in time. Travelling backward in time as a positron, it absorbs two photons, thus becomes an electron again and reverses its direction in time, again moving forward. This logic involves the static space-time picture described by Einstein: events do not unfold with the flow of time, but present themselves complete, and in this total picture, movements backward and forward in time are as usual as movements backward and forward in space. The illusion that there is a 'flow' of time results from our narrow awareness which allows us to perceive only a part of the total space-time continuum.⁸ And is not something similar going on in the alternative narratives? Beneath ordinary reality, there is another shadowy pre-ontological realm of virtualities in which the same person travels forth and back, 'testing' different scenarios: Veronique-electron crashes (dies), then travels back in time and does it again, this time surviving.

In *Veronique*, we are thus not dealing with the 'mystery' of the communication of two Veroniques, but with the **ONE AND THE SAME** Veronique who travels back and forth in time. For that reason, the key scene of the film is the encounter of the two Veroniques in the large square in which a Solidarity political demonstration is taking place: this encounter is rendered in a vertiginous circular shot reminiscent of the famous 360 degrees shot from Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; afterwards, when the French Veronique is introduced, it becomes clear that the perplexity of the Polish Weronika at this moment resulted from her obscure awareness that she was about to have an impossible encounter with her double (later, we see her photo taken at that moment by the French Veronique).⁹ Consequently, is this camera's circular movement not to be read as signalling the danger of the 'end of the world,' somehow like the standard scene of the science-fiction films about alternative realities, in which the passage from one to another universe takes the shape of a terrifying primordial vortex threatening to swallow all consistent reality? The camera's circular movement thus signals that we are on the verge of the vortex in which different realities mix, that this vortex is already exerting its influence: if we make one step further—that is to say, if the two

Veronique's were actually to confront and recognize each other—, reality would disintegrate, because such an encounter of a person with her own double, with *herself* in another time-space dimension, is precluded by the very fundamental structure of the universe.

This encounter has a different meaning for each of the two Veroniques: for the Polish Weronika, it marks, in the traditional Romantic mode, the encounter of death (and, effectively, soon after she dies), while to the French Veronique, the awareness that there is her double clearly confronts her with the possibility of choice—she may have chosen a different life (the singing career), which, again, would have led to her death. This is the reason why the double causes such anxiety: the double IS directly the object that the subject refuses to be. In Wolfgang Petersen's thriller *Shattered* (1991), Tom Berenger barely survives a car accident: when, weeks later, he awakens in the hospital, with his face and body patched up by plastic surgery, he has total amnesia concerning his identity—he cannot remember who he is, although all the people around him, including a woman who claims to be his wife (Greta Scacchi), treat him as the head of a rich corporation. After a series of mysterious events, he goes to an abandoned warehouse where he was told that, in a barrel full of oil, the corpse of the person he had killed is hidden. When he pulls the body's head out of the liquid, he stiffens in consternation—the head is HIS OWN. (The solution to the mystery: he is effectively not the husband, but the lover of the woman who claims to be his wife. When he barely survived the accident while driving the husband's car, with his face disfigured beyond recognition, the wife killed her husband, identified HIM as her husband and ordered the surgeons to reconstruct his face on the model of her husband's.) This horror of encountering oneself in the guise of one's double, outside oneself, is the ultimate truth of the subject's self-identity: in it, the subject encounters itself as an object.

Recall Humbert Humbert from Nabokov's *Lolita*: in a stroke of genius, Nabokov made his Christian name coincide with his father's name—there is already the structure of the double in his very name! (And, in a gesture of supreme Nabokovian irony, Kieslowski named the hero of *White Karol Karol*.) Humbert Humbert thus *needs* Quilty, his obscene double who persecutes the couple of him and Lolita: Quilty is the paranoiac return in the Real of the paternal Name foreclosed from the Symbolic (as is signalled by Humbert Humbert's name, where the proper family name is missing). This is how *Lolita* signals the impossibility of sexual relationship: the

liaison of Humbert Humbert and Lolita is simultaneously hindered and sustained by the intervention of a paranoiac Third—although fanatically opposed to psychoanalysis, Nabokov was well aware of the link between the suspension of the paternal function and the murderous paranoiac relationship with one's double.¹⁰ Consequently, it is wrong to read *Lolita* in a vulgar pseudo-Freudian way, as a case of 'repressed homosexuality': the point is not that Humbert Humbert chooses a nymphet in order to avoid the direct homosexual engagement with his double Quilty—on the contrary, Quilty is the necessary Third who supplements Humbert's impossible relationship with Lolita.—And the same goes for the two Veroniques. In the passage from the Polish Weronika to the French Veronique, after Weronika dies on the concert stage, we get the Dreyeresque shot from the grave (the impossible point-of-view shot of her corpse), which is then followed by the direct cut to Veronique making love and inexplicably feeling sad, as if she sensed some unknown loss—the trace of her double interferes as the *Liebesstoerer*, the intruder who disturbs the harmony of the sexual act. Again, the figure of the double is strictly correlative to the impossibility of sexual relationship.

So what is this impossibility? In Cuba, when one man boasts to another 'I HAD that woman!', he implies not just 'straight' vaginal intercourse, but anal penetration—'straight' intercourse is still considered a form of petting, of foreplay, and it is only the anal penetration that stands for the fully consummated sexual relation. Why is it so? Because the vagina is considered a pale, distorted copy of the anal opening: the anus is somehow like the pure Platonic Idea (a clear and simple round hole, with no hair or crevices), while the vagina is its distorted material realization, full of protuberances and outgrowths, far from the ideal simplicity of the anus. Is this not yet another way to supplement the non-existence of the sexual relationship—the 'natural' penetration is devalued as secondary in relation to its 'unnatural' ideal model? The male counterpoint to it is the difference phallus/penis, as it is mobilized in the standard porno shot of a woman being penetrated anally and at the same time displaying the hole of her spread vagina—as if to say 'Although I am penetrated by the *penis*, the hole is still open for *phallus*' . . . Some Hindu priests allegedly can do impossible things with their penises: not only fully controlling erection with their will; not only knowing how to ejaculate inside instead of outside, so that, instead of being released and spilled out, lost outside, the energy of orgasm gets back into the body and thus contributes to a heightened spiritual energy;

they are even able to suck small amounts of liquid like milk with their penises. . . The fascination of these cases resides in the fact that these priests seem to overcome the exceptional status of the penis, the independence of its erection of the subject's will—in short, in their unique case, penis and phallus DO coincide.

Each of the three men in Neil LaBute's *Our Friends and Neighbours* is caught in his solipsistic fantasmatic space: the first one, the only decent 'good guy,' can only find proper satisfaction in masturbation, and cannot satisfy his wife; the second one, the drama teacher, is a sleazy fast-talking seducer who alienates his wife by talking all the time during the sexual act, communicating his (private, not shared) fantasies and thus spoiling the act by rendering public its fantasmatic support—in the middle of the act, the wife cruelly tells him to shut up and go on fucking; the third one, a cold, sadistic manipulator, engages in 'hot talk' allegedly addressed to the feminine partner during the sexual act, while he effectively practises intensive body-building training. Their feminine partners are also frustrated (the teacher's wife, tired of talking, engages in a lesbian relationship: the disappointed 'good' guy's wife searches for a lover among the other two men). The film is profoundly theological, pervaded by a bleak vision of a dark 'godless' universe in which the solipsistic search for pleasure unavoidably ends in utter failure and despair (LaBute is a practising Mormon). All the characters are caught in a mechanic web of relations, like the puppets in some late-eighteenth-century French aristocratic chamber comedy of manners—exemplary here is the scene in the art gallery where five times different visitors ask the Nastassja Kinski character the same predictable set of questions and get the same answers ('Is this piece part of a series or does it stand alone?', 'Are you the artist?', etc.)

However, one should not dismiss these frustrations as the result of a specific historical situation; a more radical deadlock lurks beneath them. In a TV movie about the global ecological catastrophe, the wife rejects her husband's love-making—her reproach to him is that he is doing it to her 'as if you want to make a statement' with it. This formulation renders succinctly what Lacan has in mind with his thesis that there is no sexual relationship: the sexual act is not possible in the mode of 'making a statement,' as a symbolic assertion. Recall the first great Wagnerian love dialogue, that of the Dutchman and Senta from *The Flying Dutchman*: the two lovers seem to ignore each other's physical presence, they do not even look each other face to face, they simply engage each in his/her intimate fantasmatic vision

of the other. 'There is no sexual relationship' means (among other things) that, during a 'straight' intercourse, the man *qua* obsessional thinks of *another* woman, the true addressee of his passionate whispers, reducing the woman he holds in his hands to the material support of the fantasmatic *objet petit a*: in an inverse way, the woman *qua* hysteric doesn't want to be the object-cause of her man's (other's) desire, so she imagines some other woman, not her, in bed with her partner, while she is 'somewhere else'. What, however, if these two fantasies *overlap*, so that, during the intercourse, the other woman — the woman who the 'actual' woman engaged in the sexual act fantasizes as the one who is in bed with her partner — is the very woman the male partner imagines in bed with him? Suppose we have a woman and a man engaged in 'straight' sex — what, however, if they are only able to do it because he secretly identifies with a lesbian woman and she IS a lesbian, so that, at the fantasmatic level, the act is effectively that of a lesbian couple doing it with a dildo? The fantasmatic support of a 'straight' sexual relationship is never the scenario of a 'straight sex,' but always a mixture of 'perverse' elements. Maybe, therein resides the only possible 'harmony' in sex — Lacan himself says somewhere that sexual relation can work if man's and woman's fantasies overlap.

The feminine fantasy of being someone else in the relation with her husband also accounts for what, perhaps, is the ultimate melodramatic scenario, detectable from Rudolph Mate's *No Sad Songs for Me to Stepmom*: the idea of a woman who, dying of cancer or some other mortal disease, in her last weeks organizes things so that, after her death, a new, younger woman will replace her as the new partner of her husband and the new mother to her children. (The title of one of the TV-movies in this series is indicative: *When I am no longer there* — does this not provide the most succinct formula of the fantasy gaze, i.e. of the subject erasing herself out of the picture, remaining only as the pure disembodied spectral gaze observing the idyll that emerges in her absence?) This is the paradigmatically feminine fantasy of obliterating the inexistence of sexual relationship: if she erases herself out of the picture, the new relationship of her husband will be a full one. As Joan Copjec convincingly demonstrated, this same basic fantasmatic matrix is at work in *Stella Dallas*: Barbara Stanwyck does not sacrifice herself for her daughter; she rather 'erases herself out of the picture' in order to be able to assume the position of a pure gaze witnessing through the window-frame (of fantasy) the newly established perfect family of her daughter and her new ideal parental couple, her father and his new appropriate wife.¹¹ This fantasy of

the feminine self-withdrawal, self-erasure from the picture, finds its ultimate expression in Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, in the words of the Marschallin which open the final trio: 'I chose to love him in the right way, so that I would love even his love for another!'

Something similar happens in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* where, during the sexual intercourse between wife and husband, each of them fantasizes about embracing another partner he/she is really in love with (the husband Otilie, the wife Hauptmann) — what we thus obtain is the paradox of *marital fidelity in the guise of double unfaithfulness*. This ideal-impossible, purely fantasmatic couple of Hauptmann and Otilie is nonetheless not without material incidence: the child born from this act of marital copulation *qua* double treachery gives body to this impossible couple, i.e. he has the hair and face of Otilie and the eyes of Hauptmann, and thus renders visible the illicit desire of both husband and wife — no wonder that he dies soon after his birth.

And, perhaps, this possibility of overlapping fantasies is what sustains the subtle literary figure of the 'vanishing mediator' who brings together a couple by intentionally mistranslating their messages to each other. In a story by Guy de Maupassant, pupils in a class who have a shy teacher, intend to play a cruel joke on him by arranging for a date between him and the poor cleaning woman of the school — they tell each of the two the invented story of how the other confided in them that he/she has a concealed love interest in him/her. Hidden under the roof, they then observe the encounter, expecting a good laugh after the couple are embarrassed by discovering that they were victims of a cruel practical joke. However, when they finally meet, the couple gently establishes contact, (falsely) assured of the other's sympathy, and they end up happily married. In all these cases, a double lie results in a final harmony.

This hysterical rejection of being the body that one has is today clearly discernible in the two opposed stances with regard to woman's body: in late-liberal promiscuous tolerance, women freely expose themselves as part of the capitalist universalized prostitution, while religious fundamentalism forces women to wear veils, so that nothing is visible of them but their two eyes. This oscillation itself is significant: crucial to this is the structural ambiguity as to its meaning — on the one hand, one can say that the covered woman designates the victim of extreme patriarchal domination, as opposed to a woman of liberal Western society free to enjoy her body; on the other hand, one can say that the Western woman is turned into the sexual object exposed to the male gaze, in contrast to the veiled woman who retains at

least some dignity. The paradox, of course, is that the very fact of compelling women to be covered in order to retain their dignity asserts what it wants to deny: it automatically assumes that the view of a woman's body reduces it to an object for male exploitation, so that the way to counteract it is not to change the nature/stance of the male gaze, but to cover its object (which, of course, in this way becomes even more fascinating). On the other hand, and in a complementary way, one can claim that, in the concrete conditions of our late capitalist society, the freedom of a woman to dispose of her body is ultimately the freedom to prostitute herself, to sell herself as an object of exchange to men. We are definitely dealing here with a kind of Hegelian 'identity of the opposites'.

Another aspect of this same tension is discernible in the cases when a gynaecologist is accused of finding sexual pleasure in touching intimate parts of his patients; the reproach here is that he did not *objectivize* his feminine patient sufficiently, that he did not treat here as effectively just an object of the medical gaze. Around the turn of the century, sexually frustrated hysterical ladies from the upper-class families regularly visited doctors who applied a hand-massage on their genitals in order to relieve them of their pathological tension and unrest—to masturbate a feminine patient was considered a painful and delicate medical duty, not a perversion. This is the reason why doctors welcomed the invention of (electric and mechanic) machines to 'massage' the feminine genitalia (what today we call vibrators): these machines were not considered sex toys, but medical instruments. Does this strange example not tell us a lot about the shifts in the discursive formation of sexuality, i.e. about how a certain form of sexual (dis)satisfaction was depersonalized-objectivized, reduced to a pathological tension to be appeased through the doctor's intervention? The enigma here is: did all of them, doctors and patients, just feign and play an obscene game, being well aware that it is all about sexual (dis)satisfaction, or did they effectively treat the dissatisfaction as an objectivized illness ('hysterical tension') to be properly treated (by the masturbatory massage)? Perhaps, it effectively WAS possible to 'desubjectivize' sexual dissatisfaction into an objective affliction?

So, for Lacan, 'there is no sexual relationship' because there are always *at least three* in it, never just the two (if they are two) engaged partners — and *this* is what complicates the issue of homosexuality: it is never just the relationship between the two persons, so the true enigma is *who is the fantasized Third*. In a lesbian relationship, this third could well be a paternal phallic figure (which is why 'lesbian

phallus' is a pertinent category). The need for this fantasmatic third arises from the excess which escapes the (sexual) partner's grasp: on the women's side, it is the feminine Mystery beneath the provocative masquerade, forever eluding the male grasp; on the male side, it is the drive which makes him stick unconditionally to his (political, artistic, religious, professional) Vocation. The eternal male paranoia is that the woman is jealous of this part of him which resists her seductive charm, and that she wants to snatch it from him, to induce him to sacrifice that kernel of his creativity for her (afterwards, of course, she will drop him, because her interest for him was sustained precisely by that mysterious ingredient which resisted her grasp). This aspect accounts for the popularity of Colleen McCullough's *Thornbirds* in which Father Ralph is torn between his love for Maggie and his unconditional religious vocation—paradoxically, a chaste priest is one of the emblematic figures of the non-castrated Other, of the Other not bound by the symbolic Law.

Lacan provided the ultimate formulation of this impossibility in his 'formulas of sexuation': the masculine side combines universality with its constitutive exception, while the feminine side asserts the non-All as the paradoxical obverse of the lack of exception.¹² One should read the two levels that define each position as 'appearance versus truth': the upper level provides the 'appearance,' while the lower level discloses its 'truth'. The 'appearance' of the masculine position is that of universality, while its 'truth' is the constitutive exception/transgression (say, the Hero-Master who violates the law in order to constitute it); the 'appearance' of the feminine position is the mysterious Exception, the Feminine which resists the universal symbolic order, while its 'truth' is that *there is nothing outside* the symbolic order, no exception. If, then, the masculine stance is that of the law-suspending exceptional violence of the Master concealed behind the Universality, i.e. the Exception that grounds the Universality, the feminine stance designates the hysterical split—a woman focuses on something 'in her more than herself,' her narcissistic secret treasure that escapes the male Master's universal grasp, and the truth of it is that *there is no secret*, that femininity is a masquerade concealing nothing (as was clear to Otto Weininger, who equated femininity with the ontological Nothingness). The standard opposition of the masculine subject fully integrated into the symbolic law and the feminine subject partially resisting it is thus thoroughly misleading: it is the masculine position which involves the Exception, while in

the feminine position, there is nothing that is *not* inscribed into the 'phallic' symbolic function.

So, to conclude, Kieslowski's universe of alternate realities is thoroughly ambiguous. On the one hand, its lesson seems to be that we live in the world of alternate realities in which, as in a cyberspace game, when one choice leads to the catastrophic ending, we can return to the starting point and make another, better, choice — what was the first time a suicidal mistake, can the second time be done in a correct way, so that the opportunity is not missed. In *The Double Life of Veronique*, Veronique learns from Weronika, avoids the suicidal choice of singing and survives; in *Red*, Auguste avoids the mistake of the Judge; even *White* ends with the prospect of Karol and his French bride getting a second chance and remarrying. The very title of Annette Insdorf's recent book on Kieslowski, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, points in this direction: the other life is here to give us a second chance, i.e. 'repetition becomes accumulation, with a prior mistake as a base for successful action'.¹³ However, while it sustains the prospect of repeating the passed choices and thus retrieving the missed opportunities, this universe can also be interpreted in the opposite, much darker, way. There is a material feature of Kieslowski's films which long ago attracted the attention of some perspicuous critics; suffice it to recall the use of filters in *A Short Film About Killing*:

The city and its surroundings are shown in a specific way. The lighting cameraman on this film, Slawek Idziak, used filters which he'd made specially. Green filters so that the colour in the film is specifically greenish. Green is supposed to be the colour of spring, the colour of hope, but if you put a green filter on the camera, the world becomes much crueller, duller and emptier.¹⁴

Furthermore, in *A Short Film About Killing*, the filters are used 'as a kind of mask, darkening parts of the image which Kieslowski and Idziak did not wish to show'.¹⁵ This procedure of having 'large chunks smogged out'¹⁶ — not as part of the formulaic depiction of a dream or a vision, but in shots rendering the gray everyday reality — directly evokes the Gnostic notion of the universe which was created imperfect and is as such not yet fully constituted. The closest one can get to it in reality is, perhaps, the countryside in extreme places like Iceland or the Land of Fire at the utmost south of Latin America: patches of grass and wild hedges are intersected by the barren raw earth or gravel with cracks out of which sulphuric steam and fire gush out, as if the pre-ontological primordial Chaos is still able to penetrate the cracks of the imperfectly constituted/formed reality.

Kieslowski's universe is a Gnostic universe, a not-yet-fully constituted universe created by a perverse and confused, idiotic God who screwed up the work of Creation, producing an imperfect world, and then trying to save whatever can be saved by repeated new attempts—we are all 'Children of a Lesser God'.¹⁷ In the mainstream Hollywood itself, this uncanny in-between dimension is clearly discernible in what is arguably the most effective scene in *Alien 4: Resurrection*: the cloned Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) enters the laboratory room in which the previous seven aborted attempts to clone her are on display—here she encounters the ontologically failed, defective versions of herself, up to the almost successful version with her own face, but with some of her limbs distorted so that they resemble the limbs of the Alien Thing—this creature asks Ripley to kill her, and, in an outburst of violent rage, Ripley effectively destroys the entire horror-exhibition.—This idea of multiple imperfect universes can be discerned at two levels in Kieslowski's opus: (1) the botched character of reality as depicted in his films, and the ensuing repeated attempts to (re)create a new, better, reality; (2) with regard to Kieslowski himself as author, we also have the repeated attempts to tell the same story in a slightly different way (not only the difference between TV and movie version of *Decalogue 5* and *6*, but also his idea of making twenty different versions of *Veronique* and playing them in different theatres in Paris—a different version for each theatre). In this eternally repeated rewriting, the 'quilting point' is forever missing: there never is a final version, the work is never done and actually put in circulation, delivered from the author to the big Other of the Public. (Is the recent fashion of the later release of the allegedly more authentic 'director's cut' also not part of the same economy?) What does this absence of the 'final version' MEAN—this everlasting deferral of the moment when, like God after his six days work, the author can say 'It's done!' and take a rest?

The 'virtualization' of our life-experience, the explosion/dehiscence of the single 'true' reality into the multitude of parallel lives, is strictly correlative to the assertion of the proto-cosmic abyss of chaotic, ontologically not yet fully constituted reality—this primordial, pre-symbolic, inchoate 'stuff' is the very neutral medium in which the multitude of parallel universes can coexist. In contrast to the standard notion of one fully determined and ontologically constituted reality, with regard to which all other realities are its secondary shadows, copies, reflections, 'reality' itself is thus multiplied into the spectral plurality of virtual realities, beneath which lurks the pre-ontological

proto-reality, the Real of the unformed ghastly matter. The first clearly to articulate this pre-ontological dimension was F.W.J. Schelling with his notion of the unfathomable Ground of God, something in God that is not-yet-God, not yet the fully constituted reality.¹⁸

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NOTES

- 1 For a more detailed exploration of this phenomenon, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* (Seattle, Washington University Press, 2000).
- 2 Stephen Jay Gould, 'Time Scales and the Year 2000,' in Umberto Eco, Stephen Jay Gould, Henri Carriere, and Jean Delumeau, *Conversations About the End of Time* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 2000), p. 41.
- 3 See Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1997), pp. 37–8.
- 4 Of Alain Masson, in *Krzysztof Kieslowski. Textes reunis et presentes par Vincent Amiel* (Paris, Positif, 1997), p. 57.
- 5 It is nonetheless interesting to know that, in the Fall of 2000, Tom Tykwer was making *Heaven*, a film based on the scenario co-written by Kieslowski and Piesiewicz, the first part of the planned trilogy *Heaven, Hell, Purgatory*—so there is some affinity between the two directors.
- 6 Insdorf (see Annette Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, New York, Miramax Books, 1999, p. 175) claims that in this conversation Kieslowski directly referred to Kierkegaard's *Repetition*.
- 7 Paul Coates, 'The curse of the law: *The Decalogue*,' in *Lucid Dreams: The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski*, ed. by Paul Coates (Trowbridge, Flick Books, 1999), p. 103.
- 8 See Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (London, Fontana, 1979), pp. 237–238.
- 9 Vincent Amiel, *Kieslowski* (Paris, Rivages, 1995), p. 42–4.
- 10 More precisely, the displacement of this impossibility is triple: Charlotte loves Humbert Humbert who loves Lolita who loves Quilty who doesn't love anyone.
- 11 See Joan Copjec, 'Introduction,' in Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir* (London, Verso, 1993).
- 12 On these 'formulas of sexuation,' see Jacques Lacan, *Encore* (New York, Norton, 1998).
- 13 See Annette Insdorf, op.cit., p. 165.
- 14 *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, ed. Danusia Stok (London, Faber and Faber 1993), p. 161.

- 15 Charles Eidsvik, 'Decalogues 5 and 6 and the two *Short Films*,' in *Lucid Dreams*, p. 85 (see note 7).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 See Vincent Amiel, *Kieslowski*, p. 64/70.
- 18 And the ultimate irony is that this same point holds for Schelling's writing itself, for the very text(s) in which he deployed this pre-ontological dimension of proto-reality, his *Weltalter* fragment: there are three consecutive drafts, as if we have the three alternative-reality versions of the same text. See Chapter I of Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (London, Verso Books, 1996).