

Three Colors: Red (1994)

“Who are you?”



Major Credits

Director: Krzysztof Kieslowski

Screenplay: Krzysztof Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz

Cinematography: Piotr Sobocinski

Music: Zbigniew Preisner

Cast: Irène Jacob (Valentine), Jean-Louis Trintignant (Judge Joseph Kern), Jean-Pierre Lorit (Auguste), Frédérique Feder (Karin)

Production Background

Red completes an international trilogy based on the colors of the French flag that Kieslowski began after emigrating from Poland. The three works were shot in an astonishingly short time, approximately six months between November 1992 and May 1993. The first, *Blue* (1993), a melodrama starring Juliette Binoche takes place in Paris; the second, *White* (1994), is a dark comedy set mostly in Warsaw. Kieslowski had directed the Swiss actress Irène Jacob in *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), where she played the dual role of two young women living parallel existences in Poland and France, for which she won the Best Actress Award at the Cannes Film Festival. Sadly for American audiences, Jacob's stature did not blossom as did Binoche's or Julie Delpy, who had co-starred in *Blue*. Her two films with Kieslowski remain her most celebrated film performances. Jean-Louis Trintignant represents a quite different case. He was an early star of the French New Wave and the European art cinema beginning in the 1960s, with famous roles in Costa-Gavras' *Z* (1969) and Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970). He has appeared in more than 140 films, culminating in this role and his performance in Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012).

Kieslowski studied cinema and then taught for many years at the Polish national film school at Lodz. His career began in the 1970s making politically motivated documentaries before turning to features with *Camera Buff* (1979) and *Blind Chance* (completed in 1981 but "on the shelf" until 1987), films that reveal two of his persistent interests: self-reflexivity and the nature of chance. The dvd's of his final films, beginning with *The Decalogue*, include marvelous pedagogical shorts ("Krzysztof

Kieslowski's Cinema Lesson") in which he explains how he shot certain scenes. Kieslowski collaborated for a decade with the same co-screenwriter and composer. He had met Krzysztof Piesiewicz, a lawyer, during the early days of the Solidarity Movement. Piotr Preisner, a cabaret musician, had scored only one film before composing the music for *No End* (1984). Perhaps strangely, then, the director used a different cinematographer for each of his films (including the ten in *The Decalogue*), preferring that they all had a distinctive visual quality. Kieslowski announced his retirement from filmmaker after finishing *Red*, although he did continue working on scripts. A heavy smoker, he died in Poland during heart surgery at the age of 56.

Cinematic Qualities

Quite simply, *Red* remains a masterpiece of filmmaking techniques, both conventional (the lush musical score) and audacious (the sudden appearance of an unearthly light in the Judge's home).

1. Color: As earlier in the trilogy, Kieslowski uses camera filters and set design to emphasize a color of the French flag, only this time red predominates in virtually every moment, culminating in the giant poster that resembles the dimensions of a movie screen.
2. Music: Preisner's score provides a beautiful accompaniment to the story, giving it a romantic rather than creepy aura, but it also reminds us of the guiding hand of the composer and director in *post-production* (non-diegetic sound). In this sense, it suggests the manipulation of a fate that transcends Valentine's will. Careful observers will also notice the recurrence of a bewigged 18th century composer, Van Den Budenmayer, admired by the Judge and Auguste, on both an album cover and a CD jacket in the record store. "Van Den Budenmayer" is pure invention—a recurring "in-joke" between the composer and the director—whose name appears in their earlier collaborations as well as in the closing credits of *Red*.
3. Tracking shots: beginning with Valentine's approach to the Judge's home and her search for him once inside, Kieslowski uses the moving camera to search for meaning within the frame. Consider, for another example, the horizontal tracking shot in the bowling alley, which concludes with the discovery of a broken glass. In this case, and elsewhere, the moving camera serves to suggest the proximity of two characters who are almost never seen together in the same frame.

Questions for Discussion

1. Count the *coincidences* and *repetitions*. These seemingly infinite connections extend beyond the borders of the narrative. The aged lady with osteoporosis who reaches for a recycling bin in which to drop her bottles appears in both *Blue* and *White*—much like the recurring "angel" figure in *The Decalogue*. The major characters from the first two films in the trilogy (Juliette Binoche, Julie Delpy, and others) show up in the climax. How do these implausible concurrences contribute to the project—the "philosophy"—of the film?
2. In a brilliant review, Roger Ebert wrote, "Kieslowski tells the parable but doesn't teach the lesson." In response to Valentine's desperate need for advice, the Judge replies cryptically, "*Être* [Be]". The meaning here may be elusive, but the narrative seems to insist that there *is* a meaning. How would you "teach the lesson"?
3. In frustration, Valentine asks the Judge, "who are you?" Joseph Kern is his legal identity, but whom does he represent beyond the dimensions of the immediate story?
4. The ending of *Red*, in addition to providing a coda to the lives of the principal characters in the trilogy, is one of the most satisfying in the history of cinema. Consider the various elements of style and suggestive content that contribute to the breathtaking total effect.

