

Kieslowski's *Three Colours Blue, White and Red*: The colours of life.

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This article is an art-philosophical interpretation of Kieslowski's film trilogy, *Blue, White and Red*, in terms of Gadamer's distinction among the three hermeneutic activities of understanding, interpretation and application. Focusing on the symbolic meaning of the colours in question, namely liberty, equality and fraternity or friendship, it traces the emergence of meaning in the narratives of the three films by moving from understanding to interpretation, before addressing the question of the films' application to the lives of contemporary people.

Krzysztof Kieslowski's cinematic trilogy, *Three Colours Blue, White and Red*¹ must surely rank among the greatest film-art in the history of cinema. This could be demonstrated at many levels, including the visual-chromatic, the auditory (especially regarding the musical score) and the cinematic-narratological. An art-philosophical (perhaps: cinematophilosophical) approach to these three films would have to take all these levels into account, to a greater or lesser extent, to be able to arrive at a responsible interpretation. Here one should keep in mind that each of them (the films) represents Kieslowski's response to one of the colours of the French flag, the Tricolour, specifically to what each colour symbolizes, namely one of the concepts that, together, comprise the tripartite motto of the French Revolution. In the case of *Blue*, it is "liberty", of *White*, "equality", while *Red* stands for "fraternity" or friendship. What I would like to do here, is to explore the actualization of these three themes in the three films concerned, and to show how they intertwine or combine to articulate a philosophy of life which addresses some – if not all – of the fundamental issues that most humans have to grapple with in their lives. In brief: a specific, to my mind exemplary, philosophy of life

"comes to life" here. Because what is at stake is the relevance of these cinematic artworks for human life, I shall be guided by Gadamer's tripartite hermeneutic schema for interpretation, namely *understanding* (the implicit orientation in one's world, without which no human being could function), *interpretation* (the explicit, linguistic articulation of the specific way one understands something like a text, an artwork, a conversation, etc.), and *application* (the way in which a specific interpretation applies to one's own situation or life) (Gadamer 1982: 274-275).

One possible angle of incidence into the complex world of human relationships mapped out by *Blue, White and Red* would be the interrogative mode. Accordingly, each film might be said to pose a question in terms of its symbolic correlate (freedom, equality and friendship), and to provide an answer to this question in the course of its unfolding along multiple axes of meaning. In the case of *Blue*, the question is: "Is it possible to be truly free (liberated) without love?" In *White* the question is: "Can there truly be equality without comparable (or shared) power?" *Red*, in turn, poses the question: "Is friendship truly possible without communication which is predicated on

otherness?" The rich, poetic, multifaceted answer provided by each film is astonishing in its insight regarding the human condition. If art, in the course of its long history, is indeed the repository of humankind's self-understanding - a repository that may be revisited again and again by subsequent generations of people, given the manner in which what Heidegger (1975: 44; 66-67) called a "world" is "preserved" in artworks - then these three films by Kieslowski represent some of the most profound disclosures concerning the cultural "world" of the 20th century, as I will attempt to show in the following interpretation.

1: From understanding to interpretation: philosophy and the cinematic genesis of meaning in the narratives of *Blue, White and Red*.

To be able to demonstrate how the themes of freedom and love, equality and power, and finally, friendship and communication operate and intertwine in the films in question, it is necessary to reconstruct their respective narratives. The reason for this is not hard to understand: none of these themes or phenomena (freedom, etc.) occur intelligibly outside of the events that comprise human lives - which, in the form of life-stories or biographies, ineluctably have narrative structures - and therefore it would be impossible to grasp their relevance and significance in the absence of a familiarity with the narrative contexts within which they are played out here. In the course of delineating the narrative sequence of each film, I shall attempt to indicate how the events which are readily understandable, in Gadamer's sense of the term, to a cinematic audience at the first level of identifying the characters as fellow (if fictional) human beings in a recognizably human or social world, can, at a secondary level, be interpreted (that is, explicated) along the thematic axes

that I have indicated above. In the process, I shall also try to connect this "genesis of meaning" to specific cinematic elements, such as a certain striking image-configuration, or a play of colours, or sequence of audiovisual images representing (or sometimes metaphorically refracting) narrative events. I should stress, however, that I do not claim my interpretation to be the only valid, or perhaps rather, "responsible" one that could be offered of these cinematic works of art. Like all great artworks - for there are also artworks, which may be called "bad", or *kitsch* - they are sufficiently rich in signification to be able to accommodate various valid responses. The test of a responsible interpretation is whether one is able to demonstrate the meanings derived from the film- (or literary, or philosophical) text in question in relation to its generally accessible constituent elements, and, accordingly, to refrain from arbitrary "reactions".

a. *Blue*:

The narrative of *Blue* unfolds the tragic events of the death, in a car accident, of the composer husband (Patrice de Courcy) and young daughter (Anna) of Julie de Courcy, *née* Vignon (Juliette Binoche), and her subsequent struggle to come to terms with this profound loss. One could also say: "...her subsequent struggle to liberate herself from the effects of this profound loss", for Julie's life (initially) seems to her utterly meaningless when she regains consciousness in hospital after the accident, and learns from medical personnel that neither of the other members of her family has survived the accident. So devoid of meaning everything appears, in fact, that she attempts to commit suicide by stuffing a handful of pills into her mouth - only to find herself unable to swallow them. This does not seem to be the case physically, but more in an existential

sense: one gets the impression that, try as she may; she is incapable of taking the intended step of initiating a sequence of events that would terminate her life. The successive events in Julie's life reveal to the viewer why this is the case.

After discovering her inability to end her own life, Julie nevertheless decides to withdraw from society, from friends and acquaintances, as well as from all kinds of responsibilities, as far as possible. To this end, she refuses to talk to a television journalist who visits her soon after leaving the hospital, despite the curious question put to her by this woman, namely, whether it is true that she wrote Patrice's compositions. Julie's determination to liberate herself from all previous ties is also evident when she visits another woman – apparently a manuscript-copyist - with whom she (and probably her composer-husband, Patrice) seems to have collaborated, and fetches a musical score which she discards at a rubbish dump. She also calls an erstwhile colleague of her deceased husband, Olivier, and asks him if he is still in love with her. When he affirms this, she invites him over to her denuded apartment (the furniture having been sold) for the night, makes love to him on the only piece of furniture she has left, a mattress, and, when he wakes up the next morning, tells him, in effect, that now he should know that she is just a woman like any other, with a body on which the effects of mortality are inscribed, and that he would therefore not miss her. Then she leaves, leaving him nonplussed. (It later turns out that he has, sentimentally, bought the mattress on which they made love and has continued sleeping on it!)

Julie makes arrangements with the family lawyer to sell not only the apartment and everything in it, but also a beautiful old villa, which she visits to make arrangements for the payment of the staff and to say goodbye to them. Then she looks for an apartment in a part of Paris where no one knows her, and

when she finds one through an agent, sets out to live a reclusive life. But she cannot refrain from taking something from her former life with her - a beautiful hanging ornament consisting of pieces of glass in various shades of blue, that she takes from a room in the villa. This serves as a poignant visual reminder that she is unable, try as she may, to divorce herself completely from the memories of her life with Patrice and her daughter Anna, on the one hand, and captures, visually and chromatically, the significance of the colour blue which pervades Kieslowski's film. Blue is the colour of sadness, of melancholy, so well known from blues music, but it also connotes truth, as well as spirituality, holiness or sanctity, and evokes the symbolism of infinity that one associates with the sky. Hence one could say that the blue ornament signifies the fusion, for Julie, of sadness, in the face of loss, with the beauty and truth of her memories of lost loved ones. But importantly, it also signals the truth about her inability to free herself from the things that constitute the material world in which we live, in an absolute manner. Short of committing suicide, we are always already in a world, or, as Heidegger pointed out in *Being and Time* (1978): *Dasein* (his word for an individual human being) is coterminous with Being-in-the-world.

There are a number of scene-sequences where Julie is seen swimming in an indoor swimming pool, suffused by hues and shades of blue, from a light blue to bright blue, to deep blue, almost purple. Given the minimalist cinematic economy of Kieslowski's film, these usually take place in virtual silence and in semi-darkness, with no dialogue or even monologue on Julie's part. The impression created is that, in swimming, she surrenders herself to the water as a primordial feminine medium, like the amniotic fluid in a mother's womb - almost as if she is attempting to return to the origin of all being, before any

division takes place. But on one of these occasions, when she is again overwhelmed by sadness (after discovering that her husband led a double life involving another woman before his death), she stays underwater for a long time. When she finally surfaces, gasping desperately for air, one realizes that it was probably another suicide attempt that ended in failure. In Lacanian terms, she seems to be making an (futile) attempt to overcome the “lack” by which every human subject is characterized (Lacan 1981: 103-104; 204-205) from the moment that sexual differentiation takes place in the womb. The successive moments of birth or parturition, of the territorialization of the body into specific erogenous zones, the so-called mirror phase, when the subject misrecognizes its own mirror-image as “itself” or its ‘self’, as well as the subject’s entry into language, are all successive moments of *loss* of wholeness which, in Julie’s case, has been exacerbated by another, devastating loss – that of her family through death. Her expressions of longing for a union with a watery medium may be understood in this way, as such a desperate attempt to return to an origin or fullness before loss, which is also a way to conceive of death, as Freud did in *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1968).

The theme of liberty, then, articulates itself in *Blue* along two axes: “freedom from”, and “freedom to”. Everywhere that Julie turns to free herself from the “hold” that the world, things in the world, and the past have on her, in a desperate attempt to live out some kind of minimalistic nihilism, or even to die, finally, she finds that the world, things and individuals resist her attempts, and draw her into proximity with themselves. No matter how hard she tries, in the end she finds herself unable to relinquish her responsibility towards the world and the people in the world. There is a beautiful, cinematically minimalist scene where she is sitting in a

restaurant with a cup of coffee on the table next to her. Lost in silent thought, she holds a sugar cube just above the surface of the hot coffee, but close enough for the sugar cube to draw some coffee into it, eventually to be saturated. The scene becomes a powerful visual metaphor for Julie’s inability – but at another level for the undesirability, not only for her, but for all humans – to withdraw or free herself from her surroundings once and for all: even things (the coffee, the sugar cube) conspire to merge with her, to draw her into their embrace. Here, *Blue* succeeds in visually inscribing a woman as representative of the human species into a material context that comprises her (and our) inescapable, and therefore uniquely valuable, surrounding world.² What is instantiated here, in cinematic terms, is what Heidegger (1975: 149-150) described as dwelling in relation to the “fourfold”, namely, “earth and sky, divinities and mortals” – in other words, in relation to “things” as “places” which “gather” the “fourfold” in such a way that human beings or “mortals” are reminded of the way they belong to the ineluctable interrelations of sky (the open limit of our concrete existence), divinities (even if these are felt as being absent) and earth (as the condition of our existence). A thing as apparently insignificant as a sugar cube concentrates in itself this “fourfold”. This, as well as other instances of human involvement with the world, or “fourfold”, contribute to making *Blue* a veritable cinematic paean to our earthly existence.³

If Julie is unable, despite her effort to do so, to withdraw from the things in the world, the same is true of other people – while sitting in a coffee shop with Olivier, just after he has finally tracked her down after her disappearance, they notice that a flute player who is busking outside a restaurant is playing a melody that is only too familiar to her, but in reply to

her question, where he has learnt the music, the beggar merely replies that he invents lots of new tunes. The beggar flautist becomes another element that stands resolutely in the way of her quest to withdraw from the world. But the event that most decisively demonstrates to her that she is destined not to be separate from others, concerns Lucille, a prostitute who lives in an apartment one floor below her. When one of the other tenants comes around to Julie in an effort to solicit her signature for a petition that aims to get Lucille evicted from the building, Julie (predictably) refuses, saying that she does not want to get involved. Some time later it becomes apparent that this symptom of withdrawal has been mistakenly interpreted as an act of consideration for another's freedom, when Lucille visits her to express her gratitude to Julie for effectively preventing her (Lucille's) eviction. The irony is not lost on Julie, however, and the fact that Lucille has successfully demonstrated to her that, somehow, she is not "destined" - in the sense of a personal, instead of an impersonal, overarching destiny - to live a life that is isolated from others, is underscored when Lucille comments that the beautiful blue glass hanging ornament in Julie's apartment reminds her of one just like it that used to hang in her room when she was a child, as if to connect the present with the past, as well as with other people, in a conspicuously meaningful way.

In fact, Lucille turns out to be the human thread that reconnects Julie with the life and the people that she has tried - not with full conviction, to be sure - to leave behind her. Late one night she gets a phone call from Lucille, who pleads with her to come to a nightclub in Pigalle where she works, because she needs help. Reluctantly Julie eventually agrees, and discovers on her arrival that Lucille is in a state of shock, having seen her own father in the audience watching the sex show on stage. The fact that Julie

has responded to her call seems to confirm to her that there is still someone she can believe in. It is at the sordid nightclub where something happens that puts Julie before an agonizing choice. Lucille draws her attention to a television screen where an image of her, Julie, has just appeared, and, fascinated, Julie watches and listens to the programme, which concerns the music her late husband, Patrice, had been commissioned to compose before he died - a symphony for the unification of Europe. In the programme, her lover of one night (and erstwhile colleague of her dead husband), Olivier, explains to the television-interviewer (the same journalist who tried to interview Julie just after her discharge from hospital) that he has managed to track down a copy of the commissioned symphonic music that Patrice was working on at the time of his untimely death, and that he is doing his best to complete the symphony as intended by Patrice. The programme also features a woman, seen in photographs with Patrice in a manner, which, to Julie's astonishment, seems to indicate that they were in some kind of relationship.

Here Kieslowski demonstrates how public, electronic media of "communication" (in the broad sense), such as television, are able to affect the private lives of contemporary individuals, in this case Julie, by divulging information which would, at an earlier stage of cultural development, probably have remained unknown to them. (As I shall show, this theme of communication and electronic media is foregrounded in *Red*.)

Clearly upset, Julie wastes no time the next day in confronting the woman (the copyist) from whom she fetched the musical score some time ago - the one she dumped in a rubbish container. To her dismay it turns out that, fully expecting Julie to destroy the composition-manuscript, she had made a copy of it beforehand and sent it to

Olivier, who has been using it in an attempt to “complete” Patrice’s cruelly interrupted work on the “Concert for the unification of Europe”. When Julie faces Olivier, she has two issues to address - the work on the composition as well as the (to her astonishing) news, fortuitously seen and heard on television at the night club when she went to Lucille’s aid, that Patrice seems to have had a lover. She tells him that he has no right to attempt completing the unfinished composition, and, very significantly, he replies that his stated intention to do so was the only thing he could do to elicit something, some decision, from her (Julie) – it was all he could do to make her “want” or “not want”. As Kierkegaard (1987:164-165) would say, Olivier is attempting to make Julie realize that, sooner or later, she has to choose, the alternative to which is to “lose” herself. Not to choose, is not to exist. In Lacanian terms (1981: 243, 278) on the other hand, Olivier may be understood as trying to help Julie discover her own desire, in contrast to the desire of her alienated self, who attempted to withdraw from the world and society.

About Julie’s ignorance concerning Patrice’s mistress Olivier is surprised; he thought she knew. He tells her that Patrice’s erstwhile mistress works at the courts of law, and Julie, having seen her on television, and determined to lift the veil, finally, on this part of Patrice’s life that has been completely hidden from her, seeks her out. Initially the woman is taken aback by the direct confrontation, but when it becomes apparent that Julie means her no harm, merely wanting to know the truth, she relaxes and answers her questions. The woman, Sandrine – who wears a cross on a chain, just like the one that Julie lost at the scene of the accident, found there by a boy, Antoine, who wanted to return it to Julie only to be told by her that she wanted him to keep it - affirms that Patrice loved her,

and reveals, moreover, that she is pregnant with his child.

The rest of the film-narrative shows a new, newly resolute Julie, who starts working alongside Olivier on the score of the unfinished concerto, supposedly left in that state by her late husband. It soon becomes clear, however, that she bears more than a passing acquaintance with the composition in question; on the contrary, she works with the authority of an experienced composer. In fact, something becomes apparent that emerged hypothetically earlier (without ever becoming certain until now), namely, that she, Julie, is the “real” composer - of the “Concert for the Unification of Europe”, but probably also of most of the musical compositions that had made Patrice famous. Why this should be the case - why anyone would do something as self-effacing as composing serious music of such quality and beauty that it could certainly have earned her an international reputation, and then let someone else (in this case her husband) receive the recognition, honour, acclaim and fame attendant upon published work of such magnificence – becomes clear to the audience when Julie is seen instructing her lawyer not to proceed with the sale of the villa, and taking Patrice’s former (pregnant) mistress, Sandrine, there, telling her that the villa now belongs to her and her unborn child. Sandrine, in a voice, which registers a mixture of unbelief and gratitude, exclaims that Patrice told her that Julie was “good and generous”.

Here things come together, but with an important difference: When Julie calls Olivier to tell him that she has finished the finale of the concert, and that he could fetch it, he resists, telling her that he is able to finish it himself, although it would be a bit heavy and clumsy, comparatively speaking. But it would be his work, not hers. On the other hand, he would accept her help, but

everyone would have to know. The implication is clear: if she wants him to accept her work on the completion of the concert, she would have to come out of hiding, as it were, and accept responsibility for it. In other words, unlike Patrice before him, Olivier is unwilling to take credit for Julie's work as a well-intended gift (probably born of love for Patrice, and now, for him). Julie is in a dilemma, but finally she makes up her mind, phones Olivier, inquires whether he still sleeps on her mattress and whether he is alone, and to his affirmative reply, responds that she is "coming", the implication being that she is at last able and willing to take responsibility for her own work. And his contribution, in the form of judicious action, to her discovery of her "desire", and her freedom to affirm this desire, cannot be denied.

The final scene-sequences of the film alternate between scenes of lovemaking between her and Olivier, Sandrine looking at an X-ray scan picture of the child in her womb, Julie's mother (whom she visits in the course of the narrative), and the boy Antoine touching the pendant cross that Julie gave him. Concomitantly, the audience hears excerpts from a performance of the (presumably completed) "Concert", the choral parts of which comprise lyrics based on the familiar eulogy to love in Paul's New Testament Letter to the Corinthians, testifying to Julie's discovery, that it is finally not possible, sufficient or (especially) desirable to be "free from" the things and people in the world, even when that is what one wants most, as she did after losing her family. Through the fortuitous intervention of Lucille, who had mistaken Julie's attempt to be "free from" others as concern for her (Lucille's) right to privacy, as well as through Olivier's love for her, she has discovered that, on the contrary, one should aspire to being "free to" fulfil oneself in the world, and - perhaps most importantly - that such

fulfilling liberty is only truly attainable if one has found love in the reciprocal sense of loving and being loved by someone.

This is Kieslowski's first great philosophical lesson for lovers of the cinema: One can only truly be free when one has found love. But this truth cannot stand alone in something as complex as life in contemporary human society - hence the philosophical lessons of the other two members of the trilogy.

b. *White*:

White thematizes Equality, the second member of the French Revolution's triune motto, but as previously intimated, it does so in relation to power, along the axis of the question: "Can there be equality without shared power?" In the course of providing a negative answer to this question, Kieslowski also broaches the question of the relation between power and (linguistic) communication: Where the power of the self falters, can language play the role of what Freud (following Bertha Pappenheim) called the "talking cure", in the restoration of the self, of self-confidence, or faith in one's own power? If *White* is anything to go by, Kieslowski would certainly seem to grant language (or perhaps what Foucault would call "discourse") a crucial role in this process, but it seems to me that, for him, language is just one factor among several, including economic wealth.

It is appropriate that *White* should be connected to equality and power, given the fact that the colour white is not imbued with melancholy, like the colour blue, or charged with the vitalistic values which pervade red. It is a cold, harsh, pitiless, inexorable (non-) colour, in a way, and one could argue that, as such, it equalizes people the way the clinical white surroundings of a hospital reduces all those who lie in its white beds to the same status. And yet, the way in which Kieslowski uses it as the a-chromatic key to understanding *White*, also makes

it a persuasive backdrop for the kind of power or domination exercised here so ruthlessly between non-equals, even where it is done with the purpose of restoring equality.

Certainly the harshest perspective on interhuman relations of Kieslowski's cine-chromatic trilogy, it unfolds the narrative of Karol Karol (Zbigniew Zamahowski), a Polish hairdresser from Warsaw who fell in love and married a French hairdresser, Dominique (Julie Delpy), only to find that, being unable to find a job in Paris, and not being fluent (in fact, very awkward) in French, he feels increasingly powerless. This lack of power manifests itself in the most devastating manner imaginable for a man (given the vulnerability of the male ego in this area of experience): sexual impotence. The problem reaches such chronic proportions that Dominique sues for divorce, and the more poor Karol tries to convince the judge that he still loves his wife and that the problem will be overcome, the less interested (the appropriately named) Dominique seems - so much so that she states emphatically that the marriage has no future because she does not love Karol any more. The divorce is granted. When Karol asks the judge, through an interpreter, whether he is to be discriminated against because he can't speak French, it is a poignant reminder of the importance of communication⁴ for the maintenance of one's interests, and, more importantly, of one's "power" in the broad sense of self-empowerment. (It is not by accident that God, in the Genesis-myth of creation, gives Adam the power of naming - language is the primary means through which humans subdue nature and one another.)

In a last-ditch effort to persuade her to change her mind, Karol hurries after Dominique as she walks to her car, but she merely waves him goodbye in a gesture of dismissal more eloquent than words, leaving him his huge suitcase (a telling view of which is afforded the

audience in the opening scenes of the film, as it makes its way along a conveyor belt). When he attempts to draw money with his ATM card, the machine not only swallows his card, but, adding insult to injury, he is informed that his account has been closed - his last means to self-empowerment in Paris, France, has been destroyed. Disconsolately, Karol prepares for a night on the streets, until he remembers that he still has a key to the hairdressing salon where Dominique works, and which, under the circumstances, is a shelter not to be sneezed at.

The next morning he is rudely awakened by Dominique when she finds him sleeping awkwardly on some chairs in the salon. An argument ensues between them, with Dominique eventually standing, masterfully, astride his legs where he is still seated. Noticing a certain expression on his face, she checks herself in mid-sentence and, her eyes meeting his, she reaches downwards, verifying that he does, indeed, have the erection that his look betrayed. Without further ado, Karol with a triumphant look, and Dominique with mounting excitement, they start making love, with her sitting on top of him. But not for long. As if to rub salt into his wounds, his recalcitrant member wanes as suddenly as it waxed - judging by the changed expressions on both their faces: he looking crestfallen and she contemptuous - and she straightens herself, restores her underwear, and orders him out. When he tries, hesitantly, to reason with her, she sets fire to the curtains and phones the police, warning him that he would be blamed for the blaze. Karol's defeat is complete, or so it seems. In the next scene the audience sees him sitting at the station, producing incongruous noises (supposedly music), blowing on a comb (between his lips) covered with silver paper from a cigarette box. A man is attracted by his pitiful attempts, and drops some coins in the container next to Karol, informing

him that he knows the tune Karol is “playing” because he is Polish, too. The man, Mikolaj, starts a conversation with Karol, in the course of which he learns of poor Karol’s plight. In response, he tells him that, if ever Karol needed money desperately, he knows a man who would pay anyone a large sum of money to kill him, because he has no reason to live, but does not want to commit suicide. Mikolaj takes pity on the impecunious Karol, and undertakes to smuggle him back to Poland in his (Karol’s) own very large suitcase. Despite the discomfort, the plan succeeds as far as the airport in Warsaw, where the suitcase with Karol inside mysteriously disappears, to Mikolaj’s consternation. In the scene-sequence involving the suitcase (which resurrects the opening scenes of the film) Karol’s suitcase with him inside poignantly functions, in Freudian fashion, as a container that simultaneously represents a coffin and a womb – the symbol of his “death” as well as his potential “rebirth”. As it turns out, Karol’s suitcase has been stolen, together with a number of others, by a gang of thieves that operates at the airport. When they open the suitcase, instead of the expected goods with exchange value, the unfortunate Karol is disgorged, much to their chagrin. To compensate for their disappointment they beat him up and leave him lying in the snow. The bleak snowy landscape exemplifies the manner in which Kieslowski uses the (non-) colour white to establish a mood of harshness and pitilessness in the film by that name. Some snowscapes – especially those we associate with Christmas - are beautiful and pristine, but the snow-covered landscape outside Warsaw, with its motley patches of dirty, industrial brown like festering sores, simply strikes one as being sordid and merciless. This is exactly how Karol experiences his life at that moment.

When he finally manages to drag his battered body to his brother’s house

with its adjacent hair salon, the latter’s sole reason for welcoming him back home seems to be that his female clients have been asking for Karol’s deft hairstyling touch. It is clear that Karol’s heart is not in his hairdressing, although it does contribute financially to his ultimate goal: to win Dominique back, for he still loves her. Karol’s realization that, as a citizen of a country that is not economically on a par with France, he is at a disadvantage to Dominique, a French citizen, reflects Kieslowski’s insight into the crucial power of the economic sphere – and in the present world dispensation this translates into money, or the question of the degree of one’s access to money. Here’s another significance of *White*: white stands for the equalizing power of money, which Karol understands.

But how to make more money? In order to supplement his income as a hairdresser, he starts working as a bodyguard for a Polish Mafia-type, shadowing his employer with a gun under his arm. Judging by his remarks to his associates, the wheeler-dealer clearly regards Karol as his inferior, and as pretty thick into the bargain. But underneath his sometimes comatose appearance, sitting in the back of the car with his eyes half-closed, Karol listens carefully to all the conversations around him. Just how carefully, the audience realizes when, armed with a persuasive bottle of vodka, he visits a farmer and makes him an offer on his property – one that Karol’s “employer” is also interested in. The old man sells to Karol, who has taken out a bank-loan for the purpose. He does this a number of times, buying property which is well located for commercial purposes at better prices than those offered by his boss, but without the latter’s knowledge of his bodyguard’s duplicity, of course. As he anticipated, his boss eventually cottons on, and threatens to execute him on the spot. Karol has made provision for such an eventuality, however. If you kill me,

he tells the astonished man, the Church will inherit all the property that is in my name. Realizing that he has been outsmarted, and admitting grudgingly to a measure of respect for Karol's ingenuity, he agrees to the audacious deal Karol proposes: to "buy back" the property from him at ten times the price Karol paid. Overnight, by risking his life in an improbable scheme, Karol becomes wealthy, thus taking a huge step in his self-empowerment. It should be noted, though, that Kieslowski has not neglected the issue of empowerment through language – the audience is afforded several glimpses of Karol listening to "Teach yourself French" tapes, and doing the requisite verbal exercises. In other words, he is preparing himself for a showdown.

He also contacts his erstwhile benefactor, Mikolaj, and inquires whether the man he had told Karol about, is still willing to reward someone richly for ending his life. Mikolaj confirms this, and they arrange for Karol to meet his prospective "client" that evening. Unsurprisingly, the client turns out to be Mikolaj himself. Having satisfied himself that Mikolaj truly wishes to die, and having been told that the payment for his services is in Mikolaj's coat pocket, Karol, his gun pointing at the other man's heart, pulls the trigger. When the anticipating Mikolaj opens his eyes and realizes that he is still alive, he is informed that the firearm was loaded with a blank. Karol inquires whether he still wants to die. If so, he would do the deed – the next cartridge is real. He wanted Mikolaj to be sure, hence the initial fake shooting. Predictably, Mikolaj has changed his mind, but insists that Karol keep the money. Karol agrees that he has earned it, but informs him that he would like Mikolaj, who is an experienced businessman, to come into business with him, and Mikolaj agrees. (In the scene-sequences that follow, it is clear that this near-death experience has given Mikolaj

a new taste for life.)

Their business prospers, and Karol confides in Mikolaj that his ultimate purpose is to use his wealth to win Dominique back. When the time is ripe, he plans and stages an elaborate scheme with Mikolaj's help. First, they stage Karol's "death" by using a corpse (easily acquired in Poland, in exchange for money, of a man whose head was crushed in an accident, and is unrecognizable as a result) to "impersonate" him, and a death certificate is duly issued in Karol's name. Karol instructs Mikolaj to communicate to Dominique the news of his "death", and of being named in his will as heir to a large sum of money, on condition that she attend his funeral and collect the inheritance personally. He also arranges that Mikolaj buy two air tickets to Hong Kong.

On the day of the "funeral", Karol hides in the cemetery at a vantage point that enables him to observe Dominique, and tears of gratification appear in his eyes when he witnesses her crying at "his" graveside. To him, this is proof that she still cared for him at the time of his "death". When she enters her hotel room that evening, she is understandably disconcerted to find Karol in her bed - alive, naked and amorous. Moreover, he addresses her in fluent French. It does not take much persuasion for him to make love to her – so successfully that her audible response, accompanied by a white screen, seems to signify the inexpressible ecstasy of a "white" state of mind. Evidently, he has been re-empowered. To her further astonishment, when she wakes up in the morning he has gone, and she receives a visit from the police, who charges her with the murder of Karol Karol. At first she tries to convince the sceptical officers that he is very much alive. When she realizes that this is to no avail, she protests that she only arrived in the country after his death. They draw her attention to the fact that her passport tells

a different story, and that she had in fact entered Poland before Karol's death.

It is not difficult for the audience to grasp the fact that this is another forgery that was not difficult for Karol to procure with the necessary funds – the insight on Kieslowski's part, that money is the means to virtually anything one needs in a capitalist economy, is not without its critical, satirical side, although it is directed mainly at the socio-economic conditions which make such dubious uses of money possible. At this point it dawns on Dominique that she has been framed, and that this is Karol's revenge for the devastating, disempowering way she had treated him in Paris, when she was on home territory and had the linguistic as well as the economic advantage. The tables of power have been turned on her, and things have been equalized.

The question is, of course: will Karol leave it at that? Or will he try to make good his attempt to win back her love? Dominique is imprisoned, although it is not clear whether this is because of having been found guilty of Karol's murder, in the absence of any exonerating evidence, or pending her trial. Not that it matters. As we already know, if you have money in Poland, anything can be procured, including the freedom of a prison inmate. The film ends with Karol, tellingly carrying luggage, being let into the prison courtyard, and meeting Dominique's eyes where she is looking down at him from inside a cell. She smiles, and signals with her hands that she is ready to go with him wherever he wants to go. With tears running down his cheeks, Karol looks back at her, bathed in the white glare of the prison-courtyard lights. And the audience is reminded of the travel arrangements to Hong Kong that Mikolaj has made at Karol's request. Hong Kong, significantly, is neutral territory.

The lesson of *White* should be clear: whether between individuals, or

between countries, there can be no equality if there are no symmetrical power-relations, or at least comparable power, between the people or nations in question. And the indispensable means to gain or maintain power include, among them, linguistic prowess as well as economic means such as money. But Kieslowski goes even further: without such comparable power, and hence equality, there can be no question, in the long run, of love between individuals either. In this way he provides another thread, in addition to communication, that links all three films thematically.

c. *Red*:

As intimated earlier, *Red* addresses questions of communication in relation to friendship in terms of conditionality: what communicational conditions have to be met for friendship to be possible? The central character in the narrative is Valentine (Irene Jacob), a young French woman who works as freelance model, whose boyfriend is always on the road, travelling, whose brother has a drug problem, and who is lonely. Her boyfriend, Michel, phones her occasionally, and displays all the signs of possessiveness through the suspicious questions to which he subjects her. One evening, after an advertisement shoot, she accidentally runs a dog over in her little car. She stops, drags the dog - which can apparently not step on her hind leg - into her car with difficulty, and drives to the address she finds on the dog's collar, only to find that her owner, an ageing, apparently cynical man (Jean-Louis Trintignant), is indifferent regarding Rita's (the dog's) fate. She decides to take her to a veterinary clinic where Rita's leg is treated, and is subsequently told by the dog's owner, who sends her a refund for the cost of the veterinary treatment, that Rita belongs to her. Soon after this, Valentine takes Rita (who, it turns out, is pregnant) for a walk, but as soon as she takes the lead off the dog's collar, she absconds.

She drives to Rita” (ex-) owner’s address, and, as she expected, finds her there.

This visit proves to be a turning point, for, on entering the living room, Valentine discovers the old man listening, by means of a powerful short-wave radio set, to a telephone conversation between a man and a woman who - it gradually dawns on her - are obviously in an illicit relationship. Noticing her interest, or perhaps rather her undisguised dismay, he informs her that he is spying on his neighbours. In the conversation that ensues, Valentine learns that the old gentleman is a retired judge, and although he seems to have adopted a non-judgmental attitude to the individuals whose actions – ranging from private relationships to criminal misdemeanours – he has access to via modern communications technology, one gets the impression that he is challenging her to condemn him for his electronic eavesdropping. Which she does, exclaiming that: “Everyone has a right to privacy!”

Here the audience witnesses the ironic situation of someone whose profession required of him to judge people, presumably in a situation where adequate evidence or information was sometimes lacking, whereas now his situation is one where he possesses a certain technological “omniscience” (reminiscent of that possessed by the angels in Wenders’s film, *Wings of Desire*; cf. Olivier 1996), but this time accompanied by a suspension of judgement. The judge challenges Valentine to interfere in the lives of the people whose private lives they have access to, telling her which house it is, at that moment, where a married man is talking to his mistress over the telephone. She rushes out, and is admitted to the house by the man’s wife, who, at Valentine’s request, calls up to him that there is someone to see him. While she is waiting she notices the couple’s daughter, eavesdropping on her

father’s illicit conversation, using another telephone receiver, and changes her mind about accosting him.

Back at the judge’s house, he mocks her inability to persevere with her intention, and proceeds to point out a man talking on a mobile phone next door, walking in his driveway. He tells her that this man, whose conversations are among those he taps into regularly, is a drug dealer, and, dialling his number, invites her to talk to him. Valentine, in a state of outrage and confusion, takes up the challenge and tells the startled man over the phone that he “deserves to die”. She sees him looking around frantically and then hurrying inside. She is uncompromising in her condemnation of what the judge is doing, however, and insists that it is “like playing God”.

In this encounter between Valentine and the retired judge, Kieslowski highlights two aspects of modern telecommunications: on the one hand it gives one tremendous power to negate distances and overcome natural obstacles in the way of “reaching” other people – something emphasized at the start of the film when the camera scrupulously follows the telephone wire from Valentine’s phone, where she is dialling her boyfriend’s number, to where it joins other phone connections in the complicated mass of wires at a switchboard, and from there to where these connections are linked together to form an undersea cable, carrying her voice, together with thousands of others, to interlocutors at the other end of these connections, in other countries. But on the other hand, as the judge’s illicit eavesdropping demonstrates, this communicational power is easily abused. The technological power to extend or enhance our “naturally” given capacity to communicate is ambivalent – something usually thematized by science fiction⁵ – insofar as it has the potential to open up new worlds of experience, but simultaneously also to destroy a truly human way of living, in this case the

ability to have privacy, to prevent everything from becoming public.⁶

Implicitly, therefore, *Red* issues a warning in this regard, not to abuse the capacity of electronically mediated communication to destroy what must, after all, be presupposed by the attempt to communicate, namely otherness. Unless the participants in a communicational process are “other” in relation to each other, the attempt to communicate would make no sense. And otherness, in turn, requires a certain privacy to flourish – a world in which everyone is constantly in the glare of public exposure through communications systems or media, would be a world in which true communication, namely the exchange and sharing, not only of information, but also of joy, sorrow, pleasure and pain, is redundant as well as impossible.⁷ In the case of Valentine and the judge, Kieslowski could not have emphasized this mutual otherness more. In effect, the complications of the narrative, which set them up as being on opposite sides of a moral divide regarding the question of the ethical justifiability of invading the privacy of unsuspecting individuals, establish *otherness* as the condition of the possibility of communication (but also, of course, of miscommunication⁸, as in the case of Valentine and her absent, possessive boyfriend) in an exemplary manner. In this case, unlikely as it may seem, it also prepares the way for friendship.

Valentine’s uncompromising condemnation of the judge’s actions proves not to be in vain. After she has left, he writes letters to all the people on whose telephone-communication he has been eavesdropping, as well as to the local telecommunications authorities, informing them of his illicit activities. Predictably, a court case follows, in which he is found guilty of contravening the law pertaining to telecommunications. Two of the individuals to whose intimate

conversations he has listened, are a beautiful young woman and a handsome young man, Auguste, who lives in an apartment just opposite Valentine’s, and whose path has often nearly crossed with hers – in fact, when a giant poster of her face, against a red background, is put up along the route he normally drives to work, he stops to look at it, stunned by her beauty, not realizing (as the audience does) that the woman in the picture lives just across the road from him. Before the commencement of the court case against the prying judge, the audience witnesses Auguste, who drives a red jeep, and the blonde woman to whom he talks over the phone, begin a relationship, which obviously causes great excitement on especially Auguste’s part. On one of the occasions when he and Valentine unwittingly pass by each other (she in her car, just before she accidentally knocks the judge’s dog over, and he crossing the road), he drops the bundle of books he is carrying, and one of them falls open on the road. Superstitiously, he looks at the pages where it opened, and pays special attention to that particular section in his preparation for the law examination, which, if he passed, would qualify him as a judge. After the exam he meets his girlfriend, who gives him a beautiful pen as a commemorative present, and jubilantly informs her that he was in fact required to write on the section that had fallen open before him.

Unbeknown to them, however, things are about to change. At the court case she meets another man (also one of those involved in the judge’s telephonic misdemeanours), and gradually her relationship with Auguste peters out, to be replaced by one with her new acquaintance. Auguste cannot fail to read the signs that his erstwhile lover’s interests have shifted – despite numerous attempts at contacting her by phone, she has become elusive. Then, at his peril, he decides to visit her apartment, and on arrival decides to play peeping Tom to see what is happening in her lit bedroom.

This entails the difficult feat of climbing up onto the second-floor balcony wall, and once there, he witnesses what he feared, but did not want to see, namely, his (erstwhile) lover making love to another man. Shattered, Auguste returns home, and in typical human fashion, takes out his disappointment and rage on his dog, which welcomes him in anticipation of a walk. Instead, Auguste bundles the poor animal into his car and takes it to a spot where he ties it to a lamppost before driving off. (Needless to say, his conscience bothers him sufficiently later to fetch the dog again.) The fact that the events in Auguste's life are shown to the cinema audience in tandem with those that pertain to Valentine, the judge and his dog, Rita, together with the manner in which these events are presented – with their lives “crossing”, but not quite connecting at various junctures – sends unmistakable visual signals to the audience that, sooner or later, they are bound to meet. Moreover, the role of the judge in this is such that the narrative may be read, at a level secondary to the primary, realistic plane, in terms of a kind of divine intervention on the part of a “retired deity” who has, nevertheless, not lost all of his powers. This is what happens: when Valentine reads a report in a newspaper on the court case involving the judge and those on whom he spied gratuitously, she pays him a visit, and he confesses to her that part of the reason why he revealed his nefarious activities was in the hope of seeing her again. He offers her a glass of peach brandy (it turns out to be his birthday), and the fact that she accepts his offer, signals her appreciation of what she sees as a moral - or morally good – decision and consequent action on his part.

Valentine invites the judge to a fashion show in which she is modelling. The scene-sequence of this fashion pageant in the film is one of the most eloquent in chromatic terms, in so far as the rich red upholstery of the theatre

where it is set resonates in tone and mood with the theme in question, namely friendship and communication. But more than this, it invokes the combined themes of Kieslowski's film-trilogy, which, in its entirety, concerns life in its fullness. After all, red is the colour of life.⁹

When the show is over, and everyone (except the janitor) has left, they sit talking in the theatre. In the conversation it becomes apparent – building on information that emerged in earlier exchanges between them – that the judge was in love once, and that, in a manner that bears an uncanny resemblance with Auguste's experience, he witnessed another man (as he puts it) “between the long white legs” of his beloved. As a result, he never married, and he intimates that Valentine may be “the woman he never met” subsequently. In a curious twist of fate, the man whom his beloved had chosen above himself, appeared before him in court, accused of manslaughter as a result of negligence. Instead of recusing himself, as he knows he should have, he found the man guilty and subsequently took early retirement, out of a certain disgust, it seems, with his profession's duties and limitations.

Another strange similarity between the judge and Auguste which emerges, is the fact that, like Auguste, the judge had dropped a book shortly before his legal examination that would qualify him as a judge, and he had also studied, *and* been asked in the examination, the section at which the book had fallen open. Earlier, when Valentine told him that she was planning a trip to Britain to visit her (elusive, yet possessive) boyfriend, the judge recommended that she take the ferry instead of travelling by air and, as if to seal something already decided upon, the judge asks to see her ticket for the ferry, which she readily shows him. He has also promised, at her request, to reserve one of Rita's puppies for her.

The rest of the narrative of *Red* gives one the impression that

Kieslowski's tale moves at two levels: the largely, although not entirely – given the judicious, evocatively symbolic use of music, colour, camera angle, and so on - realistic level, where the characters are understood as real human beings, and events come across as credible happenings in recognizable social space, and also a second level (hinted at earlier), where the judge suddenly appears to be just that little too prescient, if not omniscient, to be a mere mortal. When Valentine boards the ferry, we are not really surprised to see Auguste there as well – after all, he needs a vacation after the devastating loss of his girlfriend, and besides, he has crossed paths with Valentine several times before.

Before the start of their journey on the ferry, the audience is informed that stormy weather has been forecast for the channel separating France and Britain, and when the audience witnesses the judge listening to a radio report about a ferry, among other vessels, which has disastrously overturned during the storm over the channel, with only a few survivors, he does not seem unduly perturbed. Instead he switches on the television set (brought to him by Valentine's brother, whose drug-rehabilitation seems to have begun through her friendship with the judge), and calmly – without any apparent concern or surprise - watches as the seven survivors are shown, being brought aboard a rescue vessel. The television commentator announces the names of the survivors as they step past the camera, wrapped in warm clothing. Apart from the barman of the stricken ferry, whose name does not ring a bell, there are Julie and Olivier (from *Blue*), Karol and Dominique (from *White*), and, of course, Valentine and Auguste. (I would not be surprised if the supposed "barman" turns out to be Kieslowski himself – one arbitrary character among the six principal characters from the trilogy would seem to be incongruous.)

The film ends with the judge smiling an enigmatic, somehow knowing smile, and the image-configuration of Valentine's face (in exactly the same profile as on the gigantic red poster that brought a stunned Auguste to an abrupt stop), juxtaposed with Auguste's, freezes the flow of narrative time. At this point the judge's role in all this seems, in retrospect, to be (at the secondary level) something akin to that of a mythical figure like Zeus, who acted as judge, but also as the god who 'saves', in the mythical context of Olympian deities, and who had some commanding knowledge of, if not influence over the weather. Hence his suggestion that Valentine travels by ferry. This is not all that suggests a deliberate orchestration of events on his part, though – the way his dog, Rita, seemed to guide Valentine to him, the similarities between his life and that of the young judge-to-be, Auguste, and his remark that Valentine seems to be the woman he never met, are all factors that could be read as pointing to a "replay", by means of another "incarnation", as it were (Auguste), of his (human) life that had gone awry at a certain point, and which he wishes to rectify. At this level of interpretation, then, *Red* may be understood in terms of a certain magical realism.

At yet another level, however, in so far as he appears to "direct" the flow of certain events, the figure of the judge seems to function as a metaphor for the director of the films in question, reminding the audience of the power that the film director wields over the manner of presentation of the narrative which unfolds before our eyes – a narrative which is, regardless of its illuminating mimetic qualities, in the final analysis a construction, a work of cinematic art. Not that such power is absolute – and in this respect the judge (or Zeus) is, again, an appropriate metaphor – film directors have the power to manipulate the materials of his or her medium for the best achievement of their desired ends,

but those materials (language, light, colour, music) are not of their creation. The director, like the judge/Zeus, can “order” or organize a (chaotically) given set of elements or components in a certain way, but those components are always already there, including a certain measure of chance or errancy which, when it occurs, can be either affirmed or negated, excluded (after the fact) by the director. Moreover, as Plato (2000: 47e-48b; p.36) knew, not all errancy can be successfully organized or subjugated, “persuaded” by intellect, because of what he termed “necessity” (Gr. *ananké*, “fate”), which introduces a ‘straying’ or “errant” cause (*khora*) into the course of events.

What *Red* contributes to the thematics of Kieslowski’s trilogy, then, is the insight – that may be gleaned by perceptive readers from the narrative reconstructed above – that not even the advanced electronic telecommunications of the late 20th century, such as telephones, television and radio, suffice to guarantee that there *will* be true communication between people. And such communication is a prerequisite for friendship, but also for love. The telephonic communication between Valentine and her possessive boyfriend is alienating rather than intimate; when Auguste most needs to talk to his girlfriend (who has apparently found a new love), the ringing telephone remains an empty promise; the judge’s electronically mediated ability to eavesdrop on private conversations gives him no fulfilment in the end. What does give him satisfaction, finally, is the friendship that gradually, through verbal conflict and confrontation – followed by moral action – grows between him and Valentine. It is in the development of this friendship that Kieslowski demonstrates, not merely that there is no friendship without communication, but that this communication is of a very specific kind – it is an exchange between individuals which is predicated on their

difference, their otherness in relation to each other. Their eventual friendship happens then, improbably, partly because of otherness of character, which is openly revealed in their mutual communication, through which they also discover what they have in common as human beings, namely, the need for friendship.

And it does not end with friendship between human beings, either. In *Red*, friendship is the thread that connects, ultimately, all living creatures. Without a sense of caring, Valentine would not have stopped and taken the injured dog, Rita, to the veterinary clinic. Nor would Auguste have gone back for his dog, abandoned in a moment of projected resentment. When we see the judge putting a (red) collar on the puppy that has been promised to Valentine, this visibly completes the bond of friendship between humans and dogs as representatives of all other living creatures.

As the ancient Greeks taught us, friendship or *philia* is a species of love, the other two kinds being *agape* (respect, awe, or love of humans for the divine and *vice versa*) and *eros* (erotic love), and it is therefore not surprising that *eros* is also addressed in *Red*. It is clear from the start that Valentine is searching for someone to love, and that her desperate need, expressed in the form of various “demands”, is not likely to be fulfilled by her absent boyfriend. The gap separating (biological) need and its expression in speech as demand, is precisely what “desire” amounts to, according to Lacan (1981: 243, 278), and Valentine’s desire, while (unlike need) being ultimately not fulfillable, does not find an appropriate “object” or counterpart, until she and Auguste (who finds himself in exactly the same position) finally meet, apparently by chance. Except that, as indicated above, the presence of the principal characters from Kieslowski’s two earlier films in the rescue scene reminds us that their

meeting has been orchestrated, not merely by the director of the three films, but also by what the judge represents, whether that is a quasi-supernatural force, or simply what the ancient Greeks called *ananké* or fate, necessity (referred to earlier), which cannot be finally controlled by humans, no matter how much they strive to exercise technological control over nature and society. (Interestingly, Valentine expresses her desire, as opposed to demand, to the judge where, in response to him telling her that he has dreamt of her as she would be several decades later, she inquires urgently whether he saw her with someone in his dream. He simply responds by saying that he saw her turn towards someone next to her, in this way strengthening the audience's impression, at the conclusion of the film-narrative, that the 'someone' in question will turn out to be Auguste.)

2: Application: What these artworks mean for contemporary humans.

The question, in terms of the last component of Gadamer's tripartite hermeneutical model, namely, how does the understanding and the more explicit interpretation of the three films, as carried out in the previous section of this article, apply to the lives of individuals living in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, may be stated as follows. It is significant that Kieslowski uses various cinematic means to indicate explicitly that the three films should be viewed as being interconnected in thematic terms. In other words, given these explicit links between them, they appear as cinematic elaborations of different, but interconnected, inseparable aspects of human life.

These intra-filmic, but self-transcending links include the scene-sequence, in *Blue*, where Julie, looking for her dead husband's former mistress at the law courts, peeps into a court in session, and we hear Karol – one of the

protagonists of *White* - ask the judge whether he is being discriminated against because of his inability to communicate fluently in French. In *White* we encounter the same event, witnessing Julie looking in, but this time from within the court, instead of from outside the courtroom. Apart from setting up connections between these two films which reflect the chance criss-crossing of human lives on a daily basis (mostly without individuals being aware of the specific nature of their respective projects and goals), Karol's lack of communicational ability, which is connected with lack of power in *White*, appears in *Blue* as well, in the context of Julie's quest to communicate with Sandrine in order to hear the truth about her and Patrice first-hand, so to speak. In *Blue*, however, this desire to communicate is linked to the knowledge and self-empowerment that Julie craves at that point, which is the counterpart of Karol's predicament, and which he proceeds to overcome by actualising his communicational powers, once back in Poland. Add to this Karol and Dominique's appearance at the end of *Red*, which thematizes communication most explicitly of all three films, and it becomes clear that, while each film is explicitly dedicated to the elaboration of one of the themes of freedom, equality and friendship, these themes are intertwined as the film-narratives are intertwined. I have already referred to love as an important interconnecting thread as well: in *Blue*, it is crucial for Julie's attainment of freedom to actualize herself; in *White*, love is that which depends, ultimately, on shared power, and hence, equality, between lovers; and in *Red*, it is shown (both as *philia* and as *eros*) in its interbraidedness with communication.

The films are also connected through music, generally, in so far as the specific music of each soundtrack, like the predominant colour setting the tone appropriate to the theme of each film,

enhances audience-awareness of the theme in question.¹⁰ In *Blue* the music is most conspicuous in its melancholic (but eventually also joyous) “tonal” function, as it collaborates with the different hues of blue as well as with Kieslowski’s judicious use of silences in the narrative to evoke the enigmatic velleities on Julie’s part. In *White* the kind of music that accompanies the unfolding conflict (and its eventual resolution) between Dominique and Karol is, appropriately, far more aggressive (often as a tango), especially in counterpunctal form, while *Red*’s musical soundtrack is as richly life-affirming as the various shades and hues of red in its scene-sequences. More specifically, the music of Von Budenmayer, which is mentioned by Julie to Olivier as an element or source of the Concerto in *Blue*, also features in *Red*, where Valentine selects it to listen to in a music shop.

Given these significant interconnections among the three members of Kieslowski’s cinematic trilogy, then, what does it mean for us, as inhabitants of a technology- or artificial intelligence-saturated world where truly human desires and needs seem to be relegated to a more and more exiguous status every day? How, in Gadamer’s terms, does their thematic focus, as it appears in my preceding interpretation of their respective narratives, *apply* to our lives? Obviously every person who views these films would have to decide for themselves, on the basis of her or his understanding and interpretation at the time (and being historical creatures, at different times people would find that different aspects of these rich film-texts would address them more forcefully than at other times).

Their application to my own life is not important here; what is important, however, is how they apply to human life, to our social sphere, at this time in history. And it is not difficult to perceive that they remind us of the inalienable importance, for people, of freedom in its

relation to love (*Blue*), of equality in relation to power (*White*), and of friendship in relation to communication and otherness (*Red*), respectively, but also together, in so far as those phenomena are inextricably intertwined in a recognizably human world. As such the themes elaborated in these films function as markers, as it were, to identify a human world as opposed to something that would be, in a sense, “inhuman” – in the first sense that Jean-Francois Lyotard distinguishes in his book by that name (1991: 6) – namely, what he calls the “inhuman” ideology or system of “development”, which appears, in *Red*, in the guise of mediating (but sometimes alienating) electronic communications systems. But asymmetrical power-relations, too, whether of an interpersonal kind, like those between Karol and his dominating wife/ex-wife in *White*, or of a political, or an economic kind (like those between an impoverished Eastern Europe and a wealthy Western Europe in *White*), also threaten a truly human life. And so does the withdrawal, or putative “freedom from” society on the part of intrinsically caring individuals, represented by Julie in *Blue*. Unless caring people everywhere could, like Julie, discover a reason – and what better “reason” than love? – to enact their “freedom to” build a better society, human social life faces formidable difficulties.

This is how the “applicability” of the films in question to contemporary individuals may be articulated. Everyone who reads this article, and who is familiar with the films, may decide for her- or himself how this “application” should be modulated to apply to her or his life. In the final analysis, then, Kieslowski’s cinematic trilogy – to my mind a milestone in the history of cinema – is a celebration of human life, and may legitimately be called “the colours of life”.¹¹

Notes

1 *Blue* appeared in 1993, followed by both *White* and *Red* in 1994. (Cf. Bleiler 1996: 58-59, 421, 562.)

2 Karsten Harries, in *The ethical function of architecture* (1997), elaborates on this involvement of humans with the things in their world, in this case architecture. According to Harries, architecture is capable of imparting to people a sense of their *ethos* or “place” in the world, something which goes beyond Heidegger’s analysis in an original, insightful way.

3 Another film that achieves such exemplary cinematic celebration of human life, is Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* (*Himmel über Berlin*). For a thoroughgoing examination of the manner in which this is done, cf. Olivier 1996.

4 As will become apparent in the following subsection, as well as in the last section of this article, communication is thematized most explicitly in *Red*, but is interbraided with the other themes addressed in the trilogy. This moment of Karol’s undoing, partly through his linguistic inadequacy, emphasizes the indispensable role of language in self-empowerment.

5 Elsewhere (Olivier 1996a) I have pursued at length this capacity of science fiction with reference to Cameron’s *Terminator* films.

6 In my discussion of Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* (Olivier 1996) I utilized Baudrillard’s contention that the distinction between private and public has collapsed in the contemporary, postmodern world, to interpret the relevance of the angels’ omniscience in Wenders’s film as a device to render a critique of this world’s fragmentation and attendant lack of communication between individuals. In *Red* the judge’s comparable access to other people’s private lives is put to different critical use, namely to emphasize the human need for privacy, so easily undermined by electronic communications technology, as well as the sometimes painful realization that the availability of this technology is no guarantee that authentic communication with others will be achieved. Kieslowski draws attention, then, to the plight of the lonely - in this instance, the judge - and the temptations offered to them by this kind of technology, especially in the absence of friends. Another cinematic thematization of the ambivalence of interpersonal as well as electronically mediated communication, again from a different angle, is found in the film, *Pump*

up the Volume. This film is especially useful for the teaching of critical practice courses to university students, given the fact that its narrative plays out in the context of a high school where one of the pupils, at first unintentionally, orchestrates a rebellion against a tyrannical school principal by means of his shortwave pirate radio station. What he and his fellow students learn (sometimes painfully) in the process, is that electronically mediated communication is immensely powerful, but that this power can have destructive as well as constructive, salutary, effects (cf. Hurst & Olivier 1997).

7 Again, the pertinence of Baudrillard’s critique of contemporary culture regarding the non-equivalence of information-exchange and communication must be stressed. I have addressed this issue at greater length in relation to Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* (Olivier 1996).

8 This makes of otherness what is referred to in Derrida’s work as a “quasi-transcendental” (cf. Bennington 1993: 267-284).

9 Leonard Shlain (1998:269) provides a penetrating insight into the symbolic significance of the colour red. He points out that it has been associated for thousands of years with female sexuality, with blood, vitality and passion. Hence, while it may at first seem that the pervasive presence of red in the film by this name is incongruous in relation to the friendship that grows between Valentine and the judge, this is not the case, as will be seen in what follows regarding the role that this friendship plays concerning Valentine’s future love-life. Secondly, *Red* - being the culminating film of the trilogy - brings together the themes of all three, which comprise, as I argue here, nothing less than the indispensable threads in the fabric of a truly human mode of living. As such, it is fitting that red should be its symbolic colour, given - as Shlain shows - that it is first and foremost the colour of life. After all, “feminine sexuality, blood, vitality and passion” are all inseparable from life itself.

10 The specific semiotic relevance of the music and the colour-dominance as well as -variations in the film trilogy of which this article is an art-philosophical interpretation, could obviously be addressed at greater length and in more detail. That would require another article, however.

11 Something which cannot be pursued at length here is precisely the manner in which *Blue*, *White* and *Red* succeed in surpassing their own status as cinema - that is, as artworks comprising

sequences of audiovisual *images*. Uncannily, while variously foregrounding their own "constructedness" as artworks, these films open one's eyes to the concreteness of things and events in the *lifeworld*. As such, they critique that aspect of postmodernity that Baudrillard terms "hyperreality" – the self-sufficiency of the image (cf. Olivier 1996).

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