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Thou shall see 'Dekalog': Kieślowski's masterpiece is coming to the Texas Theatre

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By Chris Vognar



When you think The Ten Commandments you think dogma, rock-hard instruction, do this or else. You probably don't think soulful humanism. And you almost assuredly don't picture a mundane Warsaw housing project.

But [*Dekalog*](#), Krzysztof Kieślowski's ten-part series of modern morality dramas, is about nothing if not defying expectations. These are crystalline one-hour dramas, originally made for Polish television in

1989-90, designed to make us think about how to live. Each chapter is based on one of the Commandments, but the crises and conflicts within belong to this world. They are fully developed snapshots of ordinary people, living in the same apartment complex, facing extraordinary circumstances. Together the chapters form one of the most ambitious and rewarding TV projects ever made.

You'll have the opportunity to see them all all, or pick and choose, when the [Nasher Sculpture Center](#), the [Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture](#) and the [Texas Theatre](#) team up to show *Dekalog* in its entirety Jan. 21-29 at the Texas Theatre. If you come for parts nine and ten on the 29th you'll also see a discussion of the series by Video Association of Dallas director Bart Weiss and myself. (*Dekalog* plays divinely on the big screen, but if you can't make it out [Criterion recently released](#) the series on Blu-ray).

Either way you're in for an unforgettable experience. Moviegoers know Kieslowski best for the *Three Colors* trilogy and *The Double Life of Veronique*, but the filmmaker's most devoted fans usually consider *Dekalog* his crowning achievement. I can't disagree. The series keeps up a sustained level of emotional intensity and philosophical nourishment for all ten hours. (There are also long cuts of two episodes, which are included in the Criterion set).

This isn't an endeavor that requires Job-like patience for a big payoff. The very first episode — "I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other God but me" — hits hard and haunts you through the rest of the series.

A ten-year-old boy (Wojciech Klata) worships his father (Henryk Baranowski), who in turn worships science, particularly the hulking computer monitor that casts the apartment in eerie green light. He's a caring father, devoted to empirical thought. He has also bought his son a shiny new pair of ice skates. To explain any more would be criminal, but be prepared for finely wrought devastation. Indeed, know that *Dekalog* can make for emotionally taxing binge watching.

The other standout is episode five, "Thou shalt not kill." With simple plotting and moral fortitude Kieslowski introduces us to a young drifter (Miroslaw Baka), as chilling in his social isolation as *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle.

The drifter actually kills a taxi driver, with remorseless savagery, then pays for his crime in a painfully realistic execution sequence.

Murder, Kieslowski suggests, is murder, whether committed by an individual or by the state. If you disagree take it up with the man upstairs. You know, the one that makes the rules. (An 84-minute version of this one is available in the Criterion set, titled *A Short Film About Killing*).

Kieslowski packs a remarkable amount of thought and action into each of these hour-long dramas, and the allegorical premise gives him license to dive deep into core elements of human behavior. But for all that there's something gentle about *Dekalog*, a generosity of spirit where you might anticipate stern judgment. Kieslowski, who died of cardiac arrest in 1996, is well aware we are all deeply flawed, that we've been known to mistake shalt for shall. This knowledge seems to make him love us all the more.

Plan your life:

Dekalog plays Jan. 21-29 at the Texas Theatre, 231 West Jefferson Blvd. Jan. 29 screening includes a discussion with Chris Vognar and Bart Weiss. thetexastheatre.com.