Paper

Subhasish Bhowmick

Reconstituting Women as the Site of European Unification: Tracing the Image of the Women Protagonists in Kieslowski's Internationally Co-produced Films of the 1990s

Abstract:

The year 1989 marked a huge paradigm shift in the political as well as economic atmosphere in Europe. Art House cinema as a medium welcomed the virtue of generosity of International Co-production, whereas National Cinemas changed their course to become Transnational Cinema. Krzysztof Kieslowski is a case in hand, where this study wishes to unravel the strategy of delineation of women protagonists in his Internationally Co-produced films made in the French Language. This study looks into the politics of representation of women in his early films, made in Poland, in the heyday of the Communist regime, and compares them with the stronger, independent, visceral women who were cast in his later films. By locating the different perspectives and keeping in mind the cultural and historical context altogether, this study reaches a point of intrigue and concludes that the women featured in Kieslowski's late films can be rendered as an emblem of European Unification.

Keywords: Arthouse cinema, European unification, Film Festivals, historiography, international co-production, Krzysztof Kieslowski

Introduction

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is perhaps the most significant phenomenon in Europe after the commemoration of World War II. Along with that, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the breakdown of Yugoslavia, the unification of Germany, and the proliferation of the European Union caused radical upheavals in the continent as a whole. As a result of that, Europe was in search of an identity: a cultural, psychic, and geopolitical idea of identity. Cinema wasn't seeking a subterfuge but rather paving the way for this collective demand. Going with this logic, the binary of West and East Europe was seeking a form of unification. Derrida's 1991 essay "The Other Heading" posited questions on this symptomatic urge of the centralized identity of Europe and laid bare an important philosophical discourse. Derrida rendered this central European identity as problematic due to its bearings on the devils of nationalistic dispersion on one hand and the other consisting of the Eurocratic Homogenization (1992, 44). Some forms of cinema help this cause in their own ways; particularly the co-produced films of the early 1990s.

This particular article aims to look at the politics behind certain aesthetic choices regarding the characterization of the women in films of the early 1990s who are being portrayed as strong individuals. Furthermore, I would like to investigate the impact of the sighting of these women on the larger

political picture of Europe, and how the altered cultural imaginary revised a certain kind of cinema through its narrative, aesthetic, and stylistic choices concerning the individuals in those films. How might one read these women's functions and placements in cinema for which she is clearly a trope? Or how the women in these films helped reconfigure a political project of the time? How did they transform themselves from the "visualizing subject" of the modernist art cinema of the 1960s to a transnational European political subject?

European Art-House Cinema has gone through some noticeable changes over various periods. One of them was the modernist project of 'Art Cinema' to the post-modernist turn after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Scholars have traced the strategies of creating a certain kind of 'modern art cinema,' and given its formula (Bordwell 1979), some simply argued the phenomenon of "art cinema" as some "institution" (Neale 1981) at work. Others have viewed this shifting paradigm as a "global art" (Halle 2010, 303) cinema being produced.

According to Mark Betz (2001), films made in Europe have frequently been coproduced by two or more countries at least since World War II, and the idea of "pure" national film cultures is a myth. Going along those lines, I think national identity was also a false claim, and my argument is that these new 1990s films will consolidate a transnational, "European" identity of unification by the proliferation of the site of women protagonists. Again, Andre Kovacs already argued about the socio-economic status of the post-war 'art cinema' individuals in his seminal work (2007); here, my paper looks at the continuation of some strategies for creating protagonists (particularly women), but in a slightly different manner, being used to label "art" in a certain kind of films coming up in the early 1990s.

Why Kieslowski?

In the following arguments, this paper takes the body of work of the Polish 'auteur', Krzysztof Kieslowski, and tries to shed light on the problem. Now it may be of immense importance to justify why, all of a sudden, I take Krzysztof Kieslowski's point as a case study. The scholarly work regarding Kieslowski has lost its interest in the present world. There has been a detectable shift in women characters' power, delineation, and roles from his early films to the later period. The late 80s and early 90s marked the most successful point in his career. Now, if we consider his filmography, we see two different characteristics in his films. His early films were made in Poland, in the heyday of the communist regime, and the form was marked by social realism. His later filmography consisted of more personal works, and he posed questions related to metaphysical issues and so on. The reception of his films in Poland and abroad by various scholars and critics justified this. So in the case of Krzysztof Kieslowski, there was always a certain sense of duality in the themes, contents, stories, filmmaking styles, production values, and personnel working on the films. A strong shift from "early realist" to "mature metaphysical" Kieslowski is always right in front of our eyes. But this article is not about the 'double' life of Kieslowski. This paper wishes to question the choice of women protagonists in his late

French-language films and accordingly shed light on the issue. Furthermore, this article speculates on the peculiar enhancement of the Polish master's 'auteur' status as a point of inflection in his career. How the aesthetics of the transnational co-productions and the artful tales form a multicultural logic that consciously sought to undermine national specificity and seek a form of universality deriving from their apparent status as *Europeans* exemplified in films of Kieslowski.

What's the problem?

The images of women in European art cinema of the post-war period, on the one hand, seemed unburdened by the restrictive roles of daughter, sister, mother, or wife and reflected a liberated nature through the roles of prostitute, kept woman, or femme fatale. On the other hand, the case is not quite buoyant, as the narratives are not brimming with life and action but dragged out in dull dead time, and characters are not in touch with the world that surrounds them but alienated from it. In this respect, modern European cinema, as Robert Phillip Kolker (1983, 136) has put it, "shares with the neo-realist tradition an observation of physical barrenness and a concern about disenfranchised people in a forbidding landscape. Unlike neo-realism, the poverty portrayed is not economic or even social, but emotional, spiritual." Film historian Mark Betz (2009, 95) pointed out that the female characters of modern European cinema collectively present the image of a flâneuse engaged in a quest for meaning as she wanders the terrain of a changing Europe.

What I'm trying to suggest is that in Krzysztof Kieślowski's co-produced French-language films, the strong, independent, as well as opinionated female characters also present a novel image of women in the heyday of the early 1990s in Europe, which was markedly different not because of the changed times, but because of the changed political scenarios. These female characters also prompt us to look beyond contextual analysis to the international co-production strategies. By looking at the image of the women in Kieslowski's films, I intend to draw attention to the changing discourse of the European "Art House Cinema" as well as the "auteur" status from the 1960s new Italian cinema or the French new wave to the 1990s European arthouse cinema, by which Krzysztof Kieslowski was celebrated.

Thinking through these issues, I would look at the shifting dynamics of representations, characterizations, and centrality in the depiction of women protagonists in Kieslowski's films. From being a mere partner of the main male protagonists to becoming the main protagonist in later French films, Kieslowski's female subjects were changed with time and, moreover, with conditions. From representing mere Polish drab everyday reality with actresses having Polish identities to depicting French women with a more globalized casting in the 1990s, as we see Irene Jacob, Juliette Binoche, and Julie Delpy in *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), *Red* (1994), *Blue* (1993), and *White* (1994), respectively. A shifting dynamic from 'non-famous' to 'more famous' has happened in terms of his female casting over the change of

productions, themes, subjects, and national borders.

What does this shift have to do with international co-productions in the case of Krzysztof Kieślowski? Does it help him to depict the more 'intimate' and 'personal' with these known actresses? Or does it have to do with the production and distribution strategies in the early heyday of the 1990s? Or has the art cinema phenomenon gone well with these actresses despite any Polish women or even Polish actresses? Were these certain actresses merely the need of the time, or did they help make the art film phenomenon a critical construct? What impact do these women protagonists make in terms of the altered larger political picture of Europe? Do they conform us to look at the European identity, or were they characterized at a problematic juncture? Krzysztof Kieslowski's case is a peculiar one to begin with.

Women Under the Influence

Firstly, in Kieslowski's early feature films, he always dealt with well-intentioned, well-mannered male characters who wanted to live a normal, happy 'peaceful' life, but in a political system, they found themselves always struggling to get past these conditions. They want 'calm' and dignity in their marginal life; from Romek of *Personnel* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1975) to Filip Mosz of *Camera-Buff* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1979). Women don't have significant agency in these narratives; these male characters have always foreshadowed them. Certainly, the question arises that women are also part of that same doomed socialist-communist society, then what about their struggle? Did Kieslowski forget that, or did he merely think of women as partners of the male 'strugglers'? The struggle of those women didn't concern the director initially, but by the early 90s, Kieslowski somehow figured that the metaphysical questions that he wanted to raise must be centered around the strong, traumatized, even shattered women and, along with that, a young, beautiful, and dynamic demeanor.

In the early films of Krzysztof Kieslowski, the female protagonists are often portrayed as narrow-minded in the narrative. They fail to be a part of the male protagonist's struggle as they did not understand the aspirations of their partner. They tend to be on the margins of Polish society and could not generate the spectator's sympathy accordingly. The early women characters are recognizable, yet they seem to be distant in Kieslowski's early stories, whereas the later individualistic characters replaced these earlier versions of female protagonists with foreign, fascinating, and enchanting women who moved to the center of the narrative (Haltof 2004, 111). Now, with the examples we shall see, we shall navigate how this framework is practiced in Kieslowski's filmography. Let us look at the short film *Pedestrian Subway* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1973). It is a story revolving around a couple who tried to revive their love and marriage, which eventually failed. Lena, played by Teresa Budisz-Krzyzanowska, is a working woman (store decorator) and the wife of Michal, played by Andrej Seweryn. Here, Michal comes to Warsaw to meet his woman and win her back to mend his marriage. They spent a night together; they talked and failed miserably to make love. Then Michal decides to leave the town and his wife alone. The

minimalist action and setting set the melancholic mood of the film. Here, one can see the perspective from Michal's point of view, his melancholia, as he wants to move back to the small town he belonged to. But what about Lena? Does the choice not belong to her also? She also works, and she has a choice. What if she knows that they can't live happily, so she chooses not to go back with her husband?

Now, if we look at the early works of Kieslowski, we see the story of Romek in *Personnel* and the story of a middle-aged manager who wanted to build a chemical plant in his hometown, Stefan Bednarz in *The Scar* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1976). In these first two feature films, there is an abandonment of significant female characters; both films tell stories from a proper male perspective in a private manner, as both protagonists face their dilemmas in their working lives. Again, another couple came in his next film, *The Calm* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1976), which depicts the story of longing for ' peace' and 'calm' of a man named Antoni, played by Kieslowski's long-time collaborator Jerzy Stuhr. The name Antoni Gralak will again come up in his film *Curriculum Vitae* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1975). This film is also solely based on Antoni's journey, who became a worker after returning from prison and wants to lead an undisturbed life. At first, when he understood he couldn't go back to his small town as his family and fiancé rejected him, we sympathized with him. He married a young woman, played by Danuta Ruksza, whose only function was to be sympathetic to Antoni when he was in prison. Not going into much detail about the film, we can easily see the narrative is structured around Antoni and his longing for 'privacy' and simplicity while struggling with the corrupt social system. Haltof noticed here that Kieslowski focused on the drab reality, an underprivileged subject, the people who lived on the margins of Polish society, the social underdogs, and dealt with the small-town life and their humble aspirations (Haltof 2004, 39).

The next film, *Camera Buff* (1979), is perhaps the most famous of that period. The negation of the female perspective and the narrow mindset of the women subject reached the pinnacle in this narrative. It's the story of an ordinary small-town working man whose wife is pregnant, and to film the growth of their child, Filip, played by Jerzy Stuhr, he bought an 8mm camera. Eventually, he became obsessed with filmmaking and neglected his wife and family. The film dealt with the issues of self-discovery through the arts and examined the impact of film on one's life. As Filip became more and more entangled with making films, his company gave him ventures to make films, and he became more estranged from his wife. Finally, while pregnant with their second child, his wife, Irena, played by Małgorzata Ząbko, left Filip. Haltof remarked that it is tempting to see the film as being about Kieslowski himself, as his "disenchantments with the realistic portrayal of unrepresented reality", and his bitter experiences with documentaries. Furthermore, in the film, we see Filip document his methodology of finding 'what is there', which is very " Kieslowskian in spirit" (2004, 48). His wife didn't understand his aspirations or never intended to. When she felt her expectations never matched Filip's discovery of interest in

filmmaking, she decided to leave. The audience felt sympathy for Filip, as in the most cited last scene where Filip turned his new camera towards him, a symbolization of personal inquiry. But what about Irena's choice? Her wish is to bring her two children up properly in a tightly pressed society with her husband. Irena is portrayed narrowly as a character who feels insecure about her husband's interests and fears that her husband might feel inattentive towards her and their children. Irena shouted, "Don't win" when Filip went to attend a film festival in Warsaw. Her disapproval is masked thoroughly, and the whole film circles around Filip's struggle and does not give any importance to Irena. Same sort of women's portrayal we saw in *The Calm* (1976).

Kieslowski staged his stories with well-intentioned male characters who search for their dignity and struggle with a political system that favors dishonesty and conformism (Haltof 2004, 49). We see the story of a young tailor, Romek, in *Personnel*; a story of an aspiring amateur filmmaker in *Camera Buff* (1979), and a story of a chemical technologist in *The Scar* (1976)- these male protagonists are always fighting against the backdrop of a meticulously portrayed Polish political reality. They made important choices in their personal lives and the political sphere. Those choices made them suffer, most importantly personally, as their 'women' didn't stand behind them and didn't understand them properly. Kieslowski's early male protagonists always suffered while the women didn't stand behind them, although the suffering of women can't be properly portrayed. His films also bordered on personal lives, as we see into the personal lives of these males, their 'home' closely, and we see their perspectives: the pessimistic stories told from their point of view. Now, in the later films, which are more 'intimate' and 'personal' in nature, we see a certain shift in women-centered narrative and their perspectives. It must be noted here that Kieslowski's *No End* (1985) is a women-centered narrative played by a Polish woman, Grażyna Szapołowska. One of the bleakest films made in that period, it contains elements of psychological drama, ghosts, courtroom drama, and metaphysical elements. Set against the backdrop of the harshness of political trials, the film is much more interesting on a personal level, as it tells the story of Urszula's loss and the psychological problem she is facing to cope with it. Urszula tried to liberate herself from the memory of her husband when she visited a hypnotist. But she failed after several attempts and then left her son with his grandmother and prepared for suicide. Even in the last suicide scene, she dressed in black, taped her mouth, cut the telephone line, and turned on the gas oven. She waited for her death, and at that time Kieślowski shot her from behind, from the point of view of her husband. At the last moment, she is also shadowed by the vision of her successful lawyer husband. Haltof reads the will of Urszula's suicide to meet her husband, also symbolizing the marginality of women protagonists in Kieślowski's early films (2004, 69).

Women Who Have Influence

If we take the last discussed film as our reference point, now moving toward the later French films, we see a story about doubleness, a story about Veronique and

Weronika, both played by Irene Jacob in *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991). It's a story about two young women living in two different countries, Poland & France, whose lives have several mysterious parallels. Without going into the plot of the film, this study wishes to seek the importance of this women-centric 'art film' on the subject of 'doubleness', as Žižek gave an example that at that time another film was also made, named *Hilary and Jackie* (Anand Tucker 1998), on the subject of 'doubleness';i.e., 'ethical choice between mission and life' (2001, 139). Irene Jacob won the Best Actress award at Cannes in 1991. The stylish filmmaking, accorded with the performance of beautiful Irene Jacob at that moment of international co-productions, helped Kieslowski to garner a name for himself on the art film circuit. In *Blue* (1993), again we see Juliette Binoche, Julie, who lost her husband, and the thematic similarity between No End, as she tries to rebuild her new life. However, her self-imposed detachment from the world doesn't serve her purpose of achieving 'calm'. Kieslowski almost framed Julie, like Weronika and Veronique, at the center of the frames consisting of them. Kieslowski portrayed Julie in the light of the schema of art films; i.e., sensitive, isolated, and psychologically troubled. Again, here Julie is a French woman, played by a French actress, Juliette Binoche, who made quite a name for herself in the European art film circuit with good performances in Louis Malle's *Damage* (1992), Philip Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), Leos Carax's *Mauvais Sang* (1986), and *The Lovers on the Bridge* (1991). Binoche won the Best Actress award at the Venice Film Festival for this performance and the César Awards in France. These awards at different film festivals subsequently gave rise to the inquisition of the politics behind these film festivals in the proliferation of casting, and the amalgamation of the 'auteur' status of Kieslowski. His next two films, which complete the Color Trilogy, are *White* (1994) and *Red* (1994), in which we notice a vengeance story and a story about a young fashion model and her chance encounter with a retired judge, who illegally surveils his neighbors, respectively. In *White* (1994), the 'Polish' part of the trilogy, we see Karol, a Polish hairdresser, going through a divorce with his French wife, Dominique, played by Julie Delpy. In this particular film, we see Karol's obsession with his wife; he comes to France and then gets to know about his wife's affair, the process of divorce, and Karol's humiliation at the hands of his wife; as a result of that he stages his death. Here in this particular part of the trilogy, the story takes a turn and becomes a saga of a man who is victimized by his beloved wife. Sexual dominance changes its course from the earlier films, where the man gets the power to dump his woman. Although Alicja Helman has something different to say regarding this, as she thinks 'for Kieslowski sexual dominance is a decisive factor in a male-female relationship, and the men who lack the power to subjugate his woman always become women's victims', as in the case of Tomek in *A Short Film About Love* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1988) and Roman in *Decalogue IX* and here also (1999, quoted in Haltof 2004, 140). In the case of Red, the most widely celebrated part of the trilogy, we see the return of Irene Jacob again as Valentine after

The Double Life of Veronique (1991), where she plays the role of a model who gets entangled with a retired judge. The film offers various traits of art film, one of them being puzzlingly connected subplots, as Valentine's life gets juxtaposed with that of Auguste (Valentine's neighbor), her telephonic conversations with her London-based lover, and her troubled teenage brother, Marc (Haltof 2004, 142). Kieslowski binds the three films with particular shots, and characters keep returning, a self-reflexive narrative strategy. Jacob was nominated for the César Award that year, and the film received many nominations, including at the Academy Awards, where Kieslowski was nominated for Best Director. By then, Irene Jacob, like Binoche, got a name for herself too, after Malle's *Goodbye, Children* (1987) and Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991).

Now, how come these women protagonists come all of a sudden, or is there a certain schema? All of these women are young, beautiful, and dynamic. Andras Kovacs, in his work *Screening Modernism,* categorizes certain criteria for one to become an 'individual' in modern art films. First of all, they must belong to the urban middle class or be upper-middle-class intellectuals, as they generally don't suffer any problems regarding materials or money. Secondly, many of them are artists as they always get entangled with their inner problems rather than what happens in the outside material world. In the case of Eastern Europe, he categorizes the protagonists as urban intellectuals, although due to their emphasis on different historical topics the range of social background sometimes ranges quite widely (2007, 67-70). For example, we see soldiers as the protagonists in Jancso's *The Red and the White* (1967), peasants in Kosa's *Ten Thousand Sun* (1965), Wajda's *The Wedding* (1973) has aristocrats in leading roles, and in Tarr's *The Family Nest* (1977), workers are in the lead, which is a rare thing in art cinema. In Mark Betz's language, "wandering women" became the site for the birth of modern European cinema and the simultaneous expiry of European colonialism. The argument continues to specify the women of the late 1950s to mid-1960s as the figuration of "recolonization" (2009, 93-177).

Now, following these schemas, we see that, in the later films, Kieslowski somehow followed these traits while forming the women characters. We see that both Veronique and Weronika are aspiring artists, and they belong to the urban middle-class group; even Julie in *Blue* (1993) also came from an urban upper-class background and has an interest in the arts (helping her husband, who is a music composer). Valentine is also a budding fashion model, and Dominique of *White* (1994) also came from an urban middle-class background, which proliferates the 'individuals' of Kieslowski's art cinema. Borrowing from the notion of the 'individual' construction of modern art films, we tend to see lonely women as protagonists of these art films who generally wander around the big city. For example, the women in Antonioni's films wander around the big metropolis, and they generally feel alienated from society and suffer personal traumas, like Jeanne Moreau in *La Notte* (1961) or Monica Vitti in *L'eclisse* (1962). Although Moreau became the epitome of wandering in the big cities, she

does this in the beautifully crafted Malle's *Elevator to the Gallows* (1958), where she tries to find her lover. Now, in Kieslowski's final films, we see lonely women, not in the exact sense Antonioni used Moreau or Vitti, but be it Irene Jacob or Juliette Binoche, we sense a melancholic tone, and they are traumatized by personal losses as they start their journey for the answers to the metaphysical questions Kieslowski presented.

Rivi Luisa, in her study, presented a peculiar trajectory of international co-productions concerning their ideological strand. She argues that the cinematographic co-production strategies epitomized the amalgamation of the "heterogeneous political configuration" of Europe and the issues of overlapping spheres of belonging (2007,3). Although only problematizing the co-productions won't solve our issue, European co-productions date back to the late 1940s; then it reached their commercial height in the 1960s and declined by the 1970s. The new wave of co-productions in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall served different purposes. One of them was the image of a centralized Europe, an image of unification. European cinema always coexisted in the duality of the "other" cinemas coming from America, Asia, and the other Third World. Catherine Fowler initiated a debate about the status of "European cinema", as she argued that " outside of the critical field there is no 'European Cinema'" (2002, 1). Luisa (2007, 40) took a step forward and argued that the co-produced film of the 1990s may have provided an image of one Europe and, in turn, solidified the possible existence of "European Cinema". My argument is that this cinema of unification, the co-produced European cinema, particularly in Krzysztof Kieslowski's late French-language films, uses women characters, their image, and their narrative position as a site of that unification, which in turn justified the larger political project of the European Unification.

Now here my argument reaches a point where one can say that the figure of women in the early 1990s is a site of European Unification, which is proliferated not only by International Co-productions but with the expanding web of Film Festivals as well. Thomas Elsaesser put this notion perfectly; for him, " style and subject matter" secured films to travel borders and secure the "national" aspect of films, but the third entity that helped cinema become "post-national" and transcend national borders is International Film Festivals (2005, 84). Also, for him, film festivals were an integral part of European Cinema; these famous festivals like Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Karlovy Vary, Locarno, and Rotterdam gave birth to categories like author, national cinema, and opposition with Hollywood. Likewise, here we argue that throughout the years the different festivals became an integral part of not only cinema but cinephilia; hence, they became an important, indisputable part of giving birth to 'auteurs'; international co-productions see this as their chance to strategize and a very secure way of marketing their product. Kieslowski's French films serve the ideological purpose of unification of Europe, bridging the gap between the East and West of Europe. Hence, committing to this political project, this study takes refuge in stating that women individuals have situated themselves as the site of European Unification in the heyday of

International Co-productions as a strategy to give the phenomenon a globalized as well as a transnational perspective altogether.

However, this study does not conclude the fact that Kieslowski's desire to secure auteur status made him leave his native land. But looking from another perspective, the emergence of international co-productions in the early 1990s, Krzysztof Kieslowski served their purpose by symbolizing the political and economic order of that period. By doing so, he garnered himself the status of a European auteur. Kieslowski's personal and intimate endeavors not only remained a tender love letter to art cinema but also conjured the essence of European unification during a muddled period.

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Subhasish Bhowmick is a research scholar in the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.