

Research Article

The Cinematic Representation of Gaze in Kieślowski's *A Short Film About Love*: A Lacanian Analysis

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History	Krzysztof Kieślowski's 1988 Polish production, <i>A Short Film About Love</i> , has inspired diverse interpretations related to the themes of human isolation, relationships, and social contexts. This paper examines the film through a Lacanian lens, focusing particularly on the concept of the gaze as it unravels the complex interactions between the male protagonist, Tomek, and his female counterpart, Magda. Furthermore, the study decodes the <i>mise-en-scène</i> and other visual elements to explore philosophical issues of desire, drawing on the works of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. By analyzing Kieślowski's cinematography, this paper aims to uncover the connections between the act of gazing and its integration into Lacanian psychoanalytic registers: the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real.
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1. Introduction

The Polish cinematic work *A Short Film About Love* (1988), directed by Krzysztof Kieślowski, explores complex themes concerning the human psyche, particularly in terms of love and desire. It's essential to state that this film is an extended adaptation of *Dekalog: Six*, a segment from Kieślowski's 1988 Polish-language ten-part television series, *Dekalog* (Baugh, 2003). Despite being submitted as Poland's entry for the *Best Foreign Language Film* category at the 61st Academy Awards, it did not secure a nomination. As the film's events unfold, we are introduced to Tomek, a young post office worker portrayed by Olaf Lubaszenko, who harbors a deep affection for Magda, an older woman played by Grażyna Szapołowska. Magda lives in an adjacent apartment building in Warsaw. The film explores the complexities of their relationship and the dynamics of desire. Having been raised within an orphanage environment, Tomek currently resides in lodgings procured from the mother of his closest confidant, portrayed by Stefania

Iwińska. Engaging in gainful employment at a postal facility, the male character dedicates his leisure hours to the pursuit of mastering foreign languages. However, amidst his established routine, one significant occurrence dominates his attention – the punctual return of his female neighbor precisely at 8:30 PM. Prior disclosures from Tomek's friend, who previously inhabited the same lodgings, have enlightened Tomek regarding the alluring and audacious nature of the female character, who tends to exhibit herself in a revealing manner near her prominently open windows. The large, open windows serve as a *mise-en-scène* device that evokes the concept of the gaze—inviting not only Tomek's male gaze but also a third gaze, that of the audience. Through this framing, the film creates a layered viewing experience where the windows act as both a literal and symbolic boundary between watcher and watched, intensifying the themes of desire, voyeurism, and the complexities of observation. The complications of this motion picture, encourage the audience to investigate its scenes and uncover deeper philosophical layers.

Critics propose various interpretations of the film, for instance, Baugh (2003) states that Kieślowski crafts the narrative structure of the film into two distinct parts; the first part primarily centers on Tomek, the young and innocent character, as the director depicts his fervent pursuit of the older woman and subtly hints at his understanding of her need for redemption. Additionally, he explores the depth of the male character's commitment to his beloved in the face of her repeated rejection, eventually portraying his ultimate sacrifice on her behalf. In the second part, which is notably shorter than the first, Kieślowski shifts the focus to the woman, highlighting her transformation towards love, her efforts to locate and reconnect with Tomek, and her expressions of affection (p. 563). Besides Baugh, Synessios (1995) focuses on the characters and claims that through this work, the director has been on a quest to discover a unique language for depicting human lives, aiming to capture the intricacies of individuals and the subtleties of their interactions. His focus extends to examining the intersections where lives touch, influence, or diverge, as well as those moments when individuals' paths merely brush past one another without a deeper connection. Through this approach, he seeks to reveal the complexity of human relationships, showing how lives may intertwine or remain parallel, each affecting the other in ways both visible and unseen (p. 395).

Coates (1992) Sheds light on the concept of isolation within the film stating that during the encounter that Tomek's landlady observes, irony strikes as he shifts from being the watcher to becoming the one watched. Tomek is truly isolated; he has no family, with his parents gone, his only friend stationed with the UN in Damascus, and the woman he loves remains distant and unaware of his emotions (p. 337). Then

Coates states:

The problem is that he cannot control the film – that part of him is not content with distance. He is a version of the mythical peasant who tries to climb into the screen. He is as it were a front-row viewer who wants a closer. (1992, p. 337)

Unlike these interpretations, this study focuses on concepts of gaze, desire, and the distinctions between the Symbolic and Real order. Through this approach, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the film's narrative and visual elements as interpreted through Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.

The concept of gaze seems to be explored from the beginning of the film as the scenes show Tomek employing binoculars to observe Magda. Yet, he soon realizes the necessity for a more refined tool, leading him to use an appropriate telescope (Figure 1). His initially erotic fascination swiftly evolves into genuine affection. The male character reaches a point where merely observing Magda's actions as a voyeur becomes morally untenable, prompting him to initiate endeavors aimed at establishing a more intimate connection with her. As spectators, we are confronted with the question of how Magda, a mature woman whose numerous past romantic entanglements have presumably been disenchanted, will respond to the innocent affection professed by the nineteen-year-old Tomek.

Strikingly, in contemporary terms, the film's central character would be classified as exhibiting stalker-like behavior. Tomek persistently monitors Magda, engages in harassing actions such as making silent calls, intercepts her correspondence, and at one point, manipulates a gas servicing emergency to intrude into her apartment and disrupt her intimate encounters with another individual. These desperate actions stem from Tomek's burgeoning emotions towards his female neighbor. Through his continuous observation of Magda from a discreet vantage point, Tomek idealizes her and superimposes his romantic fantasies onto her persona, thus constructing a fabricated image of her.

The film distinguishes itself from traditional voyeuristic narratives where the protagonist perceives the external world solely through visual observations, relishing in their role as a detached spectator. In contrast, Tomek's motivations stem from genuine feelings of love and sensitivity, rather than a sadistic desire for control. The culmination of his idealized perception of love inevitably leads to a poignant disillusionment in the final encounter. This confrontation serves as a cathartic moment not only for the sensitive and naive Tomek but also for Magda, who, despite her cynicism and disorientation, finds a sense of liberation. Ultimately, the dynamic between observer and observed undergoes a significant inversion, signifying a transformative shift in their respective roles.



Figure 1. Tomek's use of a telescope to observe Magda

2. Lacan's Gaze

Jacques Lacan's concept of the gaze has become more complicated as his theories evolved. Initially, he emphasized the act of gazing at the mirror stage, where the subject seems to gain a sense of mastery by perceiving themselves as an ideal ego. Through the mirror, the subject starts to form their own identity, entering culture and language by aligning with the idealized image they see, which represents a stable, coherent self that contrasts with the disorderly drives of the physical body. After the subject enters the Symbolic order, this idealized, narcissistic image is preserved in the Imaginary order. As discussed in Lacan's model of the psyche, this fantasy image can be projected onto others—role models, love interests, or anyone one admires—who serve as mirrors for the individual in what is ultimately a narcissistic dynamic.

Colucci (2021) states that Lacan's concept of the visual field reflects the split between reality and the Real. On one side, the visual field offers the coherence of reality (as imaginary); on the other, the gaze operates as a disruptive element. This shows Lacan's presentation of the mirror stage: unlike the voice, which can be anchored to reality through tone or volume, the gaze is elusive and uncontrollable. Myths like Medusa and Narcissus illustrate their power, representing destruction and self-destructive love. Ma (2015) elaborates on the concept by stating that Lacan acknowledges Sartre's significant contribution to *Being and Nothingness* (1943), specifically his distinction between the eye and the gaze. Sartre's achievement lies in his examination of the gaze at an ontological level, rather than through everyday experiences, allowing him to explore the gaze's role in the relationship between the self and the Other. Sartre suggests that the interaction between the subject and the Other primarily takes shape within the visual or "scopic" realm. He

defines the Other fundamentally as "the one who looks at me," framing this relationship as "my permanent possibility of being seen by the Other." Sartre explains that perceiving the Other as a human implicitly carries the constant potential of being observed by them, transforming the Other from a mere object of sight into a subject who sees me. This "being-seen-by-the-Other" thus explores the essence of "seeing the Other." Sartre emphasizes this principle by differentiating the gaze from the physical eye, noting that the presence of a gaze is often suggested by the focus of another's eyes directed toward us (p. 125).

Then Ma goes further saying that Lacan explains that in our visual relationship with things, structured by representation, there is always something obscure that subtly slips or passes through, stage by stage which he identifies as the gaze. Simply put, the act of watching is filtered through the eye. Why, then, is the gaze consistently hidden, excluded, or overlooked in our visual experiences? Because vision is content to imagine itself as self-aware, while the looking belongs to the realm of the unconscious and hence remains beyond conscious perception (p. 128). In a further contribution to the theory, it's essential to highlight Lee's views as he suggests that Lacan develops the idea of the split by reinterpreting key Freudian concepts like the unconscious and the compulsion to repeat. He suggests that the unconscious can be perceived through repetitive actions, revealing how desire adapts to the drives. The split within the subject, triggered by encounters, allows us to understand the Real, and through this split, the Real becomes somewhat aligned with the drive. The gaze represents the lack that causes castration anxiety, playing a role in shaping human subjectivity within the "scopic field," which is linked to the scopic drive. This scopic drive functions similarly to other drives, such as the oral, anal, and invocatory drive (2003). Moreover, Lee states that Lacan's concept of the intermediate space between the eye and the gaze can be understood as the space of the screen. Screens, such as those of televisions, films, and computers, are key areas of media studies, serving as spaces where projected and perceived images intersect. Additionally, this role extends to various other visual media. Therefore, Lacan's scopic field, as a space of imagery, provides a crucial framework for exploring how our subjectivity is shaped by the images we encounter on screens.

3. Exploring Lacanian Gaze in *A Short Film About Love*

As one watches Kiesłowski's *A Short Film About Love*, several questions might arise: How is Magda objectified by Tomek's gaze? To what extent does the gaze represent the self that is perceived by the Other? And whether the male/female gaze fills the gap between the characters. Through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the film becomes a powerful exploration of Lacan's provocative work, *There's No Such Thing*

as a *Sexual Relationship* (1973), in which he draws on Freudian psychoanalysis and posits that human subjectivity is fundamentally divided. The subject enters the Symbolic order – the realm of language and social structures, before they experience the Real – the pre-linguistic state of pure desire (Žižek, 1989, p. 2). Language, however, is inherently flawed, creating a gap between the subject's experience and their ability to represent it symbolically. This gap is the site of lack that propels human desire. In other words, we desire the Other not for who they truly are, but for the promise of wholeness they represent – a return to the lost unity of the Real. This concept is crucial for understanding the characters' motivations in the film. This creates a fundamental rupture, a constant yearning for a wholeness forever lost, in other words, Tomek and Magda embody the Lacanian condition.

That is to say, their desire for each other is fueled by a gaze that operates through windows and stolen glances. This gaze signifies a desire for the Other, but also the impossibility of ever truly knowing or possessing them. They observe each other, piecing together fragments of the other's life through stolen moments. Magda becomes an object of Tomek's voyeuristic obsession, emphasizing the distance that language creates. He desires not just her, but the fantasy of completion she represents which seems to be related to the Imaginary order in Lacan's theory. This also aligns with the concept of the object caused by desire – a Symbolic object that stands in for a lack (Lacan, 1977, p. 105). Tomek fixates on Magda as a way to fill this void, but the object itself is ultimately unattainable. In other words, the male character is trapped between the Imaginary and Symbolic orders through the act of watching, as he seeks the fantasy within Magda to fulfill his desire.

Eventually, through communication, the cornerstone of the Symbolic order further underscores the impossibility of achieving complete phone calls (Figure 2), which become the primary means of interaction, disembodied voices yearning for a physical connection that remains frustratingly out of reach. These conversations are riddled with misunderstandings and missed opportunities, highlighting the limitations of language in conveying the complexities of desire (Berg, 1998, p. 12). Letters are another Symbolic tool, which is filled with coded messages and veiled confessions, never quite bridging the emotional gap between them. The Symbolic order, with its reliance on language and social codes, ultimately fails to facilitate true intimacy. In other words, Tomek's gaze fails to bridge the emotional or physical gap between him and Magda, leaving him distant despite his efforts to connect. Recognizing that visual contact alone cannot fill this abyss, he turns to alternative forms of communication, such as phone calls and letters. However, even these

methods, though they provide some level of interaction, fall short of fully meeting his deeper desires. The possibility of completely fulfilling his longing through these means remains obscure, highlighting the inherent difficulty in achieving the closeness he seeks.



Figure 2. Magda receives incomplete phone calls from Tomek

The film constantly hints at the Real, that pre-linguistic space of pure desire, but never fully accesses it. It's essential to state that these passionate encounters imagined by both characters exist solely in their fantasies, representing a longing for a lost unity that the Symbolic order can never fully attain. Tomek's voyeuristic observations and Magda's frustrated attempts at physical intimacy highlight this yearning for the Real. However, the Real itself is forever out of reach, a specter haunting their attempts at connection (Žižek, 1989, p. 141). The film's climax serves as a powerful illustration of the Lacanian perspective; after a series of missed encounters, Tomek and Magda finally stand face-to-face. The scene seems surrealist as one may question: Will they finally achieve some form of connection, or are they destined to remain forever chasing a fantasy of complete union?

Lacan's statement: "there's no such thing as a sexual relationship," is not a declaration of despair; it rather acknowledges the inherent impossibility of achieving a perfect union with the Other, but also suggests the possibility for a different kind of intimacy. By accepting the limitations of language and the fundamental lack that characterizes human desire, Tomek and Magda might discover a more authentic form of connection. This connection would embrace the gaps, miscommunications, and the inherent "impossibility" that defines human relationships (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 152). In a pivotal scene of the film, Magda

confronts Tomek with a blunt question: “What do you want from loving me?” Her inquiry lays bare the complexities of desire explored by the Slovenian Marxist philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, in his elaboration of Lacan’s *There’s No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship* (1997, p. 210). That is to say, true affection, according to Lacan and Žižek, transcends the pursuit of perfect romantic or sexual fulfillment. It acknowledges the inherent lack that plagues human subjectivity and allows desire to circulate freely. Magda’s question forces Tomek to confront the nature of his longing. Does he truly desire Magda as a companion, someone to share life’s journey with (traveling together), or is she merely an object of his voyeuristic fantasy, a stand-in for the “objet petit a,” the elusive object that promises to fill the void but ultimately remains unattainable (Lacan, 1977, p. 105). His initial refusal of physical connection suggests an unconscious resistance to reducing their relationship to a mere physical act. This aligns with Žižek’s notion of love existing outside the realm of satisfying all desires.

However, the film takes a further turn when Tomek eventually accepts Magda’s sexual advances. The scene unfolds with a disconcerting rapidity, this climax arriving almost instantaneously. Through this portrayal, Kieślowski reflects on the limitations of the sexual act itself to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality. It is also essential to emphasize the French philosopher Alain Badiou’s interpretation of Lacan’s idea that “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship.” Badiou argues that while intimate encounters may be pleasurable, they never lead to a complete merging of individuals (2008). Tomek’s rapid climax embodies Badiouian perspective; that is to say, the physical act, instead of fostering intimacy, underscores the distance between his fantasized image of Magda and the reality of their encounter. The pleasure derived is fleeting, leaving the fundamental lack unaddressed.

In his analysis of Wagner, Žižek explores the tension between desire and the performance of masculinity (1996). He argues that Wagner’s heroes often embody a paradoxical yearning for a lost wholeness, a feminine principle that their hyper-masculine actions can never fully attain. This concept resonates with Tomek – his voyeuristic observations of Magda and his initial refusal of intimacy suggest a similar struggle. Is his desire for Magda fueled by a genuine connection, or is it a performance of masculinity that seeks to possess and control the Other, ultimately leaving him unsatisfied?

The film’s ending conveys a sense of ambiguity that engages with the Lacanian notion of the “impossibility” of love. There is no perfect union to fill the inherent lack. However, by acknowledging this

lack and the limitations of language and the Symbolic order, a different kind of connection becomes possible. Perhaps Tomek and Magda, having confronted their desires and communication gaps, can forge a more authentic intimacy—one that embraces the “impossibility” and allows desire to circulate in its true form.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to investigate the layers of meaning embedded within Krzysztof Kieślowski's cinematic work, *A Short Film About Love* (1988). Our aim was to examine the complex relationship between the male character, Tomek, and the obscure figure of Magda. Following the profound insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically focusing on the themes of gaze and desire, we began to read Tomek's infatuation. Through our analysis, we discovered a compelling narrative of desire entwined with notions of impossibility and longing for the Other. Tomek's longing for Magda transcended mere romantic inclinations; it is filled with a profound sense of unattainability, echoing the existential paradox of desire. Lacan's conceptual framework, particularly as explained in *There's No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship*, provides a critical analysis of the dynamics of desire. Through the complex interplay of symbolism and subconscious impulses, it becomes clear that Tomek's longing is not solely for Magda as a person, but for the unattainable object of desire itself, represented by the Other. This dialectic of yearning, integrated with notions of absence and presence, served as a profound reflection of the human condition, resonating with Lacan's profound insights into the complexities of subjectivity and desire.

Declaration of Competing Interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing of interest.

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