

# Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski revisited: *Camera Buff* (1979)

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Films of the late Polish director and screenwriter Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941-1996) have recently become available on Netflix and other online formats, allowing a wider audience to become familiar with his work.

Kieślowski's career began in the 1970s under Polish Stalinism and continued for a few years after the collapse of that regime (he officially retired from filmmaking in 1994, two years before his death during surgery after a heart attack). There are issues and problems associated with both periods—"before" and "after"—of Kieślowski's work. However, particularly in his earlier works, one finds a sincere attempt to portray social reality. An obvious desire to treat life seriously and humanely is at work there.

This reviewer had the opportunity to watch the director's 1979 *Camera Buff*, an endearing work that still resonates today.

In *Camera Buff* ("Amator" in Polish, literally, "Amateur"), Filip (Jerzy Stuhr), a working-class resident of a small rural Polish town, saves enough money to buy an 8mm camera while expecting the birth of his first child. As a new father, he is eager to document his infant's progress. The film project quickly turns into something bigger after he is asked by a local party official to shoot his firm's 25th anniversary celebrations.

The directors of the factory, making use of the existence of a newly created film club, arrange a budget for his efforts and Filip is able to procure film, a tripod and editing equipment. He makes an effort to portray the political and social reality of a local bureaucratic elite in charge of the biggest industrial complex in town.

Although overwhelmed by the task at first, Filip soon throws himself into this new undertaking with an

amateur's passion for the medium.

Objects that had always passed by unnoticed suddenly become sources of considerable artistic interest. Bleak, grey industrial landscapes viewed through the lens of the camera take on different shapes and meaning, as do pigeons eating bread crumbs; a friend driving a van and saying hello to his mother, who waves at him from their apartment in a tall block; Stalinist dignitaries taking a bathroom break at a board meeting; and entertainers paid behind closed doors after being hired to perform at the anniversary celebrations.

The shorts Filip creates have a great meaning for both those who help create them (the one-person film club soon becomes a busy beehive) and those who are filmed. The images of the van driver's mother become a priceless possession for her son after her death.

"It is beautiful what you've done Filip, very beautiful. I was moved and I had to leave," says the factory employee who is the main subject of Filip's documentary "The Worker."

Filip's documentary zeal soon gets him into trouble, however, especially as the anniversary celebrations he records were meant precisely to obscure rather than reveal certain social realities.

Nonetheless, Filip continues to document the living conditions of the town's working class. Little is spared, including images of poorly built furniture, wobbly doorknobs and a patient's screams due to lack of anesthetic in a hospital.

Filip is threatened with censorship not only by his party bosses, but also by high-level television producers, when he starts winning his first festival awards. This may very well reflect the difficulties Kieślowski himself faced as a filmmaker. In this part of the film in particular, *Camera Buff* exposes the growth of inequality in Stalinist Poland.

Unfortunately, there are consequences for Filip's family life as well. His wife Irena (Małgorzata Żbikowska) doesn't appreciate the political and personal attention her husband receives and prefers tranquility in her marriage. She threatens to leave if Filip does not abandon his film endeavors.

It is rare to find modern movies that deal honestly with artistic creativity, including the political and social pressures felt by the artist.

Kieślowski was accused by his critics of "shamefaced mysticism," and indeed introduced spirituality and abstract morality, some of which creeps into *Camera Buff*, into many of his later films (*No End, The Double Life of Veronique, Three Colors*). Nevertheless, his first documentaries and features, in this reviewer's opinion, are genuine examples of socially critical films.

At a time of growing dissident Polish film work, including Andrzej Wajda's 1977 *Man of Marble*, Kieślowski was criticized by many, including some of his friends, for "trying to be fair" to the Stalinist regime, especially after *Camera Buff* won him an award at the 1979 Moscow International Film Festival. "His friends started calling him the balladeer of communist tears," recalled Kieślowski's friend and fellow film director Agnieszka Holland.

Another well-known Polish filmmaker, Krzysztof Zanussi, appears in *Camera Buff*, playing himself and visiting small town amateur film clubs. In fact, Zanussi made himself readily accessible to working-class people.

The WSWS commented on Kieślowski in 2002: "Kieślowski was able, as were a number of Soviet and east European filmmakers, to summon up a degree of honesty and artistic integrity, and humanity, in the face of Stalinism's corruption and tyranny. The bureaucracy's collapse, however, revealed the severe limitations of his outlook. His last films (*Veronique, the Colors*) are cold, abstract and tedious." Those "severe limitations" have also made themselves felt in the work of Wajda, now a ferocious anticommunist, Holland and the other, older Polish filmmakers.



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