

Grieving, Therapy, Cinema and Kieslowski's *Trois Couleurs: Blanc* (France / Poland, 1994)

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*'The inner life is the only thing that interests me'* (Krzysztof Kieslowski in Coates, 1999: 162)

Like the others in the trilogy, *White* starts with a noise associated with movement – the rumbling of an airport baggage conveyor. Presently the camera picks up a massive, old-fashioned trunk moving down the channel. Not until a third of the film has run, however, can we see that the shot is out of sequence – this despite the fact that (unknown to us at the start) the film's tepid hero is locked within it. Encased of his own volition in this metaphorical box, Karol Karol (Zbigniew Zamachowski) is committed to a journey, but has surrendered control of its destination.

The plot has started *in medias res*, a device which alerts us to the fact that we need the back story – the true, invisible source of present action in family and cultural history – to let us understand the present. Just as Karol in his trunk occupies a transitional space, so in its own way does the audience because we cannot yet establish the significance of what we see (Abram, 1996: 320, 322). Since Karol is himself at a transitional time in his life (so lacking in energy that he can be described as a *puer*), D. W. Winnicott's theories focussing on what it means to feel real are deployed to help show how his personal and cultural history has hindered his psychological growth and threatens to lock him in perpetual grieving for a love object that he has never truly possessed.

#### *On colour and its absence*

On the baggage conveyor, the dominant tones are green and russet. Throughout the trilogy, green is so seldom on screen that when it does occur, even in so unlikely a setting as this, the gratified eye picks it out with relief. As the colour associated with fertility and natural growth, it adds to the sense that moving through psychological transitions is a natural aspect of personal growth. It is all the more noticeable because,

when the plot commences to unfold, we see careful references to the colours in the trilogy's titles. White is frequently caught between blue and red: for example, among the vehicles in a car park, or in the clothes worn to court by Karol's wife Dominique Vidal (Julie Delpy). Perhaps this device (since white is the palette on which other colours may be laid) hints that not only is the hero in transition but that the film itself represents a way marker in the progress through the trilogy.

We enter Karol's story as he arrives at court to defend divorce proceedings instigated by Dominique. A pigeon flies up as he crosses the quad and his eyes follow, looking perhaps for an omen of peace and love; but from on high the bird drops white shit on his shoulder. Colour coding, here as throughout the trilogy, spans associations ranging across archetypal opposites. Denotatively the film variously registers white in bird shit, Dominique's car, the couple's wedding, a porcelain figurine, grubby snow and ice, and stylistically in fades to white screen. White's associations and connotations will develop to include traditionally positive qualities such as femininity, delicacy, innocence, purity, beauty, truth, transcendence, virtue, the Madonna, milk and spirituality. Often the characters' behaviour (as when Dominique forces Karol to listen on the phone while behind her white curtained window she brazenly fucks a new lover) negates these values by running quite contrary to them. But even this cruelty fails to shake Karol's need to believe in his wife's essential purity. Yet, as this painful episode insists, the obverse facets of whiteness are in play too carrying associations with surrender, loss of blood or passion, the couple's *mariage blanc*, coldness, emptiness, fear and death. The film plays with both these sets of values, finally extending them (by fading to white when finally the couple achieve orgasm) to suggest the coming of light and rebirth.

Richard Dyer (to whose work on whiteness the foregoing lists are indebted) remarks that, unlike every other colour, white as a designated hue is generally accepted to have an opposite, black (1997: 48). Indeed, in opposition to its title, this film is commonly referred to as a black comedy. The colour black figures in its own right. It does this visually with silhouetted images; with scenes of deep *chiaroscuro*; and through fades to black when Karol's mind blanks an intolerable memory. Thematically, black embellishes Karol's work in the black market, the recurrent contact with death, the unconscious and his false funeral.

*On impotence and falseness to self*

Confronted by Dominique's charge that he has failed to consummate the marriage, Karol proves painfully passive. Impotence pervades every aspect of his life; but he tells the court that things were different when he and his wife met. Their back-story emerges only after Dominique has won her divorce, but it confirms what Karol has said. Formerly a prize-winning hairdresser, he met her at a competition where she was modelling for one of his rivals. In his Polish homeland in those days he abounded in creativity, an authoritative figure, while she was his beautiful idol. At that time, their love-making was mutually pleasing.

Karol's confidence sank after they moved to Paris. Although he had to cope in a language in which he is far from fluent, Dominique's actions the moment she secures her divorce prove that this was far from the only cause of his downfall. After the hearing, Karol (so dependent on her that he has not even memorised his PIN) tries to withdraw cash from an ATM. It rejects his card: Dominique has frozen him out of their joint account. She retains possession of the hairdressing salon (despite the fact that it must have been established on the back of his expertise) and boasts cruelly that she now controls everything. However, although she has seized financial power, we need to note that Karol had already surrendered it. Thus his impotence is not simply sexual: with his tacit permission, if not active encouragement, his pale wife has taken his money. Despite his implicit collaboration in his downfall, this is one of the signs that will pressurise him to change his idea of her from impossibly pure wife to whore.

Karol's family history has encouraged his assumption that expressions of devotion should infallibly bind her to him. He has learnt from childhood to ingratiate himself in this way, as we can tell when his brother Jurek (Jerzy Stuhr) acts in the same manner to get Karol to oblige him. But, adopted as the habitual mode of response, fawning ingratiation leads by definition to the development of a *false self*. D. W. Winnicott described this phenomenon as one of the most successful defence mechanisms in protecting the true self. It performs that function at high cost to the sense of feeling real, however, because when the individual's operational centre is in the false rather than true self, a sense of futility arises (Winnicott, 1971: 292). 'An individual may be successful in the world, but success based in the false self leads to an intensification

of the sense of emptiness and despair' (Winnicott in Abram, 1996: 84). And again, 'the false self, however well set up, lacks something and that something is the essential central element of creative originality' (Winnicott, 1960: 152 cited in Mitchell, 1993: 23).

Whilst every healthy individual owes his or her development to a mother figure's devotion without which that development could not have occurred (Winnicott in Abram, 1996: 125), this differs from Karol's obsessive behaviour. Fawning devotion such as his presents as having been founded during childhood in desperate attempts to assuage the mother. That behaviour ultimately formed a complex which freezes Dominique out of their relationship because it prevents her being understood for who she is. She tries to tell Karol this the morning after the divorce when she finds him asleep in the salon. Newly homeless and broke, he had sheltered there the previous night. Although Dominique's first thought is to call the police, Karol seduces her with sly humour and they commence lovemaking. But then the intense anxiety aroused in him by her need for the sense of connection that he cannot supply lets him down once again. Dominique, both angry and sad, tells him (in what amounts to a catechism of their failed relationship) that he has never understood anything between them: "If I say I love you, you don't understand. And if I say I hate you, you still don't understand. You don't understand that I want you – that I need you." And when she asks whether she scares him, Karol can only stammer that he doesn't know. Dominique tests his mettle by setting fire to the salon's curtains (fire perhaps acting symbolically as an agent of cleansing) and telling him that she will inform the police that he has done it. Rather than trying to put the flames out, the coward runs away. The horrid debacle confirms that divorce has merely enacted the dynamic of their relationship.

What has brought about the reversal from their early time together in Poland? Although Karol is wholly focused on Dominique, the only thing he can say when asked to describe her is that she is beautiful. No less striking, he has made no friends or acquaintances in Paris and now has no one to turn to. It seems that Karol's mother complex got activated from the moment he fell in love with his goddess and regressed into a position of being wholly dependent on her.

Karol can think of nowhere to go except the subway station across the road. Like many other heroes<sup>1</sup> he has to go underground to discover what darkness lives in his unconscious. Inevitably, some days after she has kicked him out, he turns back to Dominique. He phones her, hoping that the silhouette of a man shadowing her white curtains is not a lover. Far from reassuring him, she congratulates him sardonically on his timing and forces him to listen while her moans and cries pitch toward an enthusiastic orgasm.

*On transitional objects*

Almost immediately after this gross humiliation, Karol steals the plaster bust of a young woman wearing a mob cap. Carrying it with him in his retreat to Poland, this grotesquely romantic figurine becomes a *transitional object* for Karol – a concretisation of the cold white goddess ideal (part mother, part lover of impossible purity) which Dominique represents to him. In psychoanalytic theory the term ‘object’ refers to whatever is an object of attraction, love or hatred for the subject – as in ‘the object of my passion’. The contingency of the object does not mean that any object can satisfy the instinct. Rather, according to Freud, the instinctual object, often distinguished by highly specific traits, is determined by the history of each individual subject and particularly by his or her childhood history (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973: 273-5).

The bust’s significance as a transitional object can be amplified through D. W. Winnicott’s theoretical work critiquing the commonplace thought that there are two realities, inner and outer. Winnicott explored an intermediate area of *experiencing* to which both inner reality and external life contribute. Here the distinction between perception and apperception takes on significance. Apperception requires conscious perception with full awareness and is the ultimate goal of individuation. It has been described as ‘an inner faculty which represents external things as perceived by the registering, responding psyche; therefore, the result is always a mixture of reality and

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<sup>1</sup> Cinematic heroes who go underground include Holly Martins in *The Third Man*, Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* and the timorous Dr Bill Harford in *Eyes Wide Shut*.

fantasy, a blend of personal experience and archetypal imago' (Samuels *et al.*, 1986: 25).

For Winnicott, 'creative apperception more than anything else... makes the individual feel that life is worth living' (1971: 65). By using apperception to relate an object to past experience, an individual can discover newly observed qualities in that object and gain fresh understanding. Consciousness achieved via self-reflection is a creative process which integrates understanding with affect and ultimately releases energy from difficult complexes. Winnicott's model marries with Joseph Campbell's argument that the aim of individuation is not to search for the meaning of life but to feel our own aliveness (Campbell and Moyers, 1988: xvi). In theory, the more we work through our personal histories and psychological angst, the more we should feel that life is worth living. Such a thrust toward personal growth is the obverse of Karol's psychological recidivism.

According to Winnicott, developing infants tend sooner or later to weave other-than-me objects into their personal pattern. They identify these so-called transitional phenomena at an intermediate state between their initial inability and their developing capacity to recognise and accept reality. To some extent these objects stand in for the breast and thus belong to the realm of illusion. They become vitally important as defences against anxiety, especially anxiety of the depressive type. The relevance for *White* of this phenomenon lies in a variant manifestation in which the need for a specific object sometimes reappears regressively at a later developmental age when deprivation threatens. The depressive Karol undergoes just such a regression after the break up of his marriage (1971: 5).

Winnicott summarises the special qualities in the relationship with a transitional object, several of which touch on Karol's use of the bust. The infant assumes rights over the object just as Karol possessively keeps the figurine to himself. Nevertheless, some abrogation of omnipotence is a feature from the start: Karol only seizes on this marble piece because he has lost Dominique. The object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved or even mutilated; and it must have qualities that seem to show it has a vitality or reality of its own. Just so, late one night back in Poland, while trying to improve his French to impress Dominique, Karol is almost magnetically

attracted to the bust and kisses it tenderly. A transitional object must never change, unless changed by the infant – witness Karol’s distress when the thugs who steal his trunk toss the bust onto a rubbish heap and break it. Finally transitional objects are gradually decathected: in the course of years they lose their energy charge and become not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo. They lose meaning because the transitional phenomena have become diffused and spread over the whole intermediate territory between inner psychic reality and the external world, that is, over the whole cultural field (*Ibid.*: 5). This too eventually occurs in *White* when Karol moves toward a healthier relationship with Dominique and the bust (hitherto the frequent focus of his lonely, nocturnal attention) becomes peripheral to his life.

The bust represents an early stage on Karol’s journey from the purely subjective narcissistic wound he experienced from Dominique’s rejection of him, to one of objectivity (or the movement from perception to apperception already mentioned). The bust as transitional object is what we see of Karol’s progress towards experiencing realness – and it gains additional significance from the fact that he has felt the need to steal it. For Winnicott, thieving by a child originates in emotional deprivation and expresses profound need. The deprived child who behaves in an antisocial way is in fact more hopeful than the child who cannot behave badly. For the latter, hope has gone and the child has become defeated. So the antisocial tendency implies hope (Winnicott in Abram, 1996: 47), an early sign that something positive is stirring in the psyche of the hitherto infantile Karol.

Dominique’s sadism, meanwhile, is driven by rage and despair over their failed relationship. Responding to Karol’s projection onto her of his colourless, empty anima – the cool white goddess – she expresses her hungry needs by taking to bed a lusty human lover. The stark contrast between her beauteous perfection and her calculated cruelty driven by the irresistible need for completeness makes her resemble a character in a fairy-tale, a phenomenon to which we shall return.

#### *On Poland as a transitional nation*

Later we must examine how the trauma of the humiliating phone call to his sexually active ex-wife triggers Karol’s own reaction. However, his anguish carries with it more than personal suffering. As Slavoj Žižek remarks, *White* is the most political

film in the trilogy, being embedded, as Janina Falkowska notes, in the context of the unequal relationship between France and Poland (Zizek, 2001: 177; Falkowska 1999: 147).<sup>2</sup> The film's story world repeatedly touches on the political and economic impotence from which Poland was emerging in the late 1980s when France (and Western European capitalism) seemed to many Poles to provide a clean, white ideal (see Falkowska, *ibid.*). This vision of purity is instantly obliterated when Karol returns to Poland and coincides with the breaking of the bust.

Yola Schabenbeck-Ebers describes 'history' as the key word for every Polish intellectual. They subscribe to a well-established set of ideas about Poland in the 19th century – ideas driven by the nation's experience of partition between three great neighbouring powers and the subsequent tragedies of failed uprisings in which every new generation lost its most noble characters. The belief held in common was that this suffering was not in vain and that God had chosen Poland to suffer for other nations in the war against despotic, oppressive empires. Through fighting those powers the nation was supposed to attain democracy for the whole continent. Although World War II smashed Poland's newly won sovereignty and its outcome did not bring full independence, the same pattern of thinking continued to prevail through the 20th century: sustaining the totalitarian rule of the Cold War period would reinstate the nation's dignity (Schabenbeck-Ebers, 2006). As Norman Davies, says in the concluding words to his monumental account of the nation's re-emergence, –

To everyone who knows its history, ... Poland is a repository of ideas and values which can outlast any number of military and political catastrophes. Poland offers no guarantee that its individual citizens will observe its ideals, but stands none the less as an enduring symbol of moral purpose in European life. (Davies, 1982: Vol 2, 642)

The parallel between Poland's relations with France and the unbalanced marriage of Karol and Dominique is plain. Complete relationships, whether personal or international, must be equal in nature (which does not mean that they occur often). This brings with it the uncomfortable thought that suffering and sacrifice are

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<sup>2</sup> Karol specifically alludes to the want of equality when alleging that the divorce court refuses to hear his case because he does not speak French.

necessary to the quest for completion. This is what Dominique and Karol both long to have, but a complete relationship must bring the feminine and the masculine together in a natural fit like the symbol of yin and yang.

The unselfconscious, yet ingratiating defeatism evident in Karol's behaviour as an expatriate Pole maps neatly onto the backdrop of the nation's ideological history. If confirmation were needed, it comes from the intervention of a sombre fellow-expatriate visiting Paris to make money as a Bridge player. Mikolaj (Janusz Gajos) stumbles over Karol in the underground station. The latter's inanition has reduced him to a lamentable parody of a busker, with only a trunk for his few possessions. To gain coppers for survival he renders on his comb a highly appropriate, mournful tango, famous among Poles of a certain age. According to Marek Haltof, the suicidal lyrics of 'This is our last Sunday', though voicing desperate hope for a last chance, contemplate separation forever (2004: 133-4). Mikolaj (who, naturally, recognises this sorrowful tune) soon mentions that he has a faculty essential for a Bridge player – an excellent memory. But in the context of the Polish nation's history prior to the fall of Communism, memory is also an essential trait of the archaic sorrowing Pole because the national culture has imbued him or her with the knowledge that suffering cannot be escaped. And so it proves with Mikolaj when, much later, he reveals a desire for assisted suicide, explaining that he wants less suffering. Locked into its ever-increasing fund of memories that he cannot let go, his psyche ceaselessly augments his pain. Not until he grows in maturity through individuation will he develop an internal container large enough to bear his pain. Then he will cease to feel the impulse to act out the process of ridding himself of his suffering. Prior to that, like other would-be suicides, he just needs it to end.

Now, however, early in the acquaintance, Mikolaj (perhaps seeing his own suffering mirrored in Karol) generously offers to repatriate him. Easier said than done because Karol has mislaid his passport (a nice metaphor for his lost identity) and believes the police are after him (his projection of internalised Polish fear of oppressive, despotic powers). However, this time he does not succumb to misery, thanks ironically to Dominique herself. He makes the fateful phone call only after trying to show off her beauty to his new acquaintance. Unlike the devotion-blinded Karol, Mikolaj notices that she has another man with her. Although Karol cannot release his anger while she

forces him to listen to her orgasm, when he ends the call he lets go for the first time ever. The phone box withholds his change and his awful humiliation explodes in rage, albeit displaced onto a surly official. Nor does his fury wither quickly. Forced to a psychological turning point, Karol can no longer passively accept suffering this extreme. Anger awakens a trickster in him and he shows his new friend how he will get into Poland as passenger baggage, enclosed in the trunk – metaphorically a coffin for his past self and womb from which his future will gestate.

No sooner does Karol touch down in his parental homeland than thieves steal the trunk, discover him, smash the figurine and (pausing only to knock him around when he tries to stop them stealing his last two French francs) dump him on a snow-covered rubbish dump. ‘Home at last,’ the battered pauper murmurs, not one whit surprised at a less than propitious re-entry to the world that drops him right back into the Pole’s familiar painful lot.

He staggers back to the ladies hairdressing salon that his brother still operates. Once recovered from his physical injuries and the first shocking wave of trauma induced by Dominique, Karol (more popular with the clientele than Jurek) resumes work to pay his way. He is already beginning to get in touch with the feminine by re-connecting to all those women whose needs he has always been able to satisfy by attending to their hair, that symbol of woman’s sexuality. However, his mind soon turns to schemes more ambitious than his adipose brother (content with having innovated the salon’s name in neon) will ever aspire to.

*Breaking the mould: trickster work*

Karol soon finds that the rapidly changing political and economic environment offers him ample opportunity greatly to augment the limited income that hairdressing brings in – and, by no means incidentally, to boost the trickster aspect of his personality. He soon takes on a role to which he is wonderfully ill suited as bodyguard to such a man, a wily money changer (Cezary Pazura) who operates on the criminal margin. As Falkowska notes, values and money that previously had no natural home in Poland are filling the disorder following the fall of the Communist regime. Con artists and crooks step in to exploit the vacuum. Harsh juxtapositions result with brash new

capitalism already by 1993 sitting alongside rubbish heaps; corruption, poverty and crime go together with luxurious new houses and cars. ‘The country which openly turned to capitalism after 1989 is the country of cynicism, betrayal, failure and disillusionment’ (1999: 152). As a nation in transition, the Poles have (in *White*) made a transitional object of the zloty, which they intend to convert to Euros and US dollars at the earliest opportunity. Just like Karol’s new boss snatching at piles of banknotes when a gust of wind threatens to blow them out of his steel container office, they lunge after hard currency whenever the opportunity arises.

Karol’s intense desire for cash sprang from a revelatory moment when he tried to throw away the two-franc piece he got in the Paris underground. It stuck to his palm which he took as an omen, swiftly cathecting this new transitional love-object so that wealth takes on high significance for him as an object to be used in service of the greater goal of securing love. Meanwhile the passions locked in the bust will require more devious pursuit; and their magical powers, although by no means wholly decathected, are beginning to diminish – witness Karol’s clumsy attempts to restore the broken figurine. Grubby cash from the black market is beginning to alternate with ‘pure’ white desire as the means to deal with Dominique.

Karol’s pursuit of riches does not lack deviousness. He eavesdrops on his boss and an associate who plan to exploit advance information and buy agricultural land cheaply where some of Europe’s biggest supermarket chains intend to build outlets. Armed with this knowledge, Karol outpaces them and buys a small plot of land from an old peasant farmer (Jerzy Nowak) who, after a lifetime grubbing a livelihood in the backbreaking manual labour of his forebears, is dazzled by Karol’s offer of American dollars. But to him the cash, far from being usable, is a mysterious hoard to hold onto by burying it. For his part, Karol (who arrived in Warsaw broke) has financed the purchase with his brother’s savings which, much like the peasant, Jurek had merely stuffed in a box. The difference in attitude between the old money culture and the unregulated commercial behaviour that Karol is adopting exactly illustrates the emergence of a transitional object for the societal collective of the new would-be rich.

Karol’s exploitation of money confirms that he is developing beyond infantile behaviour. Winnicott reminds us that the earlier, infantile phase of development,

called object relating, is based on pure projection. It is as if the baby creates the breast, which becomes a cathected object. To make the developmental shift toward creating transitional objects, the infant must have developed the reality principle to the point where he or she has a capacity to use objects. That necessitates relinquishing omnipotent control over what he has now to recognise as something separate from the self (1971: 89).

Driven by the appetite for useable wealth, Karol wants to increase his investment by purchasing additional smallholdings strategically placed to frustrate his boss's grand ambitions. Needing more cash urgently, he recalls that in the Paris underground Mikolaj offered him the well-paid 'job' of killing a man who wants to die without sacrificing his life insurance. Karol had previously declined even to consider such an act; but now he smells the money, slyly asserting, 'When someone asks for help – you have to help him.' He has not yet matured to the extent that moral conscience has emerged. His trickster is deluding even him, concealing behind his hackneyed moral phrase an inadmissible urge. Characteristically the archetypal trickster makes mischief to bring dark impulses to the light. The effect is beneficial to the extent that the person moved by those ugly impulses learns to understand them for what they are. This will be the case with Karol.

Mikolaj sets up a rendezvous with the would-be assisted suicide in the Warsaw underground. The deserted subway is still under construction, darker than the French Metro, suggesting that the protagonists are venturing onto new territory in the underworld. And so it proves, for the client is none other than Mikolaj himself. Visibly disturbed, Karol prepares for murder. Urged on by his friend, he shoots him in the chest, catching him when he collapses, while the sound of the shot echoes like life itself departing down the tunnel. However, since accepting the commission the prospect of extinguishing a human life has evidently driven Karol to consider his moral position and he secretly loaded a blank. A significant silent pun is in play here. White is *blanc* and blank of colour, which by extension becomes the colour of the void. A blank holds a space to think and can be compared to the Buddhist position of emptiness. After this pause, Karol requires his friend to understand that the next bullet is real and asks whether he wishes to receive it. Mikolaj, having touched death's cloak, changes his mind.

The authentic suffering that the two men experience in this confrontation with death alters them, unblocking their developmentally depressive state. Suddenly they find it in themselves to face sorrow. Suddenly they find themselves exultant, sharing life – boozed up and skidding across white winter ice to Preisner’s cheerful tango. The relationship between them matures: Mikolaj insists on paying Karol for the contract ‘murder’ which, while not a physical event, did kill their dead, depressive parts. Karol accepts the money, but only as a loan. When his investment in land pays off, he insists in exchange that Mikolaj becomes his business partner.

In all this, the toughening of Karol cannot be missed. When his boss discovers Karol’s land purchases, he and his thuggish associate assault the little man. He, however, has prepared for their vengeful brutality and faces it with courage. To cite Jung, he proves to be a true trickster by exposing himself to torture and managing to achieve through seeming stupidity what the others have failed to accomplish with their best efforts (1954a: 255). When Karol declares that he has willed his property to the church the heavies realise they have been outmanoeuvred. No less the con man than they, he sells them the land for ten times what he paid; and in retribution for their aggression reveals with a pleasant smile that he owns more plots than they know.

Suddenly a wealthy man, Karol’s image transforms, trickster like. By day, adopting the oiled mane of the high-powered crook, he replaces tatty pullovers and slacks with suits and a double-breasted greatcoat. A new, darker persona – the efficient, ruthless and successful international businessman – soon emerges. Yet the transformation is not complete and at night he regresses as before to the whingeing *puer*. In a further development, at other times his personality takes on a clown’s characteristics. For example, as a company director negotiating for an office, he has no concept of the basic technology that every secretary and personal assistant depends on. When this facet of the character presents, it reinforces the comic register of *White*.

#### *The comic register*

As always, the register of a film guides its interpretation and Karol’s naivety reminds us that comedy distinguishes *White* from the other parts of the trilogy. It highlights the quirky qualities of certain characters so that, shown up by irony, their complexes

stand out in front of the grander backdrop of human potential that they seldom fulfil. In dramas that seek a documentary plausibility, characters' language, speech patterns and gestures are usually constrained by the requirements of realist conventions. Here, Zbigniew Zamachowski occasionally 'over acts' in playing Karol to distance his character from a realist portrayal. For example, when handed a gun and told to guard his money-changing boss discreetly, Zamachowski appears to quote Charlie Chaplin as Karol swells with the delusion of new-found authority and struts his pride so ostentatiously that bystanders shrink from him. In other Chaplinesque scenes Zamachowski makes Karol clumsy, wrecking his pomposity and dropping him into the defensive-aggressive pathos of the narcissism we so often witness.

Jerzy Stuhr inscribes complementary traits even more broadly on Karol's brother Jurek. He proffers the world a morose moon face, but his sympathetic gestures toward his brother do not quite erase his opportunism. Meanwhile Karol's black-and-white mental picture of Dominique (until the film's climax the only available point of view of her) switches so radically between whore and innocent that in Julie Delpy's presentation the character appears to be untouched by routine daily life. Our picture of Karol's wife is his projection from a psychological position entrapped in the age-old male split between virgin and whore from which he attempts to preserve the good mother.

The sharp reversals that transform the protagonists' personalities complement the reversals of their fates and afford further clues to the film's register. The characters live in a comic world that has the qualities of fable. The plot is structured around archetypal oppositions, and these resonate as variants of the enantiodromia familiar in fairytales. Each of the two unformed heroes Mikolaj and Karol offers to assist the other by 'killing' him; and this exchange of 'deaths' leads to new life for both. The incompetent little citizen wins power (the king or prince of the old stories, becomes the boss here) and then gives it all away. The ice-cold beauty loses her throne (the salon she has appropriated) and ends up (not exactly a maiden, but certainly in distress) locked in a tower (an upper floor of a gloomy prison) looking as though (a necessary precursor to true intimacy) she has surrendered psychologically and emotionally to their union. The nearness of those older archetypal figures cannot be missed, but Kieslowski undercuts the simple oppositional patterns of the fairytale

allowing his characters to show the complex drives that move them. Karol, the not so handsome prince, far from being damsel's liberator, has brought about her incarceration through Machiavellian trickery. And the damsel (a virgin in that her psyche has never been broken into by a lover) has been made into a cruel witch by unrequited love. These variations from the old stories speak meaningfully of the psychological development of the protagonists because, as Mario Jacoby puts it, 'From the vantage point of depth psychology, fairy tales can be understood as depictions of psychological processes' (1992: 3).

Zbigniew Preisner's melodies colour the fabric of all three movies in the trilogy, helping the viewer experience a flavour of the inner-world landscape of the characters. The drawn-out notes of a clarinet played without vibrato deepen the audience's feeling for Karol's feelings of isolation. This lament's function in the dynamic of plot and character development can be compared with the street musician's melody in *Blue* except that the latter bears the promise of grief surmounted. Karol's lament also resembles to some degree the musical accompaniment to Valentine's loneliness in *Red* except that in the latter instance strings lead the melody with ensemble playing that makes an appropriate accompaniment to the young woman's fundamentally gregarious nature.

*White* features a second musical theme that contrasts the isolation of the clarinet – a tango. To foreign audiences recalling the dance's Argentinian origins it may seem culturally misplaced. In fact, the tango became immensely popular in Poland and by the 1930s had evolved its own, distinctively Polish traits, evoking (no surprise here) both yearning and nostalgia (Placzkiewicz, 2007). However, Preisner's tango, scored for a vigorous string quartet, has abandoned sorrow in favour of a confident, cheeky rhythm.<sup>3</sup> Sustaining the comedic momentum, it underlines Karol's intermittent rediscovery of a cheerful humour. It also alerts us to his growing readiness for the psycho-sexual struggle in which lovers must engage if they are to be equal partners. But as mentioned previously, Karol's advances are not constant. By day ebullient in his role as boss and riding the wave that sweeps him to stupendous business success, his movement toward psychological integration is periodically interrupted when

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<sup>3</sup> Haltof mentions that Preisner consciously incorporated motifs from the tune that Karol plays on his comb – Jerzy Petersburski's 'This is our last Sunday' (2004: 133).

Urszula Lesiak edits in deep low-key shots (silhouettes of Karol and Dominique fading from obscurity to black) and these evoke their despairing fantasies of each other. At night Karol the *puer*, trapped under the bust's remorseless gaze, is often flooded in narcissistic misery – cue reprise of the lonely clarinet.

### *Finding the true self*

Having studied hard to improve his French so that he can communicate with her better, Karol phones Dominique and begs her to speak to him, whereupon she cuts the line without saying a word. He has failed to understand that she does not particularly want him to address her in confident French. She wants to be recognised as the woman she is rather than as an idol of freezing marble that has to be shattered if she is to claim her own true self. But paradoxically her summary rejection of his whingeing call saves him from further pained self-regard. Once again, her callousness pushes him too far, but this time he has the confidence in his new role as a businessman to be able to react effectively. Anger revives trickster wit and he crafts a revenge calculated to reverse the power imbalance between them. He first makes a will naming Dominique as sole beneficiary and then sets about staging his own death. After warning the phlegmatic Mikolaj to expect to see his obituaries in the papers, he instructs his chauffeur to register his death and buy a corpse for burial in lieu of himself. Mikolaj (a man accustomed to unexplained 'deaths') completes the arrangements.

We referred earlier to Winnicott's concept of the false self as a structure first erected in infancy to defend the true self. At that stage in its development the child shapes its defences in response to its early environment. However, when the false self dominates the individual's responses, as with Karol in Paris, a sense of unreality and futility results. The false self, however well set up, lacks something – the essential central element, creative originality. In contrast, the true self feels real. Only it can be creative: spontaneous gestures and personal ideas always reveal the true self in action (Winnicott, 1971: 102, 148; Mitchell, 1993: 23).

Karol and Mikolaj had touched their own true aliveness when the former prepared to kill the latter. Now, delivering Karol his new passport, Mikolaj asks (clearly perceiving the thrust of Karol's plot), whether he is sure he wants to follow through.

The echo of Karol's question to him *in extremis* seals the deep trust between them. Meanwhile Karol's rebellious decision to stage his own death indicates the revival of his true self. The difference on this occasion is that the laddish derring-do that characterises his black-market business deals will not suffice in facing the challenge of remaking his damaged relationship with Dominique. A complete renewal is necessary.

Winnicott indicates that invariable compliance with the pressures exerted by other people is incompatible with the true self. Always associated with living through the false self, compliance (Karol's predominant manner in Paris) is connected with despair rather than hope. Yet it attracts individuals because it brings immediate rewards and is thereby all too easily mistaken by parents or authority figures for growth (1971: 102). Nevertheless, although Karol is now acting in accordance with the demands of his true self, it is equally obvious that the person who functions exclusively in self-centred terms cannot be a member of society. Winnicott concludes that to live healthily the infant must develop the ability to compromise; but he or she must also be able to refuse compromise when the issues it faces become crucial. Then the true self should override the compliant self (*Ibid.*: 149-150). Trickster energy, it hardly needs noting, is invaluable in breaking away from compliance.

Posed in Winnicott's terms, the question that arises at the conclusion of *White* is whether Karol, having veered away from the false toward the true self, has advanced to the point where he can compromise. As a trickster he has arranged to die in order to be reborn – putting an end to the old Karol. When closing the coffin on the corpse that will substitute him, he slips his lucky coin under the lid, his symbolic farewell to money making and the archaic psychological organisation that has hitherto formed him. Indeed, he cannot return to a life focused on international business because he has willed his share of the company to Dominique. In the event, though Mikolaj has set him up with a false identity(!) and a house in Hong Kong, he will even abandon his plan to leave Warsaw and bury himself instead in the family home. He has arranged things so that he must be reborn – but will he emerge from his transformation as prince or monster?

Before discovering the new Karol, we need to pay attention to a change in point of view involving Dominique. The shift is striking in that it first occurs only after she learns of Karol's 'death'. At the funeral the viewpoint remains where it always has been, with Karol who, moved by her sorrow, spies on his ex-wife through binoculars from afar. Point of view remains his when she returns to her Warsaw hotel room that night to find him alive and in her bed. Now she is scared by him (just as he has been of her) and they both know it. But once he has supported her through the shock of a reunion from beyond the grave, his confident kindness reaches her and they make love successfully with unfettered passion.

Afterwards she agrees when Karol murmurs that her cries of ecstasy were more intense than with her Parisian lover. So he has not let that humiliation fall from memory and her words now validate their mutually satisfying reunion. Nevertheless, come the morning, he hesitates before leaving. He gazes at her lovingly where she sleeps between sheets of flaming orange that (in the colour's naked violation of the film's repressed tonal scale) cry out the shocking impact of their passion. But although he does not go through with his carefully laid plan in its entirety, neither does he give up his revenge. Fondly he smooths away a curl of hair blown by her breathing<sup>4</sup> and exits the suite just before the police, summoned by Mikolaj, arrive right on cue to spring Karol's trap.

This moment of getting even and moral reversal, coincides with the change in point of view. Just as Karol had once been alone, a stranger in Paris, so now Dominique will suffer an emotionally similar fate in Warsaw. The switch to her point of view makes her appear all the more vulnerable when she wakes alone and, wrapped only in the orange sheet, answers the suite's doorbell to be faced not by her returning lover but the cops. The police, having received reports that Karol died an unnatural death, have obtained a search warrant. They seize her passport which, despite her denials, proves to their satisfaction that she came to Warsaw before Karol's death. Unleashing the clipped fury that her ex-husband knows all too well, Dominique begins to rebut the charge. However, when awareness suddenly dawns that Karol has falsified her date of arrival to spring a trap, she falls silent, surrendering to his vengeance.

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<sup>4</sup> The moment recalls Julie in hospital in *Blue*. Metaphorically, Dominique's life is undergoing a slow-motion car crash.

Jung observed that, ‘One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and not popular’ (1954b: 265-6). John Beebe (2007) parses Jung’s observation, as meaning that spirit enters the psyche through the shadow – the compensation for suffering which may yet prove as attainable for Dominique and Karol as for the devout contemplative. Their love can’t blossom until they know more about themselves and each other. However painful, their suffering will bring the clarification needed to secure their love.

The introduction of a quasi-religious dimension to our analysis responds to a tactful crescendo of signs that are incipient in the film from its start. Here too, a shift in the film’s point of view provides a key. Occasionally during Karol’s long exile from Dominique’s affection and in the depths of his loneliness, his point of view has been intensified by a montage of the mind – the silhouetted image of her entering a dark room and moving into blackness. At the moment they occur these inserted fragments read like sombre waking reveries underpinning Karol’s dark side. However, they anticipate an almost identical repetition of the shot when Dominique returns to her hotel suite after the funeral; so these fleeting moments have eventually to be recognised as synchronicities. Did they comprise an isolated episode, it might be injudicious to claim this, but there are several corroborating moments that imply the shared psychological turmoil of the couple.

When Dominique enters the hotel room after the funeral, the blackness that surrounds her implies the darkness of her own mind, rather than as in his previous visions of this scene, Karol’s grieving. But in the next few minutes of screen time, point of view is further disturbed. When their love making climaxes, the dark room fades to black, then mixes through to white before reverting to black and a dissolve back into the room. The device is so unusual that it draws attention to itself. It is congruent with the idea that darkness must be rendered conscious before one awakens, an immolation that Dominique (like Karol before her) now begins to undergo.

Next morning, at the moment of her arrest, a pigeon can be heard flying away from her window ledge – the clatter of wings being accompanied by the lonely tune on the

clarinet that had previously haunted Karol. At the same time the recollection of their white wedding thrusts into her mind. The scene links her to Karol not only in the past but also in what appears to be the present (actually the future) as he stands in his brother's window abstractedly gazing at the comb that brought him and his wife together in the first place. While he muses (not for the first time) on this memory identical to her own, we notice that the implement has become grubby through use. Perfection in the mind juxtaposed against imperfection in life.

At the remembered wedding a mob of pigeons scattered as the couple were leaving the church to greet their supporters. The symbolism of the birds has obverse facets. Pigeons also rose up noisily when Mikolaj and Karol first get to understand each other – the latter's first meaningful contact with anyone since Dominique threw him out. All these occurrences, and another in the warehouse when Karol closes the coffin on his substitute corpse, appear to suggest, as Joseph Campbell mentioned, that the flight of birds implies the freeing of the spirit (1988: 18). However, we need to observe that, while *White* does not refuse that connotation, it does not make the association comfortable. These tough city birds not only shit on people, they survive by scratching through garbage – light and darkness linked again.

The shared evocation of the wedding provides a moment of synchronicity more emphatic for the audience than the characters. The link it forges between the couple masks the chronological elision between Dominique's arrest and Karol in his brother's salon getting ready to visit her in jail – plainly some time later. We perceive that Karol has become snared in his own trap and that his love for Dominique has denied him the escape from Poland he had planned.<sup>5</sup> In *White* (as opposed to *Red* where they are plainly marked), synchronistic moments pass fleetingly. It is as if they hint at meaning the deep value of which, while tied to their mutual struggle, Karol and Dominique's psyches are ill prepared to receive. Kieslowski, in allowing us to observe their fates unspool, gives us a slight advantage over his characters; but while these synchronistic moments hint at the spiritual riches that could open for them

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<sup>5</sup> Jurek recounts how he and Mikolaj had to identify his brother's supposed corpse after exhumation, and that they and several others would have been jailed if Karol had turned himself in. Evidently Karol has been tempted to release Dominique by sacrificing himself: a severe tug-of-love is rending his heart.

following integration, their brevity – their almost unremarked nature – perhaps also suggests that while a positive resolution is possible, it nonetheless still remains uncertain.

A refugee at in his home town, Karol skulks along the sidewalks clad once again in drab clothing and keeping away from public transport. Sidling up to the steel portal of a jail, he buys entry with a small bribe of Jurek's freshly made bread and cherry jam. It looks as though among common folk the mores of the old Poland have not expired. We already know that, amplified a hundred thousand fold, greed animates the *nouveau riche*, so when the expensive lawyer hired by Mikolaj and Jurek says to them that 'he sees a little light at the end of the tunnel,' perhaps he means that altogether bigger bribes paid to the right people might free Dominique.

The clang of metal doors behind Karol resonates hollowly through the prison's gloomy inner yard. The architecture presents a macrocosm of the emptiness to which want of love has delivered husband and wife. They are now physically so distant from each other (she at her high, barred window, he in the yard below) that to be sure of obtaining a close view of her Karol must once again with unconscious irony use bird-watching binoculars. As the familiar sorrowing music resumes (but transferred to a flute for its more delicate timbre), Dominique mimes their break up, but only in order to negate it. Then, making a circular movement with her hand before dressing her bare finger with an imaginary ring, she proposes that they complete the circle to remarry.<sup>6</sup> Her circular gesture can be read as implying not only the togetherness for which she hopes, but also the circular journey that Karol and she have taken from Poland through France and back to Poland and the sharp reversal of both their fortunes. It corresponds too to the psychological activity that impels change in both of them – namely, the movement to a more differentiated self. Dominique ends by

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<sup>6</sup> Kieslowski and his crew achieve an elegant special effect as she mimes. The camera seems to track toward the window so that its bars open and lose focus to allow a clearer view. However, the camera does not move in relation to the young woman who remains in sharply focussed close up. The unobtrusive device communicates (at a deep level that scarcely engages the spectator's consciousness) the intensity of Karol's gaze, his emotional attachment to Dominique and their mutual desire to free her.

seeking his recognition with a tentative smile, while the melody passes to an oboe (possibly for the hint of confidence that its harder edge communicates).

Winnicott remarks that the change from object-relating to object-use requires the subject to destroy the object in *fantasy*, yet the object must survive. “This destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object, that is, an object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control” (Winnicott, 1971: 94). This is exactly what Karol has had to live out with Dominique in order to make her something real and separate from him. In this journey, as an imago in Karol’s psyche, Dominique has developed her own sense of autonomy, in connecting to him more fully. The question that remains is whether Karol has learnt how to live with Dominique as woman rather than archetypal imago. *White* leaves the issue undecided with contrary indications as the contest in his heart pulls him first one way and then another.

True, he knows now that he loves her dearly. True, he weeps copiously when Dominique makes her appeal. True too, he smiles back at her; but just before the image fades for the last time, he averts his gaze and resolve braces his lips. Instead of giving in to his desire to free her, he seems likely to balance it against the recognition that to do so would be premature. He seems to know that she must feel the strength of his new sense of self, just as he was injured by hers, if they are more fully to understand themselves and each other. Thus *White* ends with hope, but no denouement. That fits not only the state of the couple’s relationship but also that of the collective. In resisting any temptation to round off *White* with a fairytale ending, Kieslowski has kept faith with the then political circumstances of Poland. In the film it remains a nation still in transition from the Communism it had abandoned only five years earlier in favour of a corrupt and corrupting free market – a period when Poles had hopes but not yet the certainty of entering the European Union. A denouement postponed until the conclusion of *Red*.

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