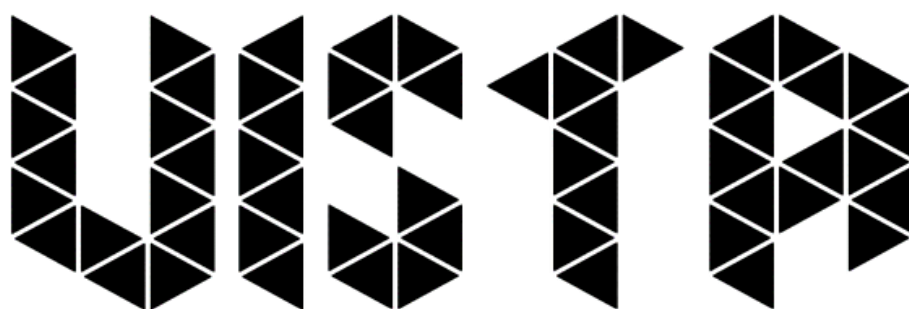




REVISTA
DE
**CULTURA
VISUAL**

e-ISSN 2184-1284

No. 18 | 2026

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<https://doi.org/10.21814/vista.7520>

e026014

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THE CAMERA TURNED TOWARDS ITSELF: REVISITING *AMATOR* (1979) AND THE INVERSION OF A CINEMATIC GESTURE THREE DECADES LATER

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ABSTRACT

Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Amator* (1979) concludes with a solitary man in a room, the camera directed at his own face. This analysis revisits the film three decades after the director's death, interpreting its final shot — the camera turned towards its operator — as a gesture whose form remains constant, though its ethical significance evolves over time. By documenting the lives of others, Filip Mosh learns that recording entails decisions marked by ownership, temporality, and personal cost; his act of renunciation encapsulates the lessons Kieślowski learned over a decade of documentary filmmaking under the Polish regime. This reading adopts the critical framework Serge Daney established in his reconsideration of the travelling shot in *Kapò*, which posits that certain camera movements carry a moral dimension that persists through history. Criticism must discern when an identical shot, despite its formal consistency, conveys a fundamentally different meaning. The frontality that, for Filip, signified confession and withdrawal resurfaces in contemporary civilian testimony, particularly in the documentation of the genocide in Gaza by journalists and civilians, serving as an archival response to erasure. An irreducible asymmetry emerges between these two gestures. The discussion concludes with the film's most challenging thesis for the present: recognising that observation incurs a cost, and advocating for a deliberate lingering that resists the rapid flow of images, thereby enabling the image of the other to become a subject of contemplation.

KEYWORDS

Krzysztof Kieślowski, *Amator*, ethics of the image, audiovisual testimony, duration

A CÂMERA VOLTADA PARA SI: *AMATOR* (1979) E A INVERSÃO DE UM GESTO 30 ANOS DEPOIS

RESUMO

Amator (1979), de Krzysztof Kieślowski, encerra-se com um homem sozinho, num quarto, com a câmera voltada para o próprio rosto. Esta recensão revisita o filme 30 anos após a morte do cineasta e lê o seu plano final — a câmera virada para quem a opera — como um gesto cuja forma permanece idêntica, enquanto o seu sentido ético migra ao longo do tempo. Filip Mosh descobre, ao filmar a vida alheia, que registrar é uma decisão com dono, hora e corpo que a paga, e a sua renúncia condensa a aprendizagem que Kieślowski fizera, na década anterior, no interior do documentário sob o regime polonês. A leitura segue o protocolo que Serge Daney legou ao repensar o *travelling* de *Kapò*: certos movimentos de câmera carregam uma moral que viaja com eles pela história, e cabe à crítica reconhecer quando o mesmo plano, apesar da identidade formal, passou a dizer o contrário. A frontalidade, que em Filip foi confissão e retirada, reaparece no testemunho civil contemporâneo, sobretudo na documentação do genocídio em Gaza por jornalistas e civis, como arquivo diante da eliminação. Entre os dois gestos, abre-se uma assimetria que não se deixa apagar. O texto fecha-se sobre a tese mais difícil que o filme devolve ao presente: aprender que

olhar também custa, e recuperar, contra a economia do fluxo, a demora sem a qual a imagem do outro não se converte em pensamento.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Krzysztof Kieślowski, *Amator*, ética da imagem, testemunho audiovisual, duração

THE FINAL SHOT OF *AMATOR*

Amator (Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1979) ends with a man alone in a room, camera in hand, the lens turned towards his own face. Filip Mosz, a factory worker in Poland, buys amateur equipment at the beginning of the film to record his daughter's birth and, over an hour and a half, discovers that filming produces consequences the camera never anticipated. The final shot is the gesture that remains from this discovery: he turns the lens towards himself, films his own face, and quietly narrates the story that opened the film: the camera he bought, the baby, the disordered life that followed. The gesture is one of renunciation.

In just over 100 minutes, Filip learns what it costs to turn other people's everyday lives into images. Each of his aesthetic achievements brings a consequence he had not foreseen: a brilliant shot leads to the dismissal of a colleague whose private life he had exposed without realising it, an honest documentary disrupts the factory hierarchy at the expense of others, a festival award arrives at the very moment his wife decides to leave. The camera shows nothing untrue, yet what it shows, once shown, becomes something else. Kieślowski guides the viewer along the character's ethical trajectory without punishing him for the framing: Filip learns, in real time, that cinema is not a window, and that pointing a camera at other people's lives entails a decision with an owner, a time, and a body that will pay the price later.

Two moments in the ending concentrate the formal weight of this discovery. In the first, at the editing table, Filip reviews the material for the next institutional film and sees what those images will do: the worker whose intimacy will not survive recognition on screen, the punishment the factory will infer from a gesture that, in the field, had been one of tenderness. Without ceremony, he pulls the strip of celluloid from the reel, holds it up to the light, and lets the image disappear. The action has the brutal simplicity of a small Bressonian gesture, with no music, no soundtrack to underscore the decision, and no shot-reverse-shot to reinforce its weight. Robert Bresson (1975) described what he practised as "writing through moving images and sounds", and by "writing" he understood, in part, the discipline of letting the gesture signify without rhetorical reinforcement. The destruction of the film belongs to this order — an act no one within the film witnesses. Only we, from outside, see it.

The second moment is the one with which the film closes. Alone in the flat, Filip turns the lens towards his own face. The shot follows the discipline of Polish observational documentary, the school of Kazimierz Karabasz, Kieślowski's teacher in Łódź, in which the camera waits for the face to become available to be filmed. The frame is tight; the light comes from a table lamp. Filip begins to narrate: my wife had a child; we bought a camera. The film's opening returns in the first person of someone who now knows what the camera will cost. The image that the film has interrogated for 112 minutes, that of another person, gives way, in the final shot, to that of the person who had, until then, been behind the camera.

THE CAMERA IS A DECISION

Filip's gesture cannot be separated from the trajectory of the person who conceived it. Before *Amator*, Kieślowski spent the 1970s making documentaries in a country where documentary filmmaking was a suspect profession. In *Z Punktu Widzenia Nocnego Portiera* (From the Point of View of a Night Porter; Kieślowski, 1977), he recorded a security guard who defended, with conviction and meticulousness, an ethic of control over his peers; the film circulated at festivals, yet Kieślowski refused, until the end of his life, to authorise its television broadcast, because he understood that a national audience would not return the security guard to anonymity. He refused the harm before it had the chance to occur (Stok, 1993). To make documentaries under that regime meant operating within a mechanism in which each recording could, against the author's will, become an instrument of power.

The Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych, in Warsaw, where an entire generation of Polish documentary filmmakers worked, taught its filmmakers a double consciousness, because each image was made for two simultaneous viewers: the official one, who would decide whether the film would exist publicly; and the one whom the filmmaker actually hoped to reach. The cinema of moral unease, which brought together Kieślowski, Zanussi and Agnieszka Holland between 1976 and 1981, was the fictional response to this lesson and took as its subject matter the small ethical decisions of professional life under late socialism. *Amator* belongs to this body of work and exceeds it, because Filip is the only protagonist in the cycle whose moral unease concerns the very camera through which he is seen. The accountant discovers, within the fiction, what the director had already known a decade earlier, except that he can reach the final shot and make the gesture of withdrawal that Kieślowski did not make in life, because he continued filming. The final shot is the point at which Filip, and by extension his author, says "no", and the camera, turned towards itself, is the only use that does not require the sacrifice of another person in order to exist.

THE SAME GESTURE, THE INVERTED MEANING

Thinking about *Amator* in 2026 requires an operation that criticism in 1992 did not yet demand. Serge Daney (1992), in the final months of his life, revisited in his essay "Le

Travelling de Kapo” Jacques Rivette’s (1961) earlier condemnation of an unjust camera movement in Gillo Pontecorvo’s (1960) *Kapò*, and drew from it a principle: a camera movement is a moral act, read as such by the viewer, who has been trained to read it, and the history of cinema is, among other things, the history of these acts. Within this grammar, the final shot of *Amator* is the inverse of the travelling shot in *Kapò*, because Pontecorvo’s camera advances toward a death it has no right to compose, whereas Filip’s advances toward the face of someone who no longer has the right to continue composing. Both are moral movements, and for them to be read as such, they depend on a viewer who possesses the grammar.

At some point in the last 15 years, the gesture that Kieślowski had isolated as the only ethical possibility became its opposite. The camera turned towards the operator, formally unchanged, began to operate with an inverted meaning, and the most radical example of this lies in the documentation, by journalists and civilians, of the genocide in Gaza from October 2023 onwards. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2026), in an assessment updated through June 2026, at least 263 journalists and media workers had been killed in the conflict, making it the deadliest for the press since the organisation began keeping records in 1992. Reporters and civilians with smartphones began filming themselves amid scenes of bombardment, displacement and death. The operation is the same as the one Filip performs in the final shot: turning the camera towards its operator, and the gesture ceases to be one of withdrawal and becomes one of persistence. What, in Filip, was a confession of harm caused becomes, in Gaza, a refusal of disappearance; and what there was the only ethically defensible use within an economy of the image that devastates the other becomes here the only possible use within an economy that attempts to erase the person filming.

To place Filip’s fictional withdrawal alongside the real persistence of Palestinian journalists is to run the risk of an obscene comparison, an equivalence that flattens the horror, and that risk cannot be entirely dispelled. The wager is that comparison, conducted with the necessary asymmetry, illuminates both gestures in a way that neither would make visible in isolation: withdrawal measures what persistence costs. In contrast, persistence reveals what withdrawal presupposed about the possibility of being heard while saying nothing. The two gestures remain in relation, and the asymmetry between them must remain visible.

The inversion is more radical than it appears. Filip films himself because the camera turned toward others causes harm he cannot control; the citizen-journalist films himself because the camera turned toward others may not reach an audience at all, once the algorithm, content moderation, and image compression within hostile circuits prevent the other’s testimony from functioning as a communicative act. Hito Steyerl (2012) described this regime when she spoke of the poor image, of low resolution, which survives by accepting loss of quality as the price of circulation, organisations such as 7amleh (2021–2024; <https://7amleh.org>), and the due diligence report commissioned by Meta itself (Business for Social Responsibility, 2022) document the systematic restriction of

the reach of content about Gaza during the period. The metaphor became an empirical fact, and filming the other would no longer ensure that their testimony was heard.

The gesture also has a legal layer, because those who film themselves under bombardment produce more than a self-portrait: a kind of testament — the camera serving as proof of existence in a setting where existence may end before the video is published. When Wael Al-Dahdouh, head of Al Jazeera's Gaza bureau, returns to the camera at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital on the night of 25 October 2023, after learning, live on air, that an airstrike had killed his wife, two of his children and a grandson, the camera turns towards him not as an aesthetic choice, but because Al-Dahdouh knows that he, too, may soon become the next image in the news. Kieślowski could not have foreseen this, because he had known the State censorship that mutilated the image, while the algorithmic apparatus that disperses it came after his death; nevertheless, the gesture he films at the end of *Amator* has, when viewed from the present, the stature of an inverted prophecy, because Filip falls silent so as not to cause harm; and those who film themselves amid the rubble cry out so as not to disappear.

LEARNING THAT LOOKING ALSO HAS A COST

The question that remains is what is left for the spectator after all this. Susan Sontag (1977, 2003) returned to the question of what an image of suffering does throughout her career, and the position with which she concluded revises the certainties she had expressed more than two decades earlier: the thesis that the proliferation of images atrophies sympathy gives way to a more troubled view, in which what dulls feeling is the passivity of those who receive the image, rather than the number of images that reach them.

Andrei Tarkovsky (1985/1987) articulated what the image requires of the spectator: the artistic image lives only in its duration, and the cut to the next shot removes the spectator from a temporal field that, while it lasted, was the work itself. Robert Bresson (1975) made the same observation in different terms, recalling that the cinematograph depends on what the spectator does not yet see and does not yet know, and that the haste of those who already know undoes the work the film was attempting. The spectator who scrolls through the screen operates within a temporal regime different from that for which cinema was made, and without duration only the surface of the image remains. The ethical epiphany that the ending of *Amator* promises requires a shot to endure long enough for the spectator to fall into it.

The Brazilian documentary filmmaker Eduardo Coutinho (2013), who spent the last three decades of his life filming conversations in which the camera waited for the other person to speak, understood this as the central problem of contemporary documentary. The cinema of encounter he practised, from *Cabra Marcado Para Morrer* (Twenty Years Later; 1984) to *Últimas Conversas* (Last Conversations; 2015), made duration itself an ethical operation, because waiting, with the camera running, for the person before it to find what they had to say became the substance of his later work. Even so, the distinction must be maintained: where Filip withdraws in the face of the harm inflicted by the

camera turned towards the other, Coutinho discovers that keeping the camera in front of the other opens a space for elaboration that would not exist without it.

This text was completed during the author's participation in the "Cine PE - Festival do Audiovisual 2026". The week is spent in a darkened room judging what is seen: each film ends, the lights come on, notes are made in a notebook, and a vote is cast for the ceremony where the awards are presented. Taken seriously, this process is a prolonged exercise in lingering, in which one remains for two hours within another person's shot, even when the shot becomes tiring. At its best, the festival is a school for this expanded sense of time that the image economy deprives the ordinary spectator of, and from this position, this text considers Kieślowski, Filip Mosz, and the gesture inverted 30 years after the director's death.

At the end of the film, Filip learnt that filming has a price, and perhaps it is time to learn that looking has one too. This is *Amator*'s most difficult contribution to the present debate: the recovery, against the structure of image consumption, of the ability to linger, without which the Palestinian journalist's video amid the rubble is merely another item in the flow, and with which it becomes once again an image in which the gesture of filming and the gesture of looking coincide in the ethical weight that Kieślowski recognised for the last time in 1979. May cinema today be the only form capable of asking the spectator to linger long enough for looking to hurt again. May *Amator*, 30 years later, continue to teach what looking costs. May every film that, in the present, regards itself as Kieślowski's heir reject the serene legacy and restore to the spectator the weight of the camera against their own chest.

Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Pedro Henrique Felix Barbosa (Sihan Felix) is a writer, film critic and filmmaker. He holds a master's degree in Art Studies (Art Theory and Criticism) from the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto and works at the intersection of film theory, aesthetics and memory. He is a member of the Brazilian Association of Film Critics and contributes essays to specialised publications, including the Criticos.com.br portal. In audiovisual practice, he works as a producer, editor and composer at Maruim Filmes, and participates in curatorial projects and juries for national and international film festivals. He remains actively involved in academic projects and teaching. He is the author of *Pensar-Cinema: Caminhos Para uma Experiência Completa* (Thinking-Cinema: Paths Towards a Complete Experience) and *A Sagração da Matéria* (The Consecration of Matter), as well as other manuscripts that explore the tensions between the materiality of art and contemporary politics. His research focuses rigorously on the poetics of the off-screen, the void, and the ethical dimension of the irreparable and of loss.

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Submitted: 24/06/2026 | Accepted: 03/ 08/2026



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