

Deeper Shades of *Blue*

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The beginning of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Blue* is a beginning, but also an ending. We see and hear dark tires rolling on a hazy highway; in the background, we see a steel blue twilight. A child's hand sticks out the rear window, waving and twirling a large metallic-blue wrapper. The wind playfully crinkles it, then snatches it out of her hand. The car pulls over; the girl runs out; the father gets out to stretch. Beneath the car, oil is slowly dripping, drop by drop. The family continues driving, off the highway and into a murky blue countryside fog. All is silent except for the motor's soft humming. And then, a sudden screech. Crash. We see a beach ball roll out of the tree-smashed car, onto the dirt road. Silence again.

Blue tells the story of Julie, a Frenchwoman who has lost her husband and five-year-old daughter, Anna, in a car accident. Instead of emphasizing the tragedy, the film focuses on Julie's emotions and the steps she takes to go on with her life. At first, she wants to sever herself from her past life; she puts her old country home up for sale and gets an apartment in Paris. She eventually rediscovers her passion for music when the media becomes interested in her husband's unfinished composition for the Council of Europe. Inspired to finish the composition herself, she also finds that her husband had a long-term mistress who is now pregnant with his son. Though at first she is determined to distance herself from people and society, her curiosity inevitably enables her to reconnect with people, and her discoveries about herself and her past life test her courage, compassion, and understanding.

The film focuses on Julie's quest for freedom from the past because Kieślowski wanted it to represent "liberty"—one third of the French motto "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*." *Blue* is the first film in his *Three Colors* trilogy; the other films, *White* and *Red*, represent equality and brotherhood, respectively. Kieślowski's aim is not to criticize these moral principles, but to explore them—to see what they really mean.

We follow Julie's transformation every step of the way. We are there when the doctor announces the deaths of her husband and daughter, when

she tries to commit suicide at the hospital by swallowing pills and then spitting them out, and when she returns home for the first time after the accident. When she arrives, she dispassionately asks the gardener if he has followed the instructions and emptied “the blue bedroom.” She guardedly goes upstairs; we see her in front of us, in a close-up of her short, dark-brown hair, as she cautiously opens the bulky door, which gives a deep, painful groan. She waits until the door’s final gripe before walking in, her articulated footsteps echoing in the silence. At first, all we see is midnight blue wallpaper, until the camera pans to the right and we see a blue-beaded chandelier, presumably belonging to her daughter. The beads softly shimmer with the light streaming in from the window behind. Julie slowly walks up to the chandelier, gently reaches out as if to stroke the beads, and yanks at them in frustration. Standing still, she stares at the ones that have fallen onto the floor, as the remaining beads sway and chink above her head.

In his essay “The Expressiveness of Colors,” artist Wassily Kandinsky—known for his early 20th-century abstract paintings—explains that blue is the “typical heavenly color,” often creating a feeling of rest (194). He suggests that a dark blue—one that “sinks almost to black”—symbolizes deep grief, and as it grows slightly lighter, it becomes more indifferent and neutral (194). In the opening scene of the film, dark blue-gray tones are used to foreshadow the heavy tragedy and deep grief that are to come. But while the blue in Anna’s bedroom also contains a hint of gray, it is considerably lighter than the previous tones; there are even bright white reflections from the shimmering blue beads of the chandelier, creating the full effect of Kandinsky’s “heavenly color.” The blue chandelier symbolizes Anna’s childhood—her angelic innocence, grace, and beauty. True to the nature of the angelic, the beads are also a painful reminder that she is forever gone. Julie destroys the tormenting memory by physically breaking the chandelier—releasing the beads, and herself, from bondage. Yet when she moves into a flat in the city, the first thing she does is hang the chandelier, fully repaired. It still represents Anna and reminds Julie of the pain, but in her new home—her new life—it also represents love and hope: love for her daughter, love for happy memories, and hope for a better future. The chandelier—like the color blue itself—can mean what she needs it to mean.

After the blue bedroom scene, we see Julie looking through her husband’s music scores. As she flips through the folders, a melody begins to play. Only a few piano notes can be heard, and while they are almost soothing in their melancholy, each note is distinctively, deliberately played. The atmosphere is eerie, surreal, and heavy with sorrow. Julie looks up from the folder and heads

downstairs towards the empty piano; the taunting yet lyrical melody intensifies. She unfolds a single sheet of paper by the piano, and as she closes it, the piano notes fade away. We hear low sobs from a nearby room, which brings us back to a solemn blue reality of loss.

The music plays several roles, representing different objects and evoking different emotions. We see the anxiety in Julie's face as she reads her husband's work; the score and the piano within her old home represent not only the past, but also the memory of her husband, and her pain in remembering. But while the melody may represent Julie's past and current suffering, it also foreshadows her eventual freedom from pain. The melody happens to be part of an anticipated yet unfinished piece her husband was working on called "The Unification of Europe." Later in the film, we will see Julie stepping out of her shell, her emotionless exile, and returning to this melody, this time to complete it. It becomes a metaphor for her emotional liberation.

And yet, even though the entire film is about Julie's personal quest to gain freedom from the past, Kieślowski himself has stated that "freedom is impossible"; it is something we all strive for, but it is unattainable (Ciment & Niogret 127). He explains that you can't be free of everything that has happened in the past, "because at a certain moment something like simple fear arises or a feeling of loneliness or . . . the feeling of having been deceived." Kieślowski sees emotions as controlling forces that arise from past experiences and inevitably thwart a person's freedom, however hard-earned. To him, emotional liberation is an oxymoron. Ultimately, he asks, "How far are we free from feelings? Is love a prison? Or is it freedom?" (*Kieślowski on Kieślowski* 213). Julie tries to be emotionless—a voluntary exile in a neutral, lifeless world of her own creation. But she needs the chandelier to remain with her; she needs that melancholy piece of her husband's score; she needs to be bound to the past to create a new present.

When Julie begins to gain her equilibrium and turns to her husband's unfinished composition, she uses a cobalt blue felt pen to compose the music on blue tinted paper. During this process, she experiments with different instruments—with brassy trumpets and smooth violins—and finally arrives at a flute that plays soft, pure, and wholesome notes that send soothing "vibrations" to the soul of the viewer. Julie, whose stiff face loosens with a rare smile as she listens to the peaceful melody, is also soothed by these vibrations. In the last scene, we see a close-up of the blue-beaded chandelier—a representation of Anna and thus a manifestation of eternal love. We also see clips of all the people who have been touched by Julie's story and generosity, including the baby boy of her husband's mistress, visible through a blue ultrasound,

symbolizing creation and life. In the background, we hear a glorious chorus singing 1 Corinthians:13 in Greek—a majestic performance praising love, charity, and liberation. We then see Julie making love to Olivier, a long-time admirer who helped her complete the composition, but whom Julie initially rejected when she isolated herself.

Yet despite every image—every sound—in the film that ultimately signifies her liberation, Julie cannot ever be free from the human ties that bind. Kieślowski's film encourages us to keep questioning what freedom really means. Alicja Helman, a professor of film theory, explains that Julie's immediate reaction is to cut herself entirely from her past life to be free of her pain, to attain "freedom *from*" suffering. But Helman claims that this "freedom *from*" becomes destructive in the long run, because it cuts Julie off from the "well-springs of life." Slowly but surely, Julie rediscovers herself and begins to find freedom in a new sense of freedom—"the freedom *to* make choices, *to* enter the stream of life and other people's affairs" (131). At first rejecting and avoiding all human contact, Julie finds herself befriending a prostitute, reaching out to Olivier, and spreading her compassion and generosity even to her husband's pregnant mistress and their unborn child. She gives Sandrine, the mistress, her old home. Helman sees this enlarged sense of freedom as a cyclical state of being—a continual oscillation between "freedom *from*" (or fleeing) and "freedom *to*" (or doing) (131).

In our society, we often hear about the freedoms we are given in the Bill of Rights—freedom of speech, freedom of religion. We take for granted the right to eat when we are hungry, or the right to have a source of heat when it is cold. Kieślowski seems to be getting at something that basic, that concrete, in his conception of emotional freedom (or its lack). David Detmer, a philosophy professor, draws upon the work of existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre when he states that "emotional consciousness is not reflective, but rather is directed out toward an object in the world. For example, as long as I am afraid, I do not reflect on my fear, for my attention is riveted to the object of my fear" (36). Experiencing an emotion isn't about being in a general mood. It is about having one's attention and consciousness focused on and devoted to one particular thing. One is literally captivated or bound to that object. Emotion is not something one can be free *from*.

When Julie learns of her husband's dishonesty, "she becomes," according to Kieślowski, "a prisoner of a jealousy which is absurd" because it is focused on her husband, who is dead (*Kieślowski on Kieślowski* 215). She is trapped by this jealousy; her anger, disappointment, and frustration cannot be directed toward an object, since her husband is long gone. So initially, she finds a

proxy in his mistress, Sandrine. Yet she does not achieve freedom from the past by doing so. And yet, she is not necessarily trapped. Acclaimed Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa explains that to achieve a greater awareness—both a spiritual and mental freedom—in which there is “an attitude of fundamental acceptance of oneself while still retaining critical intelligence,” one must leave “emotions . . . as they are, neither suppressed nor indulged but simply acknowledged” (4). You neither ignore the pain nor wallow in self-pity; instead, you accept the pain and let it pass through you. What Julie does, once she actually meets Sandrine, is both unexpected and liberating. She does not direct her emotional turmoil at Sandrine but instead reaches a sympathetic and peaceful resolution. She gives the pregnant woman her old home, and acknowledges that her husband is the father of Sandrine’s child—an act of acceptance, forgiveness, and emotional liberation.

Trungpa explains that at a certain point, emotions can become painful because we are unsure of our relationship to them—“there is a tremendous conflict, a feeling that you are being overpowered by your emotions, that you are losing your basic identity, your center of command” (64). His solution to this problem is vague, but somehow manageable: one must “be able to relate fully and thoroughly with the emotions” to not be overwhelmed by them (65). Only when the object is no longer of primary importance can there be reflection—and reflection thus characterizes the liberation from that particular emotion. Freedom depends on one’s ability to acknowledge and accept one’s own thoughts and emotions. This involves expressing the emotions, letting them pass—letting them come and go, “neither suppressed nor indulged” (Trungpa 4). Liberation comes from this acceptance; it gives us greater awareness of the beauty in life, however inescapably blue.

By the end of the film, Julie has achieved this acceptance—a freedom to do, and see, good things, despite the emotional weight of her past. She finds a new freedom in generosity and creativity, giving her old home away and her husband’s name to his only heir, and venturing back into her musical past to complete the anticipated composition. Above all, she finally reciprocates the love and compassion of Olivier. We see her after she has made love to him—sitting on his doorstep, alone, looking out into the night, with her lips resting against her clasped hands. The moonlight casts periwinkle reflections upon her smooth face and illuminates the tears that are cascading down her cheeks. It is the first time we see her crying freely, and yet she is also smiling. The end of the film is also her beginning.

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