

Synaesthesia in Kieslowski's *Trois couleurs: Bleu*

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Abstract

Studies of Kieslowski's Trois couleurs: Bleu have so far failed to unite the intensely subjective nature of the film with the apparent universality of colour symbolism. This essay proposes a reading of the protagonist, Julie, as a synaesthete who associates colour and sound in a truly personal configuration. The piece traces the history of synaesthesia from nineteenth-century artistic visions to contemporary psychology, exploring the cultural and medical ramifications of the condition. This leads to an examination of synaesthesia as a manifestation of Julie's physical injury, creativity, and social isolation. Synaesthesia attaches a powerful imagery to the deep emotions that leave her mute for so much of the film. Two recurring visual motifs are identified in Bleu: a blue rectangle and a nebulous, soft, blue shape. These are interpreted through the lens of synaesthesia to provide a new reading of the film, and a fresh approach to the questions of voyeurism surrounding this portrait of mourning.

Keywords

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Three Colours: Blue
senses
perception

Discussion of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Trois couleurs: Bleu/Three Colours: Blue* (1993) (henceforth referred to as *Bleu*) has so far failed to synthesize the significance of the titular colour with the film's intensely subjective focus on the traumatized Julie. How can we reconcile the public nature of symbolism, and the French national ideal of liberty that Kieslowski takes as his theme (Kieslowski 1993: 212), with an exploration of the wounded mind? In this piece I suggest that the close engagement of Kieslowski's portrait of anguish is not at odds with the manifestly artificial manipulation of colour in *Bleu*, nor with the sense that Julie's innermost self is communicated to us symbolically. I argue that the widely varying claims made about the symbolism of blue are evidence that it has no fixed significance and that, like the vision of liberty explored in the film, the use of colour in *Bleu* is an exposure of the highly personal, with an eye on the ethics of voyeurism. In particular, I will focus on the ways in which the different forms taken by the colour are experienced by Julie, suggesting that she has synaesthesia (a neural condition in which a stimulus to one sense produces a response in one or more others). Examining the way this uncertain perceptual experience is communicated to the viewer, I will suggest a new way of understanding the experience of watching *Bleu*. Julie's vision will be examined in the context of her status as an accident victim and as an artist unencumbered by material concerns. In this last respect, she is positioned against a hitherto unacknowledged historical background. Synaesthesia is

not a mere trick of the cinematic medium; rather, it is a tool which Kieslowski uses to probe Julie's mind more deeply than might be imagined possible, and to interweave her psyche with every symbol in *Bleu*. The film draws more universal significances from its exposition of Julie's perceptual mystery, provoking wider discussion on the figure of the synaesthetic artist. *Bleu* reinterprets nineteenth-century experiments with synaesthesia in art, their mystical practitioners and spiritual aims, to suggest a morbid detachment at the heart of such work. Julie's synaesthesia becomes fused with her music as an isolating disease, to be cured only by an act of wilful rejection.

All symbolism involves a correspondence between symbol and symbolized which is recognized by more than one individual, either because it has a general cultural significance, or because a collocation is set up within a text. The colour symbolism in *Bleu* is unlike that in the other *Trois couleurs* films. The symbolic significance of blue itself is of a markedly different order to that of red or white: white with its strong (western) associations of virginity, blankness, emptiness, and purity; red associated with anger, sexual desire, blood, and socialism. These associations are powerful enough to play a structural role in the experience of watching *Blanc* and *Rouge*: we await confirmation or subversion of our preconceptions. Although blue does have symbolic associations (with the Madonna and with the high price of blue pigment in medieval and renaissance art), they are far less obvious. Critics' assessments of its symbolic value are hopelessly tangled with myriad personal experiences: the qualities they evoke are marked by a somewhat vague, mystical quality. For Agnès Peck (who is widely quoted), blue suggests 'a whole range of reminiscent emotions (blue is often associated with the sphere of memory)' (Peck 1997: 122). It is 'the colour of the immateriality of the heavens, besides of course having an affinity with music, the least material of the arts' (Peck 1997: 123). Within the scope of the film, Geoff Andrew regards blue as 'signifying melancholy and solitude' (Andrew 1998: 32). What these readings and others suggest most clearly is that the colour blue has no definite associations that any director could rely upon invoking. Indeed, Kieslowski's initial concept was founded on his own entirely erroneous assumption that the French associated liberty, equality and fraternity with the hues of the *tricolore* flag. I would not seek to dispute the cool, recessive mood created by blue tones. However, unlike *Blanc* or *Rouge*, *Bleu* takes its eponymous colour out of the comprehensible environment of its protagonist, into inexplicable washes and lights. This calls for a more definite reading of its purpose than so far attempted: one which will acknowledge the central, defining role of blue in constructing Julie's experience. In failing to acknowledge fully the very *non-symbolism* of blue (relative to red or white), its mutability as a signifier, and the personalized nature of the readings so far suggested, existing criticism has overlooked the most subjective reading of all: blue as the individualized synthesis of colour symbolism and mental experience which resides in Julie's synaesthetic consciousness.

Synaesthesia

One of Kieslowski's avowed aims in the production of *Bleu* was to present a vision of extreme subjectivity via an elimination of trickery: 'There are a

few impressive shots but there aren't many effects as such. I cut out a great number of effects. We wanted to convey Julie's state of mind' (Kieslowski 1993: 22). What effects are apparent deserve interpretation in the light of this willed subjectivity, as well as of ludic postmodernism (for an exploration of this aspect of *Bleu* see Wilson 1998). While blue washes, and blue shapes, permeate much of the imagery of *Bleu*, and frequently coincide with bursts of music, one scene suggests the imbrication of sight and sound more powerfully than any other. In a key moment for my reading of *Bleu*, we see Julie sitting on the stairs of her apartment building, locked out. As the music of Patrice's (or maybe Julie's) unfinished concerto surges, she closes her eyes. A precise pattern of projected, deep blue rectangles drifts across her blank, closed face and around her head. Arguably, but not so far suggested, Julie is experiencing synaesthesia.¹ In her 'coloured hearing', she has the most common form, automatically visualizing coloured shapes and patterns on hearing particular sounds.

In the introduction to their synaesthesia anthology, Simon Baron-Cohen and John Harrison describe the experience:

A synaesthete might describe the colour, shape and flavour of someone's voice, or music whose sound *looks like* (my emphasis) shards of glass, as scintillation of jagged, coloured triangles moving in the visual field. [...] The experience is frequently projected outside the individual, rather than being an image in the mind's eye.

(Baron-Cohen and Harrison 1997a: 17)

Developmental synaesthesia (lifelong experience of the condition) is believed by some neuroscientists to be the unusual persistence of sensory mingling experienced by all newborns (Maurer 1997). This understanding offers a new and individualized twist to Emma Wilson's application of Kristeva: 'all colours, but blue in particular as the first colour perceived by the child's retina, take the adult back to the stage before the identification of objects and individuation' (Wilson 1998: 349). Julie is returned to infant modes of sensory fusion, signifying the strangeness and incomprehensibility of the world into which the car crash hurls her so violently. Her synaesthesia means that these modes are very particularly *her own*, cautioning us from claiming affinity through common experience. The full-screen colour wash, which startles her on the hospital terrace, is the first and also the most powerful incidence of inexplicable colour: as time goes on, the world becomes less strange, and blue reappears with less vigour. Julie learns to sense again, and her perceptions become increasingly 'normal' (and adult).

Early scenes in the hospital encourage us to understand that ensuing images will be inflected by Julie's mental state. Kieslowski describes the way 'she opens her eyes and, for a while, she sees a blur. This isn't accidental. It's typical of her mental state of absolute introversion, of focussing in on herself' (Kieslowski 1993: 222). This admission, that he distorts the visual according to mental affect rather than physical injury, is a support to a synaesthetic reading of the rectangular lights, and of other incidences where blue might be read more conventionally as part of an external reality. Why would Julie's be the only room in the hospital with blue panes

1. Paul Coates refers to synaesthesia (Coates 2002: 45), and Michel Estève wonders if Kieslowski is familiar with Rimbaud's vowels (Estève 1994: 121), but both describe symbolism rather than a neural phenomenon.

of glass (obvious in the exterior shot)? Or is Julie the only patient who sees blue panes of glass? The status of the aural is similarly confused. We are surprised by Julie's initial sudden start at music we might have expected to be extra-diegetic, but close examination reveals that even sounds we presume to be audible to other residents of *Bleu's* 'real' world are unreliable. On her return to the family home, Julie sits at the piano, clutching a piece of manuscript paper, and we hear the notes of the concerto. Although at first glance she appears to be playing the tune herself, the trembling of the paper reveals that she is holding it in at least one of her (unseen) hands. The music continues to be heard beyond the bars so far notated, and a cut to the sight of her other hand on the piano lid shows that that, too, is occupied. Rather than playing, Julie is hearing (and maybe composing) the music in her mind, perhaps emotionally unable to play it.

In reading *Bleu* through Julie's synaesthesia, we need to attend not just to colour, but to the shapes that blue takes on as she hears music. The distinctly rectangular figure, which appears on the stairs is noticeable at other moments of crisis in the film, opposed to the soft, indistinct shapes of more positive moments. The blue, square or rectangular figure presented to us in the scene on the staircase is exported from Julie's private language to become the shape of absence and bereavement in *Bleu*, appearing most obviously at the lowest emotional points. A blank rectangle easily appears as a frame of emptiness, rather than an object in itself: it is the shape of picture frames, windows, television and cinema screens, spaces we expect to be filled with something meaningful. *Bleu* makes this manifest, contrasting the exposition provided in screens within the film (the funeral, the documentary on Patrice) with its own 'blackouts' (including white and blue ones). Here, the screen is filled with plain colour, interpreted immediately by the spectator as all-encompassing emptiness extending infinitely beyond a vacant frame.

Julie's return home begins with her checking that the staff have removed everything from the 'blue bedroom', which belonged to her daughter, Anna. Everything has indeed gone, except a blue crystal mobile, which Julie eventually takes with her to Paris. The squarish room, with blue squares projected on the wall by the curtainless window, has become a box notable for its emptiness: we remark what is *not* there. It is filled with the fact of Anna's absence. The blue square appears again when Julie, apparently desperate for human contact, summons Olivier to be with her. As he enters the empty house, the screen is divided in two: on one side, the four-cornered indigo panes of the window; in opposition, the presence of a living being who can offer comfort. These empty shapes reveal the invisible presence of bereavement in Julie's life. The blue square is an extension of her personal synaesthesia into a cinematic symbolism with which Kieslowski gives us the key to wordless, intuitive comprehension.

The motif of the swimming pool acts as a barometer for Julie's emotional condition, bringing together as it does the soft shapes of the shining blue water, and the uncompromising rectilinearity of the structure. The degree of foregrounding of right-angled forms reflects her state of mind. The first pool scene seems melancholy but curative, Julie's backstroke cre-

ating arcs of sparkling droplets, recalling the crystal lights of Anna's mobile and suggesting the presence of her memories. The second visit culminates in an overwhelmingly oppressive use of the quadrilateral. After her swim, Julie half lifts her body from the water to leave the pool, but she and we are immediately confronted by the harshness of the rectangular tiles which line its sides and walls (all tinted blue by a filter). Back in the water, as she floats face-down, curled up, she covers her eyes, shielding them from the grid of rectangular tiles beneath her, whole lines of them coloured a deeper blue. Her pain seems externalized in the cage of rectangles around her. The film's cinematographer Slawomir Idziak has not used a filter for the third scene, and the pool is populated by her neighbour Lucille and a class of schoolgirls; without its blue cast, the grid of tiles loses visual primacy and is thrown into the (insignificant) background by the presence of human life and affection. In the final visit to the pool, immediately after the shock of her first meeting with her husband's pregnant lover, a splash indicates Julie's arrival before the camera pans round the space. Through a deep blue filter, we see more of the building than ever before. The lens dwells on the lines running round the walls and door and between the lanes, the railings of the balcony and the innumerable rectangular dashes of the strip lights. The environment seems to hum with the resonant emptiness and threat of a Rothko painting as she faces the pain of betrayal by somebody who is *not there*.

In direct opposition to the right-angled figure of bereavement and absence, soft blue cloud-like shapes, such as the mobile, insinuate themselves into more positive moments, representing remembrance of the dead: presence. Julie's inability to part with the mobile is her first step towards deliberately *remembering*. Away from the 'blue bedroom' filled by Anna's absence, the mobile fills Julie's new Parisian apartment with her presence. (This embodiment is highlighted by her mute, disturbed trembling when Lucille claims to have had one exactly the same, and had forgotten it as she grew up.) The mobile frequently reflects light onto Julie's face, wraps itself gently into the composition of the image: its crystals nestle physically in the hand or at the bottom of a bag, and hang noticeably but not obtrusively at the centre of her apartment. It is immanent without being oppressive; adaptable and illuminating. The soft shape is also the synaesthetic expression of a particular sound. As Julie sits in her local café, we see the street musician get out of a car against the background of a grey wall. Only after he begins to play a familiar tune does the hazy patch of blue graffiti behind him come into shot. We do not know that what we hear is not filtered through her psyche: Olivier's response to her remarking on its familiarity is a determinedly ambiguous 'Isn't it...'. Likewise then, the simultaneous display of blue on the visual plane has an uncertain provenance and an unreliable quality. Its appearance associated with the music, it seems to emanate from the recorder, offering us a suggestion of the visual manifestation these gentler tones might induce in Julie. For her, the sound of the recorder is preferable to the full orchestral music she heard on the stairs, and as such its corresponding blue shape is lighter and softer, akin to the soft form of memory rather than the empty, rectangular frame of loss. Her final change to the concerto eliminates the heavy per-

cussion and 'sounding brass' we have grown familiar with, substituting a lone, soft recorder: she rejects the monumental emptiness of brassy 'rectangular' sounds and embraces the soft cloud of blue invoked by their replacement. The fact that she only realizes this consciously so much later intimates the deep level at which synaesthesia works in *Bleu*, showing us the undercurrents of a mind too numb to express itself through the surfaces of facial expression or language. At the same time, the subtle building of correspondences gives *Bleu's* viewer an uncanny sense of the rectitude of the final version of the concerto. A sense of resolution to the equally irresolvable processes of mourning and of artistic creation is achieved by pre-suggesting the 'right' answers and embedding them in the viewer's mind with pseudosynaesthetic symbolic associations (it is notable that true synaesthetes commonly exhibit superior memory, probably the result of sensory associations which aid recollection; see Cytowic 1993: 77).

In setting a synaesthetic, creative figure so obviously in Paris, Kieslowski places Julie in a historical tradition that has not yet been critically addressed. Following a surge in scientific interest, synaesthesia was appropriated by nineteenth-century poets as a gift which set the 'seer' above the common herd. In his *Salon de 1846*, Baudelaire identified with a triple synaesthesia of sound, scent and colour, quoting Hoffman: 'The scent of brown and red marigolds especially produces a magical effect on my being. I fall into a profound reverie and then hear as though from afar the solemn, deep notes of the oboe' (Baudelaire 1992: 58). His renowned 'Correspondences' makes an even more explicit display of the manner in which 'perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond' (Baudelaire 1993: 19). Similar ideas were later reprised by Rimbaud in 'Vowels', an expression of coloured-alphabet synaesthesia: 'A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels' (Rimbaud 2001: 135).

Kieslowski transforms this misanthropic nineteenth-century sensory gift, which sets the Parisian artist *above* the crowd, into something which sets Julie *apart*, in crippling isolation. Like the young Baudelaire, Julie finds herself alone in Paris with a substantial inheritance and 'absolutely nothing' to do, as she tells the letting agent. As Kieslowski describes it, 'for all its tragedy and drama, it is hard to imagine a more luxurious situation than the one Julie finds herself in' (Kieslowski 1993: 212). He deliberately relocates her to the packed Rue Mouffetard to demonstrate this detachment from society, even as she sits in the midst of it. She is immured within herself, initially unable to respond to the social claims made on her by the neighbours' petition, and by Lucille's subsequent friendly overtures. Her synaesthesia is one component in *Bleu's* construction of this isolation, imparting the sense that she lives among others, but is not like them. The things she sees are not the things that they see. This mismatch is analogous to the relation of the albatross to the vulgar sailors in Baudelaire's 'The Albatross':

The poet is a kinsman in the clouds
 Who scoffs at archers, loves a stormy day;
 But on the ground, amid the hooting crowds,
 He cannot walk, his wings are in the way.

(Baudelaire 1993: 17)

But are Julie's cumbersome wings her bereavement, or might it be her art, and her synaesthesia, which set her apart? In which case, is Kieslowski suggesting that the price of such a gift is too high?

A morbid gift

By transforming the established image of the gifted synaesthetic artist into an unhappy, solitary figure, Kieslowski raises a parallel doubt over whether synaesthesia is itself an unmitigated good. It adds a new dimension to a question Slavoj Žižek has identified in Kieslowski's oeuvre, namely the tension between ethics and morality: 'the choice between vocation (leading to death) and a quiet satisfied life' (Žižek 2001: 137). This dilemma is invariably resolved either by death or by renunciation of destructive vocational pursuits. (In Kieslowski's *La Double Vie de Véronique/The Double Life of Véronique* (1991), Véronique the school music teacher lives, but Weronika, who aims for a 'higher' art, expires on stage.) In *Bleu*, Julie accepts Olivier's rejection of her work in favour of his own more earthbound music, apparently without rancour. Instead of expressing anger at this concealment of her talent, she embraces a return to human contact. In accepting this severance from the concerto, she ceases to be an 'albatross' and moves towards social 'normality'. The apparent positivity of this step, from numb isolation towards charity on St Paul's terms, distracts the viewer from Kieslowski's ultimately dark conclusion regarding the destiny of the gifted. (In this respect, it is significant that Olivier is shown to possess a decidedly lesser talent than Patrice.) This ambivalence towards artistic talent mirrors the status of synaesthesia: in the nineteenth century particularly, arguments were put forward that it was a symptom of mental disturbance rather than an elevating experience. Even in the present, its strangeness and unacknowledged status as a phenomenon have made it something which many choose to hide, for fear of being thought mad (Cytowic 1993: 48). In his research into synaesthesia, psychologist Richard Cytowic identified other possible causes of unusual colour experiences:

Brain damage can cause hallucinations of colours and elementary visual perceptions such as sparks, flames, or flickering. The visual scene can take on a monochromatic hue, as if a colour wash were painted over everything. Sometimes colour even takes on a life of its own and refuses to stick to the boundaries of objects [...] These visual errors amount to hallucinations in sane people. All are caused by illness in the brain.

(Cytowic 1993: 31)

Not all synaesthetes have experienced its effects since childhood: as Baron-Cohen and Harrison record: 'most cases of *acquired* (my emphasis) synaesthesia appear to arise in individuals who suffer damage to anterior portions of the brain, often the optic nerve' (Baron-Cohen and Harrison 1997b: 112). The fact that Julie appears to us with a sutured eye, after the blurred vision of Olivier, strongly hints that her distorted vision may not simply be a filmic symptom of her introspection, but the result of real physical injury. The most overpowering 'blue' sound, coinciding with the

loud burst of concerto, which wakes Julie in hospital, appears to surprise her greatly, suggesting that the experience is new to her. The fact that Julie's synaesthesia seems to subside throughout the recuperation process of *Bleu*, never again achieving the startling intensity it had on the hospital terrace, hints that it is a symptom of the damage she is slowly recovering from, a manifestation of the disease of grief and its associated art.

Casting an aura of uncertainty around Julie's ability to be a member of society, synaesthesia takes on a pathological aspect, and the heavenly in synaesthetic art appears sepulchral. Wassily Kandinsky, a synaesthete himself, put much effort into recreating synaesthetic bonds for all consumers of art (the mode of symbolism described as pseudosynaesthesia). Rejecting mimesis, he espoused abstraction, which would take art away from the earthly, up to the summit of a 'pyramid of art':

Finally, one will arrive at a combination of the particular forces belonging to different arts. Out of this combination will arise in time a new art, an art we can foresee even today, a truly monumental art.

And every artist who buries himself in the hidden inner treasures of his art is a man to be envied, a co-worker upon the spiritual pyramid that will one day reach to heaven.

(Kandinsky 1982: 155)

The supernatural nature of synaesthetic art is stressed by Baudelaire's portrait of the poet as a white-winged aerial figure, and by the characterization of Rimbaud the 'voyant' as an angel: 'Mortal angel AND devil - Rimbaud in short' (Verlaine 1999: 217). Such unearthly gifts lead away from the intimate world of personal contact portrayed in the coda of *Bleu* towards the ineffable and inhuman.

For me, the message of *Bleu* is the precise opposite of Michel Estève's reading that 'art sets itself in opposition to the death instinct' (Estève 1994: 124). I would also suggest that the mystical power identified by Agnès Peck is not 'divine "grace", a creative talent, or the pure expression of sensitivity, the gift of love' (Peck 1997: 124), but a gift of death. The uncertain positioning of Julie's perceptual faculties between real life and inner life support Žižek's sympathetic reading of her personal predicament between two forms of the real. Where Žižek sees Julie recuperated back into the Lacanian symbolic order by loving contact with other human beings, and the restoration of palliative fantasy, her own personal symbols are likewise redeemed in the apparent waning of her synaesthesia. The blue rectangle, previously the space of infinite, aching absence, is repopulated in the coda by the ultrasound image of Patrice and Sandrine's unborn child. The soft blue light of immanent, positive memory caresses Julie's face as she sheds tears for the first time. As a reflection on a window, the soft shape loses the uncertain, spectral quality that it possessed as a symbolic component of Julie's psyche, now exorcized into the more conventionally symbolic cinematic language of *Bleu*. It is meaningful and sad, but no longer unnerving, supernatural or incomprehensible. Synaesthesia for Julie is the expression of Žižek's vocation/life opposition: it is beautiful, alluring, associated with her creativity, but ultimately unten-

able. As long as she experiences it we must read her either as a traumatized patient or someone socially impaired by her artistic talent. She cannot truly live until she recovers from her trauma and rejects the art that is imbricated with it. Synaesthesia becomes deathly in *Bleu*, and Julie the synaesthete the living dead. As she rolls up her music for the last time and prepares to go to Olivier, the 'souvenir' mobile descends over her. Its shape can freely embrace her image as she abandons synaesthetic art and comes down to earth. At the same time, we hear the first words of the chorus to the concerto, from St Paul's letter to the Corinthians; words which have only otherwise been heard the last time she rid herself of the manuscript, in the back of the rubbish truck: 'though I speak with the tongues of angels and have not love, I am become as sounding brass'. As long as Julie continues to absorb herself in the music of Patrice, she speaks with his tongue: her work is meaningless if she herself does not love. Without contact, Julie is 'as sounding brass', the sound which has previously been synaesthetically associated with the empty rectangular shape of loss.

Synaesthesia is a tool, which allows Kieslowski to invert the structure of symbolism. Instead of employing the generalities of widely recognized symbols to home in on Julie's personal experience, he takes her own private, pre-linguistic symbols and exports them into the visual language of *Bleu*. By working outwards from Julie, the central subject, and using her particular symbolic 'voice' to tell her story, he evades accusations of voyeurism. Had the symbols of the film been those in general cultural circulation, the relentless pursuit of Julie might have seemed a crude attempt to force inadequate generalizations on to the unspeakably personal; a disrespectful cannibalization. Synaesthesia permits Kieslowski to extrapolate something general *from* the personal, without first requiring the personal to be translated into language (itself one of the inadequate general symbolisms). At the same time, synaesthesia creates a parity between viewer and Julie: Kieslowski sets the symbols he has populated her mind with to work in ours. Only a dissection of his images, such as I have attempted, reveals why we agree with Julie that the solo flute is right for the concerto. The synaesthetic, artistic escape into the ineffable that Kieslowski suggests is untenable for everyday life is exactly what gives *Bleu* its wordless spirituality. The triumph of synaesthesia in *Bleu* is to make us understand, without knowing why, or even what.

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