

Three Colours Blue

(Trois couleurs: Bleu) [1993, France, Subtitled]

Study Notes



Directed by: Krzysztof Kieslowski

Certificate: 15

Running time: 94 mins

Suitable for: GCSE, A Level French, Media/Film Studies

Keywords: French language, French society, Kieslowski

Synopsis:

Blue engages with Liberty, as the character of Julie searches for freedom from grief through destructive insularity and ultimately the healing power of music. After the death of her daughter and famous composer husband, Julie (Juliette Binoche – The English Patient) tries to erase the past and make a new life by selling all her possessions, moving house and destroying her late husband's work. She also distances herself from anyone who loves her and avoids discussion about the accident. When she agrees to help complete her husband's final work, she begins to allow herself to move on, leading to a stunning climax which is both haunting and transcendental.

Introductory note

This Study Guide can elicit discussion in a variety of subjects including Media and Film Studies, Music, Art and Design and French. Three Colours: Blue is the first of the famous and groundbreaking trilogy by Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski. The three films focus on the colours of the French flag (Blue, White, Red) which each represent one of the nation's principles: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

Before Viewing

Reviews of the Three Colours Trilogy are almost unanimous in their praise. It's difficult to actually find a negative review of Blue. Check out some reviews of Blue and the Three Colours trilogy as a whole from a range of sources.

- What is the general consensus of opinion on these films?
- What negative criticism is there of Three Colours Blue?

An interesting analysis of Blue can be found at www.metalasylum.com/ragingbull/movies/threecolorsblue.html

- What is the relationship between the film and France?
- The analysis describes *'one of the most incredible and creative scenes of filmmaking ever'*. What shot are they describing? Has the shot described become something of a cliché? Where else have you seen this shot?
- What expectations do you have of the film after reading this analysis?

The Opening Scene

The car accident is shot in an unconventional way that is affecting yet economical in terms of character exposition and number of shots. After the initial accident, Julie wakes to find herself in a hospital bed. Two unique shots are used as the doctor tells her about the fate of her family.

1. Before the car crash, the only member of Julie's family that we see is her daughter Anna, though we do hear Julie say a few words and catch a single glimpse of her husband. Why do you think we see and hear so little from the family before the car crash?
2. What type of shot focus is used as Julie first awakens after the accident?
3. Describe how the doctor is first seen onscreen in this same sequence. What shot types and camera angles are used?
4. In the first ten minutes (up to the televised funeral) what different shot types / angles / camera moves can you recall?
5. What effect does this entire sequence have on the audience?

Depiction of Grief

Julie responds to the death of her husband and daughter in a number of different ways in an effort to erase her connection to her past.

6. What does Julie do with her life after the accident in an effort to move on? How does this compare to other representations of mourning you may have seen onscreen?
7. What value is placed on personal possessions and identity in the film?
8. Why does Julie reveal some of her true feelings to the crash witness and to her mother? Think about narrative trajectory as well as character in your answer.

The Colour Blue

9. Which key items in the film are blue and how does Julie react to these objects?
10. What do you think the colour blue represents in the film? Does its meaning change?
11. What do you think is the significance of the blue hanging mobile?
12. Do any other colours stand out in the film's palette?

Music

The film revolves around the healing power of music, where the score of the film is almost a character in itself. Often the music seems to be playing in Julie's head, challenging the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound.

13. An early sequence sees Julie standing near a piano whilst reading one of her late husband's compositions, the notes audible on the soundtrack as the corresponding notation appears onscreen from Julie's perspective. Clearly no one is playing the piano in the room but the piece ends when she slams the lid down. Discuss: is the score in this scene diegetic or non-diegetic? Explain your answer as fully as you can.
14. What happens to the music in the scene where Julie throws a score-sheet into the garbage truck?
15. Occasionally, loud stabs of classical music punctuate moments when Julie is alone, as if she is being shocked out of her numbness. This technique has a similar effect to when the killer lurches out of the darkness in a horror movie. Can you think of any other films where music is used to disturb or to represent buried emotions/memories?

Film Language

Camera movement, transitions, mise en scène and music combine to create some magical and memorable sequences in this film, including a virtuoso scene in which the film's score reacts to Julie as she vocalises some adjustments to her husband's concerto arrangements.

16. Occasionally, a scene will fade to black as if it has ended; only to return to the same part a couple of moments later to carry on the sequence. Why do these fade-outs occur when they do?
17. Julie is in every scene of the film. Are there 'rules' for how the camera captures her or is she shot in a variety of ways depending on the mood of the scene?
18. Kieslowski has said of the film's many close-ups that '*quite simply, we are trying to show how the heroine perceives the world*'¹. What does the use of close-ups on objects Julie is focusing upon say about her during the film? Refer to specific examples that you can remember.

The Ending

Three Colours Blue focuses on the French principle of liberty (or Freedom). Early in the film a journalist tries to ask Julie about her husband's final composition 'Concert for the Unification of Europe'. Julie says, 'It doesn't exist.'

19. What political double meaning might the above exchange have?
20. The final 'concert' (the last few minutes of the film in which all the film's characters and themes are bound by the completed concerto and its lyrics) is a celebrated sequence but is rather abrupt and layered with multiple meanings. How would you respond to the following statements?

The final concert sequence in Blue is:

- a) about Julie's metaphorical rebirth
- b) hopeful
- c) pessimistic
- d) a comment on the transforming power of love for the characters
- e) a comment on the transforming power of love for the salvation of Europe and the World²

Suggested Activities

- Create a short film, study or musical composition based on a particular colour. Challenge yourself by trying not to use lyrics, words or even characters.
- Shoot an object or a short sequence repeatedly using different camera angles/shots each time. Experiment especially with close-ups. Show these sequences to the rest of your class. Has the meaning, tone and impact changed depending on the composition used?

Written by Gareth C Evans

¹ Quote from Krzysztof Kieslowski Masterclass DVD extra on disc of Three Colours: Blue (Artificial Eye)

² This thematic conclusion is suggested in the Three Colours Trilogy collected screenplays (Faber & Faber, 1998 – pg 98)