

Derek Jarman and the colour of dying

by Mia Engberg

The English filmmaker, author and artist Derek Jarman made his final film, *Blue*, in 1993. He was dying of AIDS and slowly going blind. The film consists of a single monochromatic blue image and an audio soundtrack with four voices. It is in part an homage to the artist Yves Klein and his well-known blue paintings for which the color hue IKL - International Klein Blue was named. *Blue* is in many ways Jarman's most radical film; it completely forgoes the use of images but claims its place in the cinema rather than in an art gallery.

The blue image reflects the way the artist's field of vision is slowly being reduced to a blue membrane. A song of mourning for the world of images that he – a visual artist – will never experience again. The film is also an act of resistance against the objectifying and stigmatizing media depictions of gay people at that time, when an entire generation was being devastated by AIDS, publicly shamed and cast out from society.

Perhaps the blue film was also a final, ultra-concentration of all of the images Jarman had ever seen or made in his long life as a radical and innovative artist – condensed into one single blue infinity. A film of films. A blue exit.

In Jarman's manuscript, "the image" symbolizes the information we receive every day about the state of the world. The oppression of the conventional way to represent the world and AIDS in particular. Abstaining from representation and replacing the representative image with black, like Duras, or blue, like Jarman, is not merely a way of reducing. For the artist Yves Klein, it was an expression of a megalomaniacal urge to create something more, something even bigger. He challenged the conventional way of looking at art with his blue paintings. He wanted to "de-objectify" art, and he saw his paintings as a living presence – not as material things. Throughout his working life, Klein tried to go beyond and annihilate representation itself in favor of the immaterial, of emptiness. At twenty, he had already signed the sky as his own work.

Klein saw the blue hue as a potential realm, an extra dimension, a future possibility for humans and their surroundings. In much the same way, with *Blue* Jarman challenged his cinema audience to be more than passive recipients of images. The color and the absence of representation opened up a new realm in the beholder – and in the cinema.

To be an astronaut of the void, leave the comfortable house that imprisons with reassurance.¹

To my mind, sound is a more intimate medium than image. The image, or more specifically the gaze, allows us to remain distinct from the film (or *the other*) and to objectify. We can also choose to close our eyes at any time. Sound is different. It's more difficult to shut out. In *Blue*, the narrative shifts inside the spectator, and other than the endless blue realm before me, the image consists of my own images, created in my own inner darkness. The distinction between me and the film erases itself, and the film takes place inside me rather than in front of me. I sit in the cinema, enlightened

and tinged blue by the light. I have become part of the film itself. It is an intense and deeply intimate cinematic experience.

The story told in *Blue* is deeply moving. The text is read by four voices (Nigel Terry, John Quentin, Tilda Swinton, and Derek Jarman) and the narrative moves between various layers and levels. Harsh and explicit reports from waiting rooms and deteriorating states of health, medications, side effects and physical symptoms as the virus slowly spreads and breaks down the body of the first-person narrator. Some texts are full of humor and directly address me, the spectator. Others are poetic, erotic, intellectual or philosophical.

Blue is at once an ode to the transience of everything and a declaration of love to the ones in Jarman's generation who died a premature death from AIDS, forced into invisibility by society, renounced by their families and by the entire heteronormative, conservative Thatcherite state.

Our name will be forgotten
in time
No one will remember our work
Our life will pass like the traces of a cloud
And be scattered like
Mist that is chased by the
Rays of the sun
For our time is the passing of a shadow
And our lives will run like
Sparks through the stubble
I place a delphinium, Blue, upon your grave ²

There were also political reasons for Jarman to avoid creating a visual representation of a gay man with AIDS. It was the early 90s, and the first generation of homosexuals had begun dying of AIDS. Antiretroviral medicines hadn't been developed yet and the general public and the media had limited knowledge about the disease. The people getting sick were gays, prostitutes and drug addicts – groups that were already marginalized and stigmatized by society. There are countless stories of men who weren't allowed to attend their partners' funerals because of families who denied that the deceased had been homosexual, and even denied the cause of his death. The portrayal of an AIDS-sick man became a genre of its own in the media from early on in the AIDS epidemic; a cliché with very few variations. A person sick with AIDS was portrayed as weak, alone in a hospital bed. Contagious. Never with their partner or at work. The depictions were objectifying and stereotypical:

Objectification of the other through pity.
Pity is not solidarity.³

By dispensing with the image and abstaining from objectification of those who were sick with AIDS, Jarman shifts the question from the private to the political. In the absence of image, we are not permitted to separate ourselves from the sick person. We are not supposed to empathize with *the other*; instead, the intimacy of the audio gives us the possibility for something much deeper. It isn't Him or even You who has AIDS. It's me. It's us.

In a purely formal sense, *Blue* is an exclamation mark of sorts, a concentration of everything that Derek Jarman's radical life's work stood for. Jarman chose to recount his own death with no images at all to liberate himself, as well as the spectator. An act of courage and generosity.

The film premiered in September of 1993, just a few months before Derek Jarman's death.

From the bottom of your heart
pray to be released from image
The image is the prison of the soul. ⁴

1.. Jim Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009) "All received information should make us invert sad." p. 238

2. Ibid. (p. 239)

3. From the film *Blue*, Derek Jarman (London 1993)

4. As Douglas Crimp observed in his text *Melancholia and Moralism* (p. 242 in *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations*) "Certainly we can say that these representations do not help us, and that they probably hinder us, in our struggle, because the best they can do is elicit pity, and pity is not solidarity."