

Quintessential Memento Mori Experience: Derek Jarman's *Blue*

Derek Jarman's film, *Blue*, is a transformative documentary that creates a strong sense of space in which the process of dying is hashed out with *pathos* – especially with humor and anger, and with resignation toward, and defiance of, a terminal condition. It was made in color in Great Britain – completely in a color of blue close to the artist Yves Klein's “international blue”, which fills the screen for the entire production, and it runs approximately 76 minutes. Most directly, *Blue* presents Jarman's situation as an artist with AIDS who is losing his sight and is dying.

Blue, also known as *Derek Jarman's Blue* (1993) is written and directed by Jarman, with narration by Nigel Terry, John Quentin, Tilda Swinton, along with Jarman, and music by Simon Fisher Turner. Because there is no image other than the blue screen throughout the film, there is some rationale for accessing the audio portion of the film only, which is available on an audio CD entitled *Blue: A Film by Derek Jarman* (1993). In fact, *Blue* took on various forms, including a performance piece, as it evolved (Peake 1999, 473–478). In addition, *Blue* was released in various venues including movie theaters, television, and radio (526–528). There is also the text of the film itself and writings that led to it, which appeared in book form (Jarman 1993; 1994). As I see it, Jarman's thoroughly daring work, from his earliest feature film to the avant-garde documentaries at the close of his life, especially in *Blue*, articulates a vision of life in apocalyptic and ecstatic terms.

Jarman's biographer Tony Peake (1999) reports that the film began from “some notes entitled *Bliss*” (362) and went through a variety of forms before settling in as the film. There was some consideration of “a fictional film” and then a performance based upon, and as a tribute to, the work of Yves Klein (Peake 1999, 398–399; and Special Collections, British Film Institute). The proposal for *Blue* is dated August 1987 (559, fnt 31) and titles for it as it progressed include *Bliss*, *International Blue*, *Blue is Poison*, *Into the Blue*, *My Blue Heaven*, *Blueprint for Bliss*, and *Blueprint* (398; 435; 559, fnt 30) – which help give a sense of the wide range of its associations (see also Jarman 1995, 103–124; and Special Collections, British Film Institute).

Originally, Jarman assembled a large hardcover blue notebook (approximately 15 × 15 in.) with gold lettering that shows the crucial role of the artist

Yves Klein's work as an influence upon Jarman, especially in contemplating mortality and immortality in regard to one's life and work ("Jarman II *Blue*" [GB, JP, 1993] Box 16, British Film Institute, Special Collections). Along with pressed flowers and photo-booth shots of Jarman in red and blue, the notebook is full of jottings and various cut-outs and photocopies especially related to Klein. The color blue has definite associations for Jarman with the "immaterial".¹ This notebook is another indication of a definitive place for what began as idea sketches for a film about Klein, evolved into a performance piece, and finally became a film, not about Klein, but rather about Jarman himself, his condition, and his articulation of mortal experience.

The structure of *Blue* is something like a Buddhist meditation, with the sounding of a bell marking the opening, the closing, and select points in between to call the mind to attention. Watching *Blue* in its entirety requires, in part, an acceptance of its conventions. Like in religious practice or theater, a certain amount of suspension of disbelief is necessary in order to adequately participate in this performance, though ultimately it is the *belief* that what the narration references is really happening (or has happened) that defines the film's conventions. Notable also, however, is that, while an all-blue color film seems to be peculiar, it may also be seen as formally objectifying a universal experience of film and television viewing: the continuous flash of the bluish screen.

The music and narration are divided into episodes, clips, or tracks that are short self-contained meditations in and of themselves, and they work together as a whole. Framing, composition, editing, and other visual stylistic choices are rendered virtually moot, except for the fact of Jarman's singular use of the particular blue color, and the stylistic choices fall, in the first place, to a consideration of the audio performance. Because of the all-blue screen, compositional issues are also pushed visually into the performance space in which the film is played and to the viewer him- or herself. The long-running blue screen morphs into different forms in the perception of the viewer who is left to the workings of his or her own imagination and associations and to the various physical-chemical reactions of the body and the interaction between eye and brain in response to the continuous bright blue rectangle.

1 For example, there is a photocopy of "Klein delivering his lecture at the Sorbonne on "The Evolution of Art toward the Immaterial" Paris, June 3, 1959". Jarman writes on the backside of a letter dated June 30, 1988, "If I could choose any painting to hang on my wall it would be an Yves Klein monochrome" ("Jarman II *Blue*" [GB, JP, 1993] Box 16, British Film Institute, Special Collections).