

The Mind and *Nachträglichkeit* Disturbed: Repressed Trauma and Identity Formation in *Blue*

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“An essay on Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *BLUE* is an appropriate choice for a journal issue devoted to the theme of ‘identity.’ *BLUE* is the first installment of Polish director Kieślowski’s motion picture trilogy in which he grapples with his own post-Cold War European identity through the ideals represented by the three colors of the French flag, and this film speaks to issues of historical as well as personal memory in a moving story of a woman coming to grips with the deaths of her husband and daughter. A meditation on loss and recovery, *BLUE* plays with the various symbolic associations of the color from sadness as in ‘feeling blue’ to freedom as the emblem of ‘liberté’ on the French flag. As this essay shows, traumatic memories – whether historical or personal in nature – need the healing properties of hindsight and an often radical embrace of ‘freedom’ to allow new identities to flourish.”

– Prof. Gina Marchetti

Repression of trauma is a major motif in narratives of memory, as the extremity of emotions allows for the full richness of language (whether literary, visual or filmic) to play out. Conceptions about the representation of memory have, however, evolved throughout the years of intellectual history, and the role of media language is only empowered more recently by the notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, which will be elaborated in further detail below. Moreover, memory as the narrative of selfhood is fundamental in establishing identity and subjectivity, thus defeated attempts to articulate the past, such as due to trauma, imply also a defeated identity waiting to be reconstructed. The importance of *Nachträglichkeit* in understanding memory is well illustrated in Krzysztof Kieślowski’s film *Blue*. The film depicts a trauma relentlessly haunting the protagonist, who tries to repress it at great lengths. The trauma is so extreme that it can only be conveyed through the denial and avoidance of language altogether, rather than sensibly articulated through language. Drawing on representations of trauma in *Blue* and the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, this essay studies how memory refuses to be visible and resists language, yet is still significant in shaping a renewed identity.

In narratives of memory, the notion that the past is recalled and retold differently than it is experienced in the first place has gained significance, superseding the archaic excavation analogy which presumes that memory can be restored as it is upon recollection. The earlier model, alluding to archaeological work, holds

that the memory to be uncovered is the seat of the unconscious, which has an “unchangeable” nature and is sought by removing strata of later life above (Freud 57-8, quoted in King 13). Memory restored this way lies intact. The psychoanalytical concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, translated by Laplanche as “afterwardness” (Fletcher and Stanton, quoted in King 11), appeals to the importance of hindsight, “what wasn’t known then” (Benjamin and Nicholls 53, quoted in King 12), in deciphering past events. As one remembers, hindsight fills “the space of contingency” when events are first experienced and shuts out alternative possibilities to closure (Ricoeur 188, quoted in King 23), enabling one to make sense of the past as a chain of specific occurrences leading up to the present.

Nachträglichkeit informs the reader as to the powers of language to represent and create memory, constituting a continual process of recovery, reconciliation and renewal. In Freudian terms, *Nachträglichkeit* subjects memory to retranscription and reconstruction (i.e. fabrication). Experiences are temporally reconfigured under “fresh circumstances” at different times when they are recollected (Masson 207, quoted in King 16). They can also be fabricated and fictionalised if articulating the actual experience falls on limitations of language such as infancy and great emotional intensity of the episode.

Applying these perspectives to the memory of trauma in particular, repression can be understood differently as well. The way traumatised people mourn reveals their attitudes to the past and the present. In the model positing memory as archaeological excavation, repression hints at “complete forgetting” and absolute oblivion to the great shock (King 13). Traumatic memory is repressed in a sense that it is untouched and still lies buried under the weight of life experiences accumulated over time, whereas repression, viewed through the lens of *Nachträglichkeit*, implies multiple distorted representations of trauma. Retranscribed and reconstructed, traumatic memory takes on diverse forms, for instance, factual, unregistered accounts, an alienated, distanced self, or fragmented visual images. These show how language deforms the narrative of traumatic memory as a person reckons with a distressing past. The film under study thus arguably straddles the parameters of *Nachträglichkeit*, shedding light on the limitations of language, in addition to its strengths, in representing traumatic memory.

Blue is the first of Kieślowski’s *Three Colours* trilogy, featuring the French Tricolour blue, white and red. It is a story of a woman Julie’s emotional recovery from the death of her husband Patrice – a famous

musician – and her daughter Anna. Opening with an obscure scene of a car accident, the film immediately follows how Julie lives with grief in post-traumatic times through denial and self-isolation. She also seeks to destroy the musical scores of the Concert for the Unification of Europe, an unfinished piece supposedly composed by her late husband which, as the film subtly hints, may as well be her own work. Her attempts at cutting off human connections are nevertheless frustrated, as she starts anew in an unfamiliar community and has to resolve unexpected issues through communication with her neighbours. As Julie gradually constructs her new self, she suffers another turmoil knowing that her late husband had an affair, but this time she is able to cope better, and even allows the mistress, who carries an illegitimate child with Julie's late husband, to take over her own loved one's possessions. By then, the film could be said to end with Julie's emotional liberation from her double traumas.

At the early post-traumatic stage, Julie has not recovered from the pain of losing her husband and daughter, and chooses to encounter it with a series of negations. When the reporter visits Julie and asks her where the Concert for the Unification of Europe is, Julie replies coldly that it “doesn't exist” (00:11:53, Figure 1). She denies the existence of her husband's (or her own, the film has never made it explicit whose work it is) fruit, now that her loved one passes away. Such remark is obviously untrue, and Julie in fact cherishes the music a lot, seen from its being played as non-diegetic sound whenever she undergoes emotional turbulence. Julie's relative composure in others' company after the trauma also shows her attempt to distance herself from the disturbing memory of pain and loss. Crying hard and saying she keeps “thinking of [Patrice and Anna]” and “remember[s] everything” (00:14:54, Figure 2; 00:14:58, Figure 3), Julie's cousin Marie is bewildered why Julie can collect herself when she visits the old house. It may sound legitimate for Julie to be the one ruminating over the past, but her calmness refracts deeper agony and sorrow that escape tears and verbal language.

If the reconstruction of memory, according to Freud, corresponds to the creation and fantasy of a non-existent past, negation is then the reciprocal: it tends to wipe out traces of past existence. In denying that the music exists and holding back rushes of emotional intensity, Julie tries to restore the pre-traumatic state as if the accident had not happened. In other words, her reaction is wish fulfilment for the “Golden Age of the collective past and the time before loss and separation” (King 28), as well as for the pre-Oedipal phase of

“what we *cannot* remember, but what we *need* to remember as what has been lost” (King 28, original emphases).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Julie represses her traumatic memory by hiding or removing objects that may remind her of loss from her field of vision, her memory is thus one of invisibility. She instructs Bernard to “[clear] out the blue room” (00:13:05, Figure 4), and arranges to “sell all...possessions” (00:16:26, Figure 5). After the last mourning of playing music on the piano, she then throws her late husband’s musical scores into the rubbish truck. Determined to cut off from her past and start anew, Julie is to see no remains which ring back to a state now in demise. Even when Julie meets Antoine, the sole witness of the accident, she gives up the possession of the necklace that she dropped in negligence during the car crash, and lets the boy have her husband’s love token (00:43:22, Figure 6). These moves demonstrate her ability to reason despite the trauma: she knows that she may collapse into a nervous breakdown if she is surrounded by objects belonging to the past. Rather than indulging in grief and distress, Julie knows what is good for her and is brave enough to support herself.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Julie's memory of trauma is not a retranscribed or reconstructed narrative, but embodied through non-linguistic devices of light and sound. Whenever the memory of trauma strikes Julie, patches of blue light are cast on her face, accompanied with the background music of Unification of Europe. Such instances are found before the reporter's visit, when Julie discusses the arrangement of leftover possessions with the lawyer, and as the piano lid bangs down while she is playing music etc. Wilson notes, "Julie's state of mind is a product of music and reflected light" (354). Appealing to semiotic, non-linguistic elements, which Kristeva regards as the discharge of "instinctual drives" betraying the unconscious (91), blue light and melancholic music represent Julie's tension between the yearning for inner peace and involuntary visits of trauma. As the accident scene is buried in confusion, Julie is unable to articulate her trauma in words, so her memory cannot translate into verbal or literary narratives whose temporal structure can be changed, but rather, appears in visual elements that are "organised" in mere repetition. The employment of visual elements in narration also points to the nature of film as a "multitrack medium" (Stam 56). Cinematography, post-production editing, diegetic and non-diegetic sound all contribute to the signification of emotion, in addition to literary or verbal text and still images.

Not only is traumatic memory signified by light and sound, it is represented by blackouts as well, further illustrating its unrepresentability. The first blackout appears when Antoine approaches her to return the necklace. Afterwards blackouts also interrupt the film when moments of immense intensity return to haunt Julie, like her realisation that Patrice has kept a mistress for several years without her knowing. "*Blue* illustrates the denial of memory in an absence of image" (Wilson 354), mirroring the state of the "unthought Mercury - HKU Journal of Undergraduate Humanities: Volume 1 Issue 1

known” (King 20). In such a mental state, traumatic memory may appear in fragmented, disconnected “facts, images and events as a series of photographs” upon recollection (King 20), because the shock of pain shatters the victim’s ability “to draw the right conclusions” from the clues (King 20). The victim is aware of the occurrence of trauma, but “has not truly witnessed [and] taken cognisance of” it so as to decipher it yet (King 19). This is why when Julie is reminded of the life-changing accident, her consciousness recoils to blankness, conveniently veiling the intense drama of “not knowing” and “not wanting to know.” Blackouts exemplify this condition where nothing can be spoken of the trauma, and demonstrate how trauma unmediated by language can be equally, if not more, powerful than verbal or literary narratives of memory.

In spite of the traumatic memory which evades language and transcends the *Nachträglichkeit* model of retranscription and reconstruction, the ultimate meaning of narrating memory is to form identity, which Julie also achieves in the film. King cites Foucault in suggesting that “continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject” (23). Making sense of life, which resembles reading events chronologically and achronologically that comprise a narrative whole, is the fundamental task of man. Having a coherent history, as in storytelling, is important for enunciation, empowering the subject to differentiate between the self and the other, and establish an identity.

Julie’s identity has been in ruins following the trauma, but she starts to build a new self, settling in a strange environment. She switches back to use her maiden name Julie Vignon to register a flat, quickly correcting an unconscious attachment to her old family name De Courcy. She also isolates herself from her neighbourhood, refusing to co-sign a statement to banish a whore from her building as she “[doesn’t] want to be involved” (00:38:31, Figure 7). Julie is able to conquer her childhood fear of mice without killing them and perpetrating the same violence on their family as she herself is a victim of. At first, she is able to hold back her fright and leave the mice alone, seeing the completeness and love of the mice family. (She is only aware that her fear of mice has dwelled in her since young when she later visits her mother. Years of mature adult life and especially the recent trauma have kept Julie away from her old self, momentarily forgetting how she was like before. Her visit to her mother’s house then symbolises recognition of her former self.) Yet at last when Julie cannot stand living with the mice, she borrows her neighbour’s cat to get rid of them. On the one hand this empowers her to overcome childhood fear, and on the other hand preserves her sympathy

towards a united family. In so doing, Julie also succeeds in connecting meaningfully with the community. Julie is also willing to share her flat with the whore, originally an outsider of the community whom Julie cannot care less about earlier. Gradually Julie walks out of her trauma, negotiates with her past and re-establishes her identity as a widow.



Figure 7

Julie's most significant liberation stems from her biggest blow: knowing that her husband had an affair. She decides to meet Sandrine, the mistress, but claims she "[does not] know" if she will "hate" Patrice and Sandrine for adultery (01:15:47, Figure 8). The complexity of emotions renders her inarticulate, and it is unclear whether Julie is numbed by this second trauma, or she truly does not care anymore. Julie then contemplates the particularity of events that led up to her delayed knowledge of the affair. Earlier if she has "[taken] Patrice's papers" with the photographs betraying their intimacy inserted between them (01:18:02, Figure 9), she may have known, but if she "burn[s] them" (01:18:06, Figure 10), she will remain ignorant and the proof of Patrice's disloyalty will perish.

Hindsight to interpret the intricacy of coincidences dawns on her. Looking backwards, Julie sees how "this ending require[s] these sorts of events and this chain of actions" (Ricoeur 170). This epiphany contributes directly to her emancipation, as she discerns the hidden order behind the everyday. With the crevices of fragmented blackouts and broken blue chiaroscuro filled, the memory of her trauma finally reaches language. Hindsight enlightening her rereading of life grants her power to live and to love. As a result she agrees to complete her husband's musical work with Olivier, and does so with enthusiasm,

showcasing her artistic talent. She even sells her old house to Sandrine, introduces the interiors to her and says Sandrine's son "should have [her husband's] name and his house" (01:21:44, Figure 11), so Sandrine's son can inherit the legacy of her late husband. At this, Sandrine compliments Julie that she is as reliable, "good and generous" as Julie's husband describes (01:22:10, Figure 12). At this point, Julie's reconstruction and rediscovery of identity is complete, as she seeks a new self with the "trauma of living in the present absence of the past" (Wilson 352), while retrieving and overcoming the weakness of her old self.



Figure 8

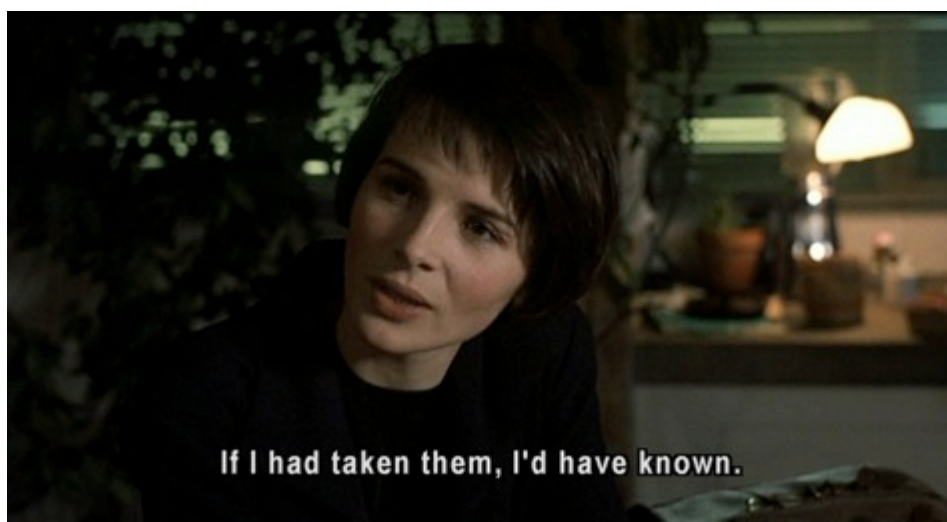


Figure 9



Figure 10

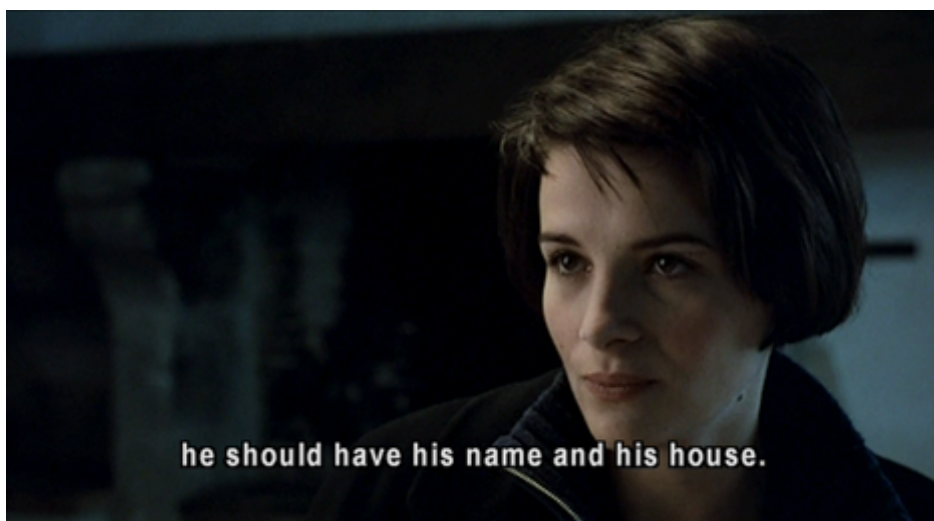


Figure 11



Figure 12

Through analysis of the film's audio-visual interplay, this essay has examined the alternative ways in which narratives of traumatic memory are retold, as well as their role in identity building. Freudian theories of memory, such as the excavation model and *Nachträglichkeit*, shed light on how the past is remembered, yet the former grossly omits that the narrative discourse of memory alters with each recollection, while the latter is based on the assumption that memory *can* be mediated through verbal or written language. Adding a subtler level to *Nachträglichkeit*, *Blue* has demonstrated the voluntary and involuntary absence of memory representations due to distance, pain and confusion; and furthermore, how the knowledge of irreversible chronology in life events restores the existential self.

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Lesley is a rising young scholar in literary and cultural studies. Currently a junior reading English and Comparative Literature, she has developed keen academic interests in meta-narratives and the city. How language fails to articulate the metaphysical, as Wittgenstein posited, is something that never ceases to trouble her, especially coupled with an unwavering belief in the value of art. Lesley is also an active member of local cultural organisations, executing arts festivals and events in town, as well as exploring urban interventions in public spaces.