

Blue

How do you cope with the ultimate personal disaster--the abrupt loss of loved ones? How do you go on living? What kind of life do you lead? These are the opening questions posed in *Blue*, the latest film by famed Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, best known for his *The Double Life of Veronique* and his ambitious *Decalogue*.

A prizewinner at the Venice Film Festival last fall, this Polish-French production could appear too “arty” or aimless to some, but thoughtful moviegoers should give it a try as a serious character study, a sober--but not morose--chamber work made special by the wonderful French actress, Juliette Binoche (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Damage*), who herself won the Best Actress award at Venice.

The film opens with Julie (Binoche) recuperating from the injuries of a car crash which killed her composer husband and young daughter. Once recovered, she decides to utterly jettison her past, selling her elegant country chateau, giving up her possessions, and even trashing a manuscript of the major work called “Concerto for Europe” which her husband was working on at the time of his death. She closes another circle by blithely undertaking a one-night stand with her husband’s colleague Olivier (Benoit Regent), who has adored her from afar, and caps it by deflatingly telling him, after their love-making, that “I sweat, I cough, I have cavities”--just like everybody else. The single thing she keeps from the memory-infested house is a slightly tawdry mobile made of blue glass. She leaves with a masochistic scrape of her knuckles along a rough stone wall.

Julie settles in an anonymous Paris apartment to live anonymously. She creates little routines for herself: shopping, swimming laps, taking coffee over ice-cream at a cafe.... But the world outside keeps insinuating itself, as when a neighbor/prostitute Lucille (Charlotte Very) asks a favor, a street beating erupts outside her building, or when mice invade her pantry. Moreover, the past intervenes, such as a young man, who found her and her family in their wrecked car, tracks her down to return a necklace he’d pinched from the scene. Another surprise piece of the past appears when she learns her husband was having an affair with a young lawyer (Florence Pernel), and the woman, whom Julie hunts down and comes to accept, is pregnant with his baby. Most insistent are the fragmented chords she periodically hears from the Concerto, a piece for which she was partly responsible by editing her husband’s score, and which burst onto the sound track at odd, inexplicable moments.

The message, perhaps banal but true, is that you can’t keep the world out; life goes on--somehow.

She gradually begins to act in the present, helping out Lucille, reconnecting with Olivier to finish the Concerto, and returning to her country house (not yet sold) to offer it to the lawyer. The film ends with the Concerto’s choral music underpinning a lingering montage of all the people whose lives Julie has touched and continues to touch, a hightoned variant of *It’s A Wonderful Life* --of how one person’s presence collectively affects others.

With *Blue*, director Kieslowski has launched a trilogy he calls *Trois Couleurs* based on the blue, white and red colors of the French flag and representing the classic revolutionary trinity: “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.” He and his screenwriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz have stated that their *Blue* stands for “individual liberty, the liberty

of life itself," a freedom limited by our ties "to people, objects, landscapes and money." As a meditation on individual liberty, *Blue* may lack the profundity its makers desire, but where it works is in its careful overall craftsmanship and the arresting presence of Ms. Binoche.

For a motion picture about a musician's wife, there are long stretches *without* music; in fact, there is no real music track. Kieslowski uses mostly natural sounds, with the occasional plangent choral interjection, as surprising and even jarring to the audience as it is to the heroine. The film is effectively built of many small, hand-held takes rather than lingering shots, adding both the pace and quirkiness of real life to what could otherwise be dreary or soporific material. The color scheme predictably features blue items (the mobile, the swimming pool) and favors blue filters, but not overmuch. The color symbolism is muted and its use is tasteful--as is the whole tenor of the film. What *Blue* must finally stand or fall on is Ms. Binoche's countenance (shown steadily throughout the picture), and for this reviewer, it is a compelling one.

With few lines but with her wide-set brown eyes and round, child-like face, Ms. Binoche convinces us she is undergoing a rich range of emotions. One critic has aptly noted her ability to switch between two French archetypes: the *gamine* and the *femme fatale*. As cameraman Slawomir Idziak commented in an interview: "Everything depends on the actress's interior monologue, on the intensity of her presence." One basically believes in Ms. Binoche's internal monologue and in her gradual awakening to a world she had tried to put at bay. She confirms in this performance the splendid impression made in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, her first exposure to most American filmgoers. She was seen to much less advantage in Louis Malle's *Damage*, where she was asked to display little more than a wooden inexpressiveness. Yet, here again, she becomes one of those actresses who, in the filmic cliché, the camera loves.

One shouldn't go to *Blue* to feel blue, but to bask in the luminous talent of a fine film actress.

(*"Blue"* is rated "R" for mature subject matter and sexual situations.)

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