8 Blocks of Suffering: Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colours: Blue*

KRZYSZTOF KIEŚLOWSKI HAS explored in cinema the boundaries between what can be figuratively shown and what does not have a visible equivalent in phenomenal reality. Profoundly interested in intimate stories in both documentary and fiction, he concluded his film-making career with a trilogy that investigates, through the extremely physical medium of film, ideals and concepts that pertain to the domain of metaphysics. This chapter focuses on the first film of the trilogy, *Three Colours: Blue* (*Trois Couleurs: Bleu*, 1993), which is a narrative, overall figurative film four times interrupted by fades to black. My contention is that these four fade-outs constitute iconoclastic *eikones* because they are a visible negation of mimetic reproduction in the face of an unfigurable and uncognisable grief.

As in Ingmar Bergman's film, in Kieślowski's, too, the dismantling of the mimetic image occurs on the face of the female character, recalling the Christian iconoclastic tradition which targeted, among others, icons representing Holy Mary. The face of the grieving mother is also a significant motif in Marian iconography, in which womanhood is primarily understood as motherhood and inextricably tied to suffering (Mondzain 2013, 187–231). Thus, throughout *Three Colours: Blue*, there is an interplay of the face as that which allows emotions to surface and an iconoclastic refusal to render maternal sorrow an accessible, uncomplicated image. In the four fade-outs, spectators see what the protagonist's feel: a grief beyond thoughts or figurative images.

This chapter first introduces some ideas on the Western concept of the face, engaging with its representation in the cinematic close-up and in Marian iconography. It then provides an overview of Kieślowski's shift from documen-

tary to fiction since it had to do with the ethical risk of mimetically recording another person's intimacy. The forsaking of documentary, which originated from questions regarding the possibility of filming everything, brings Kieślowski to explore in fiction the tension between cinema's ability to visually represent that which cannot be seen, and its ultimate insufficiency attested by the presence of undecipherable images in his films. The investigation of such a strain is at the centre of *Three Colours: Blue*, a film caught between the aestheticism of mimetic images and the blankness of monochromatic screens. The thread that ties this chapter together thus concerns the limits of mimetic representation and the ethical implications of showing the intimate suffering of others.

Notes on the Western Concept of Face

The Western concept of face is dense with meaning and has undergone various semantic shifts throughout history. Camille Chamois, Daphné Le Roux and Benjamin Levy (2012) identify some of the main shifts and define the face as a 'semiotic construction'; namely, as something that constitutes itself through culture and changes meaning accordingly, rather than as a natural given. An essential shift in the Western interpretation of the face occurred in the seventeenth century when 'the face is not anymore the effect of an external impression but becomes the place of revelation of a peculiar interiority' (Chamois et al. 2012). That is, the face became the place for the revelation of the soul (*âme*), although it was characterised by an essentially one-way movement from interiority to exteriority, rather than an interchange between the two dimensions. Another important change took place in the nineteenth century when the face configured itself as dual: it was at once the place for the expression of individuality and the manifestation of a type (Chamois et al. 2012). The face was that which not only allowed individuality to surface through facial expressions, but also permitted the often-harmful categorisation of human beings into different types.[1] Then, at the beginning of the twentieth century the face, albeit maintaining its duality, shifted from individuality-type to interiority-exteriority, or individuality-universality. The face, thus, becomes the locus where the universal and the particular meet, an interpretation that can be found in Jean Epstein's ([1921] 1977) and Béla Balázs's ([1924] 2010) accounts; their engagement with the facial close-up maintains an iconophilic quality given by the correspondence between an invisible inner life and its visual surfacing on the magnified face.

Both Epstein's and Balázs's work on the cinematic close-up have a mystical tone that intersects with an idealistic perspective which conceives of the face

as a totality belonging to a complete being. While Balázs identifies as facial close-up primarily the human face and its micro movements, Epstein recognises any object of a close-up as belonging to the category of face, including landscapes, body parts and inanimate objects. Through the notions of *photogénie* and physiognomy, they develop a religious vocabulary of the face in film and a theory of the cinematic close-up as that which allows for an enhanced knowledge of reality. Epstein expands on Louis Delluc's concept of *photogénie*, maintaining its ambiguity. Delluc ([1920] 1985) vaguely presents '*photogénie* [. . . as] the agreement between cinema and photography' (36) and develops it as a somewhat mysterious rite between a referent and the film medium. There are things which are photogenic in themselves (such as the flesh or light-coloured eyes [53]), but an agreement between objects and the film medium is required for *photogénie* to occur (56, 59). Likewise, Epstein ([1926] 2012) defines as 'photogenic any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction' (293). Despite the vagueness of definitions, both theorists stress *photogénie*'s essential capacity of enhancing aspects of phenomenal reality. *Photogénie* thus expresses a correspondence between the qualities of an object/person and the properties of the cinematic medium; that is, it bespeaks 'an accordance between reality [. . .] and its representation' (Carluccio 1992, 59). Described as such, *photogénie* would be a property of specific objects and beings that the film medium can record and reveal but is unable to create from scratch. It remains ambiguous insofar as it is a quality belonging to certain phenomenal referents – not everything can be photogenic – that cinema can make visible (or more visible).[2]

In this scenario, the close-up is that which increases the photogenic aspect of living things and inanimate objects by virtue of its dimension, thereby producing a sensory and cognitive magnification. Enlarged on the screen, the object of the close-up intensifies the viewer's perception of that portion of reality, establishing a close link between spectator and phenomenal world. Epstein ([1921] 1977) outlines the overwhelming power of the close-up to display and amplify emotions as follows:

> The close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and that is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of this suffering. I would be able to taste the tears. Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. Ever closer it presses against me, and I follow it face to face. It's not even true that there is air between us; I consume it. It is in me like a sacrament. Maximum visual acuity. The close-up limits and directs the attention. As an emotional indicator, it overwhelms me. I have neither the

right nor the ability to be distracted. (13)

The close-up has the capacity to bring onto the epidermal surface of the face an inner life which affectively addresses the viewer. As a secular sacrament, it opens a new dimension of reality, positing itself as a visible mediator between interiority and exteriority.

Similarly, Balázs discusses the revelatory power of cinema and the emotional amplification produced by the close-up, focusing on the notion of physiognomy. This concept refers to cinema's capacity to reveal the multi-faceted dimension of human beings through the continuous changes of facial expressions. The body and its movements convey inner life and, by virtue of cinema and the magnification of the close-up, 'the whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions' (Balázs [1924] 2010, 10). Like Epstein, Balázs conceives of the close-up as a mediator between the individual and the universal and emphasises its capacity to unconceal a forgotten, hidden life. At the core of this renewed visibility there is the gesture, even the almost imperceptible movement of the face's skin. Inner life, to become visible, needs to acquire a corporeal form in the facial expression which takes the form of a proper revelation in the magnification of the close-up: 'close-ups are often dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surface of appearances' (Balázs [1945] 1970, 56). The face in the close-up visually expresses inner transformations and manifests a human essence, configuring itself as a place for the interchange between an individual inner life and a universal external dimension.

Delluc, Epstein and Balázs often employ a quasi-liturgical vocabulary in their discussions of the facial close-up (for instance, their consistent yet vague use of the terms 'soul' and 'revelation'), which is indicative of the influence of Christianity on the Western concept of face and therefore on Western accounts of the face in the cinematic close-up. The recourse to a religious, primarily Christian, lexicon is also distinctive of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987, 167, 172, 176–79, 182) argument on the face and is found in scholars commenting on these primary sources (Aumont 2003, 134, 145; Dalle Vacche 2003, 15; Grespi 2013, 41–42, 46–47; Turvey 1998, 35). Barbara Grespi (2013) poignantly observes that 'the Christological icon [. . .] is fundamental for the entire path of sacralisation of the filmic image' (46), because the concept of face in Western culture is profoundly linked to Christ's face and Christ as face. Christianity represents one of the main cultural roots of Western Europe and has exercised its influence also through the sacred icon of Christ. The Christological icon is significant not only for iconophilic approaches to the cinematic close-up but also for non-iconophilic accounts, which maintain the reference to the face of

Christ and Christ as the quintessential Western face (see, for example, Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 176–84).

Indeed, an important aspect concerning the Western notion of face is its link with religion, primarily that of the Old and New Testament, found in, among others, Georg Simmel's ([1901] 1959, 276–81) and Emmanuel Levinas's (1969) analyses, which have considerably influenced film studies. Simmel ([1901] 1959, 278–79) attributes the process by which the face is associated with the expression of the soul to Christianity, since it promoted the chaste covering of the body, leaving the face as the only unveiled body part. As such, the face became that which allowed for an exchange between the individual and others; namely, it came to constitute the primary and most immediate tool for social interaction. In Simmel's perspective, as in the iconophilic interpretation of the cinematic close-up, the face is a means for reciprocating the other's gaze and for revealing the soul – a quite positive understanding which hinges on Simmel's overall conception of the face as belonging to a complete being, which is far from the fragmented subjectivity of the post-World War II period. While also in Levinas's account (1969) the face becomes the tool for the encounter with the other, the meaning of this encounter radically changes, assuming an iconoclastic quality reminiscent of the Biblical ban on any graven image (see Chapter 5).

While less often discussed, the face of Holy Mary in the icon has also influenced Western depictions and understandings of images. In binding motherhood to suffering, Marian iconography reworks the troublesome issue of maternal sorrow. Marie-José Mondzain (2013) explores the relevance of the mother for Christian and later Western conceptualisations of images, claiming that 'the mother, phantasmatic site of original fusion, was the most dreaded figure by the adversaries of the image' (190). In her fascinating study, Mondzain traces how Holy Mary's relation to the incarnation has been rendered as a relation with death. While God the father assumes a super-sensible function, that of the mother is grounded in the sensible; namely, to give God a carnal, hence perishable body. Accordingly, 'without woman God cannot make himself visible. But, if he becomes visible through her, he also becomes mortal' (Mondzain 2013, 197). Thus, the incarnation brings about the mother's and Christ's sorrow; that is, Christ suffers on the cross because of his mortal body given to him by the mother. After the resurrection, the mother and her grief no longer have a place in the Scriptures; such unbearable sorrow instead becomes the subject of plastic arts from the eleventh century: 'it is up to art alone to make her visible, problematic icon of an idolatrous moment' (Mondzain 2013, 203).

There is indeed a strand of Marian iconography which focuses on Holy Mary's maternal, incommensurable grief: the more explicit Our Lady of Sorrows and

the Virgin of the Passion types, as well as the Eleousa icon, in which the mother's grief for her son's death is tragically experienced proleptically.[3] In *Three Colours: Blue*, the mimetic depiction of maternal sorrow is set in tension with its figurative cancellation. The face is an exterior surface capable of expressing something of a person's inner state; however, when grief becomes most acute, the protagonist's painful interiority is visually rendered through an anti-mimetic form. Like with Bergman, so with Kieślowski, too, the female face is the target of figurative destruction; here, however, the iconoclastic gesture is directed towards not only a female face, but a mother's face (Julie [Juliette Binoche] suffers insofar as she is a mother who no longer has a living daughter). While Christian iconophilia figuratively celebrates the *mater dolorosa*, Kieślowski's film uses monochromatic screens to render too sharp a grief. Such grief refuses mimesis because it refuses a form which could – visually and metaphorically – contain it.

From Real Tears to Glycerine

Kieślowski began his career as a documentarist filming a Polish social reality foreclosed by official media. His documentaries mainly focus on the lives of individuals 'working for, or fighting against, State institutions' (Andrew 1998, 13), such as factory workers or surgeons on exhausting shifts. Polish politics and social issues play an essential role in Kieślowski's documentary oeuvre since they shape the lives of individuals, thereby determining their choices. Such an attention to the socio-political climate continues in his early Polish fiction films, where the context influences and interferes with the lives of the characters. In his later European co-productions, however, explicit socio-political issues are placed in the background of highly intimate stories, which follow emotionally fragmented female characters.

The passing from documentary to fiction and from Polish fictional films to European co-productions has triggered various readings, which range from interpreting this shift as an abandonment of political engagement in favour of metaphysical dilemmas (Haltof 2004, 108–14; Sobolewski 1999) to understanding it as a continuation of Kieślowski's attention to individuals and their quotidian struggles (Andrew 1998, 13–14; Coates 1999, 32–53; Reyland 2012, 81–89). Slavoj Žižek (2001b, 72) proposes a compelling interpretation which identifies Kieślowski's forsaking of documentary for fiction as primarily ethical, and Kieślowski's own account of his turning to fiction lends itself to such a reading:

> *Not everything can be described*. That's the documentary's great problem. It catches itself as if in its own trap. The closer it wants to get to somebody, the

> more the person shuts him or herself off from it. And that's perfectly natural. It can't be helped. If I'm making a film about love, I can't go into a bedroom if real people are making love there. If I'm making a film about death, I can't film somebody who's dying because it's such an intimate experience that the person shouldn't be disturbed. And I noticed, when making documentaries, that the closer I wanted to get to an individual, the more the subjects which interested me shut themselves off. That's probably why I changed to features. There's no problem there. I need a couple to make love in bed, that's fine. Of course, it might be difficult to find an actress who's willing to take off her bra, but then you just find one who is. Somebody's supposed to die. That's fine. In a minute, he'll get up again. And so on. I can even buy glycerine, put some drops in her eyes and the actress will cry. I managed to photograph some real tears several times. It's something completely different. But now I've got glycerine. I'm frightened of those real tears. In fact, *I don't know whether I've got the right to photograph them. At such times I feel like somebody who's found himself in a realm which is, in fact, out of bounds.* That's the main reason why I escaped from documentaries. (Kieślowski, quoted in Stok 1993, 86; my emphasis)

Kieślowski's abandonment of documentary seems to be responding more to an ethical urgency rather than a will to exclude politics and social issues from his work. The director questions the rightfulness of recording and reproducing real, highly intimate experiences such as sex, death and sorrow. He does not, however, renounce the filming of fictional experiences – we are, for instance, shown Weronika's (Irène Jacob) death on a stage, and Véronique and Julie making love and crying, in *The Double Life of Véronique* (*La Double Vie de Véronique*, Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1991) and *Three Colours: Blue*, respectively. Elaborating on the above quote, Žižek (2001b) inquires: 'How, then, is Kieślowski's ban on real tears related to the Old Testament ban on images?' (74). The philosopher concludes that Kieślowski's fictional works are characterised by an aesthetics in contrast to the dictates of Christian iconoclasm:

> Kieślowski seems to share the Old Testament injunction to withdraw the domain of what really matters from degrading reality. However, in a spirit which runs counter to Old Testament iconoclasm, he supplements the prohibition to depict intimate moments of 'real' life with, precisely, *fiction*, with 'false' images. While one should not show 'real' sex or intimate emotional moments, actors can *feign* them, even in a very 'realistic' way (as they definitely do in Kieślowski's films). (Žižek 2001b, 74)

Žižek continually opposes Kieślowski's fictional works to Christian iconoclasm for their realistic (figurative) representation of intimacy. Undoubtedly, at first glance it seems that the director has no issue in showing fictional intimacy in a decidedly mimetic manner. And yet, even in the arthouse European co-productions, where bodies are exhibited in both pleasure and pain, there is always at least one out-of-focus image, a blurred image, an undecipherable image that suspends mimesis. Above all, in *Three Colours: Blue*, via the annulling of any possible figurative image in the four black-outs, Kieślowski acknowledges that not everything can be mimetically represented, even in fiction.

One essential aspect for an understanding of Kieślowski's work as ethical is the importance given to that which cannot be seen but can only be hinted at. The director himself has stated:

> The moment something is named, the possibility of free interpretation is cut off. The moment you leave something unnamed, and leave the place of the name open, that place can be filled by anyone [. . .]. If *I* fill that space, it cannot be filled by the viewer. (Kieślowski, quoted in Coates 1999, 169)

Kieślowski neither tells nor shows it all; rather, he leaves it to the spectator to make sense of the fragmentary or missing images, encouraging through the incompleteness of form the exercise of our ethical imagination. He now has glycerine, films entwined naked bodies and shows life suddenly leaving a human being. But he never trespasses into the obscenity of the showing it all. This capacity for rendering visible – without stepping into excessive mimesis – that which pertains to the invisible sphere brings together iconoclastic reminiscences with an iconophilic approach to visibility. While issues of invisibility/unrepresentability run through Kieślowski's entire oeuvre, rendered through gaps encompassing the narrative, visual and aural levels, they are most clearly present in the *Colours* trilogy, in which 'very often everything that's most important takes place behind the scenes, you don't see it. Either it's there in the actors' play, or it isn't. Either you feel it, or you don't' (Kieślowski, quoted in Stok 1993, 216). Indeed, in the trilogy, dialogue is thinned out, at times reduced to the minimum, and images alternate mimetic clarity with out-of-focus, blurring or destruction of figuration. There are fictional tears (all three films end with one of the main characters crying), there is sex, there is death; and yet, the point remains that not everything can be filmed because 'not everything can be described'. This impasse – which concerns not only the film medium (can/should everything be filmed?), but also reality (can everything be cognised and made intelligible?) – is that which the *Colours* trilogy set to explore.

A Trilogy on Entangled Love

The *Three Colours* trilogy is a French, Polish and Swiss co-production and marks Kieślowski's last film-making efforts before his retirement. Kieślowski's long-time collaborator, Krzysztof Piesiewicz, suggested the basic idea for the trilogy; namely, exploring the ideals of the French Revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity – from an intimate, personal perspective. Accordingly, the first film, *Three Colours: Blue*, deals with personal freedom and its limits; the second, *Three Colours: White* (*Trois Couleurs: Blanc*, 1994), investigates the precarious equilibrium between individuals who are supposedly equal but practically one is more equal than the other; and the last one, *Three Colours: Red* (*Trois Couleurs: Rouge*, 1994), engages with the ways in which people can touch and positively change each other's lives through acts of kindness.

Albeit grouped in a trilogy and replete with mutual references, the three films are to be considered, in the director's words, as 'individual, [. . .] separate films' (Kieślowski, quoted in Stok 1993, 220). Each film focuses on the protagonist's personal experience of liberty (Julie in *Blue*), equality (Karol in *White*) and fraternity (Valentine in *Red*) and how these ideals intersect with the concept of love, specifically love as *agapē*/*ἀγάπη*. This specific type of love makes its literal appearance at the end of *Three Colours: Blue*, in the chorus sung in Ancient Greek where the word *agapē* recurs several times. In the New Testament, *agapē* primarily refers to Christ's deeds, the love of God towards humankind and God himself, therefore maintaining the meaning of a gratuitous love par excellence (see, 1 Corinthians 13:1–13; 1 John 4:8). In the *Colours* trilogy, *agapē,* free of any religious connotation, comes to signify a love which stems from 'the acceptance of others' (Žižek 2001b, 161); that is, from accepting that one cannot live far removed from the world and is inextricably entwined with the lives of others. Accordingly, Nicholas W. Reyland (2012) argues that '[t]he films propose, in their tales and their tellings, a journey one might take to live better in late-modern times: the transition from solipsistic individualism to the mutually beneficial practises of *agapē*' (3). This resonates with Žižek's (2001b) claim that 'each part of the trilogy focuses on the voyage from a certain mode of radical self-withdrawal to the acceptance of others' (161), as well as with that of Dave Kehr (1994), who observes how 'three films that seemed to have been carefully distinguished by tone, content and appearance turn out to be the same film, telling the same story of [. . .] isolation subsumed by a sense of infinite interdependence' (20). The *Colours* trilogy can, thus, be understood as an ode to love in all its subtle and peculiar manifestations. In particular, the montage coda at the end of *Three Colours: Blue* expresses the mutual entanglement which ties together the three films.

Three Colours: Blue follows Julie's life after she survives a car accident in which her husband Patrice (Hugues Quester), a famous composer, and her daughter Anna lose their lives. Consumed by grief, she sells everything and moves to a flat in Paris where nobody knows her. However, Olivier (Benôit Régent), her husband's collaborator who is desperately in love with her, finds her and tries to convince her to finish Patrice's *Concerto for a Unified Europe*. At first Julie refuses, in an attempt to shut herself from the world; but gradually she begins to establish relationships with the people around her: she befriends Lucille (Charlotte Véry), a prostitute and stripper who lives in her building, and leaves her house to Sandrine (Florence Pernel), Patrice's mistress now pregnant with his child. Slowly accepting that she cannot withdraw herself from the world, Julie finishes the *Concerto* and makes love with Olivier. The film ends with Julie finally breaking into tears, followed by an extremely evocative coda. Four shots, each showing one character who has inevitably affected Julie, are linked through fades and accompanied by a chorus sung in Ancient Greek. The lyrics are taken from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which proclaims the primacy of love above all things, thereby tying together the shots forming the film's coda. As Žižek (2001b, 175–78) and Tammy Clewell (2000, 204) observe, Julie's tears signal her acceptance of others. She is able to cry only after having come to terms with the fact that she cannot live without others, shutting herself from the world because of her fear of losing (and therefore suffering for) someone else again. The four consecutive shots are paired with music in B minor (a key fraught with anticipation and nostalgia), whose fragments were heard throughout the film, either played by a single or a few instruments. Now, instead, the orchestral and choral version of the *Concerto* aurally renders Julie's journey from isolation and withdrawal to entanglement and communion, conveying the lovingly painful sense that one's life is in mysterious and inextricable ways connected to the life of others.

When Blue Turns Black: A Grief Observed

A most striking feature of *Three Colours: Blue* is the presence of four fade-outs, which are visible black-outs that punctuate the otherwise figurative film, interrupting the flow of images. Anticipating and accompanying such interruptions is a funereal music which is a variation of the funeral march in G minor heard during Anna and Patrice's funeral early in the film. This ghostly music concretely overwhelms the protagonist, plummeting her into the core of her unbearable grief which takes the shape of a monochromatic black screen.

Significantly, the four black-outs occur in those moments when Julie's thought is brought to the death of her husband and daughter. However, even thought refuses to think these deaths. Thus, the four black-outs can be understood as iconoclastic *eikones* which, bearing witness to the unthinkable nature of these deaths (especially Anna's), allow for the representation of grief without making it obscene. The questions underlying the analysis concern if and how it is possible to represent in images and words such a grief: is it ethical to mimetically reproduce others' grief, and specifically a mother's grief for her child? (After all, even language lacks a term for a parent who has lost a child.) How can grief be represented without running the risk of making it obscene? To explore these issues, I will first touch on the significance of the colour blue and music as the fundamental elements for the representation of the protagonist's sorrow. I will then look at the four black-outs, spelling out their ethical value as iconoclastic representations of grief.

Although scholarly approaches and arguments may differ, existing literature nevertheless share the idea of *Three Colours: Blue* as being strongly related to the theme of mourning (Andrew 1998, 37; Clewell 2000; Haltof 2004, 129; Reyland 2012, 176; Venzi 2006, 124–29; Wilson 1998, 350; Žižek 2001b, 167). Whether the film is understood as a journey through mourning or towards mourning, it is undoubtedly centred on the protagonist's grief for the tragic loss of her husband and daughter. Throughout, Patrice is primarily embodied in music and Anna in colour, both of which are achingly melancholic; together, the musical cues and the colour blue represent the becoming audible and visible of Julie's grief.

While Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* was bathed in red, Kieślowski's *Three Colours: Blue* is haunted by blue, from its title to its opening (blue filters, blue objects). Due also to its being a cold primary colour, blue is commonly associated with moods of melancholy and sadness (Andrew 1998, 25; Haltof 2004, 129; Reyland 2012, 111–12; Žižek 2001b, 164). In addition to this general connotation, blue in this film is profoundly linked to the past, embodied in objects that once belonged to either Patrice or Anna, thereby recurring throughout the film as a painful reminder of the past and as a visual correlative of Julie's grief. According to Luca Venzi (2006), blue is

> the most immediate and insisting symbolic-expressive manifestation of Julie's *grief* and, more generally, of the past that she obstinately tries to remove from her existence. But the past stays close to her: in *Trois couleurs: Blue* the past *preserves itself in the colour*. (128)

Through the use of blue filters and blue objects, the whole film is pervaded by this colour. Most evidently, blue is the colour of Anna's candy wrapper in the opening scene, Anna's bedroom, Anna's crystal lamp (which is the only object that Julie brings with her in the Parisian apartment), Anna's lollipop (which Julie dolefully and furiously devours), Patrice's book binders, the notes written on Patrice's musical sheets and the swimming pool where Julie takes refuge from the world. Thus, the colour blue becomes the 'indelible trace of an absence, [the] cristallisation of a lack [. . . and] of an unfillable void, [. . . as well as] the past which preserves itself and the grief which renews itself' (Venzi 2006, 128–29).

However, the four fade-outs punctuating the film are black, not blue. Venzi (2006, 125–29) proposes a convincing reading of the colour black in these four fades as an intensified blue. That is, while the fade-outs are figuratively black, they are symbolically blue and express the extreme point of grief – that in which blue turns black. Similarly, Emma Wilson (1998), quoting the abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky, argues that 'when it [blue] sinks almost to black, it echoes a grief that is hardly human' (350). In the film's economy, black can indeed be understood as an intensification of the colour blue; namely, as the point in which grief and the doleful past (blue) are so intolerably present that they become black. Defined as such, blue stands for a clotted grief located inside Julie – the four fades to black – and around her – in the omnipresent blue objects. 'Blue is the invisible becoming visible', Yves Klein (quoted in Weitemeier 2001, 19) once argued. In *Three Colours: Blue*, the painful past concretises itself in the blue objects of the mise-en-scène, and Julie's unfigurable grief becomes visible in the four blue-turned-black fade-outs.

While the blue objects mostly embody the memory of Anna, Patrice comes back through music, which is the other element haunting Julie throughout the film. Not only does music play a fundamental role in the narrative (Patrice was a composer; Olivier tries to complete the unfinished *Concerto* commissioned by the European Council; Julie completes the *Concerto*), but it is also an essential stylistic component which meta-diegetically evokes the painful past. The music, which seems to be coming from an elsewhere, de facto blurring the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic sound, bursts suddenly, like a fragilely dormant grief, provoking Julie's black-outs. Reyland (2012) remarks that, 'throughout *Blue*, Julie is haunted, terrified and, occasionally, beguiled by the music from the *Concert[o]* and elsewhere' (119). Whether a variation of the funeral theme or fragments from the *Concerto*, music permeates Julie's experience of reality and comes to signify the aural equivalent of the fades to black.

The four interruptions that bring back the past and its grief, plunging Julie in a state beyond words or mimetic images, are composed of fades to black, visually, and music, aurally. The music precedes, accompanies and follows the fades, thence disappearing when the scene resumes. Besides the black-outs, in which a figurative shot is destroyed, there are also two moments in which images are on the verge of disappearing. The first time occurs when Julie is at the hospital, asleep on an armchair, when suddenly the music erupts, waking her up, and the figurative shot falters under an almost-fade to blue. That is, Julie almost disappears swathed in the blue. The second time a figurative shot seems to be disappearing (now in an almost-fade to black), and yet resists such fading, occurs in the Parisian café where Julie habitually goes. Here, too, it is music which firstly threatens the image. While in the previous case the music was meta-diegetic, on this occasion it is diegetic: a mendicant outside the café plays with the flute the melody from the *Concerto* that Patrice was composing. Julie's coffee cup is traversed by black shadows that seem on the verge of swallowing it in a fade to black which, however, does not happen. Both cases display the fragility of the figurative image when confronted with the eruption of grief. In the four black-outs, however, the figurative image collapses, devoured by a blue-turned-black.

The first black-out occurs at the hospital, soon after the almost fade to blue, while Julie is watching her husband and daughter's funeral on a TV. Julie sits in an armchair, when suddenly a voice off-screen says 'Hello', and Julie turns and looks with hollow eyes at the off-screen space. The funeral music erupts with Julie's facial close-up, the scene fades to black, the screen remains black for six seconds, and then the scene resumes from the moment in which it was interrupted. Julie replies, 'Good morning', and has a quick and unpleasant exchange with a journalist who wants to exploit her tragedy. The second black-out happens when Julie meets Antoine (Yann Trégouët), the hitch-hiker who witnessed the fatal accident at the beginning of the film. He has contacted her to give her back a golden necklace which he found near the car and which belonged to Anna. Antoine asks Julie if she has any questions since he got to the car just after the accident. She replies with a blunt 'no', and the music from Patrice and Anna's funeral bursts onto screen. The scene fades to black, and the screen remains black for nine seconds, before the scene continues with Antoine asking a question to Julie regarding Patrice's last words (which, as we find out, were the conclusion of a joke he was telling Julie and Anna before the accident). The third black-out occurs in the swimming pool where Julie takes refuge from the world. Julie is swimming when she sees Lucille by the pool. Surprised to find her there, Julie swims towards her. To Lucille's question, 'Are

you crying?' the music erupts, followed by a fade to black on Julie's blankly stunned face. While the screen remains black for nine seconds, 'two separate and, in both symbolic and musical sense, opposed themes are brought into conflict' (Reyland 2012, 220): the funeral march in G minor and the memento from the *Concerto* in B minor intersect. Then the scene resumes with Julie replying: 'It's the water' (Figures 8.1–4). The fourth and last black-out takes place in Olivier's apartment when Julie finds confirmation of Patrice's long-term mistress. Olivier questions Julie about her intentions now that she has found out about the adultery – and hence that Patrice was not the irreprehensible and perfect husband she had built in her head. The music from the *Concerto* erupts, and the scene blackens for eleven seconds. Then, surprisingly smiling, Julie replies: 'I'm going to meet her'.

The black-outs take place either soon after or while Julie is exposed to something regarding the past, which demands her to confront it. In the first case, it is a voice from the outside world: 'Hello' (the journalist, who knew both Julie and Patrice before the accident). In the other three cases, it is a question that anticipates the black-outs: 'If you want to ask me something . . .' (Antoine); 'Are you crying?' (Lucille); 'What are you going to do?' (Olivier). It is not solely something from the past that plunges Julie into this black stillness of time (memory only needs a sound or an image to awaken, violently), but it is also the request to confront such a past that triggers Julie's black-outs. Unable to express her grief in verbal or image form because that would be tantamount to accepting what has happened as incontrovertibly real, Julie abandons herself to thought's incapacity to deal with a reality too painful.

An Unfigurable and Ineffable Grief

Like the fades to red in Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*, the fades to black in *Three Colours: Blue* transcend the conventional function attributable to the fade – that of signalling a considerable passage of time. In Bergman, it was the fading to colour, specifically to red, which broke the traditional usage of the fade, thereby troubling the spectator's look; in Kieślowski, it is a convention – the fade to black – which is made out to be other than itself. That is, instead of signalling the passage of a substantial calculable time, the fade to black is here employed to express the stillness of experiential time of the individual in the face of grief. The fades to black in *Three Colours: Blue*, thus, represent something akin to a suspension of time: they interrupt a scene which then continues as if nothing had happened. Kieślowski himself has explained the meaning of these four fade-outs as follows:

Figures 8.1–8.4 The third black-out at the swimming pool

> There are various fade-outs. There's the typical elliptical fade-out: time passes. A scene ends, there's a fade-out and a new scene begins. And there are four fade-outs which bring us back to exactly the same moment. The idea is to convey an extremely subjective point of view. That is, that time really does pass but for Julie, at a certain moment, it stands still. (quoted in Stock 1993, 215–16)

In the black-outs, therefore, spectators see what Julie feels. In the face of a grief which she cannot, at this point, cognise, we see Julie experiencing the shutting down of her thought. The becoming black of the image is nothing other than the intensification of the blue, with all its implications, and therefore bears witness to Julie's raw, unthinkable and unfigurable grief. The first black-out imposes itself, unfathomably, upon spectators, who experience a halt of vision and the cancellation of a figurative shot without being able to attribute a meaning to it. The repeating of the black-outs, however, allows viewers to 'comprehend that it is a colour which they see recurring in the becoming black of the image' (Venzi 2006, 127). Thus, spectators can progressively read in the destruction of the figurative shot Julie's inner state, her incommensurable grief, becoming visible.

It is no coincidence that the black-outs occur on Julie's petrified facial close-ups, something which resonates with Bergman's fades to red. Like in *Cries and Whispers*, in *Three Colours: Blue*, mimetic reproduction cannot account for the most intimate and painful states of a person. Julie never explicitly talks about her grief, only mentioning matter-of-factly her husband and daughter's death on rare occasions (with the journalist; with her mother). She might say that they are dead, but she avoids expressing how she feels or what she thinks because hers is an unspeakable and unrepresentable grief. Only in the removal of mimesis can her feeling acquire a visible form. Notwithstanding Kieślowski's claim about the lack of problems posed by fiction because actors feign, he nevertheless does not put Julie's grief into words or show her thoughts by means of figurative images. The four black-outs can thus be understood as iconoclastic *eikones* in the sense I have attributed to this term. They are, indeed, images of Julie's impossibility to cognise her grief, and they are iconoclastic because they refuse to spectacularise suffering; namely, to transform something extremely intimate into a visual spectacle. In *Three Colours: Blue*, the destruction of figurative shots by means of fade-outs is of ethical nature. The sudden fade-outs that interrupt the regular narrative flow are a way to express and respect the unrepresentability of Julie's grief, as well as a refusal to spectacularise death and grief, making them inaccessible to the world of mimetic representation. Rather than concealing the unbridgeable gap between grief and its depiction by means of figurative images and intelligible words, Kieślowski inserts four fade-outs, leaving it to the viewer to make sense of them.

According to Wilson (1998), 'this is a film caught in contradiction between representation and its refusal' (351). While making an overall figurative film, Kieślowski challenges the film medium's capacity to represent: he now has glycerine and actors who feign; yet, shots are destroyed by fades to black, and intelligible speech is replaced by a funereal, evocative music. A medium such as cinema, which is based on moving images of recorded phenomenal referents, is therefore employed to represent that which cannot be seen – a mother's grief and the memory of her dear dead ones. Kieślowski could have used figurative metaphors to illustrate Julie's mournful mind state; instead, he opts for the destruction of any figuration, turning grief/the past into one colour that covers everything. In an interview, the director commented: 'Film is very materialistic: all you can photograph, most of the time, is *things*. You can describe a soul but you can't photograph it; you have to find an equivalent. But there isn't really an equivalent' (quoted in Andrew 1998, 82). There exists a gap between certain aspects of reality and their possible representation which an iconoclastic aesthetics can make visible without rendering mimetically accessible, in this way appealing to the viewer's ethical imagination. An image of imagelessness thus replaces any figurative metaphor of grief, thereby preserving the invisible nature of that which lacks a sensible counterpart, to attest that not everything can enter the world of mimetic representation without complications.

Concluding Remarks

There is a tension, in Kieślowski's work, between cinema's capacity to mimetically reproduce reality and its ability to hint at that which does not have a phenomenal equivalent. In *Three Colours: Blue*, Julie's uncognisable grief is embodied in the blue objects of the mise-en-scène, the actress's petrified face and the funereal music; but it also finds powerful expression in the visual black-outs that allow the audience to see what she feels. The four black-outs, therefore, constitute the becoming present of a grief which cannot find a figurative form, iconoclastically displaying Julie's thought in its refusal to think about Patrice's and Anna's deaths. Accordingly, the four interruptions configure themselves as iconoclastic *eikones* insofar as they represent their unfigurable model without spectacularising it. In so doing, they also leave the spectator free to fill the gaps, imagine and attribute meaning. The negation of mimetic, self-explanatory images, thus, contributes to the creation of a 'pensive spectator' (Bellour 2012, 86) by fostering ethical imagination and providing the conditions for a communal sharing of sense.