



Blue is a mood

Griselda Pollock

Blue is a mood. 'I am feeling blue,' we might say when touched by melancholy.

'The Blues' are a music that speaks of histories of suffering, but also of resistance and transformation of such suffering into a musical form.

Blue is an ethereal colour. It is the colour of the sky. It is the colour of the sublime. We speak of 'the great blue yonder'.

Some languages have no word for blue. It is the same as green.

Some people are blue/green colour blind.

There's a book called Blue Mythologies: Reflections on a Colour (2013). Carol Mavor traces stories of blue across many cultures, media and moments of literature and film. She reminds us of Jarman's film, Blue, Proust's blue, Chantal Akerman's blue.

Blue is the colour of the Christian Madonna's robe, clothing her in a celestial otherness that lifts her beyond the condition of ordinary mortal, human life and holds her in the heaven to which she was sinlessly assumed.

Blue seems thus the colour of immortality. To access the blue for wrapping the Madonna in heavenliness, artists were often specifically paid. The pigment was rare and expensive. It is made from ground lapis lazuli and called ultramarine.

In Western art blue is a hallmark of painters such as Giotto's Arena Chapel, Vermeer's Pregnant Woman Reading a Letter; the elderly Cézanne's beloved Mt. Sainte Victoire. His paintings became bluer as his eyesight was affected. His eyes registered blue light less and less. He overcompensated when painting, shifting the chromatic and affective scale of his 'late' paintings.

With nineteenth century chemical creation of synthetic pigments such as cobalt blue, Van Gogh painted the night sky.

Blue is amongst the colours with the shortest wavelengths. It is thus perhaps the first colour the human eye discerns.

The infant discerns blue before it can centre its vision and see objects.

Blue, according to Julia Kristeva, thus returns us a primordial moment of human becoming— not yet fully able to grasp the contours of self or others but moving towards the image. Kristeva makes these observations in her beautiful study of the blueness of the frescoes in the Arena Chapel by Giotto, tellingly titled 'Giotto's Joy'.

Giotto's joy is not Vermeer's. For Vermeer blue performs a dual task. Suffusing the imaginary space of the image, blue allows the dissolution of boundaries and the positions of identity. Yet it also recedes, creating a sense of distance that stretches out a tenuous coloured mist of longing or barely articulated desire.

Andrea Thoma's bookwork enters into this rich field with one word, a video and the reverie on time, loss and moving through both.

Andrea Thoma's bookwork is not called *blue*. Its title is *Blau*: the German word for the colour, from which in fact old French and English derived their *bleu* and *blue*. *Blau* does not carry the same connotations in German. In the poet-philosopher Goethe's great prescientific theory of colour, *blau* is not associated with the wondrous affects conveyed with the English word. For Goethe, *blau* is 'common': everywhere. Perhaps it is the space around us.

Andrea Thoma lives, however, in five language-worlds. She has been a traveller. She is a diasporic artist, dwelling in many countries, thinking with many languages. The naming of this work is,

however, a naming of home, a home that is part of a past, a home that is not a place but the memory of being with someone. Something of that home is lost. It is being mourned. Something of it remains in the moment of longing and farewell.

The blue of Andrea Thoma's book is azure, sky-blue, mid-way on the RGB wheel between blue and cyan. It is what I might call baby blue. This remembers the child. The book begins with just the blueness and the word. Is the word describing the hue of the book cover? Is the book cover the ground, the background, the yonder of the meditation proposed by this one word? Is it a state of mind? All this moves between colour, word and thing: the book I hold in my hands, the pages of which I turn. After a white and empty preliminary page comes a repeat. I am in another field of blue, paler than the cover, less saturated, floating more lightly on its matt paper. The same word, the same size, the same typeface repeats *Blau*. Blue..Blue...

The opening spread juxtaposes three elements. A reproduction of an opened double page spread of a rectangular sketchbook lays on the left. A shape painted in watery blue watercolour almost fills the page. It is part of sphere, or maybe I might see curve of a shaped window and a fragment of blue sky. Its pair image on the opposite page is a square of colour. It might be an image; it might be an abstraction, with varying hues suggestive of a misted view or a distant sky or a befogged landscape. Vision is ungrounded, lost in the beyond.

I turn the page. The square image takes the left side now. We see a view of roofs that stand out against a lowering red-hued, sunset sky. A slash of yellow light carves out the outlines of the buildings. I think: this is a Paris skyline. It is a view. It is a view from a window. Someone is looking. Someone is gazing out across the rooftops of Paris, momentarily detached from the world around inside. Somewhere else is being imagined.

The pairing on this spread with the sketchbook is suggestive. There are two scenes, busy with brushed colour. There are two skies, blues of different intensities set against earthy reds and greens and shared browns. Maybe a hint of the Paris skyline. Maybe a landscape, hints of Cézanne.

The next page matches. Two sketches and a photograph with the same hues and haze as the opening page. Someone is looking here, but down, from an aircraft. I see the slightest indication of a curved window. It rhymes with the curve of the coastline glimpsed below. Where sea and land meet blurs into a faint streak of lilac mist.

A city and a flight repeat across different forms and shots and media. They are suggestive of a certain loneliness, or the rather solitariness that comes from moments of meditative in-betweenness. They are suggestive of contemplation. Each image contains a sense of time between: looking out of windows, being somewhere but not being right there. The blue yonder becomes the figure of time. It suggests memory and retrospection. Yet it is also a space of transport that suspends time as the subject hovers between places.

Alongside these stills from the moving image work that complements the bookwork, are printed words. They tell us of the making of video *Blau*, the work of the sound with the image. Random sounds. Ambient noise. Recorded voices. TV voices. Engine noise. Silence. A child's singing voice.

The book adds a written voice, silently, speaking to us— and to itself. The book is written in the first person. An 'I' invokes a 'you', a partner in a possible dialogue: taking the reader on a shared

journey. I think the 'I' is a 'she'. She tells me in beautiful words what I have begun to discover by looking at this bookwork. There has been a loss. One of defining losses of all our lives: a mother. Loss is, however, ungraspable. Its meaning is always a matter of time: the time we live after the event. Loss is never in the moment of losing. It creeps up on us as we live the absence, day by day, month by month, until we realize that it has happened. We have been changed. Its meaning is not biographical. Its effects refashion how we feel in the world and in time. A work of art can be made because we have become a new kind of subject: the subject of loss. What form will that new knowledge take?

The loss of the mother is for everyone a defining moment. There is the loss of 'my mother', a woman, and the loss of 'the mother', an idea, home, a safety net, a source of ambivalence, too much, too little everything and nothing. A certain shield has been removed when a parent leaves us. We stand nakedly in time unprotected by that (m)Other who came before us. It is a chilling moment, whatever the actual interpersonal relation has been. Its significance takes time. Andrea Thoma speaks of a 'yearning for life through death and a longing to move elsewhere whilst journeying through spaces of contemplation, from scenes of childhood and home to images of travel.' She will end her text: '...the lightness and serenity of a child singing makes us long for this other place.'

Between a video with its potential to convey psychological time with its images of air travel, suspending us in the sky, hovering over the distant land between points of distance, and the book form, with its pages of image and text, its address, a certain mystery is created that resists any naming.

The word that came to me was reverie. A reverie before time. A reverie in time. A reverie on *human* time. A reverie that makes us feel time. Blue is its transport.

Andrea Thoma tells us that the work has an oblique relation to her mother and her absence. The maternal blue is invoked. Being blue is missing mother. But there is finally the child's voice and the merry-go-round, evoking the playful blue of (be)coming life.

We move through space, and we move through time. The moving image *Blau* creates its poetic images for both movements. We lose through time. We move away. We wonder who we are in movements such as these. Regret, longing, solitude, reverie are the moments between. *Blau* the book is that still space of turning pages, images reviewed, revisited and touched by another's reflection.

Griselda Pollock, Professor of Social and Critical Histories of Art at the University of Leeds, is a feminist art historian, curator and cultural analyst.

BLAU is published by the Wild Pansy Press.