

A Patch of Blue (1965)

Simon Dickel

dir. Guy Green; prod. Pandro S. Berman;
screenplay Guy Green; photography Robert
Burks; music Jerry Goldsmith. 35 mm, black/
white, 105 mins. MGM, distrib. MGM.

Guy Green's *A Patch of Blue* is an adaptation of the novel *Be Ready with Bells and Drums* (1961) by Australian writer Elizabeth Kata. Set in the United States in the early 1960s, the era of the civil rights movement, it depicts the romance between Selina D'Arcey (played by Elizabeth Hartman), a poor blind white woman, and Gordon Ralfe (Sidney Poitier), a middle class sighted Black man. While *A Patch of Blue* is structured along the categories of race, disability, and class, its main conflict is focused on the impossibility of interracial love within a racist society.

The film was nominated for five Academy Awards, and Shelley Winters won the Oscar for best supporting actress for her role as Selina's mother, Rose-Anne D'Arcey. Rose-Anne is a sex worker who lives with her father, Ole Pa (Wallace Ford), who suffers from alcoholism, and her daughter, Selina, in a one-room apartment. Selina has received no formal education, does not know Braille, and hardly ever leaves the apartment. She is responsible for the household chores and has a typical job for blind people, stringing beads. When her employer Mr. Faber (John Qualen) guides her to the nearby park where she then spends her days, she soon meets and befriends Gordon. This character counters dominant stereotypes of Black men in the 1960s. It is reminiscent of that of John Prentice, the protagonist of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), the role Poitier played two years after *A Patch of Blue*. The melodrama evolves from the opposition between their growing mutual love and society's hostility and strict rules. It is not only Selina's white racist family that rejects her feelings for Gordon; his Black brother Mark (Ivan Dixon),



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too, supports dominant ideologies when he repeatedly points out the impossibility of this love. Employing a melodramatic mode, the film negotiates this conflict and encodes Selina and Gordon's love as morally superior to society's racism and ableism. The title of the film, *A Patch of Blue*, refers to a memory Selina shares with Gordon. She tells him that blue is the only color she remembers from her childhood when she was sighted; and this memory of blue stands out against the black-and-white film stock. Selina does not understand that Gordon is Black before her mother tells her so by using a racist term. In this scene, she is shown with a happy face because she considers Blackness as something positive, as her only childhood friend was a Black girl. It is suggested that in her mind Gordon's Blackness positions him closer to her own outsider status as a woman with a disability. Accordingly, the film depicts their falling in love as happening outside the realm of the visual. Their collaboration when stringing beads in the park, accompanied by Jerry Goldsmith's score, is a metaphor for their romance. Their hands, rather than their faces, are shown in close up, and their mutual understanding is visualized through showing their movements—Selina's selecting and offering the beads, and Gordon's taking and stringing them—which become more and more synchronized through the music that imitates the sound and rhythm of the beads.

In his 2009 monograph, *I Can See Now: Blindheit im Kino*, Stefan Ripplinger argues that throughout film history cinema has used blindness as a trope to reflect on the relation between film as an art form based on the visual sense and blindness, a condition defined by its absence. *A Patch of Blue* calls for an extension of his observation. Going beyond the theme of blindness as such, it uses the visual medium of film to make a statement about the relation between race, visibility, and perception (Dickel and Potjans 206-10). The negative reactions of the other characters, such as Selina's mother and Gordon's brother, clarify that love between a Black man and a white woman provokes hostile reactions in the American society of the 1960s. This conflict is negotiated through the trope of blindness: Selina is depicted as the only white character with an ability to perceive Gordon's humanity beyond his Blackness because she is blind and does not see the color of his skin. As a consequence, the film endorses the ideology of color-blindness as a strategy to overcome racism. Color-blindness—the ideology that claims racism would come to an end if we would only stop acknowledging racial differences—has been debunked by many critics, among them Howard Omi and Michael Winant, who argue that it serves a conservative agenda and affirms racial hierarchies rather than dismantling them. The film implicitly introduces a different perspective on color-blindness by depicting the love of a white blind woman for a Black sighted man. By the time Gordon wants to tell Selina that he is a Black man and that his Blackness stands in the way of a possible marriage, she already knows he is Black and tells him: »I know everything I need to know about you. I love you. I know you are good and kind. I know you're colored [...]. And I think you're beautiful.« Gordon is surprised and states: »Beautiful? Most people would say the opposite.« Selina's reply—»Well that's because they don't know you«—suggests that an end of seeing race would make people understand that racial difference is unimportant. Perceiving the Black man through Selina's senses, white sighted viewers are led to value his virtues and flawless character independent from the color of his skin.

The film portrays the perception of race as solely dependent on the visual sense, even while it addresses the relevance of the auditory sense in attributions of social position. The auditory sense, however, solely refers to class attribution. One example

is a sequence when Gordon corrects Selina's wrong use of grammar, which indicates her lack of a formal education. Gordon's perfect grammar and rich lexicon, in turn, do not signal Blackness for Selina. Even though racism is the reason for the movie's central conflict, the film reproduces ableist persuasions in its depiction of a blind female character. The film treats Blackness and blindness as parallel categories, which is already suggested by the line on the film poster: »A man . . . a girl . . . captives in their own worlds, finding escape in each other . . .« The film's depiction of Selina serves as a further example of Georgina Kleeger's critique of filmic representations of blindness. She observes that throughout the history of film, »the movie blind [...] are timid, morose, cranky, resentful, socially awkward, and prone to despair« (45). *A Patch of Blue* resonates with common filmic stereotypes of blind women as angel-like, passive, helpless, and dependent. These stereotypes correspond with her dark sunglasses, which are commonly used in films as a visual marker of blindness.

In *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Linda Martín Alcoff, who rejects the ideology of color-blindness, points out that sedimented racist perceptual habits are one reason for the persistence of racism. Like Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and George Yancy in *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, Alcoff addresses the bodily dimensions of racism by critically building on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. All three discuss how people's racist perceptions turn into sedimented habits. Racialized people, in turn, have difficulties in maintaining their body schema, because the white gaze turns them into »an object among other objects« (Fanon 89). Even though *A Patch of Blue* brings this relationship between the significance of the visual sense and racism to the viewer's attention, it is doubtful whether the film's didacticism has the potential to make white viewers aware of their own racist perceptual habits. Through equating blindness with color-blindness, it offers a simplistic solution without tackling the full dimensions of racism. One has to keep in mind, however, that the film was produced in the mid-1960s, when the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Production Code prohibited »miscegenation« on screen. In light of the limited possibilities of addressing interracial romance effected by the Production Code, *A Patch of Blue* succeeds in positively portraying the love between Selina and Gordon. The white able-bodied characters, in turn, are depicted as having evil intentions, such as forcing Selina into sex work. What is more, it is Selina's own mother who is responsible for the accident that caused her daughter's blindness—she damaged Selina's eyes when she threw acid at her jealous husband who walked in on her having sex with another man. In the end, Selina departs to attend a school for the blind. She accidentally leaves a valued present from Gordon in his apartment, which suggests that the two lovers will meet again, get a chance to overcome society's obstacles, and might even have a chance for a shared and happy future.

References

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