

Comar

Marianna Simnett Blue Roses

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An Tobar, Tobermory

An essay by Patrick Langley

Marianna Simnett's *Blue Roses* (2015) is the final part in a trilogy of films exploring ideas of sexuality, gender, technology and agency in relation to specific body parts. Equal parts fairy tales and science lessons, Simnett's films plunge the viewer into complex narrative worlds that move between contrasting environments – hospital wards and Albanian mountains, dairy farms and the interior of human veins – in disorientating and enchanting ways.

The first film, *The Udder* (2014), features a young girl, Isabel, as she navigates the perilous terrain between innocence and experience, purity and sensuality, as manifested by the biological threat of mastitis: an infection of the udder that, in Simnett's film, is synonymous with moral corruption.

In the second work, *Blood* (2015), Isabel undergoes another transformative journey in the wake of a botched nasal operation, where she encounters a *burrnesha*, or Albanian sworn virgin – a woman who takes a vow of chastity and wears male clothing in order to live as a man. In this case blood is the focus, an essential fluid so saturated with meanings – honour, family, femininity, sacrifice, virginity, and so on – that it is forever spilling over the limits imposed on it, physical and otherwise. Isabel provides a central character with which viewers can identify, but Simnett describes the udder and blood as the 'real protagonists' of these films.

Blue Roses is both a continuation of, and a departure from, the films preceding it. As with *Blood*, the film takes a routine medical procedure (corrective laser surgery for varicose veins, the 'blue roses' of the title) as a point of excursion. Isabel does not feature in *Blue Roses* (although it would be tempting to read the central limb as belonging to a grown-up version of her). The film's principle character is a leg – more precisely the *popliteal fossa*, or knee pit – whose aggrieved, slightly paranoid interior monologue, voiced by Simnett, guides us through the film.

We move between three principle locations: an operating theatre; a cockroach laboratory; and a blue netherworld representing the interior of a knee. As with Simnett's trilogy as a whole, *Blue Roses* blends heightened documentary techniques, such as using non-actors playing versions of themselves, with hallucinatory shifts in setting and character that disrupt our ability to distinguish what is real from what is imagined.

Legs are what make us mobile, enabling us to walk, run, and jump. They also, more simply, allow us to stand upright. In primal terms being vertical conveys readiness (to fight or flee), consciousness, and self-assertion. 'Uprightness' also evokes slightly fusty, Victorian-era notions of moral fortitude. Upright people are proper. They are disciplined and reliable, if a little emotionally rigid. In the Oxford English Dictionary, the third definition of 'upright' is: 'strictly honourable or honest'.

In *Blue Roses*, the leg lies horizontally. This position exposes the knee pit, allowing it to speak. The pose also suggests vulnerability, subjugation, and exposure. Without verticality, the leg is helpless. It lies prostrate, unable to move, while a surgeon (played by Mark Whiteley, a specialist in varicose veins) swabs, scans, and probes its naked flesh. The surgeon conveys tremendous knowledge and expertise, yet the procedure he performs triggers a state of heightened anxiety. The leg wants to be healed yet fears the invasive nature of modern medicine: its desire to get better is at loggerheads with its phobia of surgery. We might think of the leg's agitated behaviour – its twitching, spasming, and self-destructing – in terms of the patellar reflex response, colloquially known as the 'knee-jerk reaction'.

The trauma of this medical procedure ruptures, not only the skin, but the very texture of Simnett's film-world. As the surgery unfolds, we progress from the operating theatre into a laboratory, a parallel world in which cockroaches, like the leg, are

probed and pierced, their insect bodies invaded and controlled by an ostensibly benevolent, progressive science. At these moments, viewers may be reminded of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), in which a man, Gregor Samsa, wakes up to discover he has transformed into a monstrous *Ungeziefer*, most often translated as insect, beetle, or cockroach. In Kafka's nightmarish tale, the transformation (or devolution) from human to insect illustrates deep-seated existential anxieties in relation to the body. One of the first things Gregor realises when he awakes to his new reality is that he cannot control his legs: imprisoned in his flesh, he is unable to move. In *Blue Roses*, the leg does not physically transform; rather, it empathises with another species. The leg conjures the cockroach in order to express its anguish.

Like *The Udder* and *Blood, Blue Roses* presents us with several doubles: characters and settings that echo one another, often in disturbing ways. This produces a sense of fractured identity. Hong Liang is the lead researcher in the Texas cockroach laboratory, and her presence echoes that of Mark Whiteley. (Hong, like the surgeon, plays a version of herself.) She is developing with her students a new technology that enables them to steer cockroaches via remote controls. This, like the vein surgery ('You'll just feel a little prick,' the surgeon says), involves a penetration: a wire inserted into the ganglia, or nerve centres, which control the insects' legs. By sending tiny electrical signals to the cockroach, Hong and her students are able to control their movements.

The idea that our limbs and nervous systems can be physically infiltrated and remotely controlled is the stuff of 'body horror', a cinematic genre pioneered by David Cronenberg in films like *The Fly*, which, though made in 1986, has proven uncannily prescient in its phobic vision of an advanced technology able to maim, mutilate, splice and subvert human anatomy. Technology is a recurrent theme in

Cronenberg's films: a Promethean gift able to overcome its inventor, muddling human DNA with that of icky insects in order to literalise Kafka's nightmare. If you feel a certain squeamishness at moments in *Blue Roses*, even, at times, want to cover your eyes or turn away in disgust, then it's an entirely appropriate response to the viscerally affecting strategies Simnett employs.

Just as veins circulate blood in a continuous loop around the body, *Blue Roses* should be thought of as a circuit: a world you enter and exit, as opposed to a tale that begins and ends. It would be difficult, perhaps even pointless, to summarise the film in terms of its narrative arc. Rather, it gains momentum from shifts and slippages in setting and time, juxtapositions of tone and character, and at times shocking use of bodily imagery. The most startling structural shifts are those that involve the Vein Underworld. For anyone new to Simnett's work, or watching *Blue Roses* for the first time, these sections of the film will likely prove the most surprising.

Simnett's upside-down head is plunged into this murky, subcutaneous realm in order to observe its own malaise. By turns angsty, melancholic and resigned, the leg internalises medical diagnoses as failures of character ('to think that it's all in my head') and constantly reprimands itself ('Feet up, lie down, don't stand').

Standing upright results in varicose veins and drains blood from the brain; lying down, by contrast, is a position of passive acceptance and resignation ultimately resulting in death. *Blue Roses* articulates a middle ground between these two incommensurable states. The leg's horizontality is improper. It isn't upright or 'strictly honourable'. It is frustrated, wilful, sarcastic, rebellious, stubborn and obtuse. Though physically constrained, it refuses to stay still.

Importantly, however, this isn't just 'a leg'. It's a woman's leg, a sex object. Indeed male-dominated sex culture often operates anatomically,

dismembering the female body at a visual level in order to consume, through the gaze, its constituent parts. Catharine A. MacKinnon has expressed this in her book *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*: 'fixation on dismembered body parts (the breast man, the leg man) evokes fetishism'.¹ The result, she argues, is a wholesale alienation of women from their own bodies: 'Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms.'

The leg in Simnett's film is anything but a beautiful, consumable sex object – it doesn't want to be. As such, it refuses to participate in patriarchal games. This is why cockroaches are such apt counterparts. Cockroaches are repulsive, but they are infamously resilient: 'they can survive nuclear disasters'. They crawl across the floor, beneath the proper people above. Their presence frightens and offends. *Blue Roses* suggests that there is power to be gained, however limited and self-destructive, by rejecting a morally upright world, and inhabiting a different realm.

Patrick Langley is a writer who lives in London. He is a contributing editor at *The White Review*.

Biog

Marianna Simnett completed her MA at the Slade School of Art in 2013. In 2013, she won the Adrian Carruthers Award and William Coldstream Prize. She has participated in group shows and screenings in the UK and internationally, and was a recipient of the Jerwood/FVU Awards in 2015.

Credits

Written, Directed and Edited by	Marianna Simnett
Producer	Emily Rudge

UK Crew

Director of Photography	Arthur Loveday
1st AC/Focus Puller	Jack Exton
	Dom Herd
3rd AD	Jasmine Johnson
Make-Up SFX	Emma Croft
Make-up Assistant	Jo Lorrier
Art Department Assistant	Chloë Dichmont
Sound Recordist	Roger Cutting
Animal Handler/Entomologist	Edward Baker
SFX Technicians	Paul Gorrie

Lyrics & Melody	Marianna Simnett
Original Music	Lucinda Chua
Script Consultant	Thomas Ironmonger

Texas Crew

Director of Photography	Stuart Hargrove
Sound Recordist	Jacob Weiss
Campus Film Coordinator	Jay Quinton
Camera Assistant	Miguel Salazar

Cast

Leg & Head	Marianna Simnett
Vascular Surgeon	Mark Whiteley
Cockroach Engineer	Hong Liang
Student 1	Thomas Kerr
Student 2	Lian Ma
Student 3	Maria Cristina Moreira
Student 4	John Reeks
Student 5	Carlos Sanchez

Sound Design & Mixing	Brendan Feeney
Colourist	Matt Osborne
Archive Footage	Rodrigo Cooper, Texas A&M University Ke Wang, Texas A&M University

Special Thanks	Artem SFX Bullion Productions Focus 24 George Huntington Jeff Hastings, Elephant Productions The Mill Rachel Pimm Sophie Cundale Texas A&M University Wave Studios The Whiteley Clinic
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¹ MacKinnon, Catharine A.: *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Harvard University Press, 1991)