

**FLESHING OUT THE IMAGE:  
PHENOMENOLOGY, PEDAGOGY,  
AND DEREK JARMAN'S *BLUE*<sup>1</sup>**

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In what follows, I want to address the reciprocity between two questions: What might a particular philosophical tradition bring to the study of film? and What might film studies bring to the practice of philosophy? Here, explored from a pedagogical perspective, my exemplar is existential phenomenological philosophy as it illuminates — and is illuminated by — Derek Jarman's seemingly "monochromatic" film, *Blue* (1993). Made when the filmmaker was almost completely blind and dying of AIDS and theatrically released in 1993, *Blue* is an instance of cinematic perception and expression at their extremity. Seemingly without figures, the screen rectangle is filled with a field of cobalt blue (except for a flash of white light at the end) as a soundtrack of voices, sound effects, and music weaves a poetic and fragmented first-person narrative of Jarman's observations, memories, and emotions in relation to his failing eyesight, horrific medical experiences, and approaching death, all in the context of a larger community of lovers, friends, and strangers living with and dying from AIDS. *Blue* not only elicits extremely positive or negative responses from most of those who experience it but also challenges our "natural attitude" (better termed "naturalized attitude") about the phenomenon we call a "film."

Screening *Blue* seems to me an ideal way to begin "Visual Perception," a graduate seminar in critical media studies that I teach at the UCLA School of

Theater, Film and Television. Shown in 35mm and a theatrical setting, the film's particular sensual and categorical provocations allow me to introduce students to phenomenological method (and philosophy) as a mode of empirical and qualitative research that demands focus not only on the cinematic text but also on the cinematic experience. My pedagogical goal is to forestall my graduate students' habitual rush into the abstraction of theoretical and formal "analysis" or contextual "readings." Phenomenological method insists on an embodied as well as reflective engagement with the cinema, grounding such secondary "analyses" and "readings" in a "fleshed out" and synthetic description, thematization, and interpretation that, I would argue, should be foundational for film and media studies.

Phenomenological method's "fleshing out" of the film experience also makes *palpable* the basic precepts of existential phenomenology — not only for film students but also for those studying philosophy. Indeed, as French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>2</sup> suggests, the cinema is a phenomenological art, "peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other." Through its particular perceptive and expressive technology, the cinema's modes of perception and expression not only *refer* to embodied experience but also *use* embodied experience (of material enworldedness, orientation, movement, seeing, hearing, and reflection) as the medium of such reference. A radical transformation of photography (and, as with *Blue*, not even completely dependent upon it), the cinema made the dynamic *action of vision* visible for the very first time: choosing its objects as it prospects the world, displacing itself in space, time, and reflection, and always engaged in making meaning. Cinema thus makes the phenomenological concept of "intentionality" explicit; it becomes *sensible* as a materially-embodied and actively-directed structure through which meaning is constituted in an on-going sensual, reflexive, and reflective process that, entailed with

the world and others, is always creating its own provisional history or narrative of becoming. In effect, *the cinema enacts what is also being enacted by its viewer*.

Thus, as I've elaborated in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*,<sup>3</sup> the film experience entails at least *two viewers viewing* (film and spectator) in a dynamic relational structure. Even such an extreme case as *Blue* reveals (and, indeed, illuminates) the essentially embodied, intentional, and meaningful entailment of two perceptive and expressive subjects who, in their respective (and supposed) "deprivation" of sight and its objects, are not only engaged in a sensually-enhanced mode of audiovisual experience but also intra- and intersubjectively enriched by intensely reflexive (as well as dialogic and dialectical) forms of "insight." Indeed, whether valued positively or negatively, the experience of *Blue* makes explicit Merleau-Ponty's description of cinema as the union of mind and body and mind and world and their expression of one in the other — not only *in and as* the film but also *between* the film and its viewer/listener.

Phenomenological investigation of this conjunction of viewer/listener and film thus entails correlating the dynamics, modulations, and effects of *(subjective) acts of audiovisual cinematic perception* with *(objective) structures of cinematic expression*. This involves not only seeking out the symmetries of acts and structures that both constitute the film object and the ways in which it is taken up by the viewer/listener but also their asymmetries. That is, particular modulations (or variations) of cinematic experience in relation to a given film are identified and described but then interpreted within the more general structures of the experience.

These opening remarks sum up to great degree why I want to introduce film students to phenomenological method — and to its foundational premises. Existential phenomenology's call to an awareness of our lived experience of the objects we study seems to me of the utmost importance in the context of the commonly abstractive practices of the humanities disciplines in today's research

university. Today, most graduate students are in such a hurry to “professionalize” and “talk the talk” of their disciplines that they often forget to attend to their own experience of “seeing” and “listening” — or they devalue it. Instead, they rush to quote others, and describe their objects of study through a range of “floating signifiers” that tend to overdetermine and foreclose their objects and their descriptions before the latter have even really begun. Hermeneutically sophisticated yet overly dependent upon “received knowledge,” these students are also secretly insecure and worried that everyone else ‘knows’ more than they do — and intellectually aware of “the death of the subject,” they are highly suspicious of their own “subjective” experience. They ignore, mistrust, and devalue it as trivial, mistaken, or irrelevantly singular — this last, a false, indeed arrogant, humility that unwittingly rejects intersubjectivity, sociality, and culture. Thus, ignoring the apodicticity (or initial certainty) and presence of their own lived-bodies engaged in being-in-the-world (and in the cinema), their thought about the world (and cinema) has no existential ground of its own from which to empirically proceed. Phenomenological inquiry affords redress to this contemporary situation: it insists we dwell on the ground of experience before moving on to more abstract or theoretical concerns, that we experience and reflect upon our own sight before we (dare I pun?) cite others.

Nonetheless, my preamble here as to “why phenomenology?” is not something I initially present to the students in my “Visual Perception” seminar. Rather we turn to *Blue* and begin — for, as Don Ihde claims, “Without doing phenomenology, it may be practically impossible to understand phenomenology.”<sup>4</sup> Before the first substantive seminar meeting, students attend a screening of *Blue* and are also assigned Ihde’s *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (1979). Accessible in style and full of phenomenological exercises, this little volume presents an overview of phenomenology (what and why it is, and how it proceeds) as well as translating

more arcane descriptions of phenomenological method into what seems a rather humble set of five operational “hermeneutic rules” (or critical commitments) that guide phenomenological inquiry (and will be elaborated in what follows). Ihde then focuses on our visual field as his initial exemplary object, first pointing out its invariants and providing a basic vocabulary for its description. What follows are a series of increasingly difficult exercises in phenomenological “seeing” — these based on investigation of the visual perception of seemingly simple line drawings of multi-stable visual objects such as the Necker cube and other reversible figures and optical illusions. The variants possible to the perception of these drawings beyond their “first appearance” are not only identified and described but also *increase* — this enabled not only by shifting the figures’ position on the page but also by provoking new modes of seeing them through contextualizing narratives (these, as we shall see, highly relevant to the perception of *Blue’s* “blueness”). *Experimental Phenomenology* thus sensitizes students to the ways even seemingly “simple” visual figures are habitually “taken up” and appear to their perception in limited ways that foreclose many of their visual possibilities. Further, it also allows them to *do* phenomenology and, by expanding the limits of their own perception, to see why it might be a valuable qualitative method of empirical research. At this point, however, students are not yet sure how to apply what they’ve done perceptually with a Necker cube to their perceptual experience of a film.

Thus, in our engagement with *Blue*, we begin by following Ihde’s hermeneutic rules — as well as the order of inquiry appropriate to phenomenological method. That inquiry does not, as students may believe, begin with the perceiving subject. Indeed, Ihde writes, it is “the inverse of introspective analysis,” in which “the ‘I’ claims direct, immediate and full-blown self-awareness as an initial and given certain.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, investigation “moves from that which is experienced towards its reflexive reference in the how of experience, and terminates in the constitution of

the 'I' as the correlated counterpart" of the thing experienced.<sup>6</sup> That is, "the phenomenological 'I' takes on its significance [only] through its encounter with things, persons, and every type of otherness it may meet."<sup>7</sup> The initial tasks, then, to quote Ihde's first and second hermeneutic rules,<sup>8</sup> are: "attend to the phenomena of experience as they appear" and to "*describe, don't explain.*" As he writes, these "first methodological moves seek to circumvent certain kinds of predefinition" or "any sort of theory, idea, concept or construction that attempts to go behind phenomena, to give the reasons for a phenomenon, or account for it in terms other than what appears."<sup>9</sup> I might, for example, at the outset, have asked students, "Is *Blue* a film?" but this question implies a theory and set of predefined criteria for what a film is rather than attending to what was before us. Certainly, this question was articulated in a few reviews of *Blue* or some negative user comments on the Internet Movie Database (hereafter IMDb), but, following phenomenological method, it must be addressed at a later point — and not through a theory of cinema but through a set of thought-experiments or phenomenological variations. My first question, then, is "What did you see and hear?"

A phenomenological "description" of *Blue* emerges initially in cursory and habituated perceptual responses — these then interrogated by a "careful looking [that] precedes classification and systematization."<sup>10</sup> Critical here is Ihde's third hermeneutic rule of phenomenological description: "*Horizontalize or equalize all immediate phenomena.* Negatively put, do not assume an initial hierarchy of 'realities' that might foreclose the phenomenon's possibilities."<sup>11</sup> As class discussion develops, so does the radical difference between description in the "naturalized attitude" and description that emerges from a careful looking at and hearing of the object and its modes of appearing. This difference is also reflected in (and cross-checked through) a range of discourses that extend beyond the classroom: mass media film (and DVD) reviews, comments by IMDb users, and academic essays. These affirm what might

be deemed either an anecdotal or highly-controlled description in a single context as also a more general — and intersubjective — description of *Blue* as it is perceived and expressed across a variety of contexts. (These responses also provide variations on the class descriptions that are critical to the later phenomenological reduction and interpretation.)

Initially, my sophisticated graduate students tend not to answer the question “What did you see and hear?” in terms of their sensual experience. Within the “naturalized attitude” of film studies, they generally first respond with more abstract generic categorizations of *Blue* as a formally avant-garde and experimental work that tests the limits of cinema; or a part of Jarman’s “auteurist” and multi-media *oeuvre*; or an introspective and poetic “diary” film, charged with documentary realism by the fact of the filmmaker’s death; or an historically activist intervention in the public perception and treatment of those with AIDS. They rarely tell me, at first, what it was they actually saw and heard and how it was experienced as they saw and heard it. Furthermore, when prodded, they begin to describe *Blue* as not having any images, as an “unchanging” rectangular visual field of bright and monochromatic cobalt that was difficult to watch (and also *not* to watch). Despite my question which involved sound, the students’ hierarchical emphasis is on the film as a visual phenomenon that (irritating or tedious to some) lacked anything visible to see. Sound is initially subordinated to the visible despite its prominent presence in *Blue*’s beginning *audio*-visual incantation: “You say to the boy open your eyes / When he opens his eyes and sees the light / You make him cry out. Saying / O Blue come forth / O Blue arise / O Blue ascend / O Blue come in.”

Students haven’t yet “horizontalized” or “equalized” all aspects of the film as it is first experienced. Indeed, as Philip Brophy suggests of film studies’ general subordination of sound, the students’ initial response tended to focus on *Blue*’s “destabilized reprioritization of the aural [as if it were] a disability.”<sup>12</sup> This, of

course, is not all that surprising. The course's departmental name — “Visual Perception” — inherently privileges vision over our other senses and thus continues the long-standing (if now often challenged) presupposition that film is primarily a visual medium. Nonetheless, this initial emphasis on visual “deprivation” rather than sonic “plenty” is also predominant outside the film studies classroom, appearing throughout mass media and viewer description of *Blue* in the visualist bias (and imprecision) of words such as “blank,” “unchanging,” “unwavering,” “empty,” “image-less,” and “nothing to see.”

The movement from this “naturalized attitude” into “careful” seeing and listening challenges such description. Looking, for the moment, only (and at first) at what is *visible* both through and in the film’s visual perception (and, correlatively, the viewer’s), *Blue* does, indeed, provide an *image* — and it appears as insistently fulsome as it does insistently deprived. Certainly, as cultural phenomenologist Steve Connor suggests, a “blank” screen is often used to represent the nonvisual. However, he continues,

as [...] *Blue* makes plain, blankness itself [...] projected on a screen, and [...] accompanied by sound, comes to have a kind of substance that can be shaped and inflected by other elements of the film experience. Blankness is not nonvisual, but is itself a certain visible content projected on to a screen.<sup>13</sup>

Watching *Blue*, we are not looking at a non-image, at “nothing”; rather, and more precisely, we are looking at *an image of “no thing”* — that is, at a *referentially indeterminate* but visible projection of a rectangular, bounded, and thus framed, bright blue visual field. Its chromatic fullness and containment prominent against the visible darkness surrounding the screen in front of us and centered in our visual field as we look at it, this visible image, this plenitude of blueness — particularly as

qualified and transformed by Jarman's sonorous invocations of the color as attached to different things, themes, and experiences — appears both literally and mutably as a 'floating signifier' not only for Jarman but also for the film and viewer. As Jarman intones on the soundtrack, "In the pandemonium of image / I present you with the Universal Blue [...] / An infinite possibility / becoming tangible." Even objectively, *Blue* is not *image*-less. Rather, it is *figure*-less.

At this point, however, given its theatrical screening from a film print, a student will invariably point out that, in fact, *Blue* does have figures: the wear scratches (usually yellow and green) that appear and disappear on the cobalt field, and that move both independent of and in seeming relation to the soundtrack's music. (One reviewer speaks of the film's only visual "highlights" as "imperfections in the film: a hair caught [...] in the projector lens, or a snow-like effect when the film changes reels."<sup>14</sup>) Although these figures are not intentional or significant in terms of the "text," they certainly are in the experience of the "film" — for, at the very least, they visibly indicate spatial and temporal *projection* and *movement*. Once these visible artifacts are mentioned and not trivialized, the students' description tends to become more reflexive — moving from *Blue* as a *visible object* to the film as a perceptual and somatic *visual experience*. Several students speak of seeing "after-images" of geometric shapes when they redirected their eyes to the screen after looking away from it, these shapes briefly imposed on the blue field as the faint and partial outlines of squares or rectangles in hues of orange and green. One IMDb viewer writes: "You notice the tricks your eyes play on you. As you watch, your eyes become saturated with the color blue, and begin to try and compensate for the overstimulation, shifting to oranges, showing illusionary shapes in the blank field of the screen" — this echoing Jarman, much later on the soundtrack, describing his own visual experience: "The shattering bright light of the eye specialist's camera leaves that empty sky blue after-image. Did I really see green the first time? The

after-image dissolves in a second. As the photographs progress, colors change to pink and the light turns to orange.”

Students note also that alterations in their visual attention — narrow or diffuse focus, visual attentiveness or fatigue — modulate the blue to varying degrees of intensity and density. And, here, in reflexive description, the soundtrack becomes prominent and equal to the image: listening is horizontalized with seeing. Students begin describing various qualifications of the supposed unwavering “constancy” of the blue image in their response to the music, sound effects, and specificity of Jarman’s narration. The tonal and affective qualities and the depth or flatness of the blue field change with the music (chimes, choral fragments, raucous punk) and sound effects (the interior of a coffee shop or a hospital waiting room). This mutability is most apparent in relation to Jarman’s varied evocations of “blueness” in relation to his descriptions and memories: a “blue bottle buzzing,” “a cobalt river,” a “blue funk,” “a sky blue butterfly,” “azure seas,” “the slow blue love of delphinium days,” the “fathomless blue of Bliss.” Thus, one reviewer writes: “As the [...] words modulate from plummy to morbid to bracingly obscene to ethereal, the blue on the screen seems to undulate with feeling — it alternately suggests a serene sky, a burnt retina, the chilliness of death, and, maybe, transcendence.”<sup>15</sup> Although viewers/listeners do not project precise representations of Jarman’s objects of blueness onto the screen (or in their imaginations), Jarman’s contextualization (his “narrativization”) of the blue field before us “possibilizes” it, aurally changing its perceived qualities and conjuring up, however diffuse and invisible, a nonetheless *sonorously visual* world. In this regard, phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, whose *The Poetics of Space* (1958) will also be required reading, is apposite in suggesting that through the poetic image (here the visible blueness conjoined with Jarman’s aurally visual figurations) a “vibrating sonorous world”

emerges<sup>16</sup> — this from a seemingly empty screen. And, quoting psychologist/phenomenologist Eugène Minkowski, he continues:

Here, to “fill up” and “plenitude” [...] have a completely different sense. It is not a material object which fills another by espousing the form that the other imposes. No, it is the dynamism of sonorous life itself which [...] fills the [...] space, or better, the [...] world it assigns itself by its movement, making it reverberate, breathing into it its own life.<sup>17</sup>

In this regard, as one reviewer writes, “Instead of watching for colors, you listen to them.”<sup>18</sup> This is particularly evident in Jarman's descriptions of yellow which, other than in occasional scratches on the film, never appears as such onscreen.

Nonetheless, as many students note, we *sense* yellow when Jarman aurally figures it — against blue — as the “yellowbelly, slit-eye,” color of disease and speaks of wilted sunflowers, “jaundiced corn,” a “lemon goblin,” a “jaundiced kiss,” “mustard gas,” “nicotined-stained fangs,” “yellow bile,” and “piss.” Here students also begin to note the sensuality of Jarman's *voice*. Critical to the impact of Jarman's qualifying adjectives and descriptive scenes is what Roland Barthes would call the “voluptuous sound-signifiers” of its “grain.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, rather than experienced as “voice-over” narration (which suggests a detachment from the image), the tone, musicality, depth, and affective qualities of Jarman's voice *in-form* both the objective “grain” of the film and our own perceptual experience. Thus, in relation to the visible and immanent screen, even as his invisible and transcendent voice is charged with dialectical tension (both for him and for us), the present shifts of his cadence and tone — mellifluous, angry, grieving, poetic, observational, reflective, loving, satiric, ironic, resigned — and the screen together co-constitute a *gestalt*. In sum, it is

Jarman's voice that phenomenologically *correlates* the intended visual object with the modality in which it appears and is experienced.

In this regard, students come to realize that, as Michel Chion writes in *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, the "aural field is much less limited or confined [than the visual field], its contours uncertain and changing."<sup>20</sup> Film sound (to historically varying degree) surrounds and envelops us and is not, like the image, "in front" of us. Merleau-Ponty tells us: "To see is *to have at a distance*."<sup>21</sup> To hear not only bridges that distance but also brings it near so that things resonate on and in our bodies. Although cooperative, as Brophy notes, "sight 'displac[es]' the self and hearing 'incorporat[es]' the self."<sup>22</sup> Sound is also sensed as multidimensional, voluminous, ambient, as spatial and temporal. It provides a sense of situation and dimension to the things we see — and, in the case of *Blue*, those we don't. Indeed, *Blue's* intense insistence on the objective direction and limits of its visual field and the subjective (and enveloping) expansiveness of its aural field, its sonorous plenitude and figural deprivation, destabilize the dominant audiovisual hierarchy and resonate with Ihde's comment in *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* that "the whole realm of spoken and heard language must remain unsolvable so long as our seeing is not also a listening. *It is to the invisible that listening may attend*."<sup>23</sup>

*Blue's* overall demand that listening attend to the invisible at the same time that seeing is engaged (for some, futilely) in prospection of a non-normative visible object provokes extreme conditions of somatic attention that are valued both negatively and positively by those who experience the film. Some felt held captive to *Blue*, while others, "giving in" to the film, were captivated by it; whichever the case, "adjusting" to the experience was difficult and remarked upon. Indeed, this difficulty and the correspondent tendency to displace their vision from the screen and then invariably return to it is emphasized not only by my students but by almost everyone else — and this primarily in reflexive terms of *physical response* and

its related *affects*. One reviewer writes that *Blue* “can get dizzying, nauseating or hypnotic — depending on your sensory makeup or your attitude toward visual deprivation [...]. You may retreat to the more comforting darkness at your feet.”<sup>24</sup> And an IMDb viewer posts: “After a few minutes I felt angry, annoyed at having to stare at a screen of blue. I tried looking at the floor, closing my eyes, anything to avoid the blue. But I kept looking back.” Indeed, “boredom,” “frustration,” and “tedium” emerge as frequent negative descriptors of this experience, these often couched in expressions of anger at the film — as a film. One IMDb poster writes: “To stare at a blue screen [...] for 79 minutes while people talk over it is entirely pointless and frustrating [...]. This is literally the worst film I have ever seen. In fact, I hate calling it a film because it isn’t.”

Positive responses also emphasize the film’s physical demands but their valuation of the experience is quite different. One IMDb posting reads: “Amazingly rich. Jarman has created the closest movie experience to a director talking to the inside of your head. The concomitant feel of terrifying hallucination and control-losing peace [...] provides an extraordinary experience [...] of letting go and getting lost.” And a reviewer writes: “Jarman evokes a sense of journey within the viewer, and the effect is hypnotic and moving [...]. Once your eyes return to the corporeal world, it’s as though sight has been restored.”<sup>25</sup> Another agrees: “You may sit through *Blue* with nothing to see, but leave it rich with images.”<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, what cuts across these often polarized (but also often ambivalent) descriptions is their reflexive emphasis on the viewer/listener’s lived-body and its material, immanent, presence to the film. It is in recognition of this *invariant structural feature* of *Blue* that we move from phenomenological description (in existence never complete or “finished”) to *phenomenological reduction* (or thematization) — and Ihde’s fourth hermeneutic rule: “Seek out structural or invariant features of the phenomena”<sup>27</sup> as they appear. To assist us in this task is *variational*

*method* which, Ihde writes, “requires obtaining as many *sufficient* examples or variations upon examples as might be necessary to discover the structural features being sought.”<sup>28</sup> These variations “‘possibilize’ phenomena,” bringing forward “the invariants in variants” and also determining “the limits of a phenomenon.” Through comparison with other phenomena like and unlike it, a general (albeit not universal) shape or pattern of *Blue* and its experience emerges — a shape we’ve in many ways already discovered but which has not yet been made explicit as to its structural features: these including, as a major example, the perceptual fact that *Blue’s* synthetic *gestalt* — *as a film* — is constituted both intra- and intersubjectively in — and by — its general structure as a dialectic between image and sound, seeing and hearing.

It is important to note Ihde’s requirement that we obtain a range of “sufficient” examples or variations. Sufficiency here does not refer to the quantity of examples but to the “whatness” rather than the “thatness” of *Blue*. The necessary conditions that constitute *Blue* as a film would seem not to be at issue then. And yet, in the phenomenological reduction, an unsettling paradox emerges as itself an invariant structural feature of the film: *the particular dialectic presented and synthesized by Blue’s sufficiency as what it is foregrounds the general question of the cinema’s necessary conditions for its existence as such*. Hence the question of *Blue’s* “film-ness” — this usually raised by angry or frustrated viewers. Given that *Blue* as a film structurally generates this question, it cannot be avoided — and here we have some help from Jarman himself.

Indeed, *Blue* found its cinematic form through a set of phenomenological variations of its *first-person narrative content* (another structural invariant) that provide the seminar with a range of “possibilities.” Versions of *Blue* include a performance piece; a written text; a multi-media event shown on British television with accompanying sound on radio; a theatrically-released film; an audio CD; VHS

and DVD releases of the film; and even a gallery installation. As the class considers these possibilities, the film-ness of the film and the sensual plenitude of the film experience become explicit. We have already identified experience of the film as a synthetic (if also enigmatic) *gestalt* of projected and framed image and sound. Furthermore, the “grain” of the film and objective artifacts on the filmstrip indicate cinematic *movement* as not only audible through the temporal stream that is the soundtrack but also visible — differentiating it in degree from its “cleaner” DVD exhibition and certainly in structure from a projected blue slide. Unlike a slide, then, the film is experienced as a *temporal phenomenon*. Thus, some viewers are disgruntled that “nothing visibly happens,” but they are disgruntled within the structure of a particular and invariant experience of *temporal expectation* that would not be present if they were looking at a slide, or reading a written text at their own pace, or listening to an audio-only CD. All these entail spatiality and temporality in different modalities and frames of provocation and experience. Indeed, even the theatrical space constructed for film-going provides generally invariant viewing conditions — at least to the extent that *Blue* is *isolated in darkness* and *audiovisually privileged in space*.

Our (provisionally) last variation is a thought-experiment: Would *Blue* be what it is if it provided *visible representation* — perhaps a dramatization of Jarman’s experiences or something more figurally abstract? As they explore this “possibilization,” students come to realize the significance of Jarman’s radical refusal of representation and move toward phenomenological interpretation. Unlike viewers who question *Blue*’s “film-ness” because it lacks representations or figures, my students understand this lack as a formal choice and thus a salient property of the film and its experience. As Noël Carroll writes, questioning the “essence” of cinema, certain films “*present* visual stimulation to audiences with the intention of eliciting certain perceptual states, toying with the spectator’s perceptual apparatus

*directly* rather than via ‘mediated’ representations.”<sup>29</sup> If *Blue* had characters and dialogue, students realize that their attention would be intentionally-directed “elsewhere” and “elsewhen” — toward the mediating bodies (and their voices) on the screen rather than their own immanent “here” and “now” in the darkened theater aware not only of the “floating signifiers” of the blue screen, Jarman’s voice, and music, but also, and reflexively, of their own lived-bodies. Furthermore, specific representations would overdetermine the phenomenological shape of attention. That is, not only would the viewer/listener’s intense sense of their lived-body’s *material immanence* (whether experienced negatively and/or positively) be greatly diminished but also diminished would be the film’s invitation (whether accepted or not) to *transcendence* — to perceptive and expressive *acts of imagination, reverie, and thought* that, in dynamic concert with the blue screen and Jarman’s own voiced imagination, reverie, and thought, are rooted in our lived-body’s immanence but also exceed its corporeal limits. Thus, although experiencing *Blue* in a representational (rather than presentational) mode might be less physically discomfiting, the possibility of “losing oneself” in Jarman’s “fathomless blue of Bliss” would be lessened.

Alternatively, if *Blue* were figurally abstract rather than representational, Jarman’s voice and the music would remain prominent in experience. Nonetheless, we would still be intentionally-directed toward the kinetic figures onscreen, these underdetermined and ambiguously located not only “elsewhere” but also “now” because of their abstraction. Given the figures’ ambiguity, however, both our awareness of our own immanence as well as our transcendent acts of imagination would be less *physically* self-reflexive than they are with *Blue* as it is. Rather, we would be engaged (to varying degree) with either “making sense” (however vaguely) of the figures onscreen in relation to the content of Jarman’s voice or be

engaged in a distracted (rather than explicitly reflexive) form of sensuous reverie in relation to the musicality of the soundtrack.

Students realize that, in both these variations, their intense awareness of their own lived-bodies in the “here” and “now” would be diminished — as would their awareness in immanence of their own transcendent acts of consciousness. Correlatively, their sense of Jarman’s *persona* — his invisible and transcendent presence embodied through voice — would not be as intense. That is, however invisible, Jarman is embodied and insistently present, the terribly consequential content of his (posthumously-heard) voice indexically connected to his corporeal existence and mortality. Barthes writes: “The ‘grain’ [of the voice] is that: the materiality of the body speaking.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, as Alison Young writes of *Blue*: “The moving image inscribes the other [not only] in the ear [but also] on the body of the spectator.”<sup>31</sup> In sum, variational method reveals that an *embodied sense of immanent presentness and presence* as well as an *embodied sense of transcendence* are structural invariants of *Blue* as the film and experience it is (or can be) — and this in relation not only to the viewer/listener but also to the film object and Jarman, the filmmaker.

This insight brings us to phenomenological *interpretation* and Ihde’s fifth and last hermeneutic rule: “Every experiencing has its reference or direction towards what is experienced, and, contrarily, every experienced phenomenon refers to or reflects a mode of experiencing to which it is present.”<sup>32</sup> Here, the *meaning* of the phenomenon, as it is intentionally and significantly *lived*, is specified through the *correlation* of the previous description and reduction. In some ways, we have been doing this all along — and, indeed, from the beginning. It is not as if *Blue* had no meaning or value prior to phenomenological inquiry. This meaning, however, was intuitive and summary. The task of phenomenological method was both to “unpack” it as constituted, lived, and given value — and then to expand its horizons and possibilities. Focus in the phenomenological interpretation is thus on the synthetic

correlation of consciousness and its object in a *lived body-subject* as it is, at once, particular in experience and general in structure. This incorporates (and I do not use the word loosely) both the symmetrical relation of consciousness and its object in experience and also its asymmetry. Thus, along with the symmetry between them, we also recognize that *Blue's* viewer/listener and Jarman have a radically *different* material and consequential experience in terms of their respective forms of visual deprivation and bodily dis-ease. Nonetheless, in their entailment with *Blue*, both intra- and intersubjectively share the experiential structure, shape, and temporality of sensual deprivation — as well as a reflexive and enhanced sensual awareness of both the richness and fragility of material existence. As Ben Bennett-Carpenter writes, the film “provoke[s] experience [of] one’s own materiality in a sort of carnal sublime.”<sup>33</sup>

Ihde’s last hermeneutic rule thus leads us, in the face of *Blue*, to the affecting and sensual discovery of the lived-body subject being-in-the-world not only as object and subject, visible and invisible, immanent and transcendent, as intersubjective yet fundamentally grounded in our own and the world’s materiality. Interpreting *Blue*, Patrizia Lombardo is eloquent: “With a violent leap, the most bodiless film ever produced projects the human body in its most cruel and unspeakable presence: pain, illness, suffering, at the borderline between the physical and the mental, the conscious and the unconscious, life and death.”<sup>34</sup> As we have seen, however, the human body projected by *Blue* is not only cruel and “unspeakable.” Indeed, Jarman’s body also serves — in the film experience — as the immanent ground of a benediction in its breathing and speaking presence: distilling, giving poignant life to, and affirming the transcendence of what Bachelard has called our “sonority of being.”<sup>35</sup> Blind and looking at death, insisting on bodily immanence and transcendence, Jarman thus creates — through *Blue's* sensuous dialectic and its synthesis — a privileged space and time that provokes from the still

living bodies before it not only reflexive self-awareness but also the conditions for ethical thought and care.

In sum, phenomenological method “fleshes out” our initial interpretations and reveals that *Blue* is not only objectively about the richness, complexity, and sensuality of audiovisual perception (as well as the pain of its diminishment and loss). It also, and more fundamentally, reveals that *Blue* is *performative*: through its seeming “minimalism,” subjectively constituting for its viewers/listeners a meaningful experience of extreme self-reflection on the dynamics, habits, creativity, and plenitude of their own embodied perception. Certainly, much more can be said about *Blue* in relation to its historical and cultural context; its generic status; its aesthetic, thematic, and social significance; and its place in the filmmaker’s *oeuvre*. In this regard, phenomenology does not dismiss the importance of culture, history, aesthetics, and ideology. As a “first philosophy,” however, what phenomenology demands is that we not rush to interpretation and judgment but attend, first, to the actual and possible embodied experience that grounds *Blue*’s meaning not only as it is thought but also as it is perceived.

## NOTES

1. This article was first published in *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*, ed. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of Vivian Sobchack and Palgrave Macmillan.

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Film and the New Psychology,” in *Sense and Non-sense*, trans. H. L. D. and P. A. Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 58.

3. Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

4. Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (New York: Paragon Books, 1979), 14.

5. *Ibid.*, 50-51.

6. *Ibid.*, 50.

7. *Ibid.*, 51.

8. *Ibid.*, 34.

9. *Ibid.*, 31.

10. *Ibid.*, 32.

11. *Ibid.*, 36.

12. Philip Brophy, “Where Sound Is: Locating the Absent Aural in Film Theory,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies*, ed. James and Michael Renov (London: SAGE, 2008), 425.

13. Steven Connor, “Fascination, Skin and the Screen,” *Critical Quarterly* 40:1 (1998): 16.

14. Desson Howe, review of *Blue*, *Washington Post*, 11 February 1994,

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/bluenrhowe\\_a0b031.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/bluenrhowe_a0b031.htm).

15. Croce, DVD review of *Blue*, *Cinepassion*, <http://www.cinepassion.org/reviews/b/Blue.html> (broken).
16. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), xiii.
17. *Ibid.*, xiii.
18. Howe, review of *Blue*.
19. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 182.
20. Michel Chion, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 91.
21. Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. and trans. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 166.
22. Brophy, "Where Sound Is," 430.
23. Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 14.
24. Howe, review of *Blue*.
25. Paul Haynes, DVD review of *Blue*, *DVD Beaver*, <http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film2/DVDreviews26/blue.htm>.
26. Howe, review of *Blue*.
27. Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology*, 39.
28. *Ibid.*, 40.
29. Noël Carroll, "The Essence of Cinema," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 89:2/3 (1998): 324-25.
30. Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 182.
31. Alison Young, "Into the Blue: The Image Written on Law," in *Cultural Analysis, Cultural Studies, and the Law: Moving Beyond Legal Realism*, ed. Austin Sarat and Jonathan Simon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 344.
32. Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology*, 42-43.
33. Ben Bennett-Carpente, "Moving Memento Mori Pictures: Documentary, Mortality, and Transformation in Three Films" (PhD thesis, The Catholic University of America, 2008), 188.
34. Patrizia Lombardo, "Cruellement Bleu," *Critical Quarterly* 36:1 (1994): 133.
35. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xii.