

**Spirit and matter: romantic mythologies
in the films of Derek Jarman**

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Only the niceties and constraints of an English upbringing stop me from reaching for a gun.

Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature*¹

To say that Derek Jarman's last completed film, *Blue* (1993), secures its author's avant-garde reputation is hardly to court controversy.² A film without images, it is a rare instance of creative puritanism: a cinema of denial. Consisting of an uninterrupted aquamarine screen, accompanied by a rhapsodic soundtrack revolving around Jarman's *experience* of AIDS, it achieves for queer cinema what Laura Mulvey had advocated for feminist film practice in the mid 1970s, namely an ascetic denial of visual pleasure.³ Mulvey's polemic, drawing support from psychoanalysis, had damned classical cinema for being an inherently phallogentric form. Pleasure should be rejected because, according to her model, it is born out of processes of identification which are channelled towards servicing the masculine gazing subject, and thus towards maintaining patriarchal power relations. There is no happy place within that regime for the objectified female on screen, and neither is there any reassuring theoretical space for female spectatorship. Marking its non-signifying aesthetic, *Blue's* single conceptual image, in so far as it can be called an image, likewise abdicates any authority for fixed subject positioning along the voyeuristic or fetishistic lines which Mulvey so roundly castigates. Paradoxically it helps to keep the issue of AIDS visible, yet pointedly

does not let us look at its symptoms. This unwillingness to direct a lens on to those with the syndrome, and to subject their bodies and the disease's inscriptions to a prurient, medicalised surveillance, illustrates *Blue's* formal aversion to assertions of authority. Any documentary approach to AIDS might well seek truth in science but can easily encroach upon the personal integrity of the sufferer, the effect being sentimental, demonising or disenfranchising. Viewed negatively, images of infected gay men risk connoting homosexuality with contagion itself, invidiously playing into the hands of homophobic rhetoric. 'If the doors of Perception were cleansed' *Blue's* soundtrack vainly hopes, 'then every- thing would be seen as it is.' *Blue* searches for an uncontaminated way of transmitting its narrative, responding to the complaint that, as Lee Edelman has remarked, 'there is no available discourse on AIDS that is not itself diseased.'⁴ In this crisis of signification, *Blue's* radical denial seems only to confirm the thrust of Edelman's observation.

The debates spawned by Mulvey's argument, including her own subsequent interventions, question *the* heterosexist assumptions behind her notion of a male gaze, and have finessed the solid demarcations of gendered and sexual identity upon which it is based. The importance of context, of audience response, and of issues of performativity and masquerade have since been emphasised, and the 1990s phenomenon of new queer cinema relishes in unstable or subversive oscillations of identification and desire.'⁵ Any images perceived in *Blue's* blank canvas may be prompted by the soundtrack but are put there by the consciously engaged, 'projecting' viewer. Jarman has often criticised the manipulative character of traditional feature films, preferring open texts and democratically encouraging an interpretative response from his 'active audience.'⁶ In offering scope for

such a theoretically infinite set of identifications to the emancipated, imaginative spectator (and denying any to the unimaginative), *Blue's* queer credentials begin to accrue.

Paradoxically, however, the way the soundtrack works to suggest visual images in the viewer's 'inner eye' also suggests that a deeply romantic philosophy of art is actually in play. Such appeals to imaginative vision have a personal resonance for Jarman, of course: *Blue's* rejection of photographic representation comments primarily upon the loss of sight which he suffered as a result of his own illness.⁷ This inscription of the autobiographical is characteristic of his work.

Mulvey's analysis of classical cinema had, of course, been part of the 1970s feminist project to interrogate the conventional production of images of women. Likewise, *Blue's* blank screen is an urgent, politicised response to other unsatisfactory representations of the AIDS crisis. In each case, avant-gardism has to engage with, and is thus shaped by, its binary opposite: namely, the tradition it seeks to reject. Perhaps this is inevitable. Alan Sinfield has remarked that dissident discourse 'can always, *ipso facto*, be discovered reinscribing that which it proposes to critique ... All stories comprise within themselves the ghosts of the alternative stories they *are* trying to exclude.'⁸ Yet 'the traditional' is rather more than a spectre to Jarman. Even *Blue* is not quite the clean break which it first seems to be. In fact, it can be seen as the culmination of an established line in his career, marking his preoccupation with vision, with the imaginative spectator and with a brand of romanticised spiritualism. This is not to deny that Jarman's work is often radicalised, most obviously by Thatcherism and then by AIDS. *Blue's* soundtrack, for instance, refers to Britain's National Health Service, to the 'state of the nation' and to other contemporary crises such as the

Bosnian conflict. Yet the polemic needs to be placed in context. The British Establishment may be attacked, but exactly what Jarman defends is open to question.

Jarman's career is marked by, and is the marker of, transformations in subcultural identity politics from the 1970s to the 1990s. His first full-length feature, *Sebastiane* (1976), abandons the English landscape altogether for the sunnier Mediterranean climes of the Roman Empire, although the very banishment of a contemporary English *mise-en-scène* works as an implicit critique of it. Graven images of naked male bodies are generously paraded, and the film encompasses homosexual desires both loving and violent, reciprocated and rejected. For offering such images alone, *Sebastiane's* very existence can be seen as a seminal cinematic event in the British history of gay liberation and solidarity, based squarely within the parameters of identity politics. Adrian's and Anthony's relationship in the film, for instance, is clearly to be read as a 'positive representation' However, the exclusively male group they belong to is, emphatically, no model 'gay community' Sebastian is the object of an aggressive, implicitly sodomising male gaze from his commander, Severus, a look unambiguously structured through point-of-view shots into the text; and Sebastian is finally executed for resisting these sexual advances. By the film's focusing on the hostile attention to Sebastian's body, the innocent enjoyment of Adrian's and Anthony's lovemaking (gratifyingly suspended for us in slow motion) is inevitably compromised. Jarman's accepted complicity here establishes what is an ongoing discomfort throughout his work with any clearly marked position of authority. Yet there is an unresolved tension, for elsewhere Jarman celebrates the commanding superiority of marginalised artist-figures whose own mystical authority is left unquestioned.

While there may be no simple continuum from the homoerotic pleasures of *Sebastiane* to *Blue*'s free-floating immateriality, what does remain constant is Jarman's repeated reformulation of what is a fundamentally idealistic aesthetic. There is a sadomasochistic subtext to Sebastian's death scene, with an implication of religious ecstasy which has an obvious sexual redolence. This said, the indifference shown for the martyrdom, which might otherwise form the film's dramatic crux, is readable as Jarman's first major cinematic indictment of the Judeo-Christian division between spirit and matter. This becomes a constant line of attack. In *Chroma*, he writes of the 'chasm opened up between the terrestrial and celestial world',⁹ a division which is seen as both unnatural and catastrophic. Sebastian's unendorsed self-sacrifice is motivated by his pious separation of divine and earthy pleasures, while conversely Adrian and Anthony's loving relationship seems to fuse these polarities ideally. Similarly, Jarman's *The Garden* (1980) allegorises homophobia by replaying the story of the Passion with two male lovers occupying the place of Christ. It conceives non-hierarchical, same-sex love as a gentle and mutual response to the queer-bashing violence of the Establishment. The frequently idealised passivity of Jarman's gay lovers is not, then a desexualisation, but rather it marks the extent to which such images are a retreat from a hostile world. The (ab)use of the sacred text in *The Garden* also collapses categories of sex and transcendence between which dominant western cultural traditions have long drawn a wedge. Whether or not it is placed within a specifically religious context, the melding of matter and spirit forms the basis of Jarman's romantic quest.

Jarman's confrontationalism is a consciously adopted posture. In his copious writings and numerous interviews, he is repeatedly found under cutting the prevailing demonisation of

queer subculture. He is often impishly provocative, inverting norms and targeting his rhetoric on what he sees as a brutal, philistine, middle-class power base, the dominance of which reached exaggerated, grotesque proportions in the economic neo liberalism and bourgeois authoritarianism of 1980s and 1990s Britain. The invective of 'Heterosoc' (his term for the powerful conflation of family, suburbia, the bourgeoisie and all the repressive machinery which shores it up) is often turned back on itself. Ironically, it is Jarman's favoured tactic never to lose the semblance of what his public schooling made him: a charming, polite and very eloquent English gentleman.¹⁰ Moreover, Jarman's genteel Anglophilia may be calculated to undermine the homophobia and muscular nationalism of the Conservative government, but what he is ultimately engaged in is nothing less than a battle for the custodianship of English culture itself. It is a national tradition which appeals to him, and it is often queerly inflected in his work. Entering the public sphere both as a speaker about AIDS and as an artist and film maker, this is the persona which Jarman strove to present.

Even Jarman's involvement in the confrontational politics of OutRage in the last decade of his life expressed anti-Establishment feelings born out of an affiliation to time honoured romantic values, from which Thatcherism is seen as an aberrant deviation. To emphasise this is to situate Jarman in a sometimes submerged and often critically disparaged anti-realist tradition within British cinema history. Jarman's work forges correspondences between authority and seeing, between magic and art, and between some of his protected ideals: 'Home', nostalgia and Englishness. This particular nexus of motifs suggests a close affiliation to the British filmmakers he most frequently claimed to admire, the partnership of

Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger.¹¹ Like Jarman's, their relationship to the Establishment was deeply quizzical. The effect of Pressburger's flight to Britain from Nazi Europe, and Powell's highly cosmopolitan romanticism, meld together in texts which problematise nationhood, craving roots while fearing assimilation. The idealistic images of magical, 'homely' and sometimes eroticised spaces in Powell and Pressburger's work enjoy a radical transformation in Jarman's becoming sequestered havens, often for happily subversive same-sex love. The shared experience of displacement (whether geographical or cultural), and the associated fascination with frontiers survive, nonetheless. Both Powell and Pressburger and Jarman draw on an English Romantic heritage and on the Renaissance, and each has a highly conventional vision of art as emanating from the autonomous, transcendental genius, a character who is often inscribed into their films. Furthermore, this character imports a quasi-magical tone denoting a rejection of both realism and reality itself. The criticism can be made that this is an evasive romantic fantasy of the most fatal kind.

How credible, then, is this stance? It is not, of course, a novel one. The critique of Britain which Jarman and Powell and Pressburger make derives from the Romantic movement's hostility to the Industrial Revolution (notably in Blake, whom Jarman frequently quotes, and in Wordsworth), a line of protest which survives through Ruskin, Morris and Wilde and into the twentieth century.¹² Yet this reaction against technological modernisation, urbanisation and the rampant entrepreneurial advances of unregulated capitalism was not confined to the dissenting margins but was (and still is) embedded within High Tory culture too. By the end of the nineteenth century, England's economic base no longer rested upon the country

estate, yet a sense of national consciousness based upon the myth that it still did was perpetuated within the culture. Old feudal allegiances survived. In Martin Weiner's neatly observed diagnosis, 'the Tory party shifted its base from the land to property in all its forms, making room for the new middle classes ... [yet] many of the attitudes of Toryism lived on within the reconstituted party, alongside industrial and capitalistic values. The party continued to invoke the rustic spirit of the nation. Conservatism was enamoured of rural England, as much an England of the mind as of reality.'¹³ A major version of the nation's sense of identity is thus invested in an emotional reservoir dislocated from the fact of modernity. This well-rehearsed argument offers up a valuable insight into the perseverance of romanticism in British cinema.

Kevin Macdonald has noted that Powell and Pressburger express what is basically an 'old-fashioned Anglican Tory'¹⁴ vision. Despite his fight with Thatcherism (whose neo-liberalism was also at loggerheads with the traditions of Conservatism), and his ongoing sympathy with left-wing politics, including a brief flirtation with the Workers Revolutionary Party,¹⁵ Jarman also admits that the work he has produced 'has always been Tory art.'¹⁶ It is clear why Powell and Pressburger's work appeals to him. Their idealisation of the nation gelled with the official rhetoric of the so-called 'People's war', mythologising the audience's commitment to the preservation of the Home Front, and in works such as *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) and *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945) Pressburger's self-confessed 'crusade against materialism'¹⁷ is clear. In *A Canterbury Tale*, disenchanting modern pilgrims are immersed in the Kentish countryside, and following the 'old road' to Canterbury they discover a cathedral which symbolises transcendental aspiration, the value of the past and the utopian possibility of the future (victory, peace, and possibly the high ideals of the Welfare State). In tension

with these communal ideals, their work shows a fascination with lone outsiders. Deriving from a more individualistic brand of romanticism, and speaking an alternative language of visionary idealism, they often represent an irrational, authoritarian force. Thus, we have, for example, the Svengali-like Lermontov in *The Red Shoes* (1948), an impresario presiding like a high priest over the film's quasi-religious attitude to art (their *Black Narcissus* (1947) likewise charts a drastically melodramatic schism between transcendental spirituality and sexual desire among a group of nuns exiled to a sublime Himalayan outpost). Such figures are alter-egos for Powell, whose occasional appearances in his own films further inscribe his self-consciously artistic status, although this act becomes self-condemnation in *Peeping Tom* (1960) where he appears, in Mark's inherited home movies, as the tyrannical, voyeuristic father-figure (the young Mark in this home-movie footage being played by Powell's own son Columba Powell). This sequence anticipates Jarman's use of his own family home-movies in his work, and closely rehearses his ambivalence towards his own father. Jarman senior was an Air Commodore in the Royal Air Force, and Derek has publicly admitted that their relationship was uneasy, the father's example being blamed for the son's recorded 'aversion to all authority'.¹⁸

Of all the magus-like 'seers' in Powell and Pressburger's output, Thomas Colpeper in *A Canterbury Tale* most expresses the romantic longing and the feudal values at the 'heart of England'. Another disturbing, disturbed, patriarchal figure, Colpeper is the local magistrate whose lectures on local landscape and history make him a spirit guide to the disoriented latter-day pilgrims. The name Colpeper (meaning 'herbalist') harks back to Nicholas Culpepper (1616-54), a writer on herbalism, medicine and astrology, whose work is referred to in Jarman's own journals.¹⁹ Indeed, Jarman's diaries are littered with references to other

Renaissance scholars, to gardening and in particular to alchemy, displaying his interest in premodern and dissident forms of knowledge. In his films, characters such as Prospero in *The Tempest* and John Dee in *Jubilee* (another historical figure, of course) represent the magically subversive possibilities of such learning, and the autobiographical current running through all of his work suggests a somewhat aristocratic identification with such fabled 'magicians'.

Regretting Kent's suburbanised commodification, Jarman complains that 'it is impossible to recapture, walking through Canterbury today, the emotions that fill that last reel of ... *A Canterbury Tale*. The city of pilgrims has become an empty "theme park". The land of England was once the home of dryads and nymphs, every now and again you can feel the last of them lurking round a corner.'²⁰ Jarman overlooks the fact that Pressburger's script for *A Canterbury Tale* anticipates a post-war tourist boom in which, democratically, city dwellers might enjoy holidays in the English countryside. While Jarman might see this tourism as a consumerist debasement of a once romantic ideal he is nevertheless open to the charge of elitism. Hence the following passage from *Modern Nature*: 'Sissinghurst, that elegant sodom in the garden of England, is "heritized" in the institutional hands of the National Trust. Its magic has fled in the vacant eyes of tourists ... The shades of the Sackville-Wests pursuing naked guardsmen through the herbaceous borders return long after the last curious coachload has departed, the tea shoppe closed, and the general public has returned home to pore over the salacious Sundays.'²¹ There is a humorous jibe at commercialised country-house culture here; and the patrician voice is inflected with a tone of arch irony, but any critique of exploitative property owners seems to pale next to a barely hidden aversion to the 'general public'. Significantly, perhaps, Jarman blames the

'blankness of the visitors' gaze for the ruin of Sissinghurst's 'magic', an attack which echoes his hope that his films might be greeted by a more imaginative audience. His lament for the loss of a faerie realm (with echoes of Tolkien's elves endlessly forsaking a Middle-England Middle-Earth) is fanciful, of course. But in its defence, Jarman's capriciousness is invariably an attack upon heterosexism and capital. These twin evils are, to him, vigorously conflated in the brutal dogma of Thatcherism, the moral hypocrisy of which is suggested in his image of the masses, in their domestic privacy, salivating vicariously at the latest sex scandals written up in the Sunday papers. Furthermore, the fantasised debauchery of the naked Sissinghurst guardsmen clearly implies that, for Jarman, homosexuality itself is possessed of an aura of elitism.

'Heritage', of course, was a ripe term in British cinema of the 1980s. Films such as *Chariots of Fire* (dir. Hugh Hudson, 1981) and the work of Merchant Ivory constitute a genre of costume dramas with period settings, purporting to recreate the past faithfully. Occupying a prestigious position within the industry, they are predominantly readable as conservative works, signaling, according to Andrew Higson 'the desire for perfection , for the past as unimpaired paradigm, for a packaging of the past that is designed to please, not disturb'.²²

'Packaging' is a choice word . This commodified culture satisfies the demands of a restrictive notion of 'national cinema' which works to promote and to secure national identity along middle-class lines, not least by drawing narratives from marketable 'classics' of the English literary canon such as the works of E.M. Forster. It is notable that, however much Forster himself was part of a Romantic anti-bourgeois English tradition, these cinematic adaptations seem to conform instead to the material pleasures of 1980s Britain. If Jarman belongs to a paradigm of 'national cinema', then it is a more pluralistic one, predicated upon a toleration of difference and a celebration of diversity, rather than on

the rigid parameters and policed borders of a more tightly delineated 'official' model. Of course, even the more reactionary films of the heritage genre may comprise subversive elements, and may offer dissident pleasures, whatever their overall project seems to be. Thus, issues of gender, class, race or sexuality may all find space to be tested progressively. Rupert Graves's roles in Merchant Ivory's *A Room with a View* (1985) and *Maurice* (1987) are notable cases in point.

Jarman does not participate in this ultimately hegemonic enterprise. He dismisses the manufacturers of such spectacles as 'Brideshead recidivists'²³ and calls instead for an imaginative treatment of the historical which breaks away from the polished actorly artifice of so-called 'classical' quality cinema. His own period films often only gesture towards re-creating the past. Rather, they modernise it, making it rough and immediate, disjuncting it with anachronisms, resisting the fetishistic aesthetic of mainstream 'heritage' cinema, which he perceived as being bound up too intimately with the current Establishment. Of course, much smaller budgets tend to enforce upon Jarman an aesthetic of makeshift artisanship. Confining his films to the specialised pocket of the art-house circuit, the production constraints he works with inevitably and directly decommercialise his films, and apparently shield them from the vicissitudes of the Thatcherite free marketplace. Indeed, their relatively non-commercial status within the industry and their minimal involvement with large-scale corporate enterprise reinforce the anti-materialistic sentiments which the texts so frequently defend. Jarman's use of video, the freedoms granted to him by Super-8, and his splicing in of his and his family's old home-movies, confirm the line of noble English amateurism in his work, and grant him an enviable scope for that most sought-after goal of the Romantics: uncompromised self-expression. As he

admits himself, 'I am the most fortunate film-maker of my generation, I've only ever done what I wanted. Now I just film my life, I'm a happy megalomaniac ... Making films our way makes all the others seem fabricated.'²⁴ This egotism goes hand in hand with his detachment from the mainstream.

What Jarman argues is that the past he tenaciously identifies with has been suppressed or warped by those forces now occupying the middle ground. The true culture of this past both antedates and should be divorced from those who now call themselves the Establishment. He draws upon a queer artistic canon, from Caravaggio to Shakespeare's sonnets, Britten's *War Requiem* and *Edward II*, to make the specific point that this culture has been criminally appropriated, normalised and neutered in the name of bourgeois suburban respectability and of capital, and more generally he declares that his own *oeuvre* actually harmonises with the central customs of English art. His work literally keeps this culture alight: images of torch-fires illuminating his films may occasionally signify destruction or cremation (and even there, the loss is generally of a value which is to be mourned), but more commonly they take on elemental connotations which are more to do with perseverance or rebirth, with the magical and the messianic. In the concluding image of *The Last of England* (1987), downtrodden refugees from an urban blighted dockland sail off, guided by just such a light. In *The Garden*, guardian angels carrying similar torches wade around a sleeping Jarman as the incoming tide washes around his bed, the film becoming a hypnagogic sequence conjured from the inspired, dreaming artist.

Jarman and his subculture may have been demonised and driven underground by

Heterosoc but, by taking with him 'the best' of an artistic heritage, he attempts to bring the centre back to himself and the more ancient tradition he says he represents. There is a double motivation here. By Jarman's reclaiming custody of this 'best', the state's spurious proprietorship of it is shown to be a dishonest appeal to misconceived 'old-fashioned values', and its cultural paucity will be left all the more exposed. Furthermore, this ancient tradition should and can be, for Jarman, a more positively liberating cultural space, where natural freedoms, both spiritual and sexual, may be enjoyed. To sing the praise of this other space, he celebrates the closeted or nocturnal homosexual subculture as one of *magical potential*. A dominant national discourse which criminally purports to tell the truth is wholeheartedly rejected; and the values of orthodoxy and unorthodoxy are inverted. 'I never believed in reality', Jarman maintains, 'because if reality was the way it was served up, who wanted it?'²⁵

But just beyond the jurisdiction of Heterosoc, Jarman cruises nocturnally among the nymphs of Hampstead Heath, venturing, as he says, 'over the invisible border [where] your heart beats faster and the world seems a better place.'²⁶ This is the forest of Arden, or the woods outside Athens: a memorable scenario in the journals contrasts the 'real fairies' of the Heath, gay men at ease in a moonlit natural setting, with an incongruous and artificial group of designer-clad film-makers struggling nearby to shoot their version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.²⁷ Jarman's favoured other space is a pastoral carnivalesque alternative to commercialised urban Britain (not least the gay club scene). Furthermore, the sense of kinship paradoxically found on the Heath, and mirrored in Jarman's film-making collaborations with a close circle of friends, suggests a nostalgic endorsement

of values of 'community' (whose existence Margaret Thatcher denied) rather than with the atomisation of modern capitalist society. Nostalgia was always present in Jarman's paintings. Despite arriving at Slade Art College in the early 1960s just at the moment of the London pop-art explosion, Jarman was, even then, out of step with the celebration of popular culture by artists such as David Hockney. While the tide of fashion faced squarely towards Warhol's America, Jarman was painting Dorset landscapes with the soft surrealism of Paul Nash, Henry Moore and the English neo-Romantic school. Where, then, is this aesthetic in his films, when works such as *The Last of England* depict city blight so thoroughly? As with the footage mentioned earlier of Jarman sleeping in *The Garden*, the opening shots of *The Last of England* show him writing in his study and clearly mark him as the film's author, yet given the lack of any classical narrative form to the film, they also mark his consciousness as one possible locus of meaning. His old nib pen and his monastic appearance cut him loose from the late twentieth century and suggest a mythic aura of timeless artistic genius. Jarman's very act of protest against oppression, squalor and injustice implies, of course, an alternative, a principle of hope which predictably is rooted in the past (for the only transcendence the present seems to offer is that gained through heroin or solvent abuse). A voice-over commentary, spoken by Nigel Terry, sounds elegiac: 'Poppies and corn-cockles have long been forgotten here, like the boys who died in Flanders ... The oaks died this year. On every green hill, mourners stand and weep for the last of England.' The rusticity of early 20th century Georgian poetry ghosts through this passage, however much it has degenerated, and, symbolically, the curative knowledge of herbalists (for whom the corn-cockle had been an ancient and useful weed) is now lost to us, conflated with a failure to remember the war dead, in a general mourning of any sense of history in contemporary Britain.

Among the riotous dystopia of the image track, muted moments of calm can nevertheless be glimpsed. Brief shots of bees, flowers, and of Tilda Swinton among a host of daffodils are matched to reflective music scored for strings, and all hint at the possibility of regeneration. As if emulating a classical deity, one of Jarman's dispossessed wanderers, a tattooed, leather-jacketed youth (an actor ironically nicknamed 'Spring') plays panpipes. Intercut with metropolitan businessfolk advancing in hordes towards the camera, Spring's playing implicitly lures these agents of capital out of their rat race, although any natural celebration connoted by the pipes is incongruous in Jarman's wasteland. More plaintively, a gentle harp melody, gesturing to the older sonorities of folk music, accompanies shots of homeless refugees gathering on a disused dock, with the lyrics of 'The Skye boat song' sung by Marianne Faithfull suggesting a narrative of exiled hope. Edited into Jarman's new footage, however, are snatches of his father's and his grandfather's home-movies, and in these are located some of the film's strongest appeals to nostalgia. These brightly coloured, sun-drenched sequences mainly show Jarman in the 1940s as a toddler, with his sister and mother, playing in their childhood garden. The image of the smiling mother, in particular, seems to radiate love, and the accompanying classical guitar soundtrack sets up a range of idyllically Mediterranean connotations. But just as this significantly amateur footage idealistically equates 'Home' and nostalgia, the clear cutting within *The Last of England* to and from this very different film stock marks its separation from the present, and the relationship between the childhood scenes and the 1980s material remains ambivalent. Continuous soundtrack stitches the images together, and the presence of the adult Jarman in the film imposes an autobiographical linearity; yet the collision of different film (and video) formats

leaves the work fragmented. The sequence may be read as a flashback from the current or may signify a fated transition from the 1940s. If the relationship is merely one of historical association, then the earlier sunshine of England's 'Blitz culture' mythic optimism clearly seems to be in dialogue with the hopeless nihilism of the more utterly blitzed 1980s. Jarman's keen and questioning sense of the historical is, in any event, visible. Particularly, his rose-tinted haven for healthy 1940s children encapsulates the high idealism of the Welfare State: the starkly contrasting urban underclass of Thatcherite Britain becomes a direct consequence of the dismantling of those ideals.

The Jarman family biography is implicated in this sense of questioning. This other Eden, Derek's childhood playground, is RAF Abingdon: a compromised idyll to say the least. The barbed wire surrounding it, the drone of planes and sounds of an air-raid mixed on to the soundtrack, all remind us of oppressive power structures, and of the absent, filming father (he is caught on camera once, in the Alps with his wife). The inclusion of aerial footage, clearly shot in the 1940s by Jarman senior from his aeroplane, symbolically gives the offscreen patriarch a troubling airborne omniscience, while his military lifestyle is, by implication, bound up with the entire film's oppositional stance to abuses of authority.²⁸ While Jarman's incorporation of himself into his work is readable as a self-promotional admission of his own directorial agency, its effect is, rather, to personalise the film, and strip it of its own authoritative objectivity. With the textual status diminished, an active spectatorial response is required. The audio-visual collage which constitutes the work requires, in any case, an imaginative and synthesising response (although admittedly, there are times when Jarman's images of violence, and use of sound recordings such as 'Rule Britannia' and a Hitler speech, lack either subtlety

or ambiguity - the meaning is all too crushingly clear).

This said, on occasions the text mischievously records the director's presence. Such disruptive moments significantly queer what is not otherwise flagged as a 'homosexual film'. Shots of the magus-like Jarman in his study are cut to Spring, bare-chested and in ripped jeans, nihilistically attacking Caravaggio's painting *Amor Vincit Omnia*, an obvious intertext harking back to Jarman's biopic of the painter. Yet this is no simple or deplored defamation of 'high art', for, given Jarman's recognition of antiEstablishment iconoclasm in Caravaggio himself, Spring's attack is deeply ironic. It is also ambiguously erotic.

Cutting from shots of himself to footage of Spring, Jarman clinically splices himself to his imagined piece of 'rough trade'; but a later shot, in which Spring effectively rapes Caravaggio's famous portrait of the naked boy, makes explicit the sexual meaning: a hand-held camera purposefully revolves around Spring so that Jarman's shadow falls on to the youth's rutting body. Abusing and destroying the classical integrity of his cinema image, Jarman underscores his fantasised participation in Spring's masturbatory sex act, and prompts the spectator to do likewise, as an orgiastic chain of homosexual encounters is enacted between bodies, shades and images.

The other sex scene in the film is differently disruptive: rather than displaying its effect, it does the opposite, keeping its secret from all but a knowing coterie. A drunken 'yuppy' (a public schoolboy 'type') strips naked and climbs on to a bed draped in a Union Jack, upon which a khaki-clad, balaclava-masked terrorist (or soldier) is sleeping. An overhead camera emphasises the flag, and the connotations which are prompted by the couple's

clumsy sexual wrestling suggest the homoerotics of soldiery and the public school system, and a subversive (homo)sexualisation of the Great British Establishment. None of these meanings is entirely undone, but they are mockingly upset, by the hidden truth that the soldier is a woman - a fact disguised in the text and therefore privileged only to that community involved in the film (and later to readers of Jarman's accompanying journal of its making).²⁹ The perception of apparently cogent and stable gender positions is thus tricked, and aspects of performance, masquerade and costume are brought into play, albeit invisibly. The signs have misdirected us. The stereotypes of the foppish rake and the sexually available squaddie are the regular fare of gay pornography, but here these seemingly uncomplicated fantasy images are deployed deceptively, and the expectations of Jarman's customary gay audience are apparently satisfied, yet are ultimately tricked. Perversely, the sequence is queered by the hidden disparity between the soldier's outward appearance and her biological sex. By so wrong-footing us, it serves as a warning against easy categorisations of biology, gender, sexuality and performance. The invisibility of the stratagem provides another layer of significance though. It comments upon Jarman's belief that homosexuality is structured around a *secretive exclusivity*.

His reading of gay subculture stresses the importance of codes, imaginative connections and unearthing meanings: a cabbalistic activity which rests upon an alternative, esoteric language, known to an inner circle of preferred initiates. It is worth stressing that for Jarman, this subculture amounts metaphorically to a form of magic, which, as he says, is 'banned and dangerous, difficult and mysterious'.³⁰ Not only is the sense of segregation acknowledged but it is, by implication, celebrated. The very existence of this

marginalised, enigmatic culture might alone trouble the confidence of society's dominant values; but it is imbued by Jarman with a superior faculty of perception, not bound by the supposedly material certainties of rationalism. Hence his 'queer magus' figures are subversive tribal visionaries, inhabiting, like Prospero, a cultural space fantastically divorced from ordinary reality, and explicitly connoted with premodernity. Jarman's version of *The Tempest* (1979) incorporates ciphers from Egyptian hieroglyphics and from Renaissance scholars, with Prospero's wand being modelled on John Dee's insignia, symbolising, as the director confirms, the alchemical unity of spirit and matter.³¹

John Dee had, of course, been fictionalised in Jarman's *Jubilee* (1978), where he transports himself and the first Queen Elizabeth to the punk anomie of 1970s Britain, a territory so alien that they ultimately flee to the fringes, seeking out the 'great elixir' of the seashore, where in Dee's words 'one can dream of lands far distant, and the earth's treasure'.

A mathematician and scientist in the late Tudor period, Dee had by repute been associated with alchemy and the summoning of angels. In old age he fell out of favour with the court of King James, dying neglected and in poverty, an anti-Establishment figure.³² Is it characteristic of Jarman that he should identify with him. Jarman's own conjuring, of course, is in the province of the arts, and a sorcerer's language informs his aesthetic pronouncements: this he declares film to be 'the wedding of light and matter – an alchemical conjunction.'³³ It is a highly romantic concept which echoes, incidentally, Michael Powell's more consciously egotistical assertion that in his films, 'miracles occur on screen.'³⁴ Such metaphysical aspirations finally achieve their apotheosis in *Blue*.

I opened with the suggestion that *Blue* is chiefly significant for marking absence, that it is a metacinematic meditation on the dilemmas of depicting what cannot satisfactorily be represented. It sidesteps the political ramifications of objectifying sufferers of AIDS, and shifts instead to pure abstraction, avoiding what its soundtrack refers to as 'the pandemonium of image'. But cannot that negation be read, alternatively, as a sublimation? While, as Richard Porton has suggested, 'it is impossible for the viewer to fetishize Jarman's film as pure transcendent form',³⁵ the religious yearning for the immaterial in the work is nevertheless to the fore, creatively in tension with its more self-reflexive aspects. The blueness may represent a semiotic void, but it is still a signifier, and its cultural connotations of spirituality or infinity propel the film towards the sublime. Images of the sea -an elemental infinitude and, to Britain's island race, a space beyond the nation's repressive rule - form a recurring motif in Jarman's work, from *Sebastiane's* Mediterranean, to the bluefiltered shots of Bamburgh's beach and dunes in *The Tempest*, through the waterfront footage in *The Garden*, *The Angelic Conversation* and *The Last of England* (and not forgetting Jarman's own beach home, Prospect Cottage at Dungeness). *Blue's* aquamarine screen alludes to these earlier symbols of possibility.³⁶ In line with his characteristic language of romantic -pastoral ,the closing lyrical moments of the film speak of a magical-marginal zone for Jarman's chosen few: in waters 'washing the isle of the dead ... we lie there ... in a deep embrace, salt lips touching in submarine gardens, ... deep love drifting on the tide forever.'

Blue's stated antecedents lie in the monochrome abstraction of the painter Yves Klein

(1928—62), the film being based on a sample of ultra-marine blue from one of his canvases. Anticipating Jarman's eventual shift into a cinematic non-pictorialism, Klein's messianic, deeply mystical view of the sacred function of art was expressed in a series of works, notably his solid blue screens.³⁷ These screens, marking Klein's deep religiosity and his longing for a primal state, position themselves squarely within a zone of the ideal, unsullied by matter. Jarman's comment in *Blue* that the 'image is a prison of the soul' thus captures the essence of Klein's work. What Jarman does is write that spirituality into the narrative of AIDS.

On the verge of death, Jarman abandons *terra firma* altogether. The concrete physical reality of gay experience (and more generally of mortality) is raised to some elevated condition. This sublimation, read in the context of Jarman's earlier work, is one of alchemical transmutation. As a conclusion to his career, it recollects his alter ego, Prospero, declaring the end of his own revels and the vaporisation of what has been an insubstantial pageant. Certainly, after the carnivalesque excess of *Edward II* (1991) and *Wittgenstein* (1993) there is a post-ludic quality to the last work, and, while the familiar voices of John Quintin, Nigel Terry, Tilda Swinton and Jarman himself are to be heard, the bodies of the actors are now rejected, melted into thin air.

This ethereal response to his illness is not, however, Jarman's sole artistic comment on it. Painting until near the end of his life, Jarman's late canvases, such as those exhibited in his *Queer* exhibition of 1992, are the visceral converse to *Blue*.³⁸ In these aggressive paintings (such as *EIIR*, *Love, Sex, Death* and *Queer*) Jarman takes multiple photocopies of

homophobic tabloid front pages and almost covers them in paint - mainly reds, browns and yellows. He then scores graffiti-like obscenities into the paint, directly invoking blood, sex and the plague. These works are emotional declarations, literally and passionately incorporating the nation's public discourse of AIDS into themselves, and the overriding sensation of series is its redness. Connoting carnality and rage, and provocatively suggesting the body's fluids and the disease of the flesh, this red is a stark antithesis to the cool of *Blue*.³⁹

Blue and red, spirit and matter, segregated into different media: the gap between these regimes is seemingly unbreachable in Jarman's final output. But his work is all acutely intertextual, each piece knitting into a wider pattern, often shaped along auteurist, or blatantly autobiographical, lines. Mediating between this late work is Jarman himself, the self-styled Romantic artist. One of the last images we have of Jarman is an oil portrait. Painted by Mike Clark in 1993, it hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. Its title, *Seer*, suggests how far that figure of the 'gifted magus' had been absorbed into the Jarman persona. Clark's portrait shows a close-up image of Jarman staring out at the spectator. Encrypted in mirrored text over him is an untranslated prophecy, implicitly Jarman's: 'Enjoy the luscious landscape of my wound ... But HURRY! ... Time meets us, and we are destroyed.' Another secret code: Jarman addresses his private coterie, to whom his *carpe diem* pleasures are exclusively afforded. The invitation here comments upon the astonishing late burst of creativity sparked by Jarman's very public decline into ill health, yet with the plural pronouns 'us' and 'we' he is allied to a community which is being wiped out by the disease. Again, the mystical insight allotted to the Jarman persona, and by implication to his threatened community, invests queer culture with a special quality,

even if what it perceives so dearly is no more than political indifference and moral hypocrisy. Like the magic spaces charted in his films, Jarman's diseased body is now a rich territory, a fertile 'landscape' to be enjoyed. That this 'wound' itself becomes a positive source of inspiration indicates how far Jarman's own experience of AIDS is pervaded by a romantic discourse. On the point of death in this interconnected triptych of images, *Blue*, the *Queer* paintings and Clark's *Seer* portrait, there is a collapse between autobiography, biography, art and politics, written through with a keen sense of the need to reconcile the material with the spiritual. However anti-Establishment the sentiments, however avant-garde the work, the mediator between these regimes is Jarman himself, and the central position afforded to his role places his work within a highly traditional artistic discourse.

Notes

1. Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (London, Century, 1991), p. 127.
2. I am excluding Jarman's *Glitterbug* (1994), the edited collage of old film and video footage released after his death.
3. See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and the narrative cinema', *Screen*, 19:3 (1975), 6-18. The essay is reprinted in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989).
4. Lee Edelman, 'Politics, literary theory, and AIDS' in Ronald R. Butters, John M. Clum and Michael Moon (eds), *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture* (London, Duke University Press, 1989), p. 304.
5. 'New queer cinema' covers such films as *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991), *Young Soul Rebels* (Isaac Julien, 1991), *The Living End* (Greg Araki, 1992), *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992) as well as Jarman's later work. Such films collide queer narratives with postmodern strategies such as parody, pastiche and intertextuality, while importantly constructing multiple 'non-straight' subject positions.
6. Derek Jarman, *The Last of England* (London, Constable, 1987), p.194.
7. Jarman first tested HIV-positive in December 1986 and died of AIDS in February 1994.
8. Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 47.

9. Derek Jarman, *Chroma* (London, Vintage, 1995), p. 45.
10. See Jarman, *The Last of England*, p. 118.
11. See Jarman, *Dancing Ledge* (London, Quartet Books, 1984), p. 216.
See also Simon Field and Michael O'Pray, 'Imagining October, Dr. Dee and other matters: an interview with Derek Jarman', *Afterimage* 1985 (12) 45.
12. See Lawrence Driscoll, ' "The rose revived " : Derek Jarman and the British tradition' in Chris Lippard (ed.), *By Angels Driven: The Films of Derek Jarman* (Trowbridge, Flick Books, 1996).
13. Martin J. Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the English Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 98.
14. Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter*, London, Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 233.
15. See Jarman, *The Last of England*, p. 213.
16. Quoted by Mick Brown, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1993 (see the British Film Institute library microfile on 'Derek Jarman').
17. Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger*, p. 233.
18. Jarman, *The Last of England*, p. 179.
19. Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 37.
20. Jarman, *The Last of England*, p. 138.
21. Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 15.
22. Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1995), p.122.
23. Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 14.
24. Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 131.
25. Derek Jarman, television interview, *Know What I Mean* (YoYo Films, made for Channel 4, 1988), broadcast as part of Channel 4's posthumous tribute *A Night with Derek*, 16 September 1994.
26. Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 84.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
28. Jarman, *The Last of England*, p. 179.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
30. Field and O'Pray 'Imagining October', p. 59.
31. Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 188.
32. See Frances A. Yates, *Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London, Ark Paperbacks, 1983).
33. Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 188.
34. Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies* (London, Mandarin Paperbacks, 1992), p. 612.
35. R. Porton, 'Language games and aesthetic attitudes: style and ideology in Jarman's late films' in Lippard (ed.), *By Angels Driven*, p. 149.
36. Paul Julian Smith sees in *Blue* a link to the French autobiographies of AIDS, Cyril Collard's film (and novel) *Savage Nights*, and Herve Guibert's novel *Compassion Protocol*, both of which treat the sea as an image of transcendence, although, in contrast to Jarman, these works repeatedly display their AIDS sufferers' bodies as unblemished and immaculate (an act, as Smith suggests, of narcissistic disavowal). See Paul Julian Smith, '*Blue* and the outer Limits', *Sight and Sound*, 3:20 (1993), 18-19.
37. See Pierre Restany, *Yves Klein* (New York, Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1982).
38. These works were exhibited at Manchester City Art Gallery, 16 May-28 June 1992.

See the published exhibition catalogue: Jarman, *Queer* (Manchester, Manchester City Art Galleries/Richard Salmon Ltd, 1992).

39. Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* also draws on this traditional division. In its symbolic colour code, a transcendent blue in the nun's costumes, matched in the Himalayan skies of the film's painted sets, is pitched against Powell's famous use of red, haemorrhaging an otherwise repressed sexual energy on to his screen.