Angellic Compositions
The Legacy of an English Queer

by José Arroyo

DEREK JARMAN was canonised before this death. In a perfectly queer way, of course, by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. With characteristic camp acuity, they dubbed him Saint Derek of Dungeons of the Order of Celluloid Knights.

Jarmain would be remembered if he had done was take on the burden of being the most public PWA in England. He performed this role with courage, humour and integrity. To many gay men, he was a better role model than any coward we could possibly out (the years after his HIV positive diagnosis in 1986 were among the most publicly productive of his life). To the culture as a whole, Jarmain represented the continuation of the tradition of artist/intellectual as conscience, a living and vocal personification of the oppressed.

But his contributions to English culture exceed his activism. He was a painter of distinction (he delighted in telling how, in his youth, he'd come second in an Art Competition that awarded David Hockney First Prize — Hockney was older); a celebrated set designer (Ken Russell's 1971 film, The Devils); a distinguished director of music videos (for Marianne Faithfull, Morrissey, the Pet Shop Boys); and an eager chronicler of his own life (Dancing Ledge, Modern Nature, At Your Own Risk). But most important of all, he made movies like nobody's business.

In the frontispiece to Quere Edward II, the collage/script of his film, Jarmain writes, "It is difficult enough to be queer, but to be queer in the cinema is almost impossible. Heterosexuals have fuched up the screen so completely that there's hardly room for us to kiss there." Arguably, whatever room there is in British cinema for gay men to kiss is largely due to Jarmain. A 'gay sensibility' may be detected in Noel Coward and David Lean's Brief Encounter (1945); Dirk Bogarde's face in Victim (1961) is still an unforgettable image of anguish; and later in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a series of films misrep the drab, the dreary and the pathetic for 'realistic' representations of gay life.

To my knowledge, it is not until Jarmain's Sebastian (co-directed with Paul Humfress) in 1976 that an analysis of the oppressive context of homosexual gets equal billing with the depiction of complex psychology (the Saint loves his pain), the joy and sensuality of two men kissing, and, even better, the ecstasy of a (beautifully photographed) fuck. Sebastian shocked audiences (and not because the characters made Cecil B de Mille jokes in Latin). The film was often mentioned in censorship debates and was heatedly attacked in Parliament. It was the first feature by a filmmaker who would go on to produce some of the most interesting cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, an oeuvre that need not shrink from comparisons with that of the best filmmakers of any sexual orientation.

Jarmain's filmography is long and diverse. One can distinguish between his narrative features (for example, Jubilee (1977), The Tempest (1979), Caravaggio (1986), Edward II (1991)) and his home-made, home-movie bricoleages filmed in Super 8 (The Angellic Conversation (1985), The Last of England (1987) and The Garden (1990)). Jarmain himself has expressed a preference for the latter on the grounds that they are more personal.

One can also look at his films chronologically and perhaps chart a change in his aesthetic from rather static, gorgeously photographed tableaux, to a more dynamic exploration of the medium itself.

FILMOGRAPHY

In the Shadow of the Sun 1972
Sebastiane 1976
Jubilee 1977
The Tempest 1979
The Angellic Conversation 1985
Caravaggio 1986
Aria 1987
The Last Of England 1987
War Requiem 1988
The Garden 1990
Edward II 1991
Wittgenstein 1993
Blue 1993
Glitterbug 1994
A True Adventurer
by Monika Treut

I never really met Derek Jarman other than some quick encounters at film festivals in Hamburg and Berlin. He always seemed to be breathlessly running for his life, off to his next movie. I’ve always admired his films: Jubilee, The Angelic Conversation, The Last of England and Wintgenstein are my favourites and have influenced my own work quite a bit. Derek was so inventive and creative. I loved the way he could make a film out of a lack of production money, yet was able to translate the richness of his fantasy to the screen. To see how a filmmaker can be so obsessed, so devoted and decided that he is able to turn hardship into a breathtaking and true adventure has always been a source of great hope to me. It has also made me feel as slow as a snail myself. Nevertheless, the beauty of his work has encouraged me again and again. To know that Derek is no longer around, that there is no chance to sit down and talk with him, is very sad. The only consolation is that he himself must have felt good, even at the end of his life, being able to see out such an incredible cornucopia of thoughts, images and sounds for other people to enjoy. And that’s my solace: I can still watch his movies, read his books and feel that he is alive in his work.

His films and books will never die.

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Monika Treut is one of Germany’s leading filmmakers, a director of international reputation, writer and broadcaster. She is the 1993 winner of the Gay Times/Jack Babuscio Film Award.

Whatever the case may be, the evaluation of his filmic legacy will be debated for years to come. There are two characteristic and often interrelated strands of his work – homosexual desire and the English nation – which deserve particular scrutiny.

Jarman’s films are queer views, queerly viewed. There are straight filmmakers who show an equal command of the medium; who make films as beautiful and as personal. But no straight filmmaker has filmed the male body, nude or not, like Jarman. Compare Kenneth Branagh or Laurence Olivier’s Shakespeare adaptations to The Tempest: in the former you may get better acting but the impact of such histrionics pales next to Ferdinand’s (David Meyer) majestic and fully frontal nude emergence from the sea in Jarman’s magical interpretation.

Gay desire is often the central subject matter of Jarman’s films (Sebastiane, Caravaggio, Edward II and others). But even when it isn’t, gay desire is evident in the mode of filming: male bodies are on display, framed and lit to maximum advantage and often in slow motion. Jarman’s work acknowledges the importance of the sexual. It does not idealise homosexuality. But it also does not shy away from romance. Even Sebastiane is of unrequited love. One would have to look further than I can see to find a meditation on love between two men more exquisite than that which Jarman achieved by juxtaposing stop-motion images of two youths with Judi Dench’s reading of a selection of Shakespeare’s sonnets in The Angelic Conversation.

Jarman places the queer firmly in the nation. His œuvre documents many adaptations of canonical works: Shakespeare’s The Tempest, Marlowe’s Edward II, Benjamin Britten’s War Requiem. It is not difficult to see this as an attempt to retrieve and re-inject social and desire into English culture and history. Even the androgynous Mediterranean sexuality in Sebastiane and Caravaggio can be read as a means of commenting negatively on English culture.

Jubilee and The Last of England, each in their own way, present a culture characterised by poverty, anxiety and terror. The bordering of past and present, which recurs throughout his work, is a device of depicting how far England is from its own past achievements and how short it falls from the ideals of the nation as espoused in culture.

In Caravaggio, the Pope tells the painter, “Revolutionary gestures are a great help to us – but you had better not do what Cérere does [they] keep the quo in the status. Never heard of a revolution, just paint brushes.”

Well, I never heard of a revolution made with celibate ether. Jarman’s work represented what was previously unrepresentable; changed the way many of us think about our sexual and national identity. His is a queer filmography, the first of its kind. I think of Terence Davies, Isabell Julien or other important gay British filmmakers would have been possible outside the context provided by Jarman’s own films.

Jarman’s work would be recognised for its form and style alone, but at an age when all kinds of struggles are waged through representative media, it also represents a great political contribution. The queer could have chosen a better patron saint for their Order of Cultural Kings.

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