

TIME IS WHAT KEEPS THE LIGHT FROM REACHING US.⁰¹

SAM BROOKS ON THE PERENNIAL CHARMS OF DEREK JARMAN
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Last year, a beloved comedian passed away very suddenly. A mutual friend said something that has resonated deeply with me: “She was a very weird person to die.” Every death is sad, every untimely death is a tragedy, but there are those deaths that come at us from especially strange angles. We can’t imagine the world without their presence.

It isn’t necessarily ‘weird’ for Derek Jarman, who famously lived with AIDs while making work that flew in the face of his diagnosis, to have died. It is much stranger that, having died, his work still feels so present and connected to the world. We are surrounded by the art of the dead, but it’s not so often that we feel the artist next to us as though they’re still alive, whispering into our ears.

Even now, thirty years after his life, eighty-two after his birth, if you have even the scantest interest in queer art, or art cinema, Jarman may very well be your gateway to another world entirely. As a person whose life overlaps with Jarman’s only by a few years, it can be easy to forget that he was one of the best-known British artists of his day despite

being born in a time when his very existence was criminalised. That’s even more remarkable given the stigma faced by queer people during the AIDs crisis, of which Jarman was a public face in many ways. Open about living with the disease and making art about life, Jarman’s response to the epidemic, like that of many artists, was both polemic and poetic, and his work tender, but full of rage.

As a filmmaker, author, visual artist, costume designer, stage designer and gardener, Jarman had so many ideas, so many profound thoughts about the world, that tumbled out with a sense of urgency through whatever means possible. Jarman might well be one of the world’s most underrated, influential music-video directors to have ever lived, alongside Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry and David Fincher. Through his collaboration with popular artists such as Marianne Faithfull, Pet Shop Boys and The Smiths, these acts were able to marry their music with an experimental aesthetic that gave them political heft and artistic legitimacy. His published diaries, *Smiling in Slow Motion* (2000), are some

of the most poignant, accessible windows into the soul of one who is not dying of, but living with, AIDs. These diaries were my first experience with Jarman, which I imagine is true for many. His paintings might be less familiar to a wider audience, but they fit within the rest of his oeuvre—reverent but cheeky, angry but with a wink. *I.N.R.I* (1988) is especially delightful, a mixed-media work featuring crushed cans and heavily muscled action figures, one bound suggestively to a blackened crucifix bearing a likeness of Christ.

Jarman is perhaps best known for his narrative feature films that remythologise artists and figures—Saint Sebastian, Christopher Marlowe, Benjamin Britten, even Shakespeare—as queer icons, presenting them as sumptuously homoerotic, as they almost certainly were, even if social conventions of their times prohibited their expression.

Sebastiane (1976) and *Caravaggio* (1986) are frozen in time. The former, intimate and unashamedly queer; the latter, as lavish as an art film could possibly be. Both are products of a gay man living in

a country that barely tolerated his existence. His work sits squarely between classicism and iconoclasm; a respect for, even a worship of, the beauty of the past is blended with an insistence that the artist’s own humanity be respected. He slingshots the austere into the boundary breaking. As such, he unmoors himself from the decades in which he made work into the amorphous present.

Perhaps the most timeless is his film *Blue* (1993). For the unfamiliar, the film consists solely of a single shot of blue filling the screen (International Klein Blue, for the pedantic). Jarman was partially blind at the time of making—a complication of his illness—and saw only shades of blue. As the eye adjusts to this hue—Jarman’s view—he and several of his long-time collaborators, including Tilda Swinton, speak to his life, his daydreams and artistic visions. Towards the end, the names of his lovers and friends are recited, immortalising the mortal and eulogising himself. It is as close to a treatise or a manifesto as the artist ever penned, arguably more personal than his published diaries.



It's a work that demands a lot of a modern viewer. The concept of sitting and watching a single frame for over an hour might be anathema to many of us. Some might have the desire to try to play it at double speed (tantamount to an act of vandalism, as far as I'm concerned), as you might a podcast. Instead, it lulls you into another world, Jarman's world. For seventy-nine minutes, your heartbeat and your vision sync

up with his—a direct line to an artist in the last days of his life, flinging a light into the future.

It is not so weird that Derek Jarman is dead. He is of a generation from which many men and women are lost to us. What makes it 'weird' is that you can watch any of his films, read his poetry and diaries, even listen to his interviews, and he feels so present, so alive.

In partnership with Gus Fisher Gallery

01 Quotation from Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 1993, film, 79 min

Derek Jarman, *Jordan's Dance* (still), 1977, Super 8, 16:15 min. Courtesy of LUMA Foundation and James Mackay