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Imaging Derek Jarman

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Imaging Derek Jarman: A Friendship in the Age of AIDS

by [Leland Wheeler](#)

This reminiscence of writer and filmmaker Derek Jarman begins with Mark McCormick, who was the scion of one of the great families of Chicago. His great, great, great uncle Cyrus McCormick invented the reaper that revolutionized farming. His father was a noted art collector and equestrian.



Leland Wheeler (left) and Derek Jarman, 1986.

When I met him in October of 1983, Mark was living in Manhattan on 62nd Street between Park and Madison Avenue. Not long after our meeting he offered me a job as his personal assistant. I accepted the position and moved from my small studio on Manhattan's West Side into, let us say, more spacious accommodations, complete with a doorman. It was the start of a beautiful friendship.

In 1986 I saw a film called *Sebastiane*, which had first been released in 1976 but was being revived in an arthouse. I was familiar with the work of Fellini, Pasolini, and Antonioni, which gave me a vocabulary that afforded me an appreciation of the experimental film, which credited two directors, Paul Humfress and Derek Jarman. I knew nothing about either of them, but would soon come to know Jarman personally and learn that he had spent part of his childhood in Italy and was influenced by these Italian filmmakers.

Still, *Sebastiane* was quite unusual even by avant garde standards, if only because it has the distinction of being the only movie to be recorded entirely in Latin, to say nothing of its nudity and frank homoeroticism. I left the theater pondering deeply what I had just seen.

A few weeks later I read an account of the Berlin Film festival where Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986) was awarded a Silver Bear. I found the review of the film intriguing and told Mark that if it came to New York we should go see it.

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Not long afterwards we came home and found a message on the answering machine from Nicholas Ward-Jackson, who was in town promoting *Caravaggio*. He was a co-writer and producer of the film. He had called to invite Mark to a private screening. What a serendipitous moment this was for me. I reminded Mark that this was the work I had spoken of earlier.

Caravaggio was screened in the Brill building on Broadway. A small group of us attended. Clearly, Jarman had developed as a filmmaker since *Sebastiane*, but he was still examining thematically similar issues. Both works explore the creative life in opposition to worldly power and sexuality. In *Sebastiane*, the emphasis is on a spiritual impulse, while in *Caravaggio* it is on an artistic one.

As surprised as I was by the actors speaking Latin in *Sebastiane*, I was equally delighted by Jarman's creative use of anachronism in *Caravaggio*, as in the scene where an art critic sits in a bathtub writing up his review of the latest exhibited painting by Caravaggio on a typewriter.

In this film, the painterly Jarman melded so beautifully with the filmmaker Jarman as to create a rich tapestry of art, passion, love, sex, power, and murder. Considering its small budget—less than half a million dollars—and the fact that the entire film was shot in a studio, its achievement is remarkable. It owes much to Jarman's ability to collect talented people to collaborate with him. In addition, Jarman always had a great gift for making much from little, often a necessity because of his small budgets. Still, as miniscule as it was by Hollywood standards, the budget for *Caravaggio* was significantly larger than that for *Sebastiane*, and this is reflected in better production values.

I grasped intuitively what I would learn more concretely later: the worlds of the queer artist Caravaggio and the queer filmmaker Jarman were strikingly similar. Just as Caravaggio had to contend with the papal state, Jarman had to struggle with the Conservative government that controlled arts funding at the height of his creative output as a filmmaker. But whereas the Church often ignored Caravaggio's sexual proclivities in order to acquire his art, during the Conservative Party reign Jarman was often vilified as a pornographer and denied support from state agencies.

For example, one Member of Parliament, Winston Churchill III, in a failed attempt to extend the Obscene Publications Bill to cover television broadcasts, called *Jubilee* (1978) and *Sebastiane* "pernicious filth." Screening of Jarman's films on Channel Four, a public service broadcaster begun in 1982 as an alternative to the BBC, was consequently moved to late night viewing.

The British film establishment was also uneasy with Jarman and his films. For example, David Puttnam, producer of *Chariots of Fire*, attacked Jarman personally, and critics were particularly skittish about the queerness in his work.

After the screening, I let Mark know of my enthusiasm for Jarman and his work. In an extravagant gesture, he proceeded to buy the North American rights to *Caravaggio* and in partnership with Cinevista distributed it in the United States. Nicholas Ward-Jackson no doubt felt that his telephone call turned out to be a serendipitous moment for him as well.

Mark stipulated that the film's American premiere should be a benefit for Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), which was doing so much to support people with AIDS at a time when most of the world was still in denial about the pandemic. President Ronald Reagan had first uttered the word the previous year, but it was still mostly considered a gay man's problem and, more often than not, one unmentionable in polite society.

In addition to directing the box office receipts from the film's opening to GMHC, Mark also arranged with the popular nightclub, the Palladium, that a certain percentage of the door for that night would also be donated to the organization.

So after the premiere, the *Caravaggio* party was at the Palladium. In anticipation, we distributed free tee shirts printed with an image from the film. We had the sidewalks of New York stenciled with the word "Caravaggio" on the corners. Invitations were printed with images from the film and distributed to gay businesses.

The buzz of that moment in New York was *Caravaggio*. When we learned that Jarman and some members of the cast would be coming to New York for the premiere, we arranged a press reception on 63rd street, just around the corner from us, to introduce them to the press.

Mark had insisted that Jarman and his retinue stay with us. Thus, in August of 1986, Mark and I sat in the apartment awaiting their arrival.

Tony, the doorman, called to inform us that there was a party of people in the lobby asking to come up. He was an older gentleman and I detected a certain hesitation in his voice. I assured him that we were expecting them.

We were on the second floor so I stood with the door open, awaiting the elevator's ascent. The doors parted and out came Derek Jarman, Tilda Swinton, Spencer Leigh, and Simon Fisher Turner, whom I recognized from the film. There was someone else with them and I immediately understood Tony's concern. His name was Spring (aka Mark Adley). Tattooed and pierced, he was dressed in ripped black jeans—a look not often encountered on Park Avenue then. Introductions out of the way, I led them to the sitting room where Mark was waiting.

And so it began. The apartment turned into a crash pad of sorts. After three years of working with Mark, we had become friends, so I moved into his bedroom temporarily and gave mine to Tilda. Derek and Spring, whom we quickly realized were in a relationship, occupied the guest bedroom. Simon and Spencer slept on the large, plush el-shaped sofa with many overstuffed pillows in the sitting room.

I was excited that Lena (Tilda), Jerusaleme (Spencer), and the cute monk (Simon) from *Caravaggio* were in my apartment. A few short months ago, I had not known who Derek Jarman was and now he was sleeping in our guest room!

The other guests were talented collaborators who formed a kind of acting company cum support group for Jarman. In Tilda Swinton, he found his muse. She appeared in all of his films from *Caravaggio* onward and then went on to win acclaim as one of England's finest actresses, known for her work in both arthouse film and mainstream movies.

Simon Fisher Turner, sound designer and actor in *Caravaggio*, served as sound designer for Jarman's *The Last of England* (1987), *The Garden* (1990), and *Blue* (1993). Before meeting Jarman, he had had a successful career in England as a child actor and recording artist. He subsequently established himself as a composer of film music.

Spencer Leigh also had a successful career as an actor in British television prior to working on *Caravaggio*. He would also act in *The Last of England* and *The Garden*. He continues his successful acting career and now lives in Brooklyn.

Spring appeared in Jarman's films until they ended their relationship, which came at the end of their first visit with us. Instead of returning with Derek to England, Spring decided to stay in America.

The press reception was a success. Its highlight was a nearly naked, very muscular friend sprawled upon a table, surrounded by plates of fruit and cheese platters, a la *Caravaggio*. We owed the idea to my boyfriend at the time. The reception was well attended and everyone seemed pleased.

We all attended the premiere together and then went on to the party at the Palladium. The film garnered mixed reviews, but I became a Jarman devotee. GMHC benefited and Mark and I made friends with Derek, Tilda, Spencer, and Simon, so the event was a great

success.

Whenever they were in New York, Jarman and friends were welcomed by Mark and often were guests in the apartment. I frequently drove them around the city, not as part of my job, but as a friend who wanted to be helpful. On that first visit Derek asked if I could drive him and Spring to Tribeca to visit his friend Howard Brookner.

Sometime in the early 1980s, the *Village Voice* had done a piece on Howard Brookner, who had made a documentary about William Burroughs. The feature included a full page photograph of Brookner in a business suit. He was standing in a hallway. He held his arms up to support himself as he braced against the two walls. The angle of the photograph had him leaning forward as if the next step he took he would come off the page and be in the reader's space. He was extremely handsome and I often looked at that photograph fantasizing that he would step off the page and into my bed.

So when I was asked to chauffeur, I gladly acquiesced. Howard lived in an industrial loft. I recall seeing the Hudson River. My memory has Howard dressed in a blue sweater. Although as handsome as I remembered, he was shorter than I had imagined. We spent much of the afternoon in his loft.

Wherever Derek went, his super eight camera was usually with him. He was always filming. Once I chauffeured him to lunch at a grand estate on Long Island, a place I imagined Jay Gatsby walking about. After lunch I accompanied him into the garden and watched while he filmed the bees dancing among the flowers. When some of that footage appeared in his next film, *The Last of England*, I was inwardly pleased I knew when and where it had been filmed.

Spring appears in *The Last of England* stomping upon and then sexually humping a copy of a Caravaggio painting. There was another inward thrill for me knowing he had stayed with us. I also began to understand Derek's love/hate relationship with the film *Caravaggio*.

As a gift for our hospitality on that first visit, Derek presented us with a copy of *Dancing Ledge* (1984), his account of his early life and art. It details the difficulties of bringing *Caravaggio* to the screen, a frustrating process with numerous script rewrites, several false starts, and setbacks often caused by homophobia and the fear of homophobia.

Inevitably a visit from Derek meant numerous journalists tramping in and out of the apartment in order to interview him. Derek submitted to the interviews with good humor, but he did not enjoy them. The questions were not very interesting and often repeated from one interview to the next.

As the years passed, our friendships deepened and we became familiar with each other's eccentricities and tics. Derek, who was surprisingly shy, frequently ended his sentences by questioning, "know what I mean?" He preferred diners to the upscale restaurants Mark frequently treated us to. Tilda appreciated fresh blueberries and yogurt. As often as Derek was filming, Simon was recording sounds, any sounds that caught his fancy. We appreciated each other's rather different senses of humor and there was much laughter.

Invariably each visit by Derek involved a trip to a grocery store. He loved to walk up and down the aisles amazed at all the brands of cereals or the many different kinds of soaps available. I wondered if the crass, over the top commercialization of everything in America did not also appall him. But mostly he seemed to enjoy these trips to the neighborhood grocery stores.

I recall asking Derek during the 1986 visit what he was working on next. I do not remember precisely what he said, but to my ears the question elicited one lovely image after another. As it turned out, he was telling me about *The Last of England*, his poetic lament for traditional English culture, inspired by Ford Madox Brown's painting of the same name.

When I visited London in March of 1987, I visited Derek at his Phoenix House studio flat off Charing Cross Road. I also saw Tilda, Simon, and Spencer. Derek was finishing up *The Last of England* and also painting a lot.

In August 1987 Mark and I, along with a few other friends, traveled to the Edinburgh Festival to attend the premiere of *The Last of England*. I enjoyed *Sebastiane*, was excited by *Caravaggio*, but *The Last of England* removed any doubt I might have had that Derek Jarman was a genius.

As I watched the film, I wept from beginning to end.

The work obliquely evokes the relationship Derek had with his father, who was a bomber in World War II. I felt a connection to this aspect of the film because my father was also a career military officer, also a pilot in World War II. I saw a great similarity between Thatcher's England and Reagan's America. I understood how a military industrial complex needed wars and money.

In addition, *The Last of England* mirrored my own interior world more fully than anything I had seen to that point. The poetic style of the film gave order to chaos, a feat I struggled to achieve in my personal psychology. The images from Jarman's father's home movies of the family in India and Italy evoked my own experience as a military brat; my family had lived in Morocco and Spain where my Air Force father was stationed.

Deeply political, while also intensely personal, *The Last of England* is an expression of outrage, a rebellion against abusive authority, a cry for humanity. It bitterly indicts the Thatcher era's greed and oppression, but it goes beyond politics to articulate a deeply personal vision.

Tilda told me once that someone had come up to her after a screening and recited his elaborate interpretation of the film, which he wanted her to verify. She answered that whatever he saw was what it meant for him. I also felt I had connected all the images into a coherent whole though it may be that the interpretation derives as much from my own psyche as from any objective reading of the work itself.

I often wonder what Jarman would make of today's political climate. Since he prided himself on his heterodoxy and iconoclasm, I imagine him being slightly horrified at the idea of same-sex marriage and gay assimilationism, but perhaps not. In his journals he often rails against how the laws are used to oppress queer love. And he was very vocal in his protest, including joining marches against Clause 28, the notorious Thatcher law that prohibited the promotion of homosexuality.

Although Derek prided himself on his non-conformity, I do not think he was a revolutionary. He was certainly not an anarchist, for he was not opposed to authority per se, only to abusive authority. That being said, I feel certain that he would have been made near apoplectic by today's corporate fascism and perpetual wars, which fuel the global economy.

In *The Last of England*, Jarman mourns a promise that England seemed to be turning its back on. He feared that the Camelot idea of "might for right" was morphing into a Thatcherite "might is right" ethos. Sadly, this betrayal of promise seems now to be continuing on an even larger scale.

Mark had booked a suite at Edinburgh's Princess Hotel. At the end of the festival, we all gathered in the suite to observe the fireworks display and say goodbye. This trip established what would become a pattern for some time, shared happy meetings and bittersweet partings. Jarman and his retinue would come and stay with us or we would meet them somewhere in Europe or England for a premiere, or some other screening, or event.

Then there would be stretches of time when Derek would be creating his next work and we lived our life in New York. We knew little about that time for them and they knew little of ours. Yet when we reunited, it was as though we had not been apart at all.

Having become friends with Derek, I avidly sought out his earlier films. This is how I came across *Imagining October* (1984), his experimental meditation on the end of the Cold War in which he reflects on the politics of both the Soviet Union and Thatcherite Britain. I also watched *The Tempest* (1979), his unconventional adaptation of Shakespeare's play, as well as *Jubilee* (1978), his homage to the punk rock apocalyptic sensibility that exploded in

London in the 1970s.

I received a letter from Derek in the summer of 1988, saying "I should pass thru N.Y. for a few days but can't stay long as the sound has to be done. I'm bringing a new friend with me this time he's smashing in everyway he's moving down here from New Castle where I met him. . ."

When *The Last of England* was featured at the New York Film Festival in September of 1988, Derek, his new friend, and Tilda stayed with us. The new friend, Keith Collins, was a tall, handsome man with intense green eyes.

On their first night there, we went out for dinner. Keith ordered a steak, raw. All of us were slightly horrified, but Keith insisted upon a raw steak. I noted that, despite our reactions, Derek took a peculiar pleasure in Keith's unorthodox behavior.

Keith maintained singular ideas on many things. I think this was part of the appeal for Derek. Although Keith was not an avid fan of Derek's films at first, in time he came to recognize their worth. He acted under the screen name of Kevin Collins and would play a major part in *The Garden*. In *Edward II* (1991) he was the jailer. He also did some editing for Derek. They were together until the end of Derek's life.

When we went to the theater for the premiere of *The Last of England*, Howard Brookner was there. His brain under siege by a horrible virus, he was confined to a wheelchair. Although we were all grievously familiar with the ravages brought on by AIDS, Howard's appearance nevertheless shocked us. He died on May 8, 1989.

I was a volunteer at the Gay Men's Health Crisis Center. At this time, AIDS was not a "manageable illness." A positive diagnosis was a death sentence. Rather heroically, in 1987 Derek had publicly announced his positive status.

In those days, a great deal of fear surrounded AIDS. We were afraid to shake hands, much less to kiss. Fear lurked in our hearts. Our feelings were raw and confusing. Activism became a way for us to process those feelings.

The fights during the Reagan years were grueling and disheartening for us in the United States. The same could be said of England, which was experiencing the Tory hell of Margaret Thatcher, who seemed determined to restrict the rights of homosexuals and whose AIDS record was as dismal as Reagan's. Derek became an outspoken AIDS activist in England.

In England, a schism developed in regards to AIDS and gay activism. In response to Clause 28 and the Thatcher government's unresponsiveness to the AIDS crisis, a number of celebrities and establishment figures founded the Stonewall Group to lobby Parliament and the media on behalf of gay issues and concerns, much as groups like the Human Rights Campaign do in the United States.

The approach of the Stonewall Group, one of whose chief supporters was the Shakespearean actor Ian McKellen, was challenged—and in many ways supplemented—by a more radical organization founded by Peter Tatchell, Outrage! This group, somewhat analogous to the American organization ACT UP, employed direct action and civil disobedience. Derek was aligned with Outrage! just as I was supportive of ACT UP.

When Derek and Keith came to New York for the American premiere of *The Garden* (1990) at the Film Forum in January 1991, Derek was in the news as the result of having denounced McKellen for accepting a knighthood from a repressive and downright hostile government. "As a queer artist," Derek wrote in *The Guardian*, "I find it impossible to react with anything but dismay to his acceptance of the honor from a government which has stigmatized homosexuality. . . . I think it's a co-option."

Although Thatcher had resigned, the government of Prime Minister John Major still championed her political worldview and Clause 28 remained the law, as it would until 2003.

Derek's letter began an epistolary tempest and divided the British gay community between those who supported McKellen's acceptance of the honor and those who did not. Adherents to either side roughly corresponded to those who supported the Stonewall Group (McKellen) and those who supported Outrage! (Jarman).

Fortunately (or perhaps not), Mark had a home fax machine, something not all that common then. Thus, a fax war commenced. As faxes arrived from abroad, Derek would compose responses that I would transmit to England. This skirmish lasted a few days and our sitting room became the headquarters for the battle of the faxes.

One never knew after having left the apartment what would be waiting for us upon our return. It was a welcomed excitement for me, but I felt Derek's discomfort. He did not relish the role of bomb thrower, but thought it necessary to protest what he saw as collusion with

oppression. He certainly did not enjoy exacerbating the schism in the queer community. I can appreciate McKellen's decision to accept the knighthood better now, but at that time, our outrage was still so painful, it seemed a betrayal, especially since McKellen had himself come out specifically to fight Clause 28.

Derek considered *The Garden* his Christian film in the same vein as Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. It was also about AIDS and intolerance. Derek returned to the visionary style he used in *The Last of England*.

Perhaps the best way of understanding *The Garden* is through the lens of the five stages of grief as delineated by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. From that perspective, the film might be seen as Derek's "bargaining," an attempt to postpone or delay death.

Still, *The Garden* was too religious for my taste. I was more excited by the news that Jarman was planning an adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's great queer tragedy and gay love story, *Edward II*, which would appear in 1991.

One of the things about us that Derek and most people did not know was that Mark struggled to maintain mental stability, a struggle that I kept as private as possible. Unfortunately, when Derek and Keith came to America for the opening of *Edward II*, Mark was in a residential treatment facility, suffering from a bipolar condition.

Although we saw each other and I attended the opening with them, Derek and Keith did not stay at the apartment this time, but checked into the Mayflower Hotel. The impact of AIDS upon Derek was obvious. I had seen enough friends die at this point to recognize the signs.

There would also be no difficulty in recognizing *Edward II* as a Jarman film. As a reworking of Marlowe, it is perhaps more accessible to a large audience than most of the earlier works. Still, it is quintessentially Jarman.

Derek uses the story of Edward II's infatuation with Piers Gaveston to examine the complicated and often deadly relationship of queerness to the dominant social power and culture of an era. As Craig Kaczorowski explains in the gltq.com entry on European Film, "Jarman's direction turned the source material into a parable of homosexual martyrdom in the face of institutionalized homophobia, with direct references to the repressive nature of Thatcher-era British politics."

Juxtaposing contemporary and medieval elements, Jarman includes such delicious anachronisms as Annie Lennox heartbreakingly serenading the separated king and his lover with Cole Porter's "Every Time We Say Goodbye." And with a clear jab at the English government's neglect of the AIDS epidemic, he depicts Edward's army as composed of gay rights protesters.

In February of 1993, Mark committed suicide. I had been with him as employee and friend for ten years. He was a remarkable man who deeply influenced my life in many ways. He also afforded me the opportunity to begin and pursue my friendship with Derek.

When I last saw Derek, it was a month after Mark's death and I was in deep grief. Derek and Keith had come to the city for the New York premiere of *Blue*.

Although Derek was almost completely blind then, he had expressed a desire to see the gardens of the Cloisters. I guided him through the herb garden. I would say what herb we were in front of and he would reach down and crush a leaf in his fingers and bring it to his nose. I could see the butterflies, he couldn't.

A few years previously, Derek had spoken about wanting to do a film about the artist Yves Klein who painted almost exclusively with the color blue. The film *Blue* turned out differently than he had planned.

He still had a blue screen, but now Nigel Terry, his Caravaggio, read excerpts from Derek's journal about losing his sight and the treatment he was undergoing. At times Derek and Tilda added their voices.

As Richard Bartone observes in his gltq.com survey of Documentary Film, in *Blue* Jarman alters radically the representation of AIDS. He "mounts an auditory assault on the audience over one solid blue image for 75 minutes, privileging the vision of the mind's eye over sight."

It is not comfortable to watch, but *Blue* is both audacious—the very idea of creating a motion picture with no moving pictures!—and profoundly moving. For all the criticism I hear about Derek's vision being so dark, he was a man who loved life and the world. He did not create the darkness; he reflected it back to the world, to the men who had created it.

In *Blue* he expresses a whole gamut of emotion: anger, outrage, humor, love, and compassion. Even blind, he was able to look unflinchingly into the abyss. The vision he brought back was one we must all grapple with, the realization that much of the comfort of our lives is at the expense and misery of others.

On the eve of World War II, in his great poem "September 1, 1939," Auden wrote, "We must love one another or die." He later changed the line to the bleaker but more honest admission, "We must love one another and die." In *Blue*, Jarman also expresses a similar point about the human plight.

As was his custom, after the screening of the film at the New York premiere, Derek sat for questions and answers. Thin, frail, and nearly blind, he nevertheless exuded keen intelligence and wonderful humor.

He died February 19, 1994, a little less than a year after Mark's suicide. I am happy to say that the other friendships formed during this time continue. But all of us know that with Derek's death an important chapter of our lives ended.

I am saddened when I encounter glbtq people who have not heard of Derek Jarman. Yet I know that his legacy will grow and that his work will continue to affect others. It is there to be found and those who need it will find it. I will always be grateful for having known him at a time when his work spoke so meaningfully to me.

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