Review of Derek Jarman by Michael Chatsworth

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‘Consider the world’s diversity and worship it.’

– Ariel, Derek Jarman’s *Jubilee* (1977)

Many of the greatest avant-garde filmmakers have engaged in artistic practices that went far beyond the domain of cinema: think of Man Ray’s photographs, Jean Cocteau’s poetry, and Michael Snow’s forays into sculpture and jazz. Much the same can be said of Derek Jarman. While he was directing some of the most important experimental films ever produced—such as *The Last of England* (UK/West Germany, 1988) and *Blue* (UK, 1993)—he was also creating strikingly original poems, paintings and gardens. Since a substantial amount of scholarship on Jarman engages only with his films (at the expense of his other artistic endeavours), it is refreshing to read Michael Charlesworth’s *Derek Jarman*, a monograph on the prolific polymath that analyses his art as a whole, unifying his diverse practices into a cohesive aesthetic—and ethic.

After an opening chapter that analyses the centrality of gardening for Jarman, the book is organised chronologically, offering a biographical portrait of the artist—from his childhood traumas (he was frequently abused for his sexual orientation) to his death from AIDS in 1993. In spite of seeing Jarman as kind of secular prophet—given his prescient films and progressive queer politics—Charlesworth wisely resists the temptation to write a hagiography. Unafraid to note the artist’s missteps and failures, he comments on the immaturity of Jarman’s early book of poetry, *A Finger in the Fishes Mouth* (1972), and incisively critiques the aesthetic weaknesses of films like *The Tempest* (UK, 1979) and *Caravaggio* (UK, 1986). The result is a nuanced appraisal of Jarman, one that both humanises him and enriches the reader’s understanding of his art.

The writing is admirably lucid and carefully researched; there are only a handful of oversights in the text, and they are generally inconsequential. For example, Jarman’s film *Garden of Luxor* is dated at 1972, but later, on the same page, 1973 is provided as the film’s date (47)—and no explanation is given for the apparent discrepancy. What is more, the book often lags when Charlesworth is recounting the details of Jarman’s life. This is largely because most of this material has already been covered in greater detail in Tony Peake’s biography of Jarman (2000).

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Nonetheless, Charlesworth engages along the way in several close readings of individual films and paintings, and this is when his writing is most compelling. The interpretations proffered are often idiosyncratic—even counterintuitive—yet they are ultimately persuasive. For example, Charlesworth skillfully deconstructs Sebastiane (UK, 1976), Jarman’s first feature-length film, arguing that the film’s protagonist is not a hero—or even a sympathetic character—but a champion of the repressive and homophobic early Christian church. And he draws attention to Jubilee’s often overlooked satirical dimensions and ‘unruly humor’ (64), seeing it as a scathing critique of capitalism that is as jocular as it is unsettling. Such analyses reveal the richness and multivalence of Jarman’s cinematic vision.

However, since there is already a copious amount of scholarship on Jarman’s films, I would argue that Charlesworth’s most substantive contributions to scholarly discourse are his close readings of Jarman’s paintings. Consider his discussion of Irresistible Grace (1982), a cryptic Blakean reverie consisting of several men, a skull, a floating egg, and a prominent erect penis. Charlesworth argues that Jarman modeled the work on a painting by El Greco, and he sees in it a poignant juxtaposition of ‘spiritual rebirth’ and ‘physical putrefaction’ (88). The analysis of the painting’s motifs (alchemy, spirituality, and sexuality) may be brief, but it is thoughtful and erudite.

A minor objection: Charlesworth speculates that Irresistible Grace was modeled on El Greco’s Lamentation (c. 1565-70). However, the painting that served as Jarman’s inspiration is almost certainly El Greco’s later Pietà (c. 1587-97) (currently a part of the Stavros Niarchos Collection in Paris). Jarman’s central figure in Irresistible Grace is in precisely the same pose as El Greco’s Christ in Pietà—although, with characteristic irreverence, Jarman has replaced the head of the Virgin Mary with a large phallus pointing heavenward. (This represents a consistent theme in Jarman’s art: what Kate Higginson has called a ‘queering of the sacred’ [Higginson 2008, 83]).

One of Jarman’s foremost preoccupations was colour. He wrote an entire book on the subject, entitled Chroma (1994), and his final film, Blue, visually consists of nothing more than a monochromatic cobalt blue screen—an uncompromising embrace of colour over line. These facts make it all the more disappointing that the reproductions of Jarman’s paintings in Charlesworth’s monograph are entirely in black and white. When Charlesworth asserts that the GBH series represents Jarman’s ‘greatest work in painting’ (94), one is forced to take his word for it—the black and white reproductions provided clearly do not do justice to the original works. It is maddening to read about Jarman’s ‘glowing colours […] seeping or oozing out of the surface of the paintings’ (98) while being offered only colourless reproductions, stripped of their original vitality. This is not a critique of Charlesworth (the lack of colour is no doubt a decision made by Reaktion
Books, one based on pragmatic economic considerations), although one wonders if, at the very least, colour reproductions of the paintings referenced could have been made available somewhere online.

In spite of such reservations, Derek Jarman is a substantive work of scholarship. While those seeking historical or biographical information will likely find Tony Peake’s book on Jarman more useful, anyone interested in close readings of Jarman’s films, paintings, and poetry will find that Charlesworth has much to offer. His interpretations are incisive and illuminating, and he engenders a renewed appreciation of the breadth and depth of Jarman’s artistic legacy.

**Bibliography**


**Filmography**


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