



DEREK JARMAN'S ANGELIC CONVERSATIONS

Jim Ellis

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JIM ELLIS

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Quotations of poetry from *Blue* and from unpublished materials by Jarman held by the British Film Institute are included courtesy of the Estate of Derek Jarman; the author thanks Keith Collins.

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Getting History Wrong

IN AN ENTRY OF *MODERN NATURE* dated April 4, 1989, Derek Jarman records a conversation with Mrs. Oiller, a ninety-four-year-old fellow inhabitant of Dungeness: “She tells me one sunny afternoon she saw two men fall out of a plane in a still blue sky, remain suspended in the azure while she held her breath, before they plummeted out of sight behind the holly bushes at Holmstone.” On June 1 of the same year, the novelist Neil Bartlett visits Jarman at his cottage: “When I told him old Mrs. Oiller’s story of the two men falling from a plane in a clear blue sky, he said that it was the first shot from *A Matter of Life and Death*; in Mrs. Oiller’s story they had disappeared behind the Hoppen Pits, where the film was shot.”¹ This is a characteristic Jarman anecdote for the way that it illustrates his belief in the power of cinema to remake the world. Film, the episode suggests, can alter our experience of landscapes and other places, colonizing our memory and thereby transforming the real. On another level, the story is also characteristic of Jarman for the way that it (consciously or unconsciously) plays fast and loose with history: the location shooting for *A Matter of Life and Death* took place on the other side of the country, at Saunton Sands in North Devon, and the shot that Bartlett describes doesn’t exist.²

“Getting its history wrong,” wrote the French philosopher Ernest Renan, “is part of being a nation.”³ Eric Hobsbawm uses Renan as a starting point for a consideration of how the work of historians can alternately contribute to or challenge nationalist ideologies. Jarman was an artist who well understood the role history and mythology played in the psychic life of communities, whether these were mainstream or underground. His films hijacked some of the favorite stories of English nationalism, using them to create new mythologies that challenged the dominant version of the present. In other works he created new histories and alternative lineages for himself and the new communities

in which he lived. The anecdote about *A Matter of Life and Death* is a small example of this tendency, serving partially to connect Jarman to a tradition of nonrealist, romantic, or expressionist filmmaking that exists in opposition to the dominant British schools of “heritage” films and social realism.⁴ More particularly, it connects him to the filmmakers Emeric Pressburger and Michael Powell, filmmakers whom he greatly admired, and who, beyond the stylistic parallels, share with Jarman a deep love for traditional English landscapes and a concern about their disappearance. This investment in a version of pastoral was cause for accusations of political conservatism against all three, paradoxically existing alongside official suspicion and even condemnation of their films.⁵ Jarman was aware of this irony, and occasionally highlighted it by claiming that he was a true conservative and patriot, as opposed to those Thatcherite politicians who were busily tearing down the welfare state previous generations had fought to establish. Although he clearly identified with oppositional and alternative communities, he was very much alive to the strategic value of claiming membership in the nation, and the crucial role that history could play in this claim.

Jarman’s interest in historical subject matter was thus doubled-edged: both challenging official versions of history and claiming ownership of it. In films such as *The Tempest*, *The Angelic Conversation*, and *Edward II* he seized on canonical texts from what is perhaps the key site of British national glory, the English Renaissance, and used them to tell different stories about the nation. In films like *War Requiem*, *Wittgenstein*, and *Blue*, he constructed new traditions of gay or alternative artists and thinkers. Elsewhere he explored some of the dead ends of history, arcane and alternative knowledge systems, to offer different perspectives on the present. Beyond this strategic use of historical subject matter, however, Jarman strove in his work to invent new ways of seeing and of representing the relation between the past and the present, of exploring the ways in which history inhabits and informs the present.

In her overview of British cinema, Sarah Street writes that “In many senses, Jarman’s films can be called *histories*: they revel in presenting history as a complex process which interweaves past and present.”⁶ Jarman’s use of anachronistic props is the most obvious example of this mode of representation and one of the most commented on of his

stylistic choices; what is less often explained is the complex historical vision that this signals. One model for thinking about this particular vision can be found in the work of the Renaissance painter Caravaggio, the subject of one of Jarman's most successful early films. Caravaggio painted his biblical subjects using his contemporaries as models, and deliberately mixed contemporary and period dress, which prompted the accusations that he had used a prostitute for the central figure in *Death of the Virgin*. Caravaggio's paintings require of the viewer a historical double vision, making two distinct temporalities occupy the same representational space. A similar claim might be made about many of Jarman's historical films, which often involve the juxtaposition of at least two historical periods.

For Jarman, the past, insofar as it can be said to exist, exists within the present, often imagined by Jarman in spatial terms. Even in his earliest films, Jarman is interested in how objects trail behind them their own histories, or, to put it another way, how objects import into the space of the present their own pasts. The represented space in the film is at times a collage or a palimpsest, combining or layering different temporalities that exist in productive relations with each other. History can function something like a building from the past, which brings into the present its original moment, as well as all of the transformations and accretions of the intervening years. We inhabit the myths and stories of the past much as we inhabit these buildings, and they can mold our consciousness much as a building shapes our movements and directs our activities. But we can also productively misuse the past just as we can deform the spatial regime of a piece of architecture, exploiting its program for our own purposes.

Collaging or juxtaposing historical styles was a hallmark of post-modernist art in the 1980s, but Jarman would have encountered it earlier as a student at the Slade School of Fine Art in the 1960s, during the heyday of British pop artists like Richard Hamilton and American modernists like Robert Rauschenberg. He glued objects onto his landscape paintings, and his early set designs for theater and ballet extended this interest in collage into three-dimensional spaces. His first work in film was as a set designer for a couple of films by Ken Russell (*The Devils* [1971], *Savage Messiah* [1972]). Russell was at that time reinventing