

My Body is a Temple and a Prison: Derek Jarman's Body-of-Work

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Abstract

Painter, designer, filmmaker, gardener, activist: for Derek Jarman living with and navigating between all of these roles served as a manifestation of his being-in-the-world. Within the potentialities of these diverse ventures lied the capacity to touch others. Therefore, in this need to touch his audience and his fellow countrymen, the body, for Jarman, gained prominence as the ideal mode of communication. While this is true of his entire body of work, an oeuvre that seeks the visibility and admittance of the Queer body into the body politic, this need to touch others gained greater importance after Jarman's 1986 HIV diagnosis. As a result films like *The Last of England* (1988), *War Requiem* (1989), *The Garden* (1990), and *Blue* (1993) are brought together in their foregrounding of the body as the main concern.

Jarman's filmic concerns also find outlets in his paintings and, perhaps more prominently, in his personal garden at Dungeness, on the shores of Covington, England. In his post-1986 work, the body feels, suffers, moves, and communicates. Moreover, the body serves as a locus where seemingly disparate bodily experiences converge. Thus, a film like *War Requiem*, Jarman's adaptation of Benjamin Britten's requiem of the same name (itself an adaptation of sorts of Wilfred Owen's WWI poems) allows Jarman to blend the bodily experiences of war with those of People With AIDS during the early years of the outbreak. These bodily experiences are characterized by a constant demand to be on alert, what I will refer to as a state of siege. It is these states of siege that permeate Jarman's post-1986 work.

While the style, form, and methods change from film to film, from painting to painting, the sense of being under siege remains Jarman's greatest focus. This focus finds its apogee in Jarman's two final works: Jarman's final film, 1993's *Blue* and his found object garden at Dungeness. In these two projects, Jarman brings the body, his own body, to the limit. *Blue* captures Jarman's day to day experience with late-stage AIDS. Having lost his eyesight due to

CMV (cytomegalovirus), Jarman opts to direct a film that denies the viewer any visuals, removing the iconic, indexical, and symbolic registers usually contained in the moving image. The experience brings the viewer into direct contact with Jarman's experience of the illness. The viewer is invited to listen; but above all the viewer is beckoned to feel through Jarman's constant references to his body. Simultaneously, Jarman employs his body to the tending of a garden. His garden, on the shores of Covington, takes root on a shingles beach, the least ideal of places for a garden due to its lack of stability. It is this same instability that lures Jarman to the task of doing the impossible. Thus, the garden becomes a parallel to his dwindling body. The garden becomes a symbolic effort to battling the forces of change and death.

In foregrounding the body, Jarman ultimately makes of his own body the work. Jarman seeks potentiality in the act of throwing himself into the world. It is in the act of touching, in the act of making sense (in terms of seeking signification but also in terms of employing the senses) that Jarman's latter work invites the audience to foreground their own bodies and, consequently, use them as vessels of communication.