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"Blue, Upon Your Grave": The Testament of Derek Jarman in *Blue* (1996)

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Abstract

This article develops an understanding of Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993) as a testament film. It considers the filmmaker's personal philosophy and concept of history, proposing the resonance of Walter Benjamin's *angel of history*, the epitome of Benjamin's contention with the 'continuum of history' in his final text, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. This article considers the testament of *Blue* as a concept of history, contextualised by Jarman's reckoning with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and thereby with his own mortality, as Jarman's attestation of a model of history (both personal and national, or coinhered as 'memory'), which answers the demand of the 'tradition of the oppressed.' Theories of *profane illumination*, *second nature*, and the *crisis of representation* are explicated for the purposes of identifying Jarman's model of history, and of his refusal of a *historicist* conception. In addition, it proposes the context of the AIDS crisis, as the 'state of emergency', the condition which compels this concept of history.

Keywords: *angel of history*; Walter Benjamin; *Blue*; *denkbild*; Derek Jarman; HIV/AIDS pandemic; post-queer theory; queer cinema; surrealism; testament film

1. Introduction

This article considers *Blue* (1993), the final work of the English filmmaker Derek Jarman, as a *testament film*. A testament film is defined here as a filmmaker's final work, produced under the horizon of mortality, and by this premise, as occasioning a consideration of the film as a reckoning of what 'came before', to which it answers. Such a film is distinguished, not just by chronology (which instantiates the viewer's consideration of the work as testamentary, as the 'last' work) but equally by a self-reflexive quality of the work, as a confrontation with legacy, time, and death, in which it is organised as an aesthetic and historical problem (namely, its position within a *history* of work—whether personal, national, or a coinherence of each as 'memory.') It is under these conditions that *Blue* is considered. This definition distinguishes the testament film from other categories such as 'autobiographical cinema' or 'diary film'. While these forms may involve retrospective reflection, a testament film is characterised by the explicit 'horizon of mortality', or the sense of finality which organises the work's relation to history. The testament is not merely biographical; it is historical. It reckons not only with the filmmaker's life but with the historical conditions through which that life becomes 'meaningful'. This article uses the term "testament film" as an analytic category rather than a genre descriptor, in order to foreground this intersection of form, temporality, and historical consciousness. In this sense, *Blue* is exemplary in that it stages both personal mortality and the wider catastrophe of the AIDS crisis as historical problems.

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Blue, which has a singular position within the historiography of *queer cinema*, and not simply as an exemplary work amongst others, has come to stand in a symbolic relation to the development of a concept of queer cinema itself. As Jarman's final work, produced at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and, thereby, under the conditions which have since come to qualify 'queer art', *Blue* is understood as the testament of queer cinema as such: the discursive limit at which queerness, precipitated by the historical crisis of AIDS, is bound to the aesthetic and conceptual imagining determined by the development of a concept of queer theory itself, coinhered in *Blue* as a final, self-evident form. Analyses of the film (or Jarman's filmography, as a whole), as yet, have struggled to diverge from the "analytical prism of 'queer'" (Richardson 2009, p. 3), since its consideration, such as in Niall Richardson's influential text, *The Queer Cinema of Derek Jarman*, as 'testamentary' to queer theory, the imperative of which has determined the trajectory of discourse. To consider *Blue* beyond this discursive limit, therefore, necessitates an account of this critical inheritance; though it may appear to depart from its consideration as a testament film, it is, by this fact, necessary that an argument, otherwise, may be situated: namely, one which reads the film against this discursive limit, that is to say, not as a testament to queer cinema, but as the *testament* of Jarman himself, or as a philosophical work in its own right.

Richardson's text is one of few studies (and, at present, remains the pre-eminent monograph) on Jarman's films, coming out of the renewed interest in gay and lesbian studies of the 1990s. *Queer studies*, as it was coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, is championed by Richardson, who prides himself on his text as being "the first study devoted to an analysis of how the political and cultural debates of 'queer' are represented throughout Jarman's cinema" (p. 7), positioning itself against earlier *auteur* readings of Jarman's works, principally Michael O'Pray's *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, the first comprehensive text on Jarman's films. While O'Pray is particularly interested in contextualising Jarman's films within wider cinema movements in Britain and Europe broadly, (measuring the English character of Jarman's films, which Richardson rejects), Richardson's interest lies instead in measuring *queerness*: by this, however, he misinterprets O'Pray's analysis as blind to the queer character of Jarman's films, in a wider condemnation of queer erasure in history, which he positions Jarman as unambiguously insisting upon, through his works, as the queer nature of certain historical realities. "Unlike other studies", Richardson intends to, "rather than simply praise Jarman's films as political allegories" but examine "how Jarman illuminates the debates in current 'queer theory'"(p. 10), albeit at the expense of considering for *what*.

Richardson, who situates Jarman within the *New Queer Cinema* movement, drawing comparisons to his American contemporaries such as Gus Van Sant and Gregg Araki, makes little reference to Jarman's immediate context. O'Pray, rather, tracks the influence of British filmmakers such as Peter Greenaway, Michael Powell, and Ken Russell, as well as the resonance of Continental directors, such as Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Besides the context of cinema, O'Pray considers Jarman as being within a British literary tradition, the lineage of the Romantic poetics of the 18th century, like "a latter-day William Blake", or sharing the sensibilities of Lord Byron, in his attitude to his country; "patriotic and steeped in English life" but "acutely aware of the reality of social injustice and prejudice" in England (O'Pray 1996, p. 8). While it is unfair to say, as Richardson suggests, that O'Pray considers the queer element of Jarman's films as dispensable, it is correct in the sense that O'Pray does not find it meaningfully productive, neither for *queering* its subject *n*or for a queer subjectivity itself. This is to suggest that O'Pray fails to consider Jarman's meaning in warping British history and cultural iconography (which he *inflects* through a relation of sexual politics, and especially of the AIDS crisis) beyond a reference to his immediate context. Equally, O'Pray ascribes the homosexual subjectivity of his films either

as a mere relation to Jarman's biography or solely to address the then-present AIDS crisis, and Jarman's anachronistic insertion of it in his films as a mere reminder, a relation to the present, rather than a concept of history. For O'Pray, the queer politics of Jarman's films is simply a contextualisation, and for Richardson, an important correction; but perhaps both authors fail to recognise a sense of meaning beyond their context, as a revising of history?

British Queer Cinema, a collection of essays edited by Robin Griffiths, is one text which recognises this aspect of Jarman's cinema, in which Griffiths and his fifteen contributors outline a history of queer cinema in Britain, beginning with the pre-gay British cinema and continuing until the post-AIDS positivism of the 2000s. In its introduction, Griffith introduces the 'queer revisionism' of Jarman, a preface for Raymond Armstrong's chapter on Jarman's films. While there is considerable discussion of the *heritage film,* Armstrong and his colleagues fail to discern Jarman's meaning in 'queering history', or the queering of the heritage film, beyond illustrating the fact of its development in a wider history of queer British cinema, and besides tracking 'the phenomenon' of the heritage film and biopic genre as a "'safe' and perhaps contained space to explore queer identity" (Griffiths 2006, p. 12), to which *Blue*, it is stated, appears as a 'complication.' Besides celebrating its consolidation of historical memory and queerness, little is discussed of its effect beyond articulating Jarman's queer identity. Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised aspects of *Blue* which exceed questions of identity alone. Jesse Khalip's discussion of the film's 'archaeology of sound' foregrounds the centrality of auditory experience in Jarman's construction of memory and historical presence. Similarly, Alexandra Parsons's work on Jarman's life-writing highlights the continuity between *Blue* and the diaristic practices which structure his later writings. This article extends these concerns by considering how such formal strategies precisely contribute to Jarman's philosophy of history, by an understanding of *Blue,* 'on its own terms' as a testament film.

This article, however, is not oriented towards measuring the queerness of Jarman's work, as in Richardson's book, or in opposition to Griffith or O'Pray's contributions, but contextualised by this factional historiography; rather, it considers what is, perhaps, neglected by Richardson, O'Pray, and more recent writing which arbitrates between the two: namely, what is produced by the queer character of Jarman's work? Through a textual analysis of *Blue*, Jarman's testament, instead, is considered here as a philosophy of history, rather than a history of sexuality. Contextualised by this discursive limit of queer studies, the ambition of this article is to offer an analysis of Jarman's work beyond queer theory, identifying a concept of history which emerges beyond this context, against the critical inheritance of Richardson and O'Pray, or "the exhausted project of sexuality's politicisation" (Penney 2014, p. 1).

To evaluate what is synthesised by the 'queer character' of Jarman's films, this article proposes the resonance of *Theses on the Philosophy of History* in articulating a theory of history, as a "model for a queer conception of historical breakdown", (Davis 2013, p. 214) in the meaning of *Blue*. *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin's final work, comprises the theoretical context of this article: the text, bearing the weight of its context,[1] Benjamin is Benjamin's attestation to the failure of the 'continuum of progress', upon which he accuses its contingency upon 'the services of theology' (Benjamin 1969, p. 253), to mean a faith in its correction, by eventualities of history (i.e., what Benjamins describes as *vulgar Marxism*.) Its usefulness to an analysis of Jarman is compounded by the nature in which it was composed, belonging to 'the tradition of the oppressed', as a text which "teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live in not the exception but the rule" (p. 257). Benjamin's contention with historical materialism (of which he levels despite the Marxist heritage of his work), is particularly useful in articulating Jarman's testament of history: inflected by his own context of burgeoning homophobic violence and the indifference of

Thatcherite Britain to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Jarman's effort to consolidate queerness and historical memory, too, appears to demand a recognition of what Benjamin stressed as a need to "attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with [the] insight" granted by the *tradition of the oppressed*, which marked against its 'opponents' who "in the name of progress, greet is as a historical norm" (p. 257). A definition for this is given as the 'tradition' of writing, or making, against the 'oppressor,' from post-colonial writing to queer cinema, produced in a 'state of emergency'. It is such that the 'state of emergency', rather, demands a philosophy of history which recognises its exigency. The contextual role of AIDS, one which constitutes the "political unconsciousness of queer cinema" (Arroyo 1993, p. 92), is the element of *Blue* which invites this application of Benjamin's text; catalysed by the "end-of-an-era feeling that AIDS [reinforces]; an exhaustion, for many, of purely secular ideals" (Sontag 1989, p. 166); the replication of a context such as that which produces Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Benjamin's relevance, here, extends beyond a resemblance between two authors writing under conditions of catastrophe. More significantly, Benjamin provides a model for understanding how historical experience becomes legible precisely when narratives of 'progress' fail. His critique of historicism, and an insistence upon the historical knowledge afforded by catastrophe, illuminates *Blue*'s formal strategies of refusing narrative continuity. (Griffiths 2006, p. 12).

Having established this, it must be acknowledged that this article uses extensive quotation, as necessitated by the difficulty of the texts, both Jarman and Benjamin's writing being recognised as obtuse, or even contractionary; but particularly, for the fact that it is formally based on literary criticism, (or in Jarman's case, the literature itself) and as such the meanings of either work can be seriously undermined by its summation. In this light, my interpretation, here, appropriates Benjamin's (and Jarman's) methods; that is, to approach the work on its own terms. It is also necessary to state that while Benjamin's writing provides the principal theoretical framework for this article, its aim is not to treat *Blue* as simply an illustration of Benjamin's philosophy, but as illuminating the philosophical density of Jarman's work, which I argue, is not simply an illustration of queer theory. Rather, it is to say that Benjamin's philosophy of history, here, can provide a vocabulary through which the film's formal strategies may be understood. The argument proceeds in three stages. Firstly, I define *Blue* as a testament film and situate this category in relation to existing scholarship on Jarman and queer cinema; secondly, I examine the AIDS crisis as a "state of emergency" in common with Benjamin's, arguing that this historical condition compels Jarman's repudiation of representative forms; and finally, I analyse the film's formal organisation as the means by which it articulates a 'non-historicist' conception of history, with particular attention to sound, temporality, and the use of aniconism.

To understand this 'state of emergency' which compelled Benjamin's philosophy of history as it reoccurs in Jarman's incident, as the historical catastrophe of AIDS, too, necessitates its prefiguring for its being not merely the 'context', but the condition itself from which his concept of history emerges. This relation is illuminated by Larry Kramer's influential text, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*, a figuration of the crisis as a "holocaust", by which he sought to render legible the scale of state indifference, moral complicity, and social abandonment structuring the epidemic. (Kramer 1994, p. 42). Kramer's provocation is useful here not for the sake of rhetorical equivalence, but insofar as it clarifies AIDS as a historical emergency which, like Benjamin's own moment, exceeds the categories by which it would otherwise be made intelligible within the *continuum of progress*. It is this extremity, and not simply the biographical fact of Jarman's diagnosis, which animates *Blue*. AIDS, though rarely directly represented in Jarman's cinema, is nevertheless its determining force, persisting not as subject matter, but as the subtextual condition which compels his repudiation of historicist and representative forms. In this

sense, Jarman's refusal of what became known as 'AIDS art' is significant. Such work, often conceived for activist ends, sought direct representation of the crisis. Jarman, however, regarded this imperative as formally and politically insufficient, remarking that "all the art failed", insofar as it remained "well-intentioned but decorative" (Jarman 1995, p. 91), the insufficiency of which he identifies as not simply aesthetic, but as indicative of a historical condition. For Jarman, the AIDS crisis demanded not merely its representation but a form adequate to the fact that representative art itself had entered into crisis.

Beyond resonating with the 'state of emergency' in Benjamin's conception of history, *Blue*, precluding the attitude of the New Queer Cinema movement "reprises the essay's signature attitude of looking despondently backward, in tandem with its famous epitome of the *angel of history*" (Davis 2013, p. 214). Recalling Paul Klee's monoprint, the *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin explicates this model of historical conception as such:

[F]ace turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he [the angel of history] sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm (Benjamin 1969, p. 257).

Benjamin, attesting to the failure of historical materialism, offers a reading of Klee's angel, which, propelled by the brutalising force of history (as progress), beholds just the memory of the past, obfuscated by "rubble on top of rubble [hurled] before his feet" (p. 257). Jarman, facing the 'wreckage upon wreckage' of the past, too, identifies the distressed face of the angel within his conception of history, as his personal testament, the identification of which is the charge of this text.

2. "The 'State of Emergency'"

This section treats AIDS, not simply as biographical context, but as a structural condition shaping Jarman's formal choices, as its expression of a both a life and a philosophy transformed by the crisis. Inasmuch, the culmination of Jarman's work, as in Benjamin's, was wrought, not by its artistic or literary conclusion, but by personal catastrophe: HIV/AIDS, first diagnosed in 1981 in the UK, was without standard treatment until 1996, two years after the release of *Blue*, and just months before Jarman's death to the virus. Benjamin, writing in 1940 of his flight into exile, at the moment of the territorial height of the Third Reich, attests to "[t]he astonishment of the things we are experiencing in the 20th century." This 'state of emergency', and neither his 'astonishment', to Benjamin, however is "by no means philosophical":

It is not the beginning of knowledge, unless it would be the knowledge that the conception of history on which it rests is untenable (Benjamin 1969, p. 257).

After beginning treatment in 1987, Jarman's work, too is characterised by such an 'astonishment', and from this point increasingly abstracted as his condition worsened in the 1990s: *Caravaggio* (1986), the last film before his diagnosis, is equally his last narrative feature. Later films, reflecting the frustration he articulated prior with 'representative' AIDS art, abandon narrative entirely: first arriving at 'meta-narrative' with *The Last of England* (1987) and *The Garden* (1990) before turning to more experimental modes, returning firstly to the short form and also painting (see Figure 1), both of which reflected his fatigue with conventional, 'representative' outputs.

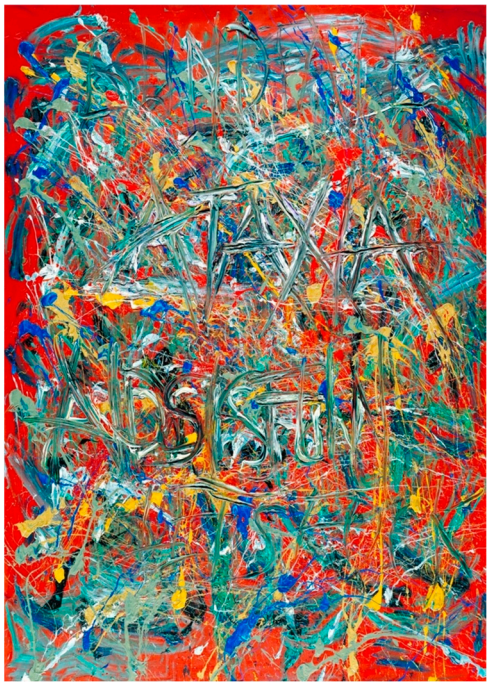


Figure 1. A painting of Jarman's titled *Ataxia–AIDS is Fun*, completed in 1993.

By this point, nerve damage had eroded Jarman's coordination and sense of vision. Initially interested in landscape and portraiture, his worsened condition compelled more confrontational works, here revoking the logic of perspective and favouring a disorderly composition: a reflection on the 'state of emergency' of the AIDS crisis. Jarman, unsatisfied by his own contentions with AIDS, was unrelenting in this frustration. *The Garden*, by his own admission, was a failure: the 'state of emergency' of the AIDS crisis, for Jarman "was too vast a subject 'to film'" (Jarman 1995, p. 91). Crucially, this shift is not only thematic, but formal, whereby perception itself must be understood as beyond a 'non-visual' or 'post-visual' condition, which becomes central to *Blue*'s structure.

The crisis, "by no means philosophical", thereby compelled a further *crisis of representation*. For Jarman, the penance of 'AIDS art', which emboldened the stratification of the British public from its sexual minorities, reflected the moral panic which acted as a 'cause for war' for the election of five successive Conservative ministries, three of which under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher. Under her leadership, the British government formalised a prohibition of "the promotion of homosexuality", as the 'Section 8' clause, fashioned in 1987 for the Conservative Party's general election campaign of the same year. The "desublimati[on] of the inherited sexual guilt of a grotesquely homophobic society" (Watney 1987, p. 18), which Jarman made the conceit of films like *Caravaggio*, was overturned by discourses of contagion as the crisis worsened, "transforming sexuality back into neurotic guilt", where those most affected by AIDS were "turn[ed] into its source" (Penny 2016). This crisis of representation, as a definition, is contended with at the onset of the "disappearance of discourse", or distinguished by the loss of 'the referent,' as the 'fragmentation of language.' It is attested to, firstly, by Foucault, (at the time describing the surrealists) as a sign that "language, having been detached from representation, the being of language itself had become, as it were, fragmented" (Foucault 1994, pp. 306–7).

This crisis of representation, for Jarman, by the nature of its 'appearance' instantiates a 'fragmentation' of image, where the imperative of representation, obsolesced "by the full elaboration of its own logic", is vassalised by a repressive regime of signification (Penney 2014, p. 1). For Jarman, such a regime had blunted the representative arts, whose redemption, thereby, was beyond 'representation' itself, but still the charge of representative

art. It was, perhaps, by this 'acknowledgement', that Jarman seeks to surpass this limit, by an aesthetic displacement, as the imperative of *automatism*. This realisation, for Jarman, coincided with a complication of his illness, when in 1992, he was at the onset of a rapid loss of vision: and for this, he determined to make an 'image' of blindness, as an 'automatic,' or experiential idea of its 'representation.'

This nature of Jarman's repudiation of this 'regime of signification', as automatism, invites a comparison to the surrealists themselves, who for Breton, "in its pure state", by which "one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought", was a definition for surrealism, and its innovation an exemption from "aesthetic concern" (Breton 1972, p. 5) For Benjamin, the 'surrealist experience' was distinguished by profane illumination, a "materialistic, anthropological inspiration" (Khatib 2014). Such an inspiration, compelled by the failure of representation or the "concreteness of image" (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 12), reappears as the ambition of *Blue*, a single shot of undifferentiated blue (see Figure 2).

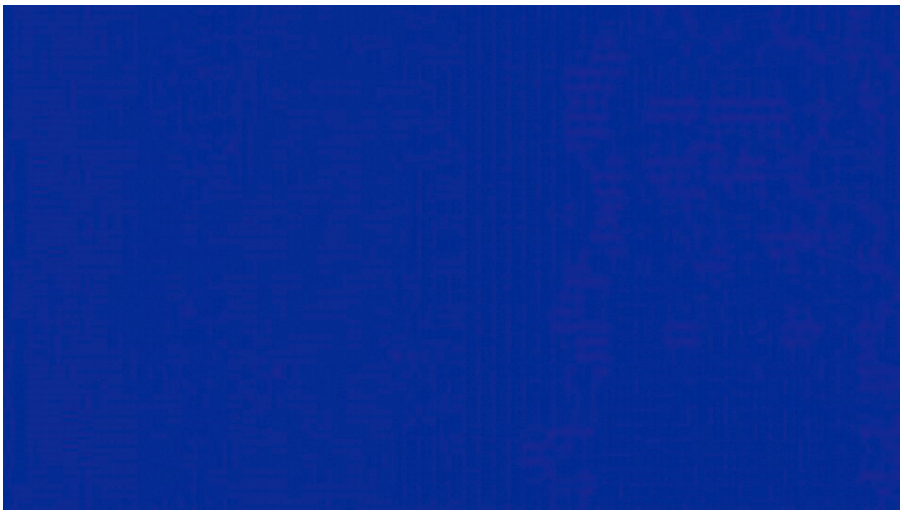


Figure 2. A still from *Blue* (1993).

3. "The Pandemonium of Image"

The imperative of automatism, 'in a pure state,' for Breton, is the approximation of the "process of thought" (Breton 1972, p. 5). As a 'pure state,' *Blue* was produced, 'automatically,' by Jarman's nerve cell degeneration, which by 1993, had reduced Jarman's vision to just shades of blue. His undifferentiated blue is thus an explication of his neurodegeneration, as a mode of 'translation,' into the image. "In the pandemonium of image", only the *universal blue*, for Jarman, satisfies the 'vastness' of AIDS (Jarman 1993, p. 10).

Blue, in which Jarman dispenses with image altogether, still, must be thought of by its 'images,' as an intellectual image, (or as a constellation of 'suggested images' as analogies). Composed of voiceovers from John Quentin, Tilda Swinton, Nigel Terry, and principally Jarman himself, there is considerable resonance with the structure of Benjamin's final *Theses*: its 'scenes', like the paragraphs of Benjamin's text, are often poetic or scientific analogies used to present a critique of the 'historical moment.' In Benjamin's text, each paragraph is a *denkbild*, or 'thought image:' an epistemological model that expresses a 'thought' in a pictorial formulation. Jarman's is of a similar constitution, where each segment is a "literary miniature", set "between poetry and social theory" (Kuttenkeuler 1973, p. 137). The structure of these 'thought images', in each case, is evinced by their diaristic style, the composition of which suggests an urgency to their articulation: in both, the author arrives at the 'thought image' at a time of crisis. *Blue* begins, as read by Jarman, with the following:

"You say to the boy, "Open your eyes." When he opens his eyes and sees the light, you make him cry out, saying: "O Blue come forth. O Blue arise. O Blue ascend. O Blue come in."

The 'state of emergency' is ushered in so: black, which, with the sound of a bell, turns instantly to an undifferentiated blue. Yet, by the disappearance of visual differentiation, the film's monochrome image redirects attention toward sound (and silence): here, the primary 'mode' of historical experience, the witness of Jarman and the voice actors is 'spoken', but unlike speaking, appears instead as if read, as a literary 'collage,' such as in the style of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's experimental novel *Dictée*. Here, like in *Dictée*, the 'thought image 'produces a fragmented temporal field in which memories emerge, disappear, and return without narrative resolution. Sound therefore becomes the principal medium through which the film articulates a historical consciousness. As Khalip writes, sound in *Blue* is organised through a temporality that collapses distinctions between past and present, producing what he describes as a condition of contemporaneity in which events "slam" against one another across historical distance (Khalip 2010, p. 115). Rather than unfolding sequentially, memory emerges through acoustic association, repetition, and resonance. In this respect, *Blue* resembles Benjamin's conception of historical experience as a 'constellation', rather than as a continuum: as a gathering of fragments brought into 'relation', rather than a linear sequence of events. The historical image appears not as chronology but as constellation: a sudden encounter between disparate moments which become legible only in their juxtaposition. Sound, instead, begets a function as the means through which *Blue*, as a film, (and as a 'character'), articulates a concept of history, here, beyond a substitute for 'vision.'

From the onset of the film 'Blue' begets both a 'characterisation', as a deity, appearing in dialogue with Jarman, and as a 'realm', an eschatological 'world to come.' 'Blue', to whom Jarman addresses the film, an unambiguous delegation of the disease, is, however, by this characterisation, greeted as a "universal love": for Jarman, it is "the *Terrestrial Paradise*", the "slow Blue love of delphinium days" (Jarman 1993, p. 4). The Terrestrial Paradise, where the sins of the saved are washed away, is an absolution without penance: its invocation here, by Jarman, is a reaffirmation of his refusal to regret his diagnosis. Jarman, rather, reveals "a political understanding of the significance accorded to the epidemic." By this affirmation, Jarman refuses to endow the AIDS crisis with a "meaning as retribution," as penance or as trauma (Penny 2016).

Instead, 'Blue' is redemptive. It is blinding, but evinces a sight 'beyond sight', the axis on which Jarman draws his contention with "the continuum of history." As in the epitome of the angel of history, history is revealed to Jarman as "a single catastrophe" (Benjamin 1969, p. 257). Inasmuch as it is blinding, the undifferentiated Blue, to Jarman, permits him "past the gates of conscience." Blue, reimagined as eternity, one which is 'outside of history' relative to 'the continuum of history', is the mechanism by which Jarman conceives of a concept of history. To Benjamin,

> [Where] [h]istoricism depicts the 'eternal' picture of the past; the historical materialist, an experience with it, which stands alone. [. . .] He remains master of his powers: man enough, to explode the continuum of history (p. 261).

'Blue,' as a mechanism, reveals the artifice of a historical conception, upon which, a regime of signification is precipitated, which turned those most affected by HIV/AIDS into its 'source.' Instead, Jarman imagines Blue as a historical constant, one which guides the expeditions of "Marco Polo", who "stumbles across the Blue Mountain": or as that which anoints "the lapis throne by the River Oxus, [. . .] ministered to by the descendants of Alexander the Great" (Jarman 1993, p. 12). Jarman's supposition, of "the universal Blue" (p. 4), rather than rectifying 'historical truth', is to reveal the mechanism by which history,

and by which authority predicated upon such a history, is demarcated: firstly, to reveal 'second nature,' or the artifice of this demarcation, and secondly, to dream of its redemption, for which Jarman proposes the cognition of this 'artifice' as contingent. The incongruity of historical memory and the condition of modernity, propelled by a reckoning with the AIDS crisis, is the nexus by which Jarman arrives at the Terrestrial Paradise, where sin is absolved without contrition.[2] Jarman's It is, as in Benjamin's instruction, "in remembrance", by which the present is infused with a "messianic power, upon which the past has a claim", one which "is not to be settled lightly" (Benjamin 1969, p. 253). Where Benjamin imagines the angel of history, Jarman proposes the 'universal Blue,' an *aether* by which the process of history is excavated from ideology. *Blue*, in tandem with Benjamin's epitome of the angel, imagines the archaeology of "the city of Aqua Vitae," hidden by a labyrinth of mirrors, which, in the light of the sun, is imperceptible (Jarman 1993, p. 6). Only 'Blue,' which "transcends the solemn geography of human limits," can recover an image of the ruins. To Jarman:

> The road to the city of Aqua Vitae is protected by a labyrinth built from crystals and mirrors which in the sunlight cause terrible blindness. The mirrors reflect each of your betrayals, magnify them and drive you into madness. Blue walks into the labyrinth. Absolute silence is demanded to all its visitors, so their presence does not disturb the poets who are directing the excavations. Digging can only proceed on the calmest of days as rain and wind destroy the finds. The archaeology of sound has only just been perfected and the systematic cataloguing of words has until recently been undertaken in a haphazard way. Blue watched as a word or phrase materialised in scintillating sparks, a poetry of fire which casts everything into darkness with the brightness of its reflections (p. 12).

Here, the past and present coexist without clear distinction, the significance of which occasions a departure, both formally and 'meaningfully' from the developmental logic of historicism. Rather than presenting history as succession, *Blue* assembles historical experience through juxtaposition. The result resembles what Benjamin describes as a 'constellation': a moment in which disparate historical fragments become newly intelligible through their encounter. The city of Aquae Vitae, like Benjamin's angel, is recovered only by a recognition of the process of its identification: the signification by which it is distinguished, or the meaning produced by its presence in time and space. Unlike the historicist, who "contents itself with establishing a causal nexus of various moments of history", without a recognition that "no state of affairs is, as a cause, already a historical one", can one redeem the present; rather, "it becomes this, posthumously, through eventualities which may be separated from it by millennia" (Benjamin 1969, p. 163), where, only by an integration of both the contemporary context and the past (such a context being that which produces the 'meaning,' or possibility of meaning, from the past), can it be redeemed. Equally, a further significance of the passage is in this emphasis on 'excavation', whereby the "archaeology of sound" is figured as a recovery of traces otherwise lost to history. Importantly, what is recovered are not images but words. This shift from visual to auditory memory reflects the formal logic of the film itself, where history persists not as spectacle (or 'experience') but as its residue (as memory). The passage therefore provides one of the clearest expressions of Jarman's historical imagination: a conception of the past as something excavated, rather than inherited. Similarly, for Benjamin, "[t]he historian who starts from this, ceases to permit the consequences of eventualities to run through the fingers like the beads of a rosary" (p. 263). The present command of history is, rather, to record the constellation in which "his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one." Only by such a command do we arrive at the concept of the present as that "of the here-and-now, in which splinters of messianic time are shot through" (p. 263).

4. "To Explode the Continuum of History"

This question, that of the resonance of Walter Benjamin's epitome of the angel of history in Jarman's historical concept, has wrought an unanticipated characterisation of both Benjamin and Jarman. That is to say, as men who stood in symbolic relation to their moment in history. The consideration of the Holocaust, in Benjamin's incident, and the "holocaust of AIDS" (Kramer 1994, p. 173), in Jarman's, has revealed a proximity by which Benjamin and Jarman, by the exigency of their historical moment, or "state of emergency," demand a concept of history which corresponds to the fact of its extremity, which thereby attests to the necessity "to explode the continuum of history" (Benjamin 1969, p. 261).

This text, by this suggestion, is the first of its kind, inasmuch as the theoretical implications of Jarman's concept of history, as they are consolidated in *Blue* as a testament film, are unaccounted for beyond a supposition of Jarman's 'queering' of history, the effect of which is limited to discourses of gender, sexuality and the body. Since its release, discussions of *Blue* have tended to remain within the interpretative horizon of "queer", the discursive limit of which has set Jarman's artistic position, or 'meaning', within this limit also. While the film has been extensively discussed within queer theoretical frameworks, these accounts often do not fully address its formal and philosophical construction of historical experience. The effect of this is a difficulty of approach, by which this critical inheritance has determined that the object of meaning here is its subjectivity, as an 'objective' appearance of value, and that its disclosure as valuable for this appearance is the direction of interpretation. To read *Blue* otherwise, therefore, necessitates a method commensurate with this difficulty, one which approaches the work on its own terms, even where these terms appear, themselves, fragmented. But it is in this sense that *Blue*, as a testament film, is a culmination of Jarman's work, and as such presents the possibility of reading Jarman's wider work through this same conceptual horizon. Yet this remains contingent upon first recognising the discursive limit within which the film has been received, and against which the present argument is necessarily situated.

But such a discourse "has run its course" (Penney 2014, p. 1) the atrophy of which has compelled this reappraisal of Jarman's work. Beyond a reduction to meditations on gender and sexuality, *Blue* evinces this symbolic relation to his historical moment: the conception of such, by the historicist model, at the identification of its significance, is interpolated within a "causal nexus" (Benjamin 1969, p. 263), of historical understanding. The film, at the site of this identification, refuses this reduction, of which it is accused of relying on the "services of 'theology'", by which it has by its supposition of the model of the here-and-now "summarised the entire history of humanity into a monstrous abbreviation" (p. 263). As a testament film, Jarman challenges the 'causal nexus' by interposing signification upon signification, by a means of collating the broad themes of his work, coinhered here as a final memory. The result is an attestation to his identification of the mechanism by which such a conception of history precipitates the condition of modernity through 'the lie' of supposing historical absolutes. If, in his earlier works, Jarman identifies this doctrine of signification, *Blue* is the overturning of this doctrine. It is the means by which Jarman, seeking to redeem the present from such a doctrine, reconstitutes the past. It is from this that he interposes "a messianic power" (p. 263), and claim, to the future: and for which he supposes one can redeem the present. It is to say, as Benjamin describes in his sixth theses, the prerogative of "His[, whose] face is turned towards the past" and constitutes history as the fragments which "pile [. . .] before his feet" (p. 257): or as the 'angel of history,' the explication of which I have made the task of this article.

If, as Benjamin claims, "it is good to give materialist investigations a truncated ending" (Benjamin 1982, p. 472), I will leave the last words to Jarman, who instructs the following in *Blue*:

> For accustomed to believing in image, an absolute idea of value, [this] world had forgotten the command of essence: Thou Shall Not Create Unto Thyself Any Graven Image, although you know the task is to fill the empty page. From the bottom of your heart, pray to be released from image (Jarman 1993, p. 14).

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Notes

[1] Benjamin completed the text amidst the escalation of antisemitic violence and pogroms of European Jews at the onset of the Holocaust, which, after the capitulation of the French Third Republic to Nazi Germany, compelled Benjamin's suicide: originally exiled to Paris, Benjamin took his life after being refused at the French-Spanish border in 1940.

[2] Jarman's use of 'Terrestrial Paradise', an archaic term for the Garden of Eden, appears to be a reference to the Hieronymus Bosch painting of the same name, by which it is used to refer to an interim state between the Last Day and the ascent of the faithful to heaven, for which they are garrisoned in the Terrestrial Paradise. It belongs to a polyptych with *Fall of the Damned into Hell*, *Hell* and *Ascent of the Blessed*. *Terrestrial Paradise* figures the marshalling of the faithful by the angel Michael who beckon to the heavens beyond the garden, rendered by Bosch in a pale blue. Its reference in Jarman's film is particularly understandable as the invocation of Bosch's impression of an eschatological world to come.

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