

‘Dance against the void’: Derek Jarman, dance, queer classical receptions

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This article considers three moments from the beginning, middle and end of Derek Jarman’s artistic career: Lindsay Kemp’s opening dance in *Sebastiane* (1976), Jarman’s words on a performance by Michael Clark in the 1980s, and Jarman’s last film *Blue* (1993), while holding onto the affective registers of his final diary entry (1994). Considering the ways in which Jarman indexed the ephemeral myth-making processes of queer life and art, the author develops a new kinetic-temporal methodology for exploring reception based on the fleeting queer modalities of dance. As such this article makes a series of important connections between classical reception studies, queer theory, critical theory, and dance studies. It argues that, despite the fleeting, erotic, and partial engagements with the past offered by Jarman — which challenge ideas of fixity or lineage — an identification nevertheless emerges with the hierarchies of white supremacist imperialism.

Derek Jarman died in 1994 from an ‘HIV/AIDs related illness’; the last words in his diary read ‘Birthday. Fireworks. HB true love’.¹ *Sebastiane* (1976), his first feature film, premiered 18 years earlier. Throughout his life Jarman revolutionized cinema, queering the collaborative models and approaches he was taught by directors such as Pier Paolo Pasolini. He emphasized the people making art, not just the art they made, directing Tilda Swinton in her first film role for *Caravaggio* (1986), collaborating with co-director Paul Humphress and composer Brian Eno for *Sebastiane*, and Annie Lennox for *Edward II* (1991). He was even canonized by the Canterbury branch of the international order of queer and trans* nuns, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, who declared him Saint Derek of the Celluloid Knights of Dungeness. Jarman’s process-based approach to filmmaking did not present mythic worlds and historical events as the *products* or *outcomes* of artistic collaboration; instead, in the films he helped make, those worlds and events are always in a process of becoming, through the artistic strivings of his collaborators, in their gestures, lighting decisions, songs, or merely their fleeting presence in front of the camera. In short, the cinema Jarman made was not one of iconicity or symbolic reference to a timeless or universal myth, but cinema which indexed the ephemeral myth-making processes of queer life and art. This is affectively marked in his last diary entry, in the fleeting contingency of a birthday celebration barely sketched, in the crack and splatter of fireworks long faded from the sky, or in Jarman’s final written gesture, which orientates us towards Hinney Beast or HB for

¹ Jarman (2000: 387–8).

short — also called Keith, otherwise known as Kevin Collins — who was Jarman's long-time partner, collaborator, friend, and 'true love'.

Sebastiane, in some sense, inaugurated Jarman's co-operative filmic practice, developing as it did through collaboration with friends, activists, artists, co-conspirators, and lovers.² Like Jarman's last diary entry, it is a material gesture — not of ink and paper, but time, flesh, and film reel — which archives a series of relational moments between queer people assembled around a project and a series of eroto-historical encounters. In this article, I return to three moments from the beginning, middle, and end of Derek Jarman's cinematic career: Lindsay Kemp's opening dance in *Sebastiane*, Jarman's words on a performance by Michael Clark in the 1980s, and Jarman's last film *Blue* (1993), while holding onto the affective registers of his final diary entry (1994). By using the reception of dance (and dance as a medium itself) as a lens for connecting with multiple texts, genres, and temporalities, I vivify and corporealize the shifting relations between these gestures, which attempt to render something of the past so that it may remain for longer than just the fleeting contingent moment of the present — and may perhaps be carried on into the future.³ In doing so I foreground the queer, disjunctive, and partial acts of *affinity* and *attachment* that Jarman makes, not for the sake of, say, the Roman past or History, or the Classical, but for the lives and futures of the queers he loved.⁴

Consequently, I offer a new kinetic-temporal methodology for exploring reception within and outside the classical, by emphasizing the collusions and collisions between these forms of assemblage-thinking (affinity, attachment) and dance (reception, practice). Insisting on relationalities, agential networks, or affinities, this method explores connections that are, as Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet describe them, 'never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind'.⁵ Thus, in conversation with ongoing work in reception studies — to account for modes of relation, neither framed by concepts of reading, literature (the intertext), nor filiative models of inheritance, 'lines of descent', of kinship — I suggest that Jarman's queer practice of performing encounters with and renderings of the past affords a process of rearticulating classical reception through the fleeting queer modalities of dance.⁶ As such, this piece draws upon a broad range of scholarship from classics, reception studies, critical theory, queer studies, anti-colonial and decolonial thought, and dance studies to suggest a particular queer form of the assemblage, termed, after Jarman, 'dance against the void': a set of entangled queer poses made in relation to the past, to loss, and to abandoned visions of the future.

Across three sections and a post-script, I describe this assemblage and consider three questions: what happens when it is triangulated, particularly, with a rendering of the ancient past? How does this assemblage-machine include or depend upon different structures of power to function? And what can be made of Jarman's uses of 'dance against the void' in *Sebastiane* to imagine a world where queer people, particularly white gay men, could live together and love each other openly? I argue that despite the fleeting, erotic, and partial engagements with the past offered by Jarman — which challenge ideas of fixity or lineage — an identification with the hierarchies of white supremacist Imperialism emerges, constructed through Jarman's practice, in such a way

² See Dillon (2004); Ellis (2009); and Mills (2018).

³ I am indebted to Borelli (2014) for this phrasing and method of conceptualizing the work done by both Dance studies and Theatre and Performance studies.

⁴ In Classical Reception studies so far, engagements with *Sebastiane* have tended to examine the classical references or the film's position within histories of sexuality: see Wyke (1997); Joshel *et al.* (2001).

⁵ On agential networks and affinities, see Born (2013: 138–9), Deleuze and Guattari (1983), on hierarchies of power and the assemblage, see Weheliye (2014), and for the assemblage and classical reception, in an article which repeats the quotation used above, see Ward (2019), referencing Deleuze and Parnet (1987: 69).

⁶ See Crawley (2018, 2021); Greenwood (2010); Hall and Macintosh (2005); Holmes and Güthenke (2018); Slaney (2022); and Ward (2019, forthcoming).

that *Sebastiane* articulates and affirms an imperialist and racializing mode of reception. I wager that this encourages us to rethink the queer engagements with the past that Jarman offered, to de-idealize Jarman as a figure in queer history, and to argue for queer concepts of destruction, forgetting, and unmaking alongside modes of affinity.⁷ As such, this article is an exercise in queer relation to and with an artist whose death haunts and illuminates the present. Hopefully it works towards a collaborative queer reception studies methodology that can articulate the ways in which the ‘performative force of the past’ flows into the present and can hopefully assemble our relationship to the future differently.⁸

Diocletian’s palace

Sebastiane starts with a riotous dance sequence. It is messy and tangled, full of prop erections, orientalism, racism, sex, and violence. This is not a stable place to begin a movie. It is a partial unsettling of some of the tropes and expectations that had, at the time, been established by Hollywood’s Roman epic cinema from the fifties and sixties. This American-influenced cinematic tradition envisions Rome as a neo-colonial orientalist’s playground, and within this particular imperialist fantasy, Rome functions as a stage on which ideological battles take place.⁹ These are often between individuals, who come to represent constructed opposing political, ideological, and/or religious forces: good versus evil, the might of republican empire versus the perceived dangers of socialism, Christianity against paganism, East versus West, misogynist heterosexuality against homosexuality.¹⁰ Interwoven between scenes, which clarify and lay out a winner for those battles (America, men, the West), are highly choreographed and organized set-pieces: wars that might dictate or influence the outcome of the ideological struggle or other spectacular scenes including dances, meals, cityscapes, all featuring a large number of actors, grand sets, and mass movement. These scenes have a weight and function too, laying out how lavish and decadent a falling pagan king or queen might be, or playing out a particular orientalist fantasy of the Other.

Sebastiane begins as if we have been dropped into the middle of one of those sequences; however, Jarman and his crew exaggerate the perversion, the queerness, of these celebrations. The film opens with a close-up of Lindsay Kemp, who was a genre-bending mime artist, choreographer, and dance-artist (01:37). As the camera cuts away from his lips, tongue, and painted eyelids, Kemp is revealed in full pose, back arched as he relaxes into one hip with his arms held carefully by his sides — a statue in contrapposto with dyed red hands, wearing a gold thong. This moment of calm is brief: just as it is revealed to us, he melts into an extension of the right leg. Kemp, rolling his head, contracts his abdomen while his arms lift; each separate movement follows the same gentle impulse which begins this restless dance (1:46–1:53). As viewers, we are invited to participate via the choreography of the camera. A wide-shot cuts in so that we peer just over the shoulders of Kemp’s troupe (2:15–2:25). Then, as his hands lower, it traces his undulating body; the frame settles on his hips before pulling us back out of the circle (2:33–2:39). This teasing invitation, entrenched in the rhythm of the cuts, is matched by Kemp’s convulsions, which originate from his lower back and hips, both seductive and erotic zones of movement.¹¹

⁷ As explored in what follows, de-idealization is a methodology developed by Amin (2017) for ideas of destruction, forgetting and unmaking; I am in sympathy with Umachandran and Ward (forthcoming).

⁸ Muñoz (2019: 19); this quotation is from and much of the methodology of the paper is in conversation with queer of colour critique after Muñoz such as Ellis (2020), Nyong’o (2018); Black feminisms such as Hartman (2019), Sharpe (2016), Silva (2014); and anti-colonial methodologies in Classical Reception studies: Eccleston and Peralta (2022), Greenwood (2010), McConnell (2013), Umachandran (2022, 2023), Umachandran and Ward (forthcoming), Vasunia (2013), Ward (2019, forthcoming).

⁹ See Wyke (1997), Joshel *et al.* (2001).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Borelli (2014: 16); for ‘metric’ rhythm in editing, see Mulvey (2006: 68).

As Deleuze notes in *Cinema II*, here ‘dance is no longer simply movement of world, but passage from one world to another, entry into another world, breaking in and exploring’ (2005: 63). Thus, Kemp’s dance is not only how we are enticed into the world of *Sebastiane* but also our entryway to the version of Rome constructed by the film. And consequently, dance facilitates the entry ‘into another world, that is, into another’s world, into another’s dream or past’ (Deleuze 2005: 63). Simultaneously, instead of remaining live in the ‘reality’ inhabited by the dancing body, dance is constructed through the techniques of cinema: lighting, *mise en scène*, camera position, and editing, and these ‘camera and editing techniques shape and give meaning to even the smallest of gestures’.¹² In this sense, Kemp’s performance is happening for us as we watch, but it is already over, and has been shaped by the filming and editing processes, his experimental combination of techniques, styles, and affects creating a choreographic palimpsest across time and place.¹³ Because, it has in a sense already happened before we watch it. So, the potential of the body to occupy different spaces than the ones it already has, to make mistakes, or literally to slip-up, is technically lost. But the *feeling* of possible alterity remains because we still watch a body moving, and by its very nature the body is capable always of collapse or failure. So, in this sense, Kemp’s erotically charged performance (which is located within Diocletian’s palace) strings together different ‘time-places’, some virtual, others actual: the spectators present, the time of the shoot, and the fantasy of the ancient past are but a few. Additionally, it brings a paradoxical relationality to the fore in the moment of reception: we watch something both complete and incomplete, stable, and precarious, something that is always already an amalgam of multiple times and places. If meaning is made at the point of reception, then here it is made discontinuously, inter- and intra-temporally, on unsteady ground.¹⁴

The filmic choreographic process constructs one continuous dance from many fragments, each potentially a different take of the routine, each of which happens in slightly altered versions of the same space. It presents a hyper-iteration of *both* dance’s particular capacity to vanish as it is being performed *and* cinema’s capacity to transform, layer and accumulate transformative functions, combining and working at the junctures between sound and image, flatness and depth, vanishing and re-iterating, past and present, contact and distance, ‘movement-image’ and ‘time-image’. The film thus enacts and re-enacts a version of Clark’s dance which is not equal to the live performances but contains some lively traces of it - construction of a multiplicitous choreography from a choreographic multiplicity.¹⁵

Direct access to the ‘real’, ‘live’ performance is troubled through this choreographic encounter with a compression of various materialities and surfaces (physical, digital, haptic, fleshy), each with their own ephemeral quality. This (dis)continuity is present at each and every screening. And while the movements of the dancers remain the same, new meanings can be continuously generated depending on both the viewing conditions and the opening or enfolding of that (dis)continuity. Therefore, in addition to the discursive, material and technical mediations of filmic technologies, Kemp’s dance is also mediated by the viewers’ experience of and agential responses to the dance — how they feel and how they choose to respond. All of this has perhaps been noted in film studies and Screendance before,¹⁶ but attention to the encounter between the fleeting quality of dance and the capture of film is illustrative of the kind of assemblage Jarman constructs when he configures queer ‘presents’ with the ancient past.

In order to make these general observations more concrete, we can turn to the shifting relationship between Kemp and the outer circle of dancers which follows his opening solo. At first, while circling Kemp they appear as a painterly frame which recalls, for me, Henri

¹² Davidson (2017: 393).

¹³ For more on palimpsest, see Hutcheon and O’Flynn (2013).

¹⁴ See Martindale and discussions on Martindale in CRJ (2013: 5:2).

¹⁵ See Muñoz (2019) especially 80–1.

¹⁶ The references here are numerous, but for an overview of film studies, feminist approaches, and theory, see Balsom and Peleg (2022); Stevens (2022); for Screendance, see Dodds (2004, 2014); Borelli (2014); Rosenberg (2017); and for film, materiality, and the ephemeral, see Bazin (1967); Mulvey (1975).

Matisse's 'The Dance' (1909–10), a representation of a Bacchanalia. In this context they symbolize an artistic engagement with the dance worshippers of the god Dionysus — maenads and satyrs. Later, they lower themselves to the ground, becoming the internal masturbatory viewership to an erotic dance performed by Kemp (3:23–3:35). Finally, they dance the roles of participants in an orgy, engaging in simulated anal penetration before lifting Kemp onto a crucifix, lowering him to the ground, and performing a collective orgasm. The scene ends with a close-up of Kemp's face covered in a condensed milk ejaculate. These shifting frames and choreographic relationships suggest, perhaps, an overwhelming series of possibilities for meaning-making. And yet they are gathered around a set of questions and concerns: what does a queer intervention into Epic cinema look like? With what means and in what way do queer people represent themselves through (and beyond) existing aesthetic and political frames? And how is dance a particularly queer tool for thinking about our relationship to the ancient past and the uncertain future? Or in other words, how is dance a particularly apt practice for working towards a queer methodology of reception? In order to suggest answers to these questions, I will pull back to consider Jarman's thoughts on dance from a reflection he makes later in his career on the work of dancer Michael Clark, before returning to the opening of the film.

Dance against the void

Throughout his life, Jarman wrote about dance in many forms.¹⁷ But I turn to a particular responsive gesture he makes — in London, in the early 80s — after watching a solo performed by a certain punk, choreographer, postmodern dancer, and club-kid:

This evening at the Riverside studios Michael Clarke [sic], a young dancer of supreme artistry, performed the dance, and as he danced raised this question – as to what he should dance. For the dance is so old and alive, and the dance he danced was new, but was dead; as dead as the fragmented universe we live in. Glue, I thought; but what glue to piece together the fragments on the blank canvas bequeathed to us by modernism? In a rush we have revived our own past, every -ism and decade. In Michael's piece the videos flickered and Cerith Wyn Evans moved them with dexterity, and all this was surely done before by Merce and the others who followed him. Then perhaps it had meaning, when with a series of large NOs the old order was hemmed in, trapped. Now surely the time has come to banish the abstract space, fill it with our daily life transfigured.

Michael dances his dance at the edge of time. And if, I thought, if only he danced his own life we should all be transported - but then this was his own life. 'Banish the blank black stage and fill it with a thousand roses', said John Maybury, and Cerith timidly handed Michael a garland which for a brief moment strangled the artifice. He commanded not only his own body but touched out to ours – dance against the void.¹⁸

In this description, Jarman writes Clark's movement as dance through text. He translates both affects and effects of the choreography, exploring the compression of decades of dance history shuttling between three entangled sites (embodiment, representation, and memory), articulating a queer and postmodern encounter with the past that re-articulates the present.¹⁹

¹⁷ One of Jarman's first professional jobs was costume and set designer for Frederick Ashton's *Jazz Calendar* (1968), commissioned by the Royal Ballet. Some of these designs are held by the V&A; Jarman noted that this work taught him a lot, and that Fred was a great teacher, see *Face to Face, Derek Jarman* (1993), held by the BFI.

¹⁸ Jarman (1984: 224).

¹⁹ I believe the performance Jarman is describing is one of the iterations of Clark's *Parts I-IV*, perhaps the run 29 October to 5 November 1983 at Riverside studios in London, see Stanger's chronology in Cotter and Violette (2011, 332–447); the description of the work by Evans and his emphasis on the influence of Rainer's work on Clark feels relevant (107), as does Evans' account of Clark's 'spatial concerns' in this piece (107); the photography of the performance by Harris — see Cotter and Violette (2011: 105) — also echoes the picture by Conway, of Clark's 1983 performance in Jarman (1984: 225).

First, we hear about ‘Merce’ Cunningham (who gave anti-balletic dance abstraction a technique grounded in geometry), and then Yvonne Rainer via her infamous ‘NO’ manifesto. These two artists both conjure the gestural languages of American dance myths (Stanger 2021): Rainer grounded in a refusal of choreographic displays of ‘moving’ and ‘being moved’, of narrative and spectacle, through the embrace of the mundane (Rainer 1964); Cunningham re-writing space and time through a choreopolitics of acceleration, chance, and abstraction. Through both references Jarman is himself writing Clark’s dance as a remediation of history, choreographing his own mobile and animate reception of a live performance.

For example, over and above Clark’s formalism and his re-embodiment of modern and classical (ballet) dance techniques, Jarman amplifies the connections between Clark’s work and these aforementioned (post)modern dance practitioners — postmodern dance being a movement which originated in the 1960s within spaces like the Judson Dance Church. It blended visual, material, and live art to reject modern dance’s emphasis on abstraction, form, and narrative mimetic content (Rainer 2009). Here, everyday action can be material for choreography. This is possible in ballet and modern dance (take, for example, Balanchine’s integration of the dancer arriving late in *Serenade*, 1935)²⁰; but the postmodern dancer’s use of the everyday was not geared towards an integration of daily movement into other techniques like ballet. Instead, it demonstrated that everyday gestures and motions are themselves techniques with social and historical specificity, codified already as/like dance techniques, as fluid and open to transference and play.

By adopting this strategy, postmodern practitioners asked interrelated questions: what counts as dance; is dance an art generated by the dancer moving or is the dancer moving the art? If it is the latter as well as the former, then how unmediated are our everyday gestures, how already dance-like is crossing the street? Rainer’s ‘Trio A’ (1966) is a clear example of this interrogative practice: she continuously moves, leans, reaches, sits, stands, and walks through space, utilizing repetition and variation. As she does, Rainer demonstrates how actions are learnt, that sitting is a particular kind of gesture which can be done in various ways, each with a particular set of cultural codes and affective structures.²¹ Thus, Jarman in his own act of choreography, emphasizes chosen connections (‘glue’), the rush and collapse of time, and the banishment and re-irruption of abstraction and ‘real life’, respectively. This is a filmic, analogue, and painterly approach to dance that mixes media (time, materiality, genre, affect, style, politics) in a way that many recognize from Jarman’s cinematic work.

Throughout *Dancing Ledge*, the text from which the description of Clark’s performance comes, dance functions in this way. It is a method of queer sociality: a pretence for cruising within London’s nightclubs and a kind of foreplay; it takes place in apartments, while blue smoke fills up the room; it is a method of celebration, mourning, and care. Dance, in Jarman’s work, expresses politics, love, and desire; it is a *mise en abyme* for his artistic practice of indexing the ephemeral myth-making processes of queer life and art. This figures dance as an aesthetic mode of social and affective relation — a shifting, provisional, and rhythmic network of transference between queer bodies. An account that prefigures the later work of performance and dance studies scholars who write about what dance *does* and not just what it is trying to say.

Taking forward this sense of the provisional, carried by the rhythm of queer lifeworlds on the dance floor, we can find tools for understanding the performance of the past through the body of the dancer. ‘And if, I thought, if only he danced his own life we should all be transported – but then this was his own life’. In this moment, Jarman’s reading enacts a desire for more from Clark but ends in the short-circuiting of that desire. This is indexed by the dash in the sentence which interrupts the thought, and functions

²⁰ See Homans (2022).

²¹ See Borelli (2014) and for a general introduction to this thinking, see Mauss (1973).

as a gap to connect want, its arrival, and Clark's body. It is a dancerly use of text that is repeated throughout the excerpt, giving it the rhythm of one of Clark's choreographies.²² Clark's life is present in the dance he makes, because — we might say — his moves articulate experiences he has had, or it performs experiences he wants his audience to think he has had.

Then Jarman comments, 'he commanded not only his own body but touched out to ours — dance against the void'. Here the dance speaks not only of the body moving; it communicates to and with those watching (in somatic terms). Their embodied spectatorship is connected to Clark's through rhythmical liaison, generating a collective experience through the multiple bodies in proximity through the encounter. The hope for transport that feels dashed in the previous line ('And if, I thought, if only he danced his own life we should all be transported'), is achieved here as Jarman notes that the spectators have been affected, moved. It is this multi-sensory encounter across bodies and time-places that Jarman names 'dance against the void' — a capacious and seductive phrase. It is, perhaps, an attempt to index in writing the functional but non-linguistic way that dance practice connects bodies to each other, to polyvalent queer histories, to other dances, to politics, through flow and rhythm and kinetic movement, through multi-sensory experience, re-iteration, and desire, *through* the acts of rupture and deconstruction indexed by postmodern dancers Rainer and Cunningham. This, I suggest, connotes a choreographic practice, a metaphor, a technique, and a material set of strategies: 'dance against the void' — which is not dance that tries to overcome the void, but dance which presses up against it, dance that is shaped by encounters with loss, death, annihilation, absence, and destruction.

We can see how this functions through Jarman's reflections on dance. As he writes and re-choreographs Clark's performance, the muddle of connections and heterogeneous elements are re-articulated as a unity — of gesture, video projection, sound, image — that emerges, fleetingly, only for as long as it co-functions. With no video of the dance remaining, we encounter the haunting quality of Clark's performance again in Jarman's description, reanimating the feeling that 'the dance he danced was new but was dead'. An eery affiliation thus emerges between Clark–Jarman and other encounters with a lost past, or an absent, vanished live performance. The confusion between artifice and reality re-plays in his description, with an emphasis on artistic techniques, canvases, fragments, videos flickering. All of this is provisional, a rush that attempts to fill up blank, empty spaces with hundreds of roses.

Elsewhere in *Dancing Ledge* Jarman describes how it is dance — in bedrooms, nightclubs, on street corners, alleyways, and in parks — that facilitates queer desire through physical contact and affective exchange, outside or away from heteronormativity; it is dance which brings bodies, gestures, ideas, relationships, events, feelings from the past back together into conversation with each other via provisional exchanges. This queer choreography of dance against the void functions to configure a desire for that which is at risk of vanishing, that which is haunting, like the fleeting contingency of Jarman's other gestures: the description of the fireworks from his birthday before he died; his love for Keith, or Kevin Collins; the lives of the queers he documented in each of his films. A brief efflorescence embedded in a gestural practice that acknowledges, in the desire for (the) vanish(ing/ed), a remain, a residue, a trace. This echoes the erotics of reception described by Joshua Billings, in which a frisson emerges in 'the dialectic of absence and presence that antiquity cannot but evoke'.²³ It is through this erotics that I wish to return to the opening sequence of *Sebastiane*.

²² For the relationship between dance and text, see Chaganti (2018).

²³ Billings (2010: 22).

De-idealizing Sebastiane

The opening dance sequence ended with a close-up of Kemp's face. What is at stake here? By referencing the cinematic language of pornography and especially the 'money shot', Jarman's aphorism 'an orgasm joins you to the past' mobilizes desire as the method for co-situating different temporalities.²⁴ In their first relation to Kemp — as a moving collective that denotes a chorus of satyrs — the dancers appeared out of step, in relation to the anachronistic *mise en scène* which combines period set dressing and costuming worn by the guests, many of whom were recognizable from London's emergent queer punk cultural milieu. In this way, the construction of Rome which the film organizes emerges from the queer London Jarman has cultivated. Both are articulated in the bodies' shifting conceptualization of time and space — they are co-nascent. The group dance thus plays a role in constructing *Sebastiane* in a myth which moves like Clark's dance: appearing at one moment ancient, the next contemporary. In other words, Kemp's sticky and sexualized dance is the means of joining the constructed Roman past with both queer seventies London, on the one hand, and the viewer's present, on the other. It is also, therefore, the method of blurring the distinctions between these three place-times.

To add another layer of mediation to this already dense constellation, we might note that this sequence's *mise en scène* recalls the screening parties Jarman held before viewings of his super-8 films in London. As Jim Ellis has noted, the context of Diocletian's party reproduces the 'spectatorial conditions' of those screenings (2009: 29). This positions the rest of the film, which is set away from Diocletian's London on the outskirts of the Empire, as if it were the film Jarman and his friends were about to watch at the party (taking place within the palace), so that the remainder of *Sebastiane* is established through the opening sequence, 'through the party'. The proceeding events are 'directed toward the partygoers, Jarman's community' (Ellis 2009: 29). This is a theatrical conceit which produces the conditions for the dancing chorus to appear both as revellers from the seventies about to watch the film with us, and as revenants from the fantasy of Rome that will be played out in the remainder of the film, but which currently appear in Jarman's London space. As Jarman describes it, the scene 'winks back' at the Rome we are about to see (1984: 147).

If we think back to Jarman's observation about Clark, we might find some way through here. In Clark's dance at the Riverside Studios the body reached out to its audience and facilitated the construction of meaning. In Jarman's analysis, dance was able to perform its own history. 'In a rush' it allowed us to '[revive] our own past, every-ism and decade'. And in this sense the movement of history is resurgent, the past appears in the present and is ordered, or enacted by the moving bodies. This provides the participant spectator the opportunity to engage in the construction of that history on an embodied level. Thus, in Kemp's erotically charged movement sequence from *Sebastiane*, we as viewers experience 'the return of time out of joint'.²⁵ Dance is our means of crossing the thresholds into the film and for blurring temporal distinctions between *mise en scène*, historical fantasy, and theatrical setting. The erotic valances of this dance sequence allow for slips between the constructed version of the past, which remains on the move, at once galloping back in time as it turns forwards, 'teetering on the edge of an intellectual abyss'.²⁶ This sets the spectator up for the remainder of the film. It also establishes the potential for a queer futurity here, predicated on, or potentially undermined by, a self-conscious and polyvalent embodiment of the past. In other words, this is not only a version of time presented as dance-like (jittering, repeating, skipping), but it is also a scene of writing multiple histories into space, laying unsteady ground for alternative futures yet to come.²⁷

²⁴ Jarman (1993: 31); on this see Blanshard (2015: 18); Wyke (2001: 230).

²⁵ For the relevance of this quote and idea to dance and performance studies, see Schneider (2011: 1).

²⁶ Schneider (2011: 14); Gotman (2018: 304).

²⁷ Gotman (2018: 1–24).

Consequently, we can say that *Sebastiane* is an exercise in queer unhistoricism (Matzner 2016). It enfoldes multiple time-spaces by operating across and in-between, both literally and symbolically. What we see, as captured by the camera, is both constructed as ‘live’ and serves as a record of the original live performances at a party in Rome, in a warehouse in London, or — later in the film — in a naked duet on the water’s edge. Thus, as is true of Jarman’s description of Clark’s dance, the film works against the void, reaching out to touch the bodies who receive the film, crossing the interstices between each moment. This is not dance across the void, as there is not necessarily physical contact between performer and audience member or film and witness. But instead, it uses spectatorship as Laura U. Marks describes it, ‘as though it were a sense of touch’.²⁸ By this line of argument every (re-)screening of the film is itself an instance of sensory encounter with an historical queer construction of the past, a haunting, through which we experience the return of a particular queer structure of feeling, out of joint which shuttles between multiple times and spaces aiming for a future for queer people to live and love one another openly.

But what structures and facilitates this touch, this encounter? It is evident that this movement and these choreographic liaisons are reliant on violent hierarchies to function. Following the dance, the scene extends into punishment, murder, and exile. It is in this sequence that a Black performer, who is chained and who does not speak, is driven to maul another performer who has been sentenced to death by the Emperor. The music which plays in the background of the scene pastiches African music from the continent and diasporas. And so, this opening dance — while it deconstructs a site of the modernist imaginary: American Roman epic cinema — sets up and normalizes hierarchies of racializing violence via the tools and language of both Empire and embodied reception.

This reading is amplified by the filming. The hand-held camera movements index the anthropologist’s lens, the costuming and choreography reference the ‘world’ dances of Ruth St. Denis. Consequently, this scene features both a celebration of a certain queer erotic *jouissance*, a way of bringing the past into the present and the present into the past, and it normalizes systems of empire, colonialism, and racism in order to facilitate a move to ‘settler ignorance’.²⁹ In short the dance offers queer modes of relationality — public group sex, queer opulence and decadence — but it does *not* do so in order to reimagine, re-story, and remake the world so as to accommodate for full queer ‘relation and not ownership’ set against the operation of empire and colony.³⁰ Instead it perpetrates and re-articulates a pervasive mythos of white supremacy founded on the practice of the classical/classics, based on appeals to touch.³¹ Present throughout *Sebastiane*, the efflorescence of the fragile, fleeting, and ephemeral past thus becomes codified, fixed under the grammars of imperialism.

Jarman’s party scene is not massive in scale, and expensive, like the Epic cinema it parodies; instead, it is slap-dash; it probes the tropes of Epic but does not critique them thoroughly. Instead, *Sebastiane* repeats the coloniality and nationalistic exceptionalism of works like *Cleopatra* (1963), but with a kind of detached and queer, ironic eroticism — it is almost akin to Muñoz’ idea of disidentification (1999) but does not go so far as to denounce whiteness and its other self-sustaining violent myths. So, we could say that it is a queering. But after Amin (2017), Puar (2017), Muñoz (2019), and Berlant (2011), we should understand it to be a queering that is not essentially ‘morally good’ or radical. We can say that it is for the *disturbance* of normate representations *qua* Hollywood’s systems of sexuality and gender. And in this first reading Jarman’s understanding of dance against the void functions to

²⁸ Marks (2000: 127).

²⁹ Described as a frequent modality in classical reception by Ward and Umachandran, after Mawhinney, Tuck and Yang; see Tuck and Yang (2012); Umachandran (2022: 26 ft 3); for a description of how this fits into broader methodologies of decoloniality in Classical Reception studies, see Umachandran and Ward (2021).

³⁰ Brand *et al.* (2021).

³¹ See Eccleston and Peralta (2022); Umachandran and Ward (forthcoming).

entangle the dancer, filmic medium, and audience. But we need also to say that to facilitate these actions, the film relies on, utilizes, and replicates broader racializing hierarchies and assemblages as a choreographic function (see Weheliye 2014).

In other words, this queer act looks towards the past to create an imaginative landscape for the future, away from the city, away from what Jarman termed ‘Hetsoc’ — where previously non-existent realities might be given expression. And yet, within this film the performers and technicians conjure weather systems of desire and hope that are still dependant on racialization, the figure of empire and the colony.³² When facing the void, the performance turns back to the force that created it, rather than continuing onwards and dancing into its maw.³³

For example, take the duet between two soldiers, Anthony and Adrian, mid-way through the film. In opposition to the quick-fire, opening dance sequence in the palace, the remainder of the film slows down considerably. Due, partly, to the material condition of the editing process — for Paul Humfress and Jarman struggled to make the footage they shot on location reach the ‘eighty minutes plus which was the minimum for a feature’³⁴ — but also to emphasise the erotics of touch and the queer gaze, this slow motion effect is exaggerated in the duet. The camera lingers on their interlocked bodies, until Adrian pulls away, leaving behind his right arm with his palm open as a gesture of invitation to Anthony. Taking his hand, Anthony is led towards the water. Adrian melts back into the depth of the shot revealing his erection to the camera. The torsion of Adrian’s body, initiated by a step with his left foot, drives his hips and leads the rest of him around, pouring through the frame like honey (33:55–34:35).

The use of montage here echoes the essayist, playwright, and activist Jean Genet’s *Un Chant d’Amour* (1950) — a touchstone for *Sebastiane* as one of the only publicly screened explicitly queer and erotic films, which was still being shown at film festivals at the time of *Sebastiane*’s release.³⁵ In Genet’s film, the hierarchical arrangement of power facilitates sex acts based on voyeurism, longing, and the threat of violence as, cut between scenes set in a prison are sequences set in a void. The physical movements of each duet (Jarman and Genet) are almost identical in pose, tension, rhythm, and camera framing. The dancers drag themselves along the floor, grasping at hips and buttocks, and eventually lie face down on top of one another (22:30; Fig. 8). Or they flip one another over in the water, spraying liquid up into the air, legs softly grazing backs, hands clung in necessity to shoulders. The disruption of spatiotemporal continuity — at one moment Anthony and Adrian hurl each other into the air, the next they are submerged in the water, in an embrace — fragments the body into parts: arms, legs, hips. And a tension emerges from reading across and between the gaps.

As Maria Wyke has noted, the names Anthony and Adrian can be read as allusory references to the historical figures of Hadrian and Antinous.³⁶ Here the abjuration of any concrete identification between Antony/Adrian and Antinous/Hadrian might encourage an additional desire in a viewer, who may hear the aural similarity, to make a liaison between historical figures and the performers’ physical presence. Without any concrete foothold there is pleasure here in recognition without confirmation: an iteration of Billing’s erotics of reception. But, as we watch the two dance, we see neither erotic release, nor the confirmation of Anthony and Adrian’s allusory connection, nor the death of Antony — which might affirm the reference. Instead, a naked dance, and one of the first scenes in British cinema to feature an erection, points towards the potential for a form of queer erotic liberation (public displays of sexual freedom and male–male desire at a time when it was

³² On this tension in assemblage-thinking, see Weheliye (2014: 46–7), on weather, see Sharpe (2016).

³³ On the power of collective and choral dance to refigure, see Hartman (2019).

³⁴ Jarman (1984: 153).

³⁵ Wyke (2001: 241); Dillon (2004: 63–4); Waugh (2000: 69).

³⁶ Wyke (2001: 243).

criminalized), while still being marred by the strictures of empire. A military commander watches on, forcing Sebastian into a series of BDSM acts; the whiteness and muscularity of the dancers is emphasized, valorized; classicizing homoeroticism, and the reference to Genet amplifies the carceral logics of eroticized domination in these instances. This tension is mirrored in the media reviews of the film at its release, whereby the socialist left — who were disappointed by the film's inability to arouse them to climax or provoke them to action — faced the conservative right, who resisted the explicit male–male desire the film presents.³⁷

This highlights, after Amin (2017), a powerful entanglement of disturbing attachments (race, empire, queerness, and ancient Greco-Roman landscapes and scenarios) that continue to flood the film's assemblage of dances set against the void. At the film's screening this muddle was aimed at normalizing some forms of queer desire and projecting those into the future. In our contemporary moment, it is worth re-iterating the danger and harm of such performances — both when they were first screened and on each proceeding — and re-iterating the importance, again following Amin, of de-idealizing queer figures and particularly ancient Greece and Rome as *topoi* in queer utopic desire/sexual play. This does not deny or refuse to acknowledge the potential in queer receptions for thinking through the knots and knotty ways in which queer theory and classical reception have celebrated this period and these sites as phantasms of queer identity formation and future-orientated worldings. Instead, it calls for closer attention to the ways in which we might undo such knots and their reliance on racist, carceral, and colonial grammars.

Afterwards

When seen as a performance of *both* imagined queer social relation in the Roman Empire, and imagined queer world-building in the 70s, *Sebastiane* marks an important historical juncture. The period between Stonewall riots and the HIV/AIDS crisis in which it was released is a key but perhaps overdetermined interstitial moment in queer history. Its release at the time figures the film as an example of melancholic universalism — as it seeks to assimilate normative fantasies of queerness into empire, while insisting on that universal that repudiates others (Ahmed 2015). Here the cost of identifying with Roman queerness, moving into its embrace uncritically, is to accept the conditions of colonial racialization and harm, in order to go into a space of fantasy before HIV/AIDS. But we could also feel that it is an example of *Cruel Optimism* (Berlant 2011), an archival record of a vision of an alternative future from the moment before catastrophe struck, and a record of embodied investments in a set of conditions that seem to be liberatory but are precisely those which ended up facilitating the scale and pervasiveness of the catastrophe of HIV/AIDS when it arrived. Another way to put it is that *Sebastiane* is an exercise in queer futurity that short-circuits: an attempt to move people out of the contemporary city and to the edge of the Roman empire in order to look forward to a world where queer sociality is not policed but remains militarized.

So, the film holds open a future which we know in retrospect could not be: could not be because the very systems which *Sebastiane* clings to, the racializing assemblages of capital and colonization facilitated the flow of the virus through queer bodies, Black and brown bodies, without offering them help or assistance. This was state-assisted dying. For, if queer people were not seen as living, not seen as grievable or as human by the government in the first place, but instead always already dehumanized by modernity and its approved modes of reproduction and extraction, then what help would those governments offer to those its development is predicated on erasing?

What to be made of the film's ending in this light, and of Jarman's relationship to the failing, dying, queer body? What of the aftermath of the film and its relationships to the

³⁷ Derbyshire (Summer 1977: 19); Wyke (2001: 240).

HIV/AIDS crisis? To end this exploration of dance against the void and to reanimate the connections between hope and loss indexed by Jarman's last diary entry, I want briefly to focus on the relationship between this first feature film and *Blue*, his last.

Blue is a 75-minute shot of Yves Klein's monochrome painting IKB 79 (1959) that features voiceover work from Jarman, Swinton, Nigel Terry, and John Quentin. The soundscape oscillates between poetry and prose centred on meanings and associations of the colour blue, but also features autobiographical reflections from Jarman on suffering. The blue scrim that covers the entire screen indexes the blue haze that overcame Jarman's vision — a side effect of the medication he was taking to help slow the virus. The stark and overwhelming loss that plays throughout this film, released a year before his death, manifests in the blue haze of the screen. It is an affective mediation, which is as much about the loss of sight, as the total experience of this colour — revealing the already tactile, sensory affective qualities of the gaze, and the visual qualities of the aural, for example.³⁸

The blue alters the material conditions of the wall it is projected onto. As a viewer within the spectatorial conditions of a black-box theatre or gallery space, we have only this window out, fractured through the gaze of a man facing death. The film shifts the space aurally too through the timbre of voices (Jarman's own, his friends') expressing reflection, and eulogy. Thus, Jarman's recollections of friends lost and the ever-present knowledge that he was running out of time, are embalmed in the film, but they are not hopeless.³⁹ They index the everyday fragility of queer life in an expansive film that both denies any finality of death, and yet is all about endings.

Conversely, *Sebastiane* ends by thrusting us behind the eyes of the dying saint. During the establishing shots the camera pans across the hilltop, showing soldiers ready to kill Sebastian, the latter tied to a wooden post, half-erect. Any speech is obscured, all we hear is the noise of the wind while the arrows begin to launch into his flesh. It is not until we cut to Sebastian's point of view that Eno's soundtrack floods in. We hear synths that outline the contours of a body in ecstasy, soaring electronic melodies, and a rich sense of both longing and impending release. A wide fish-eye lens warps our view, expanding and bending the landscape in and round from the periphery as we look back on the soldiers who have been slowly firing arrows into Sebastian's body. This shift opposes *Blue*, so that the screen is not a window out of, but into suffering. We dive into the body of the Saint and stay there, humming, still but moving, not yet dead but dying, on the edge of release.

Sebastiane remains in tension with *Blue*. To watch the former with any knowledge of the latter amplifies the out-of-jointed sense of the past articulated in *Sebastiane*. While the saint may have re-surfaced as a thaumaturgical figure during the HIV/AIDS crisis, in *Sebastiane* he signals the failure of hope. This feeling is captured in other work of the time, such as Ron Athey's live-art piece 'St. Sebastian' (1999) where the artist repeatedly exclaimed that there was 'no cure', while his body is pierced through by long surgical needles, his queer blood, carrying HIV/AIDS, pouring close to the spectators. What is the point of this queer suffering, martyrdom?

Through Jarman's portrayal, Sebastian is robbed of his thaumaturgical powers, his martyrdom undermined: the film ends on the cusp of his death, before his revival, and before he plays a role in any counter-plague insurgency.⁴⁰ This prefigures Athey's treatment of the Saint and emphasizes, not his capacity for rebirth, but an aestheticized acceptance of annihilation. The moment of Sebastian's death does not come in either Athey's work or Jarman's: a performance of revelatory eroticism that has no future, no end. Conversely, *Blue* is about facing a real death, a material closure. As Jack Halberstam has written of the queer art of failure — and this too is a point made by Dimitris Papanikolaou, reflecting on Queer cinema through the HIV/AIDS crisis — these moments

³⁸ See Marks (2000).

³⁹ Capettini (forthcoming).

⁴⁰ Wyke (2001: 234, 245).

‘present losing not as a final point but as a productive position’.⁴¹ By considering *Blue* and *Sebastiane* together, we see two distinct versions of this queer sense of failure that does not precisely culminate in death, but that expressed the metaphysical force of dying as opening, fragmentary, broken gesture. The latter explores the process, the durational experience of queer failure and generation; it is pleasurable and ecstatic. The former acknowledges that what may come after may not be experienced by the individual but will be left to others.

Sebastiane and *Blue* both remain. One a remnant of a world before a virus tore through vulnerable communities, the other as a capture of the effects of that catastrophe. There is much left to be said about the moments that stich between the opening dance in *Sebastiane*, Jarman’s last diary entry, Anthony and Adrian’s duet, and Jarman’s reflections on Clark’s dance at the riverside. Much to write about his works, his activism, painting, and the mark these gestures left on queer cinema and art in the years following his death. A whole article could be written on his relationship to queer nightlife, his symbolic reading of dungeons and nightclubs — Heaven is a particular target of his, for its typified system of desire based on race, physique, and archetype: white muscle daddy, twink, jock etc. One could also talk for hours about how Jarman constructs a narrative that positions a moment of excess — the sex and partying of the seventies — right before a pivot, mid-paragraph: ‘Now, from out of the blue comes the Antidote that has thrown all of this into confusion. AIDS’.⁴² A book could be written on how he understands the shifts in sexual politics at the time, the criminalization and shame emerging around sex during the spread of the virus, and how he still held on to dance and connection through the fear and hatred. But this article began by thinking about Jarman’s last written gesture and its relationship to his filmic work and so to gather all of these threads up but not sew them neatly together, this is how it will end.

As Jarman’s last diary entry makes clear, queer archival moments, no matter how ephemeral, can function as monumental records of hope in the face of disaster. Those words ‘Birthday. Fireworks. HB true love’ describe a particularly queer, affective experience that has everything to do with a collective, decentralized relationship to the past. They index, for me, a kind of melancholy: yearning, hopeful, a queer feeling backwards (Love 2009), a grief split open by joy and pain, captured in the image of a drag queen smoking in the rain as make-up runs off their painted face, of standing together at a protest, dancing together in the face of authoritarian power structures; reminding us, through a constellation of ideational, discursive, political, and performative mediations, that a queer act is also the one which attends to, destroys, sketches, traces, or lets go of that which cannot continue while fighting for those who are still alive, those yet to come, and those whose deaths, in their thousands, haunt the present.

And so, if *Sebastiane* excavates a pluralist, (dis)continuous way of viewing processes of queer history and classical reception as dance-like, it does so to remind us that the past can disturb and disappoint us, while giving us the energy to move forward differently. Reading the film in conjunction with Jarman’s writing can provide us with a model of classical reception based on affinity - dance against the void - that allows us to analyse choreographic patterns of co-functionality and co-unity. Perhaps, then, it also offers us one way of constructing a methodology of reception which involves initially a close engagement with the ancient past as figured by a queer artist, a de-idealization of that act of creation, an emphasis on co-functional relations set up by the reading of the artists that includes both construction and deconstruction, and then a process of letting go. This would require a turn away from the models of Classics and classicisms, and towards critical practices of queer solidarity and decoloniality. In doing so, we might reposition Jarman’s work with the

⁴¹ Papanikolaou (2015: 293); Halberstam (2011).

⁴² Jarman (1984: 231).

ancient past so that we can hold onto some of the interventions he made while critically unmaking the world he upheld.⁴³

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Filmography

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⁴³ See Bey (2022), Halberstam (2020), Yusoff (2018).

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