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Diffusing the Vir/us: Derek Jarman's Transmedial Eco-logy as Pharmacopoeia

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Abstract

Decades after the outbreak of aids, the disease is still a crucial topic in identity politics, as the queer community strives for worldwide recognition. Past guilt-ridden representations of the aids epidemic, much has been done towards a less dehumanizing re-evaluation of those deemed responsible for the spread of the virus, following the footsteps of spokespersons like filmmaker Derek Jarman. With him, medicine and environmental concerns merge as his body and his unenclosed garden become a somato-political manifesto against epistemic violence. This article contends that Jarman's multimodal art is ecological and historically conscious in representing homosexuality in its collision with medicine and the law. Focussing on the journal *Modern Nature*, the film *The Garden* and Jarman's gardening work, a form of pharmacopoeia surfaces as a material-semiotic resignification of illness in the face of a new subject-object relationship.

Keywords: AIDS and HIV, Derek Jarman, Ecocriticism, Symptoiesis, Transmediality

Ce qui est naturel, c'est le microbe.
Le reste, la santé, l'intégrité, la pureté,
si vous voulez, c'est un effet de la
volonté et d'une volonté qui ne doit
jamais s'arrêter.
(Camus 1972, 228)

Introduction

In 1986, soon after testing positive to HIV, artist and activist Derek Jarman retired to Dungeness, Kent, and took residence at Prospect Cottage, a former fisherman hut facing the North Sea on one side and a nuclear power station on the other. There, he set out to build his "impossible" garden in spite of harsh meteorological conditions, as he once reckoned in retrospect: "When I came to Dungeness in the mid-eighties, I had no thought of building a garden. It looked impossible: shingle with no soil

supported a sparse vegetation”, but then “decided to stop there; after all, the bleakness of Prospect Cottage was what had made me fall in love with it. At the back I planted a dog rose. Then I found a curious piece of driftwood and used this, and one of the necklaces of holey stones that I hung on the wall, to stake the rose. The garden had begun” (Jarman 1996, 12). All the while, he was grappling with his fast-declining health, whose crude reality he began to portray in written, visual, and material form. The result is a historic site still accessible to visitors today, and a series of journals, the first of which, aptly titled *Modern Nature*, is at once a memoir and a tribute to literature, homosexual desire and love, and the transformative power of nature.

Entertaining a dialogue with literary, artistic, filmic, and gardening tradition ranging from the Latin classics to contemporaneity, as well as with body politics and activism, Jarman’s personal ode to nature will be here approached by means of an eco-logical exploration of a selection made from his transmedial legacy, which counts numerous sketchbooks and journals, paintings, and films such as *Caravaggio* (1986), *Wittgenstein* (1993) and *Blue* (1993). This article will focus mainly, but not exclusively, on his first published journal, *Modern Nature: 1989-1990*, his garden, and the film *The Garden* (1990), with particular attention to what Jarman himself considered the essential part of creation: the process, the hermeneutical potential of theory and practice, of theory as *praxis* – to borrow his own words, “[t]he filming, not the film” (Jarman 2018, 201). Perhaps more than elsewhere, in these three artistic productions, Jarman’s ability to merge the personal with the political comes to the fore as a process of crafting narratives that are equally intimate and critical of a turbulent socio-political climate. The historical context is not in fact to be overlooked, as the late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by significant political strife in Britain, under the leadership of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher’s conservative government, attacked by Jarman on multiple occasions, had a controversial approach to social issues, including medicine, right as AIDS was beginning to spread across Europe and America. With the implementation in 1988 of Section 28, a law prohibiting the “promotion” of homosexuality by local authorities and institutions, widespread protests, in which Jarman actively participated, smashed against the government’s systemic repression of the LGBTQ+ community.

Imbued with a sense of defiance and configuring as a call for compassion, *Modern Nature* documents Jarman’s day-to-day life, his experience of illness, and his reflections on mortality, nature, and art, taking on the tones of an outright political statement. Analogously, the film *The Garden* juxtaposes the serene beauty of his shingle-beach garden with what may be defined a counter-Christian symbolic imagery critiquing the homophobia and religious conservatism of his days. Hence, the film’s non-linear narrative and dreamlike sequences, a signature of Jarman’s avant-garde approach, utilizing the garden as the epitome of both immanent spirituality and physical and emotional resilience. Indeed, not only do these seminal works reveal the constant intersection of the personal and the political, but they come through as a testament of the semiotic significance of both author and his output (see Brabazon 1993) and the hermeneutical value of emotionally charged counter-narratives athwart epistemic violence.

1. *Eco-Logical Symptoiesis*

Amid the stony desert of Dungeness, Jarman embarked on the creation of an unexpected Eden on Earth, undertaking the endeavour on a modest budget, hauling manure, digging holes in the shingle, and coaxing aging roses and fig trees into a rediscovered life. Recalling a conversation with painter Maggi Hambling, to whom he once described his garden and announced his desire to write about it, his passion for gardening emerges as diverging from that of a conventional Victorian naturalist, hence Hambling’s verdict: “Ah, I understand completely. You’ve discovered modern nature” (Jarman 2018, 8). In contrast with traditional botanical projects, contingency

is in fact welcomed into Jarman's garden, both ideally and concretely, as friends and family were invited to take part in its growth. On account of that, Jarman's lifestyle in his final years can hardly be described as reclusive since, apart from his visits to various hospitals, where he soon started his therapy with Azidothymidine (AZT), he was often on the road either working on his films or taking part in public manifestations. As said, for Jarman no schism exists between private and public, which is why he also lamented how fiction could barely convey the weight of the situation: "The terrible dearth of information, the fictionalisation of our experience, there is hardly any gay autobiography, just novels, but why novelise it when the best of it is in our lives?" (56). His praise of the autobiographical accounts of those affected by AIDS should not however be misinterpreted as a nostalgia for biographism, in that his musings seldom come through as purely intimist and reach instead the hubbub of the worldwide political debate.

Specifically, Jarman is wary of the matter-of-fact and often misleading contribution of journalism, noticing that "little survives publicity. A world is experienced through a filter of journalese" (176). This tendency was also recorded by Susan Sontag, who angrily commented on the chaotic handling of the AIDS crisis both by the media and medical institutions: "A wave of statements and articles affirming that AIDS threatens everybody is followed by another wave of articles asserting that it is a disease of 'them', not 'us' " (1989, 82). Miscommunication leads to misinformation and, as the disease made its way into individual bodies, the fear of the disease slithered along the grooves of society as a whole, revealing the complexities of biopolitics in the face of uncertainty. Along with the capitalistic nature of biopower, which Thatcher's policies embodied, and thinkers such as Michel Foucault extensively explored, light was soon shed onto the ideological goals (and shortcomings) of the Iron Lady's government. Surely, if biopower is to be viewed as a series of "méthodes de pouvoir susceptibles de majorer les forces, les aptitudes, la vie en général sans pour autant les rendre plus difficiles à assujettir" (Foucault 1976, 185), then the subverting narrative activism of Jarman and his epigones did much to contrast the opiate illusion of obtaining a high-functioning society when its health system was shaking at its foundations.

As Paula Treichler famously wrote, "AIDS is a story, or multiple stories, [...] a nexus where multiple meanings, stories, and discourses intersect and overlap [...] an *epidemic of signification*" (1999, 19). Much like Sontag's attack on the metaphorical interpretations of HIV and AIDS, which she notoriously reprised after her seminal text *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), where she discussed cancer and its representations, Treichler also hints at how semiotics ideologically concurs in sublimizing the tangible pain of the ill while proposing a reading of their experience which constrains them into fixed identitary categories. A similar clash, which is centuries-old but has been recently rekindled following the COVID-19 pandemic, is the one between scientific jargon and what the (post)humanities see as a much-needed artistic turn in the perfunctory, if not elitist, lexicon of medical empiricism, which often thinks in oppositional terms. Metaphors generated along these parallels of binary ideologies still persist: perpetrator/victim, war/peace, guilty/innocent, plague monger/puritan redeemer.

When it comes to the health/illness divide, the damage derived from speaking of it in merely metaphorical sense relates to the subsequent neglect of the concrete effects of the disease, whose blows on body and psyche alike are rarely rendered without creating imbalances along the material-semiotic continuum: "Now the media rummage each morning through our discarded psyches to make a few bob", Jarman sadly recorded (2018, 176). On the other hand, to dryly illustrate the stages of a disease as a doctor is usually required to do is to deny the hermeneutical value of the individual's experience of illness, and an illusory aspiration to a disincarnate representation of human suffering. This further applies to AIDS, which, as Cathy Waldby writes, develops by "forcing the human cells to manufacture alien viral cells, forcing

human identity to participate in its own infectious defeat" (1996, 1), while also resisting a unitary definition, being a chronic, ongoing disease, which explodes into a myriad of opportunistic infections overtime. "That AIDS is not a single illness but a syndrome", added Sontag, "makes it more a product of definition or construction than even a very complex, multiform illness like cancer", alluding to the fact that "the contention that AIDS is invariably fatal depends partly on what doctors decided to define as AIDS" (1989, 28).

Furthermore, for what concerns the ideological function of metaphors, medicine is not exempt, and possibly the greatest culprit at that, since "[v]irology supplies a new set of medical metaphors independent of AIDS which nevertheless reinforce the AIDS mythology" (68), especially when the disease progresses in its mutated forms, as it has also been witnessed with influenza viruses like COVID-19, whose evolving ability soon had consequences in the molecular designing of effective vaccines. Similarly, if we are to contend, borrowing from a popular song by Laurie Anderson, that "Language Is a Virus" (1986), then the application of metaphors to a disease ought to mutate as fast as the illness does, and should not resort either to generalized definitions, as in the comparison of AIDS to the plague, or specific ones informed by epistemically violent agendas, as with the acronym GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency), sometimes also referred to, not by chance, as the gay plague.

Embittered by the invectives of some Jehovah's witnesses who once went up to his cottage, one of Jarman's diary entries encapsulates the leaden atmosphere of those years by emulating the discriminating language of anti-gay preachers:

The unleashing of the full fury of the sexual revolution has not yet produced any measurable benefits to the country as a whole, unless we think in terms of monetary gain. But with its emphasis on sex as a recreation and spectator sport the revolution has produced a host of problems that threaten us with social chaos. Venereal disease for one. VD is not a new scourge, but it has now become a plague, giving rise to new strains of exotic bacteria and virus-like agents. (2018, 149)

With his usual wit, Jarman reflects on such uncertain times by taking on full response-ability¹ in the face of what so closely affected him and several of his loved ones: "As I sweat it out in the early hours, a 'guilty victim' of the scourge, I want to bear witness how happy I am, and will be until the day I die, that I was part of the hated sexual revolution" (*ibidem*). Interestingly, the use of quotation marks for the expression "guilty victim" not only highlights the inflated adoption of both moralistic tones and war metaphors to talk about AIDS, but also gives the sense of Jarman's resistance to allowing such terminology to access his familiar lexis and, by extension, his own self. On the contrary, his vocabulary taps into the thesaurus of nature, as when he wonders, "Who makes up the names of drugs? Fansidar, Triludan, and one called Dom Perignon – near as dammit, why not Petal or Fleur for a bit of fancy?" (304).

What Sontag did in theory when she observed that "much in the way of individual experience and social policy depends on the struggle for rhetorical ownership of the illness" (1989, 93), Jarman did in practice, adapting his personal syntax to what he deemed fitting for writing about and for his generation, in the same way he let his rhizomatic plants spread in a pre-decimal state around his garden, and garden-as-text, whose "boundaries are the horizon" (Jarman 2018, 3), not the shackles of empirical measuring systems: "I measure out my garden one foot

¹ "Response-ability" is a term I borrow from physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad, who intends it as the relational imperative that, whenever and wherever an identity intersection occurs, each agent must abide by, being "responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other" (2015, 402).

in front of the other, country feet, as intuitive as writing" (147). Delineating a sort of ecosophy, meant in the way Félix Guattari did, namely as a way to "apprendre à penser 'transversalement'" (1989, 34), and less as deep ecologist Arne Naess conceived of it – as "a philosophy of ecological harmony and equilibrium" (1973, 99) – Jarman gaily cruises the complexities of the so-called Anthropocene, registering the state of the planet as troubled but still breathing. He likewise seems to contemplate (linguistically) and cultivate (materially) a middle ground between arbitrariness and contingency, treading carefully the minefield of metaphorical language, and letting the materiality of his multimodal art do the rest since, as Nicoletta Vallorani notes, the context in which AIDS appears is a "borderland – if not a wasteland – where the signifier, be it human being or text, or both, is doubled, made ambiguous, relocated, and displaced by the infection" (2011, 211). The same applies to scientific jargon and its contradictions. After all, as Donna J. Haraway puts it, "Plato gave us the tones in the inextricable ambiguities of his pharmakon: cure and poison; care, curare; remedy, toxin; treat, threat" (2016, 105) and, as Annamarie Jagose states in her exploration of queerness, ambiguity is intrinsic to homosexuality, even more so when faced with AIDS:

The discourse of AIDS [...] offers a contemporary instance of the long-standing definitional incoherence of homosexuality. In terms of Sedgwick's argument, it is not a matter of determining what homosexuality or heterosexuality really 'is', but of understanding that – despite various attempts (for a range of strategic purposes) to fix the definition of homosexuality – modern knowledges of it are structured by irresolvable incoherences and discontinuities. (1996, 21)

Rather than a metaphor, Jarman's garden might be said to be a "model" in the sense attributed to it by Haraway, who writes that a "model is a work object [...] not the same *kind* of thing as metaphor or analogy. A model is worked, and it does work. A model is like a miniature cosmos" (2016, 63), a material but not essentialist dimension where human and non-human, biological and non-biological entities and agents come together in a collaborative project which is far from pre-determined. Unsurprisingly, Haraway too gathers such agents under the sign of a material-semiotic continuum:

Conjugating is about yoking together; conjugal love is yoked love; conjugated chemical compounds join together two or more constituents. People conjugate in public spaces; they yoke themselves together transversally and across time and space to make significant things happen. Students conjugate verbs to explore the yoked inflections of person, number, gender, kind, voice, mood, position, tense, and aspect in a field of material-semiotic meaning making. (110)

As difficult as it may be, theory and praxis are required to be in unison, in that, whilst wording is crucial in raising awareness, intellectualized depictions of a disease, and the experience of a disease as illness, are not the same thing² and, by analogy, "[i]f gardens are semiotic, then their legible signs are not only the overall look or design a gardener creates, but also the methods, aesthetics, and the specific details of gardening" (Zeiger 2017) – what Jarman calls the "codes and counter-codes, the secret language of flowers" (Jarman 2011, 76). Besides, such double effort must be made to avoid apocalyptic scenarios and bucolic imaginaries, and to enact a queer ecopoetics. A narrative ecopoiesis that also configures as "the practice of forging human and nonhuman community beyond the bounds of nationality, territory, ethnocentrism, and

² Whereas the term "disease" refers to the physical symptoms of a pathological condition, "illness" regards the subjective experience of disease (see Yu 2020).

the normative family unit” (Hume and Rahimtoola 2018, 134) and does so to a greater degree as ecological and health discourses intersect. Ecopoiesis is not neutral, though, so that, while the quarantine following the outbreak of COVID-19 has been sometimes hailed as an awaited comeback of nature, as dolphins were spotted swimming in the usually highly polluted canals of Venice, AIDS rekindled a complicity with disaster. Indeed, AIDS soon became metaphorically associated with pollution (see Sontag 1989, 17), resulting in a form of ecoanxiety that the medical authorities helped feeding into as they took the habit of employing botanical and zoological metaphors in a way that increased rather than contained such fear, leaving the brunt of it to the gay community as a whole. But while in this attitude Sontag registered “a rise in apocalyptic thinking [as] inevitable” (87), the same cannot be said of Jarman, although the two seem to agree on the way AIDS came to clash with the clockwork progression of daily life, being a “a catastrophe in slow motion” (88).

Rather than existing in fear of or opposition to change, however bleak its aftereffects, everything in Jarman’s films and diaries suggests that relationality, investment, and even mutual improvement can be predicated on an acknowledgment of new kinds of endings. Indeed, though he welcomed the contingency of nature as self-defining itself, he refused any ideas of absolute human non-intervention. To an “ecological puritan” passerby who once scolded him for transplanting a dog-rose from a nearby copse, he replied: “It’s a Dungeness plant. If the world stopped still and humanity ceased, who could tell if it had been planted by me or a bird?” (Jarman 1996, 30). And, while living in the shadow of a nuclear power plant, Jarman went on to argue in favour of the ontological relevance of inanimate objects as well, even landing on new ways of memory-making by discarding the chilling notion of impending disaster to restore the season-like fluctuation of time, albeit altered by his (eco)awareness. Dungeness is after all a different world – not a Utopia by any means, but a much-needed alternative, that is why plants there are permitted to roam, weeds are as welcome as cultivated flowers, and in contrast to what defines almost all gardens, there are no walls or fences marking the property’s beginning or end. As Jarman writes:

The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end. A time that does not cleave the day with rush hours, lunch breaks, the last bus home. As you walk in the garden you pass into this time – the moment of entering can never be remembered. Around you the landscape lies transfigured. Here is the Amen beyond the prayer. (2018, 30)

Jarman’s approach to life exemplified a non-deterministic balance between nature’s fortuity and human intervention, a theme that resonates not only in his gardening and artistic practices but also in his response to AIDS as a personal, political, and artistic matter. Jarman did not exhibit a desperate clinging to life, but he maintained a pragmatic commitment to taking the first available medication (AZT), recognizing the importance of medical intervention in managing his critical condition. His stance, however, was not passive, as he advocated for broader access to the treatment, pushing for systemic change within the medical institution. His critique was twofold: he challenged both the prejudice and the preconceptions entrenched within the medical community regarding HIV-positive individuals, and he fought for the dismantling of these barriers to ensure equitable access to life-saving cures. His approach was rooted in a profound belief that while nature’s unpredictability could not be controlled, human intervention, when compassionate, informed, and inclusive, could mitigate suffering and promote justice in the face of any crisis.

Nowadays, the options Jarman provided us with to think alternatively of HIV and AIDS, and of natural processes at large, have an equivalent in the medical field, too. In 2022, a long-acting therapy was introduced for those living with HIV, which involves the administration of

injectable antiretroviral drugs monthly or bi-monthly, thus offering an alternative to daily oral medications. Before that, in 2012, a preventive treatment (Pre-exposure Prophylaxis, or PrEP) was developed to reduce the risk of contracting HIV by more than 99%, even though the drug has for now been made available only in high-income countries, which is symptomatic of a disparity that is far from simply geographical. On a larger scale, as anthropogenic paradigms are being dismantled along with their human(ist) legacy, thus dis and re-locating the presence of human race on Earth in a relational, rather than oppositional, encounter with both the macro and micro systems of other species and even microbial agents, an attenuation of the perpetrator/victim dichotomy has come about, at least in the case of AIDS, whose retroviruses can now be easily neutralized. Consequently, static conceptions of organic matter and the introjected conviction that a disease is an inevitable death sentence are now being rejected also by the scientific community since, as Francesca Ferrando notes,

DNA has the power and ability to evolve. [...] Mutations are often presented as DNA copying mistakes that can lead to serious diseases; and yet mutations can bring advantages to the organism too. [...] Some are harmful, while others are beneficial and protective – for instance, 1 percent of Northern Europeans carry a genetic mutation called CCR-5, which confers immunity from HIV infection. (2023, 58)

A positive re-evaluation of our bond to viruses and bacteria, historically and biologically, entails the acknowledgement that diffusion is a result of our closeness. “Companion species infect each other all the time”, Haraway believes; “Bodily ethical and political obligations are infectious, or they should be. *Cum panis*, companion species, are at table together” (2016, 29). Haraway does not speak as lone voice; thinkers like Anna Tsing work to overthrow human hegemonic perspectives, showing how even a mushroom can become an ontological correlative of both stewardship for a sustainable future and response-ability towards what has been forever damaged:

Matsutake are wild mushrooms that live in human-disturbed forests. Like rats, raccoons, and cockroaches, they are willing to put up with some of the environmental messes humans have made. [...] To follow matsutake guides us to possibilities of coexistence within environmental disturbance. This is not an excuse for further damage. Still, matsutake show one kind of collaborative survival. (Tsing 2017, 3-4)

Undoubtedly, the western episteme has had a hard time realizing that to “be animal is to become-with bacteria (and, no doubt, viruses and many other sorts of critters; a basic aspect of sympoiesis is its expandable set of players)” (Haraway 2016, 65). But also, to activate theoretically and practically one “must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures” (57). The com-posted narratives Haraway advocates for are devoid of innocence and endlessly in-becoming, since to be accountable within the worlds these stories create necessitates developing viral response-abilities, spreading and transferring meanings and materials across species in order to spark “epidemics of multispecies recovery” (114) on one side, and an epidemic of signification (see Treichler 1999, 19) on the other. After all, “acknowledging bacteria and viruses as (p)art of our existential revealing” is not only desirable, but indispensable, in that if “[f]rom an anthropocentric standpoint, ‘they’ become alive by becoming ‘us’”, from “a posthumanist perspective, the opposite is also fitting: ‘we’ become who we are through ‘them’, not only at the individual level [...] but also at the evolutionary level” (Ferrando 2023, 55; 63). It should be noted that the semiotic plexus of this mutual recognition is stressed by Ferrando also in a taxonomic, other than symbolic, manner:

The spelling of the term ‘virus’ can symbolically turn into ‘vir/us’, to emphasize the role of viral contributions to ‘us’, as we are. Think, for instance, of the placenta, which develops during pregnancy in the uterus: one protein essential to its formation (syncytin) originally became (p)art of the genome of our ancestors via a retrovirus infection. (*Ibidem*)

Metaphors marking microbial and human life as mutually exclusive pertain to paradigms still anchored to an outdated set of preconceptions, since it is now common knowledge that many viruses allow for their host’s life cycle to continue (see Roossinck 2011, 99), proving the *vital* contribution of *viral* agents and of those who, like Jarman, are equipped with the tenacity of ruderal species, which thrive on lands that have known disturbance, be it natural or human-related.

2. *Transmedial Pharmacopoeia*

Discarded as infesting and unsightly, ruderal plants fill up the cracks of pavements and stain with green the concrete monochromaticity of urban landscapes. Together with lichens and fungi, they inhabit liminal spaces and are either metaphorically associated with resilience or at odds with the geometric and abstract aesthetics of modernist gardens. However, ruderals are equally useful to think-with transversally and transmedially. Neglected in our daily lives and rarely featured in the excessively polished cottagecore contents of social media and TV programmes, ruderals can in fact serve as a unique theoretical and methodological lens to uncover a multitude of intricate narratives. Far from being merely representational, they allow unexpected connections between filmmakers, audiences, plants, and the camera, although, as Teresa Castro suggests, “[t]hinking with ruderals about other filmic histories [...] is no minor affair” because it means accepting “the politicisation of the living to which ecological thought has been inviting us for several decades [...] bringing the unnoticed, the trampled and the trodden to the space of our agonistic polis, to reimagine it as a common ground” (2023, 3). Ruderals give life to complex networking systems, hence Deleuze and Guattari’s notorious praise of the de-centralized wisdom of plants that, despite their roots, interact with “un dehors où elles font rhizome avec quelque chose – avec le vent, avec un animal, avec l’homme” (1972, 18).

Following this logic, ruderal plants can also be easily made into a model for literature at large, meaning the immersive and interactive experience that is permitted by and transmitted through a language, whatever is the medium it relies on, and whose development is as fortuitous as its origin. A much-needed distinction here is the one formulated within media studies between intermediality and transmediality, whose main difference is that the latter, as Werner Wolf writes, “is a quality of phenomena that appear in more than one medium without being, or being viewed as, specific to, or having an origin in, any of them” (2022, 215). Its main goal being that of spreading across as many platforms as possible, it is no surprise that ecology vocabulary has been employed to talk about transmediality: “Like our physical planet”, Gary Hayes affirms, “mass-media and its internal cultures has splintered, the land masses moved apart leaving a complex environment to navigate” (2011).

Jarman’s cross-media and cross-disciplinary approach is a case in point, and one that predates many of the interconnections within today’s cultural production, distribution, and reception systems, which has eventually led to a thorough reconsideration of the humanities and the overdue implementation of an interdisciplinary attitude that integrate literary, media, and cultural studies with less human(ist) philosophies. For literary scholars, this has also involved leveraging their expertise in literary analysis without prioritizing literary (i.e., written, book-

form) narratives in the convergence era (see Georgi and Glaser 2015, 25). Jarman's poetics is one that "*cries out for collaborative and divergent story-making practices, in narrative, audio, and visual performances and texts in materialities from digital to sculptural to everything practicable*" in the hope that others will "*change parts of the story and take them elsewhere, enlarge, object, flesh out, and reimagine [...] lifeways*" (Haraway 2016, 143-44), which also raises ethical questions around the conservation of Jarman's garden – the same garden he convincingly kept untamed when he was still alive.

Significantly, transmedia narratology emerges as transdisciplinary, so that, in Henry Jenkins's words, "a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction" (2008, 98). Granting that the physical toil involved in taking care of a constantly mutating garden cannot be compared to the durability in time of the finished product that is a film, *The Garden* exceeds the visual medium, as Jarman employs gardening and journal-writing as counterpoints to traditional cinematic forms, contrasting his film's structure with the more linear narratives of mainstream cinema, wherefore advancing an analogy with the disruption of nature's seasonal rhythms. His landscapes, caught in a barren and desolate state, stand in stark opposition to the typical portrayals of prosperous English nature, so as to challenge the easy consumption of images, a tendency reinforced by media-driven capitalism, especially when it comes to depictions of environmental decay or vanishing natural spaces: "I offer you a journey without direction, uncertainty and no sweet conclusion" (Jarman 1990, 01:41), utters the voiceover in *The Garden*. More importantly, the film is set up as the blueprint for a brand new symbolic and social order, presenting "a paradoxically idiosyncratic *and* collaborative vision of the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the Passion of Jesus Christ transformed into 'gay fables'" (Garrard 2022, 214).

Moreover, working on *The Garden* meant for Jarman coming to terms with terminality. "Behind the façade my life is at sixes and sevens", he recorded in his diary in November 1989; "I water the roses and wonder whether I will see them bloom. I plant my herbal garden as a panacea, read up on all the aches and pains that plants will cure – and know they are not going to help. The garden as pharmacopoeia has failed" (2018, 179). Refusing to ban the visceral nature of affects like grief and fear, a shift had begun after the birth of the garden the previous year, when Jarman still "saw it as a therapy and pharmacopoeia" (2022, 25). Yet, he still managed to feel "a thrill in watching the plants spring up that gives me hope" (Jarman 2018, 179). Endowed with a sensibility that rarely clouds his critical thinking, by 1990 Jarman was no longer optimistic, but continued to nurture hope, imitating his sky-blue borage plant, which "droops in the early morning frost but recovers quickly: 'I borage bring courage'" (4). Hope for him not only is an affect, but also functions as an agent of temporality targeting the future. Opposed to the rift between futurity and homosexuality, which he views as socially relevant rather than synonymous to exclusion, Jarman's posture eschews both the idea of homosexuals' obsession with a death drive (see Edelman 2004), and of queerness as taking an antisocial turn (see Bersani 1987). As Gero Bauer writes, "hope is emphatically distinct from common conceptualizations of optimism, and more akin to a [...] version of Bloch's *docta spes*" (2024, 12), hence the critical/practical hopefulness Jarman learns from his plants, living and dying well in an unstable but interconnected world, showcasing resilience without being lured back into utopistic scenarios, in a logic which considers the eventuality of having to give in to the ineluctable without giving up on life *a priori*. As Jarman's partner Keith Collins noticed in the foreword to a collection of his lover's writings, "Slowly the garden acquired a new meaning – the plants struggling against biting winds and Death Valley sun merged with Derek's struggle with illness, then contrasted with it, as the flowers blossomed while Derek faded" (Jarman 1996, 8).

A closer look into the ambivalence of Jarman's relation to his garden and to his art is offered by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, who argues that central to Jarman's art is a non-reactionary melancholy through which he stages "intense and direct conversations between landscape and death, between environment and AIDS, between places and bodies", thus enacting a complete transition out of the norm, and moving "from a gay-focussed experience of AIDS to a distinctly queer appreciation of nature" (2010, 355). In line with this is Timothy Morton's conviction that "ecological thinking and practice must entail dropping the imminence of disaster" (2012), something that is valid for health discourse too, where terminality ceases to presuppose a definite ending. Jarman fully embraces this view, so that life's biological end may sharpen rather than diminish his engagement as an activist opposed to ideological accusations:

Conversation throughout the day has revolved around the greenhouse effect and HIV. [...] I know of couples who had full sex till both were body positive. Who should have been responsible for whom? It's a terrible thing to have done, but the onus is always on those who have been brave enough to get tested. Are they always the guilty ones? (Jarman 2018, 289)

To this end, the ailing body is not repudiated, becoming instead the central focus of Jarman's filmic compositions, as in *The Garden* a sinister erotic tension is created between a sensual Madonna and a set of paparazzi in balaclavas that viciously hound her; or between the beauty of male bodies swaying by the beach and the bleeding stigmata of Christ. Lippard and Johnson think that "the recurrence of the body seen in various degrees of suffering is richly significant [...] to examine how a filmmaking practice of stories shaped by suffering offers an opportunity to see the larger issues at work in the interplay of health, sexuality and storytelling" (1993, 282). Like in Virginia Woolf's poignant *On Being Ill* (1926), Jarman's artistic rendition of illness requires a total *inclination* of perspective that could account for the materiality of pain, as when, writing the accompanying notes to his film *The Last of England*, he conceded: "I feel I have to write this book, coughing and spitting with bloody bronchitis" (1987, 66). Consequently, in perfectly Foucaultian fashion, Jarman's archaeological, scavenging method is rendered on film by shooting on Super-8 documentary cameras, which he preferred, being "very close to the body" (Charity 1991, 57).

With this in mind, Jarman's twisting of religious iconography does not seem to be casual. Much more than stylistic, his choice might even be paralleled to the process of humanization initiated by Giotto in pre-Renaissance pictorial art, when he substituted the unnatural posture of *Christus triumphans* with the aching, if not more erotic, body of a *Christus patiens*, with his arms stretched to the point of tearing, heavy limbs falling forward, bloody wounds, and the cross driven deep into the rocks of Calvary. The same applies to a whole set of religious figures, who are rediscovered in all their vitality, including the apex that leads to its dissipation, in opposition to the "innumerable images of Saint Sebastian [...] with the face demonstrating its effortless superiority to the atrocious things that are being inflicted down there. Below, the ruin of the body. Above, a person, incarnated in the face, who looks away, usually up, not registering pain or fear; already elsewhere" (Sontag 1989, 40). As in much religious art, in Jarman's films aesthetic and ecstatic elements merge, but the erotic tension of ecstasy is not moralistically sublimated into an out-of-body experience as it would be the custom in biblical illustrations. Jarman's take on the martyrdom of St. Sebastian in the film *Sebastiane* (1976) is exemplary. In it, the saint is caught in the corpo-reality of a sexually emancipated gay boy who, after being pierced by Roman arrows almost up to his head, not only exudes sensuality as much as he does blood, but virtually disactivates the power of his murderers' gaze, as the film closes with a wide-angle shot that overlaps the spectator's point of view with that of the lethally injured man.

Certainly, Christ acts as centrepiece in this mosaic of unconventional gay icons in that through him the link to HIV is made self-evident, as bodily fluids become the direct means of transmission, instilling, as Sontag said, a “[f]ear of the Communion cup, fear of surgery: fear of contaminated blood, whether Christ’s blood or your neighbor’s” (73). Supporting his visual experiment with a process of re-semanticization, Jarman even playfully became the patron of a new faith, “St. Derek of Dungeness, a hermit in the wilderness of illness” (2018, 307), orator of blasphemous prayers like following one:

I knew the joy of heaven was there, the splendour and nobility of warriors, and I vowed to revenge my generations, to shred the false white veil of holy matrimony and fuck the haughty Groom, and to wipe up his come with the Saviour’s shroud. Then our task completed on earth we would enter the Kingdom, a band of warriors and gang-bang the Trinity on its throne of gold before a multitude of saints, until this Christ repented and confessed his true love of Saint John. Now and forever Amen. (51)

Jarman’s multimedia and multimodal rendition of the communitarian bond that held Jesus and his disciples so closely together also raises important questions about the introjected indoctrination latent in the queer community up to this day, whose internal oppositions risk jeopardizing the pioneering work of many past activists, Jarman included. For instance, in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, queer digital spaces and apps like Grindr have emerged as new arenas for connection, where desire and risk are intertwined in complex ways. The acronym DDF – drug and disease-free – is one that reflects a virtual promise that testing is both frequent and current, an assumption that users are constantly navigating the precarious boundaries between being uninfected and possibly contagious. This tension between the possibility of becoming ill and the desire for intimacy parallels the paradoxes explored in Jarman’s work since, while his art predates the rise of digital communication as intended today, his engagement with the fragility of queer bodies in the face of disease and social exclusion remains incredibly pertinent.

Today, the landscape of queer community-building is no longer confined to physical spaces like bars, clubs, or community centres, and has moved online instead, creating spaces that are fraught with challenges, particularly around issues of race, body politics, and HIV status. Much like the fragmented, collage-based style of Jarman’s work, the digital space for queer bodies is indeed a fractured and sometimes hostile terrain, as Grindr and the likes of it often perpetuate internalized forms of racial and sexual exclusion, where body types and HIV status are key determinants of desirability. In a world where “clean” and “fit” bodies dominate, and HIV+ individuals are still stigmatized, the digital landscape mirrors the racism and homophobia that have historically fractured queer communities. A counter-reaction to this detrimental drift does not lie in the refusal of the Internet as a valuable source of sociality. Even Jarman, though he did not fully witness the great digital transitions of the 2000s, was hardly technophobic. His work, particularly as it bled into the era of AIDS, acknowledged the possibilities of technology and media to connect, create, and even to heal. He embraced the potential of film, video, and photography to confront social issues head-on, using each medium as a way to challenge stigma and redefine narratives of queerness. Right now, Jarman’s teachings may be crucial for fostering a renewed, less hypocritical ethics of care against the toxicity of phenomena like bottom-shaming, racism, HIV stigma, and internalized homophobia. After all, in his oeuvre and life the queer body is rarely just a site of sexual exchange. It is a space for resistance, one of beauty and survival, and his exploration of queerness in a world ravaged by AIDS was never just about the body’s frailty, but also its resilience. The message is clear: queer bodies, intended both as single organic entities and as a social body at large, are capable of healing, but only if they nurture and support one another, refusing to participate in the cycles of harm that have historically plagued us all.

Conclusion, on the colour blue

Crowning the birth of a new, queer religion, in 1991 Jarman was even “canonized” during a “whimsically camp ceremony” (Hudson 2020) by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a drag performance group of queer “nuns”, who proclaimed him St. Derek of the Celluloid Knights of Dungeness. The ostentatious ritual, staged in his garden and involving a throne and yards of golden cloth, clearly reflects the influence of *The Garden*’s aesthetics, which interweaves grotesque ambiances à la Ken Russell (one of Jarman’s early mentors) with strong political stances. Still, Jarman’s raw narrative critically engages with the question of (ir)representability. In similar fashion to *Sebastiane*, *The Garden* reaches its climax when queerness, this time embodied by two male lovers who are about to be murdered, is repressed by the State. Once again, though, the hegemonic look gets tarnished, as the couple literally pushes away the inquisitive camera and its insistent close-ups. A clear reference to Clause 28, the censoring gaze of the government is critiqued also in its medical declinations, reiterating that, as Foucault notes,

Les formes de la rationalité médicale s’enfoncent dans l’épaisseur merveilleuse de la perception, en offrant comme visage premier de la vérité le grain des choses, leur couleur, leurs taches, leur dureté, leur adhérence. L’espace de l’expérience semble s’identifier au domaine du regard attentif, de cette vigilance empirique ouverte à l’évidence des seuls contenus visibles. L’oeil devient le dépositaire et la source de la clarté ; il a pouvoir de faire venir au jour une vérité qu’il ne reçoit que dans la mesure où il lui a donné le jour; en s’ouvrant, il ouvre le vrai d’une ouverture première. (1992, 10)

Shortly before he began losing his sight due to complications related to AIDS, Jarman already pondered on what it means to search for an-*other* look, wondering what happens when sight fades and the panopticon is no longer lit up. The answer to this question is offered by Jarman himself in his last film, *Blue* (1993), released in the UK five months before his death. In it, blindness becomes a form of vision, although the visual richness of his previous projects leaves room to a monochromatic blue screen. Far from a finished product, *Blue* has been rightly interpreted as a phase of the process that, from the diagnosis onwards, saw the gradual shedding of Jarman’s physical and symbolic weight in favour of the recognition of the inevitable and the unexpected semantic flowrate that springs from factual blindness (see Vallorani 2021). Being Jarman’s ultimate testament, the film closes with the repetition of a list of names – John, Daniel, Howard, Graham, Terry, Paul – innumerable friends whose stories bleed into Jarman’s, which is destined, in turn, to be told by yet another voice. “Two hundred and thirty-four tides have flowed since Derek left Prospect Cottage”, wrote Keith Collins in his epitaph to his late lover; “now I sit in his chair, at his desk, in the room he called the Spring Room”, recalling how the “fountain pen’s sepia scratched on the ivory paper a scrimshaw of sketches and ideas, fragments of poems, fleeting notions of future projects never to be realized” (Farthing and Webb-Ingall 2013, 251).

Passing the baton to his heirs, Jarman leaves behind a legacy that fills a compost pile rich in artistic and activist humus, allowing for many others to pick up from where he left. Nature writer Robert Macfarlane is among these, and even recalls his visit with a friend to Dungeness, where they set to build what Zeiger calls a “vulnerable tribute” (2017), a salute destined to be reabsorbed by the sea in an endless cycle: “Rough circle of poles and spires, pushed down into the gravel – a homage to Derek Jarman’s driftwood garden on Dungeness. Our henge would last as long the next high tide” (Macfarlane 2008, 261). The awareness of our ontological instability and biological finitude is a lesson Jarman taught himself long before becoming a model for resiliently existing on a damaged planet. Such realization encompasses every facet of being human, and that is how a form of collective healing is attained. Jarman’s journey and

our individual journeys unfold together, in that healing is a process of self-discovery, where the single and the community reveal their intertwined nature and their shared capacity for transformation. We are both singular and plural, analogue and technological. Our existence reverberates and is poetical as much as it is agential. We are part of the species because species are part of us – we are them, and they are us.

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