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"Spell-bound": Queer Futurity and Material Transfiguration in the Collected Sketchbooks of Derek Jarman

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'Derek had almost made the films in his imagination before a frame was shot, so during filmmaking he was casting a spell, transmuting the imagination into the physical' (Collins 118)

Expansive, palimpsestic, the many sketchbooks crafted and compiled by Derek Jarman throughout his creative life are art objects that continue to complicate normative boundaries of definition and interpretation. Whole worlds hand-bound on reams of luxurious off-white paper, the mature sketchbooks are a distinctive media unto themselves. Set within large, deckle-edged photograph albums bought by Jarman in bulk from a trusted artisan supplier in Florence, he would typically christen them with a rough coat of jet-black paint before ritualistically embellishing the covers with distressed squares of gold; a rough-edged, soft-focus signature. Calligraphy — wisping cursive ink, sometimes *sgraffito* — marks many of the books as objects of process, sometimes scribbled with multiple working titles for the projects contained within, on others simply his name and the year (Jarman in Farthing and Webb-Ingall, 14-15).

A body of life and/in work, the sketchbooks and notebooks total over thirty volumes of radically interdisciplinary art-making, vital and generative conduits for developing work across media and — crucially — an intermedial work of their own. Aesthetically, they are at once delicate treasures and dog-eared tomes, suitably representative of their maker's practice. Jarman's *oeuvre*, filmic and painterly, revels in the play of contrasts, is illuminated by the layering of opposing forces, concepts, and materials — the interplay of informed, visionary narratives and wild, heterogenous multiplicities. The sketchbook provides in many ways the ideal space for such blurring and layering: within the pages of these 'portable studios' numerous intersecting planes, images, and processes can be brought together or placed in relation to one another (Farthing and Webb-Ingall, 25). A certain unity of form connects the books as objects through what could be described as the years of their "maturity" from 1978-1991, with their tough cover bindings most often sharing a common visual presence — variations on a theme. Within the pages, aspects of consistent artistic method run throughout: the collage aesthetic, unbounded ink handwriting, and their use as a multimedia working

space. However, the sketchbooks diverge significantly in terms of their context and function. The particular tone of each volume, in its field of reference and style of articulation, evolves so profoundly in symbiosis with Jarman's social, cultural, and political environment so as to be a sort of time capsule compiled by an artist who collected out of necessity the changing symbols of his moment. Life and art were always dynamically entwined in Jarman's work, a critical attunement to contemporary political fractures exhibited even in the fantasy of his historical dramas. The sketchbooks, in all their ambiguity as unsettled art objects, should be read as the purest location of Jarman's embodied life-work, his *Gesamtkunstwerk* in queer process. This essay will trace this process and interconnectivity within individual sketchbooks dedicated to particular projects and across the collected sketchbooks as a diverse whole, illustrating that in every sense they are objects of boundless creation, a stitching-together of disparate threads. I seek to position and to value these books as art objects, embracing the polymorphous materiality and processual liminality which are perhaps their only unifying characteristic. Further, I hope to explore the ways in which Jarman's sketchbooks are engaged as the first point in an artistic project of queer transfiguration coursing throughout his *oeuvre*. Seeking a liberated subjectivity for himself and his community, Jarman would craft and nurture an alternative of otherness through irreverent conflations of the aesthetic, the material, the temporal, the personal, and the political. A lifetime's sketchbooks substantiate this project as source texts of radical possibility, from and through which Jarman transfigured scraps of collective past and present into a visionary, queered future.

Jarman's radical vision roamed, voracious, across media and method during the thirty years between his early collaborations in art school and his death of AIDS-related illnesses in 1994. Whilst his filmography (eleven feature films and over fifty short films, music videos and posthumously edited works of Super-8 footage) has received some excellent critical

attention, both during his life and after, much of Jarman's other visual work and his vast body of writings remain under-researched and broadly side-lined in popular and scholarly studies of his practice. And yet here, spilling from thick Italian albums, Jarman's art *and* life are manifested in continual, processual documentation, evasive to attempted categorisation as solely one or the other and suggestive of a radically collapsed boundary between the two. Throughout those thirty years of art-making and radical queer politics the sketchbooks were a constant, nearly always the first point of creation and the heart of his filmmaking process. The sketchbooks are not, however, static art objects in a conventionally "completed" state. By virtue of their complex situation at the intersection of process and exhibition, private and public, function and beauty, they are dynamic, even subversive, art objects. Their analysis, therefore, must acknowledge the essential resistance to fixity and singularity absolutely intended by Jarman within these books. On purely material terms, too, the sketchbooks require an inclusive understanding of "objecthood". As objects of compilation, in both function and aesthetic, sketchbooks layer their objectivity with the potential for analysis in the singular (a page) and the plural (the collected book). These dynamic text-objects 'challenged dominant notions about the boundaries of the work of art, and art's role in the world' — in Jarman's life and still today, they are profoundly generative spaces for overlapping creative developments, indulgent curation, and archival holding across an insistently queer and multimedia practice (Ellis, xvii).

> Way beyond a scrapbook, [Jarman's sketchbook] was a moveable brainbox: littered with pasted and drawn images, snatches of dialogue, scored revisions, the typed pages of his latest screenplay draft, filigreed with the henna-like pattern of his brown or black hieroglyphic handwriting. Part talisman, part private confessional, wholly unmediated raw dreamscape… (Swinton in Farthing and Webb-Ingall, 18-19).

Actress Tilda Swinton's foreword to the Thames & Hudson edition of *Derek Jarman's Sketchbooks* establishes with first-hand clarity and tender reverence the artistic value and versatility contained within those pages. An adored collaborator over nine years and seven films, Swinton's anecdotal reflections on the sketchbooks manage to contain the tangled essence of their leading role in Jarman's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Foremost notable is her observed understanding of the books as generative sites of multimedia art-making; indeed, as the driving creative project of his life in art, his 'first creative base, his ground zero and his last resort' (19). They were a constant — it was 'unthinkable' that there would not be a sketchbook 'on the go' — and indivisible from his wider *oeuvre* (19). Describing her first meeting with Jarman, in the early stages of the project that would become his (trans-)historical masterpiece *Caravaggio*, Swinton writes how 'even before he started to talk about the film he was planning' he reached for its connected sketchbook, stating: "here's the film" (19). Illustrative of the depth and breadth of his sketchbooks' artistic function, this story furthermore encapsulates the redefinition — the queering — of the art object so vital to his practice; collapsing the boundaries of objectivity and subjectivity in both written and filmic work. The book *is* the film; the art *is* the book. In this lies the basis of the sketchbooks' appeal and potency for an artist as restlessly intermedial as Jarman. In the space of only a few consecutive pages, he could write out fluid chronicles of his day-to-day in London or Dungeness complete with pressed flowers from the garden or souvenirs from set, alongside palimpsestic edits of his script and intricate scenographic sketches, bookended by painted folios or archived personal correspondence. The collision and elision of material and time in the sketchbooks is the cross-fertilised bud of his practice, a space of creation and recalibration inhabited by an artist reluctant to be labelled solely as such. Rather, Jarman also becomes an historian preserving the stories and images of his life and others'; a 'fabulist'

reclaiming, rewriting, transfiguring existing narratives into the queer present and future (Ellis, xvi). Autobiography sits at the crossroads of these intentions, and very little of the art developed and contained within the sketchbooks does not in some way leap from, or return to, his life. In centring his own political and personal subjectivity Jarman embodies the affective power described by David Getsy as an 'adjectival' queerness, a 'tactical modification [...] that invokes relations of power and propriety in its inversion of them' (13). Thus, a letter from conservative moral campaigner Mary Whitehouse viciously attacking Jarman's art for its "offensive" depictions of homosexual desire and queer excess is archivally layered amidst the final, handwritten voice-over script for *Caravaggio* and a selection of ephemera including an invitation to the film's screening at the 1986 Berlin Film Festival — a defiant testament to the necessity of his audaciously queer art (Jarman in Farthing and Webb-Ingall, 23).

Stephen Farthing and Ed Webb-Ingall write of the collected sketchbooks as Jarman's 'workshops in which the planning, presentation and outcomes of each day's endeavour was first carried out, reflected upon and finally stored' (23). A lifelong experimentation with medium — from various approaches to painting, to mixed-media, installation, and film — resulted in a corpus of incredibly diverse content, all of which at some point touched the pages of a sketchbook. Jarman adopted the Italian photograph albums as his book of choice during the filming of his 1978 feature *Jubilee* — by 1985 they were his familiar, unified medium, depended on until the illness of his final few years limited his methods. However, in the art school notebooks of the 1960s and those from his early work in set design of the 1970s there is already a considered — and beautifully articulated — approach to form and materiality that prefigures the large-format developments of the mature sketchbooks. Lavish calligraphy, often expressing the poetic and the personal, sits alongside highly composed collage. Combining text and image in a responsive harmony would remain central to his

practice, its play of juxtaposition and amalgamation showing the influence of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, whose Pop aesthetic was contemporaneous with Jarman's time at the Slade. This era of work in mostly A5 notebooks exemplifies how Jarman conceived the books as art objects from the outset: there is a veneration of the "working-out", the fragmented, reclaimed, and rearranged that sets the stage for the construction of what I suggest to be utopian spaces in later sketchbooks. A two-page spread from an untitled 1965 notebook features his distinct handwriting, neat and measured, shaped around pasted cut-outs of numbers, an indecipherably inscribed tag or label, and a delicate silhouette of a hand holding a bouquet of flowers (40). Whilst seemingly just quick musings, perhaps notes inspired by another work of art, these pages are framed with an attentiveness towards the artful, an intertextual proclivity. This is carried further by subsequent pages of the same book: a written contemplation of collage technique ('on certain advantages of construction…') describes its 'characteristics akin to the cinema' — its ability to 'make [...] ideas *pictorial*' (42, emphasis my own). An approach clearly carried through to his filmmaking, the books often play with a kind of translation, a visualised assemblage of sometimes abstracted or fragmented source material. Ruminating on collage in this early notebook, it is possible to observe Jarman's developing understanding of an aesthetic practice that would remain the crux of his artistic method, less concerned with narrative coherence than with expressive effect. Other pages also illustrate what could be called auto-collage: Jarman in layered dialogue with himself, the 'confessional', diaristic potential of the sketchbook used as a "voice" or "voices" with which to conceptualise his work. This can be seen in pages from an untitled notebook of 1974 in which Jarman works through the logistics of designing a 'whirlpool' effect for stage, using scribbled notes ('can it be done? … Yes') and dynamic sketches drawn in response (49). Touchingly, he places a Polaroid self-portrait on the page opposite — the artist, shirtless and reclining on a satin sheet, gazes upwards at the unknown

photographer. Is this snapshot connected to the whirlpool project opposite, as the compiling editors seem to think? Is it rather an impromptu photo taken on the same day, pasted adjacent — scrapbook-style — by coincidence? In any case, it results in an affecting collage through its folding together of life and art; the interpolation of the private into the public is mediated by the sketchbooks, any conception of those spheres as separate joyfully challenged within these pages.

In her 2021 text *Luminous Presence* Alexandra Parsons gathers Jarman's assorted literature under the umbrella of 'life-writing'; a term broad enough to 'encompass [his] capacious, varied autobiographical project' (10). The sketchbooks were his seeding ground, his 'experimental, ritualistic recipe books' out of which this roaming body of life-writing sprung, to be published in numerous volumes between the 1970s and the turn of the millennium (Farthing and Webb-Ingall, 24). A tendency towards the autobiographical can be seen in the early notebooks and into Jarman's dawning film career: the notebook dedicated to his 1976 debut feature *Sebastiane* includes cheekily annotated on-set photos — moments of queer tenderness archived alongside that day's script copy, life expressly imbricated in art (70). So often casting or working with his friends, lovers and collaborators, Jarman's films were overtly personal affairs, and each project's lovingly compiled archival space reveals how significant an embodied art-making was to his process. The *Sebastiane* scrapbook is, Keith Collins observes in this page's notes, 'the prototypical ancestor of the later sketchbooks', in which Jarman's quintessential fusion of autobiography and political art would become his life's work (70). 'Practicing political aesthetics from first to last', Jarman's long-term commitment to artistic autobiography sustained a vital thread of practical, public activism at a time of erasure, disinformation and demonisation of homosexuals and of queer life (Mayer, 116). Throughout the 1980s Jarman advocated a politics in the first person, understanding even before his own diagnosis as HIV positive in 1986 that power lay in

radical openness; that the only way to counter a regime of state-sponsored necropolitics, oppressive media homophobia and a seemingly indifferent public was to intervene, to affirm, to rewrite. 'I had no choice', he writes in the diaries that became *Modern Nature*, 'I've always hated secrets, the canker that destroys' (25). As such, his autobiographical writings form the critical base of a wider embodied resistance, claiming the liberation of self-representation through the 'performative power of life-writing' and literally creating new 'cultural scripts' in the first person, wrought truthfully and vulnerably from his own queer body (Parsons, 6). In later years, the sketchbooks contain archived snatches of that toxic political contemporary. As well as the aforementioned Mary Whitehouse letter, there are stickers from marches and activist groups like the AIDS Coaltion to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and OutRage!, clippings of homophobic tabloid gossip, and even a letter from the Metropolitan Police informing him of dropped charges following his arrest for protesting (even *after* he tenaciously admitted to still-illegal homosexual intercourse; a suitable example of Jarman's interdependent, rebellious political aesthetics) (210). The books also contain countless pages of meandering, processual life-writing — this is where Jarman left the most visible, radical trace of his 'luminous presence'. The diaristic writing seen throughout the mature sketchbooks occupies sites of multiple significance: it contests and refutes the discourses of hegemony that so dangerously attempted to define life for queer people in Thatcher's Britain, it revises and redeploys narratives of queer self and community so lacking from the public realm, and it sanctifies, revivifies and imagines a hopeful, futuristic alterity.

A queer man publishing plainly queer life-writing in a period wracked with the intense objectifying and pathologising of queer bodies, Jarman's subversion should not be understated. In close to ten volumes of autobiography that would eventually be lifted from the sketchbooks and published, Jarman creates and illustrates the potential of "otherwise" — a term used by David Getsy to signify everything utopian towards which queer creation is

posited (15). As well as a practiced commitment to 'the important work of political defiance and critique', he explains, queer art so often also finds power in acts of 'visualising or inhabiting otherwise' (15). This, I suggest, was one of the primary functions of the sketchbooks for Jarman, and remains their lasting effect. During his life, many sections and versions were published with speed to 'provide a swift response to the impact of HIV/AIDS, Section 28 and a homophobic press' — this was a conscious act of vulnerability that he saw to be critically imperative (Parsons, 17). Whilst much — if not all — of the writing addressed and engaged with the politics of the day, it did so couched within the processual diaristic style with which Jarman found the potential for queered alterity. This destabilised and reframed the discourse into his own terms, with the most affecting passages often the most personal: moments of contented queer domesticity, conversations with friends, or the ordeals of securing funding for a risky new project (all projects are "risky" when you are a gay artist, he often protested). The life-writing process is illustrated neatly in pages from the sketchbook titled 'The Jigsaw', of 1982 — here, Jarman is working on the text for *Dancing Ledge*, his first collection of diaries to be published. On the right of the page, his neat entries are laid out in fountain pen, dates and locations typically acting as subheadings (84-85). Opposite, a computer-typed and printed A4 sheet copies out, with edits made in green and red ink. Once again, the work is defined by an intimate, layered process; in reclaiming the autobiographical, Jim Ellis posits, Jarman was 'inventing new forms of writing by rewriting old ones', opening out an alternative to a form 'premised on the exploration of interior, privatized [sic] psychologies' (Ellis, xiv).

Instead, with their combination of radically open life-writing and visual archiving, Jarman's mature sketchbooks make the private *personal*, the intimate *public*; they resist to the best of their ability the conventions and limitations of form, consistency, and cultural propriety. Viewing the sketchbooks as a queer "space", it is useful to counterpose the

different navigations of public and private space experienced by gay men in the era following the Sexual Offences Act of 1967. Whilst legalising for the first time gay sex in private spaces, the Act was 'intended to be accompanied by a complementary suppression of manifestations of gay life that were public' (Lemmy, *Architectural Review*). For Jarman and his gay and queer friends and collaborators, the authentic — joyful — public expression of their private lives remained "controversial", and commonly reviled, to many. In the sketchbooks, as in Jarman's films, queerness is unflinchingly visible and centre-staged, folded literally and temporally into the pages of these living archives. Tender Polaroids are pasted throughout the collected sketchbooks: stills of a gay embrace during the filming of *The Angelic Conversation*, candid snaps of Jarman and his partner Keith Collins during the editing of *The Last of England* (88-89; 142-143). These photos are collaged interventions in the sketchbooks' palimpsest — manifest evidence of Jarman's life, wonderfully entwined in his art. They interact spatially and symbolically with that which surrounds them, enlivening scripts and imbuing particular moments — scenes, visions, reflections — with the spirit of his *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The 1988 sketchbook titled 'Dungeness' contains more photographs than most, enlarged black and white 35mm shots, through which Jarman constructs an ode to his beloved garden. Images of whimsical sculptures beginning to transform the barren shingle are set next to a poem flowing with pastoral imagery and gay desire, its heavy editing perhaps suggesting an ongoing work in progress, but one developed enough to take this place (177). It is clear how much the cottage, the garden, and Dungeness meant to him at this point in his creative life — one year after he bought the land and two years since his HIV diagnosis. Photographs and ephemera of this space and place fill the books through the next couple of years as he nurtured his own transfigurative heterotopia and worked on the film that would become *The Garden* (originally titled *In Borrowed Time*, surely reflecting Jarman's post-diagnosis angst) (180; 188). If queerness and space occupied a particularly fraught

tension through the later decades of the twentieth century, then Jarman's sketchbooks were an antidote; a preserve of reclaimed pasts and a studio of projected futures. Huw Lemmy contends that 'the modern homosexual subject was created through a fear of their corrupting influence on public space, [...] their limited early rights won through an appeal to a specific bourgeois ideal of domestic privacy' (*Architectural Review*). In response to such an oppressive politics Jarman staged a defiant "otherwise", rejecting the dominant mode of privacy and interiority, striving constantly instead for a liberated, queer subjectivity that, akin to the garden at Prospect Cottage, had no fences, and in which he could sow the seeds of his idyll — 'the part of the garden the Lord forgot to mention…' (Jarman, 23).

Perhaps best known for his transgressive approach to historical filmmaking, Jarman found consistent inspiration in the past and its resuscitation through an alternative gaze. Every one of his feature films, and each sketchbook in turn, 'plays fast and loose with history'; drawing divergent narratives out of familiar texts and crafting compelling overlaps of source material, Jarman's queered temporalities 'invented new ways of seeing', 'new mythologies that challenged the dominant version of the present' (Ellis, vii-viii). The four consecutive sketchbooks across which the gargantuan project of *Caravaggio* developed contain incredible layers of historical, trans-historical and quasi-historical influences, a studio space overflowing with the ideas and materials for a revised dramatic biography. Close studies of scenes and sets spread out next to their relevant script section on nearly every page, detailed sketches in a light pen. Here, the sketchbooks clarify their generative role in Jarman's filmmaking process: as early as 1974 he can be seen using this workshop space for speculative planning, experimenting with potential new methods and approaches like scratching and masking the frames and drawing out the practicalities of capturing certain movements of the sun and moon (52-55). The books were at once his initial drawing board at the beginning, dependable writing (and "seeing") room during the process, and first editing

suite at the end. Comfortably straddling mediums, the sketchbooks often contain staggering detail, their pages as much functional as they are inspirational. When filming *Jubilee* on a tight budget Jarman meticulously sketched every scene, working out his camera angles and the actor's positions so as to avoid multiple takes on expensive film stock (80). This approach returns seven years later in the first of the books titled 'Caravaggio', this time less for financial reasons than artistic: the lush theatricality and historical depth of this film, as well as its technique of framing painterly tableaux in the style of the eponymous artist, required an attention to detailing that Jarman, it seems, relished (100-105). Keith Collins recounts that 'Derek had almost made the films in his imagination before a frame was shot, so during filmmaking he was casting a spell, transmuting the imagination into the physical' (118). This practice is held, archivally folded, in the pages of thirty years' sketchbooks, his indispensable, lasting interlocutor. The sketchbooks and the films engage a mutual and interactive play of time and text. In their layered resistance to the conventionally fixed they open up 'temporal dislocations' — fertile 'heterochronias' of queer perspective — and they "write in" to this radical creative space a beautified queer subjectivity (Ellis, xiii). *Edward II*, Jarman's final historical film, permeates at least three of his last sketchbooks, its gloriously irreverent approach to adapting the Christopher Marlowe play planned out in pasted juxtapositions of historical reference points and their mischievous reinterpretations (212-213). A section of script in which Edward and Gaveston 'work out with the gym youths' is kept next to the reference Polaroids of semi-naked bodybuilders required on that day of the shoot; continuity shots show actors dressed in contemporary clothing ready for their scene in a medieval dungeon (220-221; 224-225). The intertextual queering of this Renaissance play is visible in the interaction of original dramatic dialogue, printed on thin strips of paper, and corresponding strips of rewritten script in Jarman's own hand, with darting arrows highlighting important connections or displacements (240-246). This active recontextualising

— all written in striking red ink — encapsulates Jarman's 'personal investment in a queer history project', one that challenges any official claims to narrative truth and collapses the boundaries of art and life (Parsons, 4). Anachronism is embraced as a playful and subversive tool: in films like *Edward II*, it allows troublingly prescient parallels to be drawn between the historical machinations of court and the turbulence of Jarman's dark political contemporary.

Jarman's sketchbooks are shapeshifting archives of a life in and of art — reliquaries, records of the quotidian and the fantastical alike. They hold within them the committed practice of enfolding and enlivening that guided his visual art and his political presence, a constant embodied thread of what José Esteban Muñoz describes as 'not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future' (1). This is Jarman's transfigurative project — hopeful, angry, resourceful — mischievously layering together the historical, the contemporary and the speculative to insist upon a new discourse of subjectivities, one as reparative as it is representational. Jarman's own highly visible individuality is mapped outwards, committed to the collective nurturing of a rehabilitated queer subject, an unwavering resolve he described as 'putting myself back into the picture' (Jarman, 30). Forever working somewhere between the magical and the material, these text-objects remain Jarman's spell-bound workshops of charged potential, the aesthetic keys to his expansive, utopian visions of alterity.

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