

FILM

Home Movies

ED HALTER ON DEREK JARMAN'S SUPER 8 FILMS



Clockwise from top left: Derek Jarman, *In the Shadow of the Sun*, 1974, still from a color film in Super 8 mm, 58 minutes. Derek Jarman, *Studio Bankside*, 1970-73, still from a color film in Super 8 mm, 6 minutes 30 seconds. Derek Jarman, *Sebastian Wrap*, 1975, still from a color film in Super 8 mm, 5 minutes 52 seconds. Derek Jarman, *Sloane Square: A Room of One's Own*, 1981, still from a black-and-white and color film in Super 8 mm, 9 minutes.

DEREK JARMAN was once lionized as Britain's home-grown Cocteau. Features such as *Caravaggio* (1986) and *Edward II* (1991) marked him as heir to the baroque art-house theatrics of Michael Powell and Ken Russell, while his unabashed homoeroticism and strident politics were an inspiration to the New Queer Cinema, of which he was a leading light. Jarman's influence has dimmed since his AIDS-related death in 1994, but recent activity suggests a reassessment. Last year, Zeitgeist Films released a remastered box set containing *Caravaggio*, *Wittgenstein* (1993), *Blue* (1993), and *The Angelic Conversation* (1985), while British artist Isaac Julien premiered his biographical documentary *Derek* (2008) and organized an exhibition of paintings and films by his former mentor at London's Serpentine Gallery that included Jarman's rarely screened Super 8 films from the 1970s and '80s. In New York, Elizabeth Dee showcased four digital transfers of Jarman's Super 8s this past February, and now X, a new nonprofit created by Dee to revive the former Dia Center for the Arts building in Chelsea, has installed eighteen of the small-gauge works on three floors as the centerpiece of its current, inaugural show (through May 30).

Jarman's Super 8 work constitutes a major portion of his filmography: In the six years prior to his debut feature, *Sebastiane* (1976), he completed more than

forty Super 8 films and continued to work in the format throughout his career. Certain practices and motifs carry over, but the Super 8 films form a body of work distinct from the features—more improvisatory, often nonnarrative, replete with arcane symbolism, and deeply invested in the material, non-representational qualities of the image.

Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, and George Kuchar produced standard 8-mm films in the '60s, but the more recently introduced Super 8 system wouldn't be

widely embraced by the avant-garde until several years after Jarman began shooting on the new gauge in 1970. The user-friendly but technically limited format was at that time primarily employed for home movies, and many of Jarman's earliest titles document the scene around him in a diary-like fashion—self-consciously if nonetheless casually, as friends were then calling him the "Andy Warhol of London." A steady pulse of shots taken around his London studio, *Studio Bankside* (1970-73) contains markers of nascent gay lib: a tube of K-Y displayed amid antiques and ferns. In *Andrew Logan Kisses the Glitterati* (1973), Jarman's young neighbor enthusiastically osculates men and women in various camp costumes, from raffish '30s garb to a multicolored clown suit.

Other films evince Jarman's interest in the occult, linked to his admiration for Kenneth Anger. Jarman drew symbols and concepts from the Renaissance hermeticist John Dee, Elizabeth I's court astrologer (who makes an appearance in the filmmaker's 1978 punk fantasy *Jubilee*), and from Jung's *Alchemical Studies*, which inspired Jarman to let his images "drift and collide at random." Thus Britain's mystic past appears in *Journey to Avebury* (1971), an investigation of an ancient English stone circle. *Tarot* (1972-73) depicts a sorcerer in silken finery who casts spells on a couple, leading the man to strangle the woman with a string of pearls.

Jarman recycled footage from both films for *In the Shadow of the Sun* (1974), an hour-long masque of indeterminate rituals set in a maze of fire, rephotographed to achieve elaborate superimpositions and a shifting palette of golden-red variations. Jarman called it "the wedding of light and matter—an alchemical conjunction." In turn, this film became integrated into the three-screen expanded-cinema piece *Art of Mirrors* (1976), whose title alludes to John Dee's chosen instrument of divination.

Superimpositions were only one technique in Jarman's repertoire of DIY transformation. Shooting at low speeds, he could stretch out one three-minute reel to almost half an hour of glacially moving pictures; at times he added thick, painterly layers of color by projecting through gels. For *Ashden's Walk on Moon* (1973), a spiral galaxy conjoins with a hike through the woods and along the seashore, forming a dreamlike meditation on the macrocosm. *TG Psychic Rally in Heaven* (1981) interpolates a strobe light into concert footage, adding a visual pulse to Throbbing Gristle's electronic drones. Celebrating Super 8's potential for "contraction," Jarman called it "the 20th century hieroglyphic monad," referring to John Dee's combination of all occult symbols into a single potent glyph.

Despite the obvious affinities to avant-garde cinema, critics and historians have been hesitant to place Jarman's work in this lineage. His oneiric alchemy remained out of sync with the dogmatic structural-film scene in '70s London; experimental filmmaker Peter Gidal went so far as to categorize the work of Jarman and that of his New Romantic circle under the "fascization of art." In retrospect, what Jarman called his "cinema of small gestures" has more in common with the intimate, personal work of American counterparts like Saul Levine or Luther Price. Standing apart from the operatic ambitions of his features, the Super 8 films seek out their own internal aesthetics, reveling in the ecstatic freedoms of a private language. "In all home movies," Jarman wrote at the time, "is a longing for paradise." □

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