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A New Archaic Avant-Garde?

Tradition and Experimentation in the Neo-Mediaeval Cinema of Terry Gilliam, Derek Jarman, and John Boorman

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SCOTTISH
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A New Archaic Avant-Garde?:
Tradition and Experimentation in the
Neo-Mediaeval Cinema of Terry
Gilliam, Derek Jarman, and John
Boorman

Ewan Wilson

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of
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Declaration

I, the undersigned, confirm that I am the sole author of this thesis; that, unless otherwise stated, all references cited have been consulted by me; that the work of which the thesis is a record has been done by the me; and that it has not been previously accepted for a higher degree.

Introduction

When the title of this thesis was first suggested to me, I had never heard of Terry Eagleton's *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, let alone the concept of the 'archaic avant-garde'. So, I found the book, and I read about it, and I learned that Eagleton's term encompassed an idea that I had identified in Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King* (1991): that of an unhappy present looking to an idealised past for a better future. This idea, of course, is synonymous with mediaevalism, the driving force behind this project as it is deeply ingrained in the films of Gilliam, Derek Jarman, and John Boorman. These three filmmakers, whose work is often dismissed as privileging style over substance, have a shared interest in an idealised mediaeval past. More than this, however, they share an interest in evoking, incorporating, and participating in the art and practices of the Middle Ages in their films. Their interests and influences span from the Early English poetry of *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*, through Chaucer, Bosch, and Breugel, to Malory and Chrétien, and the neo-mediaevalism of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This continuum of artists covers a period of several hundred years, and the filmmakers here discussed show little concern in which century they cherry-pick from, so the terms 'mediaeval' and 'Middle Ages' are used loosely to refer to the period ranging from approximately the fifth to fifteenth centuries.

The primary focus of this thesis is the neo-mediaevalisms of Gilliam, Jarman, and Boorman, and so there must, by necessity, be limitations placed upon its scope. In the early stages of this project, it was suggested that it be structured thematically. It quickly became apparent, however, that to do so would require that the films discussed herein be grouped under themes so broad that these groupings became essentially arbitrary. The approach taken instead was to address each director individually, on a film-by-film basis. For the most part, this is done in a more or less chronological order. This has allowed me to scrutinise the ways in which these directors make use of their mediaeval influences within the context of their own work, tracing the evolution of such themes and processes that emerge through their output. Common influences quickly arose: *Beowulf* appears multiple times in the following chapters, as does *The Wanderer*; Hieronymous Bosch, too, has a strong presence. And yet, these filmmakers do not simply appropriate, adapt, or illustrate their mediaeval

material. What makes the interesting is their visionary quality, their use of the mediaeval in conjunction with the avant-garde. Gilliam, for example, borrows from mediaeval manuscript illuminations to create the animated sequences of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975); for Boorman, it is pairing Shakespeare's Sonnets with imagery inspired by a mediaeval poem to tell a love story between two men; and for Boorman, it is applying the grail legend to his films so that he may search for his own personal grail through his films.

Each of the three chapters in this thesis is subdivided into several smaller subsections which each focus on a specific element of a specific film. By doing so, this thesis gradually uncovers a pattern of influences and practices within each body of films and joins the three directors together by means of a naturally forming narrative. In Chapter 1, Gilliam, I begin by examining the role of the director in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. With reference to biographical texts, I delineate the responsibilities of Gilliam and Terry Jones; then, I examine their working practices to draw the conclusion that their working model on this film mirrored that of the mediaeval scribe and the illuminator. Next, I look at *Jabberwocky* to chart the differences in approach taken by Gilliam in his directorial debut and establish the beginnings of his individual style. I then move on to *The Fisher King* and argue that the film, in addition to being a modern fable about spiritual healing in a jaded society, was a healing process in itself for Gilliam who was still smarting from *Baron Munchausen's* lack of success. In third subsection of this chapter, I examine the then un-filmed script of *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* in comparison with *The Zero Theorem* to identify the continuation of Gilliam's personal grail quest and an apparent interest in mediaeval ideas surrounding light and colour.

In the second chapter, Jarman, I begin by assessing Jarman's claim towards membership of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood by unpicking the wealth of colour symbolism embedded in *Blue* and, working backwards through his theories on colour as expounded in *Chroma* (1993), to his landscape and super-8 films of the 1970s. Observing the mysticism of *A Journey to Avebury* (1971), I then move on to a landscape based reading of *The Angelic Conversation* (1985) as a film inspired by the Early English elegy *The Wanderer*. Continuing to examine the connection between landscape and psychology, I move on to consider *The Last of England* against the framework of the mediaeval dream vision. I then consider *Jubilee* and *The Garden* in the same light, situating Jarman somewhere between the mediaeval dream poets and the filmmakers of the American avant-garde.

Finally, in the chapter on Boorman, I find that viewing *Point Blank* through the lens of *Beowulf* provides a new level of insight into the character of Walker and his relationship with his environment. Then, I find that this structure also applies to *Zardoz*, which I examine as a receptacle for some of the material Boorman prepared in his unmade *Lord of the Rings* script. This leads me into an examination of the script for *The Lord of the Rings* as a prefiguration of Boorman's later work; specifically, as a first run at what would later become *Excalibur*. Next, I identify some of the unused elements of *The Lord of the Rings* in the first draft of *Excalibur*, then called *Merlin Lives*, in an attempt to understand Boorman's distillation of his central metaphor and symbolic matrix. In the final section of this chapter, I look at *Excalibur* as the culmination of Boorman's efforts to realise and reinvigorate a myth by interrogating the film's visual style. All three of these filmmakers belong to two overlapping traditions: firstly, an alternative and often maligned school of British filmmaker which is as visually orientated as it is literary and eschews the dominant aesthetic of social realism in favour of something more fantastical and dream-like. Secondly, I will argue that they belong to a wider tradition of British visionary artists which can be traced back to the likes of Chaucer, Blake and William Morris.

Chapter 1: Gilliam

A Tale of Two Terrys: Illustrating the Middle Ages in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *Jabberwocky*

Though now a thoroughly established director in his own right, Terry Gilliam has never been quite able to entirely divorce himself from his first ventures onto the silver screen as part of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969 – 1974). Despite numerous attempts to forge a separate creative identity for himself, the prominence of his animated segments within *Flying Circus* and his dual responsibilities as both actor and director in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) have cemented the association for most audiences. Indeed, Gilliam recalls that when he made his first solo venture, *Jabberwocky*, in 1977, his distributor, a certain Don Rugoff of Cinema 5, 'went round and round on *Jabberwocky*, not knowing how to sell it, before he eventually gave in and started calling it *Monty Python's Jabberwocky* – the one thing I said he couldn't do'.¹ Rugoff's intention, evidently, was to capitalise on the popularity of the Pythons to launch a decidedly idiosyncratic film, though Gilliam notes that the comparison did more harm than good: 'In Germany, Poland and places like that – where they didn't know *Python* – it was really well received and the reviews were great. But in places where *Python* was known, that was all they saw in it'.² The director's relationship with *Python* is not a negative one, yet though he speaks fondly enough of his time as part of the troupe he bemoans, justifiably, their use as the yardstick against which his independent features are measured by critics and audiences alike. Nevertheless, it is with *Monty Python* that any study of Gilliam's directorial career must begin; for a study of the mediaeval influences so prevalent in his work, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

Accounts from members of the cast and crew on the production of *Holy Grail* tell of a division in the approach to filming taken by its two co-directors. Whereas Terry Jones framed shots in a functional manner, aiming to allow the Pythons on screen the greatest range of movement and performativity possible, Terry Gilliam prioritised the artistry and aesthetic of the frame. As producer John Goldstone observes:

¹ *Gilliam on Gilliam*, ed. by Ian Christie (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 75.

² Christie, p. 71.

Terry Jones' attitude (as opposed to Terry Gilliam's) has always been much more about performance than visuals [...] ultimately the nature of Python is more verbal than visual, and it seemed very important to make it work on a performance level and that the words were there. But it's just the way Terry shoots things [...] he'd prefer to make sure a scene was properly covered to give him the ability in the cutting room to get the performance to work than necessarily show all the visuals that your crew provides you [...] but you have to make a decision as to what the thing is *about*, and that's Terry's strategy. That's why his films are different from Terry Gilliam's.³

Although Gilliam ruefully admits that by the time *Holy Grail* had reached the editing room he and Jones were not seeing eye to eye, and so he would 'go back late at night and recut what had been done during the day',⁴ Howard Atherton notes that, during filming, 'there was never any animosity between them [...] they might do it one person's way one time and the other way another time'.⁵ The catalyst for the division of their labours was not, Gilliam's various printed recollections agree, rooted in the fact that both he and Jones had their own 'strong ideas about what [they] wanted to do',⁶ but a fraying of tempers during the filming of the scene in which Graham Chapman's Arthur encounters John Cleese's belligerent Frenchman:

It was a matte shot and I had to keep their heads lower than the battlements. And the only way we could do it was to dig a hole in the ground and have them all on their knees, and John was going apeshit because he was uncomfortable. And I finally said 'Fuck it. It's your sketch, you wrote it. I'm just trying to make it work. This is a tricky shot here.' Finally I said 'Fuck you' and I went off in a snit and laid down in the grass. Terry and I, who had always sort of been one voice, suddenly realised we weren't. It ended up with Terry talking to the guys, and me talking to the crew and the cameramen and that side of it. It worked fine once we got that sorted out.⁷

The purpose of this discourse is to identify the mediaeval influences within Gilliam's body of work as a solo director, but in order to do so it is necessary to identify and isolate his role within the *Python* collective. Not only does this clash illustrate the fact that Gilliam was used, as a cartoonist turned animator, to working with subjects that did not talk back, but also that he was used to operating as an isolated entity within the nuclear group; while Cleese tended

³ David Morgan, *Monty Python Speaks!* (New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1999), p. 154.

⁴ Christie, p. 58.

⁵ Morgan, pp. 160 - 161.

⁶ Bob McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam* (London: Orion, 1999), p. 57.

⁷ McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*, p. 56.

to pair off with Chapman, Palin would write with Jones, leaving Idle and Gilliam to their individual components of the *Python* output.⁸

It is true, of course, that since the early days of *Python*, Gilliam has been considered a member in equal weighting to his colleagues and yet as the lone American expatriate in a group of Oxbridge graduates, he has always been something of an outsider. As Cleeve observes, 'he's much more like an artist in a painterly sense. He works in a studio, he doesn't work in *team*, or didn't on Python; we worked very much in a team'.⁹ This distinction between the Englishmen and the American, the writers and the artist, is a particularly interesting one for the purposes of this argument, for it allows us to consider the work of the Pythons and that of Gilliam as belonging to two different traditions: the written, and the visual. The Oxbridge contingent of the Pythons are heavily steeped in the written culture of Britain: Jones and Palin read in History; Idle, English literature; Cleeve, Law. Gilliam, on the other hand, 'just wanted to get on and paint and draw and sculpt';¹⁰ he studied at Occidental College, drifting from physics to art history to political science, dipping into oriental philosophy and drama along the way. Their studies were never the main focus of the soon-to-be Pythons, however; while the Englishmen brought their brand of 'literate comedy'¹¹ to the Cambridge Footlights, Gilliam immersed himself in the reinvigoration of Occidental's 'previously quite serious art and poetry journal called *Fang*, which [...] was rapidly transformed into a showcase for scabrous gags and unfettered cartooning'.¹² While a bent for comedy and innovation is their uniting factor, a clear divide in practice is struck between the wordsmithing of the Footlights alumni and the visual absurdism of Gilliam.

Having established this division of the Python body into its written and visual aspects, it is now possible to return to the matter of its *Holy Grail*. In order to properly understand the role of mediaeval theme and tradition in the film, and to then extrapolate these influences to gain a further understanding of Gilliam's particular engagement with the Middle Ages, this discourse will examine it, alongside *Jabberwocky*, within the following contexts: the 'historic' films of the 1970s, particularly those termed 'cinema Arthuriana', and their representations

⁸ Morgan, *Monty Python Speaks!*, pp. 108–9.

⁹ Morgan, *Monty Python Speaks!*, p. 106.

¹⁰ The Pythons and Bob McCabe, *The Pythons Autobiography* (London: Orion Books, 2003), p. 86.

¹¹ Pythons and McCabe, p. 85.

¹² Terry Gilliam and Ben Thompson, *Gilliam's Quest: A Pre-Posthumous Memoir* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2015), p. 46.

of the Middle Ages on screen; the methods and traditions of mediaeval manuscript illumination; and, finally, as an adaptation and continuation of the canon of Arthurian literature.

Hollywood's Distorting Mirror

The first, and indeed the seemingly inevitable question one comes to in the examination of a film that purports to be set in the past is one of historical accuracy. Regardless of the fictive nature of the narrative, the question of period authenticity is quick to arise, and with it, Umberto Eco's outline of the Ten Little Middle Ages.¹³ The 'neomedieval wave',¹⁴ Eco explains, uses the Middle Ages as a platform on which to address contemporary problems: as he points out, 'all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages: Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks, and prime rate) are inventions of medieval society'.¹⁵ The Middle Ages, then, are rarely portrayed for their own sake, but for that of a director's agenda, and so the question of authenticity is often overlooked in favour of mere representation. Despite the possibility of the cinematic past being mistaken for the real thing, as was the case when John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) was released in America,¹⁶ there is no real obligation on the part of the filmmaker to portray the past in an entirely accurate manner. As Robert A. Rosenstone points out of the representation of history in cinema, 'the focus tends to be on the creation and manipulation of the meanings of the past, on a discourse that is free of data other than that of other discourses, on what seems to be the free play of signifiers signifying history'.¹⁷ Though the Middle Ages appear on film in many guises, be it 'sword and sandal', 'sword and sorcery', or Biblical epic, they are quite evidently not the *real* Middle Ages but a re-imagining of the period through the lens of contemporary culture: rarely are they *historical* films, but rather films set in history.

Moreover, film is, by its very nature, designed, be it evident in the mise-en-scène or merely the manner in which the film has been shot and edited together; in the simple act of

¹³ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality* (London: Picador, 1987), pp. 68–72.

¹⁴ Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, p. 64.

¹⁵ Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, p. 64.

¹⁶ Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, p. 63.

¹⁷ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 10.

deciding where to place the camera in a single shot, a filmmaker ascribes a sense of their own particular vision to the film. Even within the documentary format realism is not a requirement. Look, for example, to the slew of documentaries that Ken Russell made for the BBC during his *Monitor* years (1959 – 1962), or Vincent Ward's *Rain of the Children* (2008), in which facts are presented accurately but with a measure of artistic vision that defies our expectations of a relatively sober genre, perfectly illustrating Rosenstone's observation. Historicity has its place in production of a film, naturally, but it is generally observed only so far as it reflects the needs of the narrative and the creation of a *sense* of period as recognised by its audience. As Jane Barnwell, writing on the role of the production designer in British Cinema, explains:

The production designer's task is to collaborate with both the producer and the director to create a 'look' for the film within the limitations of its budget. The process relies on research, which is brought to life through inspiration, and the adept use of volume, light and colour. The deployment of screen space is often physically and emotionally essential in order to underpin the concepts of character and narrative, and it can often take on a personality of its own.¹⁸

For Barnwell, historical authenticity plays a clear role in the creation of a film's *mise-en-scène*, but in the form of inspiration, a kit of parts the production designer can utilise in order to craft an environment suitably reflective of both the signified period or locale and the characters it contains. In applying her explanation of production design to films which engage with the Middle Ages, we are of course drawn back to Eco and his Ten Little Middle Ages, primarily those of 'the Middle Ages as pretext' and as 'ironic revisitation', but also to Susan Aronstein and Nancy Coiner's expansion of these definitions in their examination of 'the American Middle Ages: The Middle Ages of Democratic Possibility'.¹⁹

Focussing on these two examples of Eco's Middle Ages, Aronstein and Coiner suggest that the mediaeval past as presented in American pop-culture is largely rooted in 'a uniquely American take on the medieval past' in which 'the narrative outline [is] provided by the dream of the local boy who, through his gumption, imagination, and hard work, achieves financial

¹⁸Jane Barnwell, 'Between Realism and Visual Concept : The Role of the Production Designer in Contemporary British Cinema', *Journal of British Cinema & Television*, 2005, 117–29 (p. 117).

¹⁹ Susan Aronstein and Nancy Coiner, 'Twice Knightly: Democratizing the Middle Ages for Middle-Class America', *Studies in Medievalism*, 6 (1994), 212–31 (p. 213).

and familial success'.²⁰ Using Disneyland and Circus-Circus's Excalibur Hotel as a case study, Aronstein and Coiner explore the way in which middle-class America perceive and engage with the Middle Ages as a vehicle for their 'own founding national myth, the American dream of riches and success'.²¹ The mediaeval past depicted by these sites of capitalist attraction is not, however, that of the British Middle Ages, but of the sanitised fantasy worlds of Walt Disney's films, the doctored version of 'history as it should have been' that Steven Fjellman dubs 'Distory'.²² The iconography of the Middle Ages – castles, knights, swords, and princesses – are divorced from their historical context and repurposed as tools to convey the message of the American Dream, of the prosperous underdog, a metaphor for the rise of America itself. As Coiner and Aronstein observe, 'Distory both incorporates the story of "local boy makes good" into its cleaned up history and transforms that story into the larger chronicle of the nation'.²³ In doing so, it participates in Aronstein's 'politics of nostalgia', a concept that she applies variously to these American attractions, cinema Arthuriana, and the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s and 1990s.²⁴ Like Eco's 'neomedievalism' and Terry Eagleton's 'archaic avant-garde',²⁵ cinema Arthuriana looks to 'an idealised past for a solution to a troubled present'.²⁶ The operative word here is 'idealised'; the mediaeval past returned to by cinema Arthuriana is, like that of the tourist attractions, two-steps removed from reality, at once filtered through and sustained by pop-culture's conception of the Middle Ages.

The mediaeval past of American cinema is not that of Chaucer, Bede, or Gildas, but that of *The Black Knight* (1954), *Sword of Lancelot* (1963), and *Camelot* (1967). As Alan Lupack observes, 'while these films contain elements or episodes that are unknown to medieval legend, all of them appear familiar to anyone versed in Arthurian tradition.'²⁷ Though these films make use of literature from the Arthurian canon, such as Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* or *Gawain and the Green Knight*, they appropriate rather than adapt their source material directly, twisting and grafting tales together to fit contemporary needs. Indeed, Aronstein

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Aronstein and Coiner, p. 215.

²³ Aronstein and Coiner, p. 216.

²⁴ Susan Aronstein, 'The Return of the King: Medievalism and the Politics of Nostalgia in the Mythopoetic Men's Movement', *Prose Studies*, 23.2 (2000), 144–59 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01440350008586710>>.

²⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 273–319.

²⁶ Susan Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 2.

²⁷ Alan Lupack, 'An Enemy in Our Midst: The Black Knight and the American Dream', in *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, ed. by Kevin J. Harty, Revised Ed (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002), pp. 64–70 (p. 64).

notes that the release dates of the films she categorises as Hollywood Arthuriana ‘cluster around times of national crises – the red-scare of the 1950s, the breakdown of authority in the 1960s and 1970s, the turn to the right in the 1980s, the crisis in masculine and national definition in the 1990s’,²⁸ and the three aforementioned films are directly reflective of these periods. *The Black Knight*, as Lupack points out, espouses the heroism of the ‘self-made man’²⁹ and is ‘an allegory for the triumph of American values over a Communist threat’;³⁰ *Sword of Lancelot* is notable for its portrayal of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere as explicitly adulterous, their youthful passion threatened by the power of the aged Arthur in a reflection of the inter-generational politics of the 1960s; while JFK’s widow took pains to equate her late husband’s administration with the ‘right for right’ utopia of *Camelot*, and indeed Camelot, by means of associating him with the eponymous 1961 stage musical. The resurrection of the Arthurian myth in these moments of societal unrest is, quite evidently, as a vehicle for propaganda, a balm for uncertainty. In the same way that we take refuge in the familiar for comfort in moments of personal stress, so does the myth of Camelot function to provide a source of comfort in a nostalgic past, ‘returning’, as Aronstein writes, ‘to the past to remind a sceptical audience about America’s privileged place in history and to convince its viewers to construct themselves in such a way as to make the revival of the nation’s “Camelot” possible’.³¹ Arthur and his kingdom were set on a pedestal, a pseudo-Christ figure and his promised land set for a second coming.

By the time the Pythons turned their attention to the subject of the Holy Grail, however, the genre film had gone from being the prevalent mode to the subject of irreverent mockery. While parody films such as *Casino Royale* (1967) and *The Producers* (1968) gained traction in Hollywood, Britain saw the *Carry On* franchise churn out pastiche after pastiche, to the sum of twenty-five films between 1958 and 1973. Mark Forstater, producer for *Holy Grail*, recalls that:

British comedy films of the 1970s, unlike the TV shows, were pretty awful. Most were spin-offs of successful TV series, made for quite low budgets [...] These films were largely made for UK audiences and could only be exported to countries where the TV series had found a home [...] flat overall lighting was

²⁸ Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 2.

²⁹ Lupack, p. 66.

³⁰ Lupack, p. 70.

³¹ Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 79.

used to give the actors as much freedom of movement as possible, but also to avoid major lighting changes between set-ups. The Pythons' first film *And Now For Something Completely Different* (1971) fell into this category.³²

An amalgam of a number of sketches from *Flying Circus*, *ANFSCD* was a feature length sketch show which failed to make any real engagement with or exploitation of the cinematic form. The first draft of *Holy Grail* exhibits a similar lack of cohesion, being formed of two parallel grail quests – one past, one present – which eventually collide in Harrod's department store. Forstater notes that 'the medieval story had much more potential for laughs and for medieval pastiche',³³ and the Pythons, too, found that there was more original humour to be mined from the court of King Arthur than from the present of Arthur King. Indeed, as Michael Palin recalls of a morning's writing with Terry Jones in November, 1973, 'Prompted by my reading out a sketch about a knight using coconuts instead of a horse, we agreed around this time to investigate the King Arthur story as a basis for the new film'.³⁴ By doing so, the Pythons were plumbing not just a wealth of literary and cultural material, but also the genres of the pastiche and cinema Arthuriana.

Although the *Carry On* films had lampooned everything from the National Service to the Hollywood epic, the Arthurian canon had been mysteriously overlooked by their ribaldry, leaving it ripe for the Pythons' picking. At first glance, *Holy Grail* may seem little but a frivolous romp accoutred in the tropes of Arthurian myth, a mockery of the films that came before it and the texts that came before them. But if we consider this engagement with the existing body of cinema Arthuriana it is evident that the Pythons are engaging with the films not just on a superficial level, but also sub-, and indeed meta-textually. By deconstructing and demystifying their source material, they at once overturn the reverent nostalgia instilled in the public reception of Arthurian literature by the likes of Tennyson's *Idylls to the King* (1859) and undermine the use of the genre as a vehicle for political ideologies. The Arthur of *Holy Grail*, unlike his counterparts in earlier Hollywood Arthuriana, is a figure of virtually no authority; the peasants rebuke him, his Camelot is a joke made at the expense of the eponymous musical, and his round table is all but never seen. The question of Arthur's authority, or lack thereof, will be returned to in greater detail later, but for the moment it is

³² Mark Forstater, *The 7th Python: A Twat's Tale* (London: Irregular Content, 2015), p. 15.

³³ Forstater, p. 36.

³⁴ Michael Palin, *Diaries 1969 - 1979: The Python Years* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), p. 163.

sufficient to highlight *Holy Grail's* portrayal of the iconic hero as entirely ineffective. By undermining the power, and thus reliability, of the established authority as represented by the king and his knights, the Pythons deal a fell blow to the notion of the Arthurian film as an idealistic allegory for society. Don't rely on established structures of power, they say; they're no better than the rest of us. Indeed, though Aronstein makes a convincing argument for *Holy Grail's* 'anti-medievalism' in its rejection of 'benevolent patriarchy, manifest destiny, and the promise of science and reason',³⁵ Elizabeth T. Pochoda's observations on Malory's *Le Mort D'Arthur* offer an interesting angle from which to view the Pythons' use of material:

Malory's attempt to use Arthurian legend as an historical ideal of life leads him to uncover the fact that Arthurian society actually provided itself with the means by which all of the conflicts which were eventually to destroy it could continue to operate unacknowledged by the members of the society.³⁶

In much the same way that Malory came to realise the unfeasibility of the Round Table model of political idealism, so too can the Pythons be said to have identified the ideological content of cinema Arthuriana and undercut it entirely with their post-modern riff on the epic form. While *Holy Grail* may be, as Aronstein suggests, 'anti-medievalism', it is arguably the political dimension of cinema Arthuriana to which the Pythons object rather than the material itself. The Pythons' work is, of course, distinctly coloured by the political climate of its time, and the body of *MPFC* is comprised of sketches which pitch their absurdism against the seriousness of history, institution, and government alike. What better way, then, to tackle the cinematic form than to level that absurdism at cinema itself?

As Forstater observes, the comedy films of the 1970s were mostly adapted from television, and they brought their flat aesthetic with them. With *Holy Grail*, however, the Pythons melded together a wealth of influences, bridging European art cinema with Hollywood Arthuriana, Malory with Marx, and the epic with the comedy. For their visual register, they drew on the likes of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957), Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), and Pasolini's *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), the last of which Palin recalls 'Terry G had recommended. Superb recreation of mediaeval England – the kind of style and quality

³⁵ Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 100.

³⁶ Elizabeth T. Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life* (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 1971), p. 29.

of shooting that we must get in our film, to stop it being just another *Carry on King Arthur*'.³⁷ Evidently the Pythons wanted to be taken seriously in Hollywood, in so far as a parody of the quest for the Holy Grail could be, by proving that they could make the jump in production values from that of the small to the big screen. In much the same way that their comedy reacts against the political and societal models of 1970s Britain, *The Holy Grail* reacts against both the British comedy film and the Hollywood epic by colliding the two genres to create a low budget romp with an art film aesthetic that would prove to be highly successful.

Figures Traced in Shite

As Goldstone noted, Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam took different approaches when directing *Holy Grail*: Jones' focus was on the Pythonic wordplay and physical comedy; Gilliam's, the technical and visual aspects of the production. In this division of labour, *Holy Grail* displays a level of mediaeval influence that extends beyond that of its subject matter. In her paper 'The Animation of Marginal Decorations in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*', Martine Meuwese identifies Lilian M. C. Randall's encyclopaedic *Illustrations in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* as Gilliam's source for the images that he employs in the animated segments of the film. As she observes:

Gilliam's animated sequences contain many medieval visual motifs. In 'The Tale of Sir Launcelot,' this animation sequence is restricted to the Celtic-style text; the rest of the animation develops in Gilliam's own style of drawing. However, 'The Quest for the Holy Grail' contains a Romanesque Christ and a series of Gothic figures, while 'The Tale of Sir Galahad' and 'Season Animation' are also mainly populated by figures which look as though they have been borrowed directly from early fourteenth-century manuscript illustrations. And indeed, that is precisely what has happened.³⁸

Meuwese goes on to connect Gilliam's numbering of his concept sketches for the film's animations to the numbered illustrations in Randall's book, suggesting that the relationship between Randall's text and Gilliam's appropriation of it might be compared to that of a

³⁷ Palin, pp. 163–64.

³⁸ Martine Meuwese, 'The Animation of Marginal Decorations in "Monty Python and the Holy Grail"', *Arthuriana*, 14 (2004), 45–58 (p. 47).

medieval scribe and his source book; she writes that ‘Gilliam’s orientation sketches and notes may be compared to the terse instructions that a miniaturist would scribble or sketch next to the place where the illustration was to be executed’.³⁹ As insightful as her observations are, Meuwese limits the scope of her study to Gilliam’s use of manuscript material in his animations and neglects to consider the film as a whole, or indeed the role of the other Pythons, particularly that of Jones, within the production of the film. While it is useful to consider Gilliam as a modern miniaturist, it is perhaps more accurate to cast him in the role of illuminator; the other Pythons, having been more directly involved in the writing of the film’s script, can thus be viewed as akin to mediaeval scribes, represented by Jones as writer-director.

It is prudent to note at this juncture that the practice of manuscript illumination is one which spans several centuries, and as such the relationship between and responsibilities of the scribe and the illuminator evolved accordingly. Jonathan J. G. Alexander offers a studious overview of the evolution of the process from the Early Middle Ages of ‘about 650 to about 1100’⁴⁰ through to the end of the fourteenth century, and it is possible to identify elements from different periods of this history which correspond to the relationship between Jones and Gilliam. He observes, for example, that ‘looking at the list of illuminator’s names prior to the year 900 AD given in the standard dictionary of miniaturists, almost all turn out, on closer inspection, to be scribes’,⁴¹ a blending of roles which is not so dissimilar to that of the writer-director or director-animator. When discussing Gilliam in this manner, however, it is useful to make the distinction between the terms ‘miniature’ and ‘illumination’. David Diring connects the term ‘miniature’ with the Latin words ‘*minium*’ and ‘*miniare*’ which relate to the use of a red paint made with ochre or lead, explaining that ‘Miniatures may be executed without the use of gold or silver while illuminations may not. Although there are illuminated miniatures – *i.e.*, pictures finished with touches of gold to represent the lights – many miniatures are not illuminations’.⁴² By dividing these two terms on the basis of their constituent alchemical metals it is a simple matter to neatly connect the practice of

³⁹ Meuwese, p. 54

⁴⁰ Jonathan J. G. Alexander, *Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 72.

⁴¹ Alexander, p. 6.

⁴² David Diring, ‘“Introduction” The Illuminated Book’, in *Reader in the History of Books and Printing*, ed. by Paul A. Winckler (Englewood: Information Handling Services, 1980), pp. 148–53 (p. 149).

filmmaking with that of manuscript illumination; the silver pigment of the page becomes the silver halide of the film stock, while the representation of light becomes the projection of light.

Applying a mediaeval model of practice to a modern form inevitably fails to produce exact parallels, but viewing the division of work within the Python troupe in this way does provide an interesting insight into Gilliam's aesthetic and his evolution as a filmmaker. It has been noted above, of course, that though less visually oriented than Gilliam, Jones still had a significant role in shaping the look of the film. In the medium of film, the written word becomes the spoken word, and so in his care for capturing the performances of his fellow Pythons Jones' directing style is directly comparable to the care with which a mediaeval scribe prepared their page. As Alexander informs us:

Before a scribe started to work, the page had to be ruled. It is the general, or at least by far the commonest practice throughout through the Middle Ages, for this scribed ruling to dictate the format of the miniatures, borders, and initials; that is, for them at least to conform to the column of script in width and to the lines of script in height. It has been shown that in Parisian illumination manuscripts of the early fifteenth century, the page ruling might affect not just the format of a miniature, but its internal spatial organisation and objects represented, for instance the alignment of roof-lines or the doorposts of buildings.⁴³

In much the same way that Meuwese makes the link between Gilliam's preliminary sketches and the sourcebooks of the mediaeval illuminator, a parallel can be drawn between the practice of ruling as outlined by Alexander and the preparation of a film's script. If we consider the completed film as an illuminated manuscript and the performances contained within as its text, it follows that Gilliam's animated segments, which Meuwese suggests 'function [mostly] as comic interludes that prevent the movie from becoming boring',⁴⁴ become the historiated initials that begin each segment of the story. The film's script, then, is the underpinning structure that is the ruled page, a comparison which complements Meuwese's observation regarding Gilliam's orientation sketches. Again, a relatively clear division is struck between the written and visual components of *Holy Grail* and the respective directorial responsibilities of Gilliam and Jones.

⁴³ Alexander, p. 40.

⁴⁴ Meuwese, p. 46.

Having approximated the practises of the scribe and the illuminator with that of the screenwriter and the director, we can now examine the production of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in the terms of an illuminated manuscript, with the addition of the elements of time, movement, and sound. This likening of the cinematic form to the plastic arts is not a new concept, as is made evident by the titles of such studies as Andrey Tarkovsky's *Sculpting in Time* (1987) and David Bordwell's *Figures Traced in Light* (2005). Likewise, the formal similarities and intertextuality of the *fumetti*, the comic book, and the film have proved of interest to several filmmakers, including Federico Fellini, Peter Greenaway, and Gilliam himself. Though a sequential art form in its own right, film is often employed as a vehicle for spoken narrative or, in other words, as a form of illustration. If we return now to the idea that *Holy Grail's* script is the equivalent to the scribe's meticulously ruled page, we can compare the scribe's preparations to the that of the director. As Bordwell writes, 'From the early 1900s to the 1970s, directors working in film industries were expected to turn the script into scenes, and that task involved plotting, moment by moment, the dramatic interactions of characters in space'.⁴⁵ Both mediaeval scribe and contemporary director are responsible for the allocation of space in the visual embellishment of their written material, the scribe by dividing up the blank page into the territories of text and image, and the director by converting textual information into spatial, visual information. The line between writer-director-scribe and animator-director-illuminator may appear to blur here as the duties of the cinematic scribe and the filmic illuminator tread the same ground, but it must again be noted that the mediaeval practices which this discourse employs as its comparative model converged in a similar manner in the tenth and eleventh centuries; as Alexander notes, 'the two practices have now drawn together, are complementary, and in practice are often done by the same person'.⁴⁶

The most useful comparison to be made, however, is with that of the collaborative turn that the process of manuscript illumination took over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In a very similar fashion to the way that the production of a film is a process involving experts in several crafts, practitioners of illumination began to specialise in different styles and techniques and additional designers and assistant illuminators began to be incorporated into the process. Alexander writes that:

⁴⁵David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light* (London: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 7–8.

⁴⁶ Alexander, p. 10.

we begin to hear of lay illuminators who are professionals working directly for a stipend in cash or kind [...] lay artists were more mobile and could import new styles from considerable distances. A typical situation seems to have been that of a master craftsman, able to execute works in different media, being called to a monastery and given board and lodging for as long as was necessary to execute whatever was required.⁴⁷

It is no stretch of the imagination to apply this framework to Gilliam's initiation into the ranks of *Monty Python*. Though not a particularly experienced animator when he left America for the UK, Gilliam had 'worked as a volunteer for a while in a studio that did stop-motion photography (dancing cigarette packets, that sort of thing)',⁴⁸ and has memories of attempting to create animations by drawing directly on the celluloid.⁴⁹ By the time he came to work on *MPFC*, however, Gilliam had made the leap from near silent caricaturist on *We Have Ways of Making You Laugh* (1968) to animator for the same when he offered to animate the 'terrible little punning connections' of disc jockey Jimmy Young.⁵⁰ Furthermore, as the filmmaker notes, 'Terry Jones has always claimed that my cartoon *Beware the Elephants* was the inspiration for the continuous stream-of-consciousness approach in *Monty Python*; in other words, we weren't constantly stopping and starting'.⁵¹ Though the truth of this claim is likely a tenuous one at best, it points to an early instance of Gilliam's role as a cohesive force, as the linking component between the sketches written by the other Pythons. The animations he made for *MPFC* function in much the same manner as they do in *Holy Grail*: as a whimsical means of getting from one sketch to another, or as the historiated letter at the beginning of each new chapter. In this way, whether considered as a cartoonist, an animator, or an illuminator, Gilliam fits the profile of the mobile craftsman, plying his expertise far from home.

Even in their utilisation as a narrative glue, there is a mediaeval sensibility to Gilliam's animated segments of *Holy Grail* that extends beyond their utilisation of period manuscript illustrations. Their positioning between narrative episodes is just as important as their visual design, as is the predominance of elements such as the changing seasons and the

⁴⁷ Alexander, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Gilliam and Thompson, p. 67.

⁴⁹ McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Christie, p. 39.

⁵¹ Christie, p. 43.

transgression of boundaries, such as doorways and indeed the ellipsis of time itself. As Michael Camille explains:

In folklore, betwixt and between are important zones of transformation. The edge of the water was where wisdom revealed itself; spirits were banished to the spaceless places 'between the froth and the water' or 'betwixt the bark and the tree'. Similarly, temporal junctures between winter and summer, or between night and day, were dangerous moments of intersection with the Otherworld. In charms and riddles, things that were neither this nor that bore, in their defiance of classification, strong magic. Openings, entrances and doorways, both of buildings and the human body (in one Middle English medical text there is mention of a medicine corroding 'the margynes of the skynne'), were especially important liminal zones that had to be protected.⁵²

Each and every one of Camille's instances of 'betwixt and between' are present in *Holy Grail*, multiple times over; The Black Knight, the Blind Soothsayer, Tim the Enchanter, the Cave of Caerbannog, and the keeper of the Bridge of Death are all found at boundaries that Arthur and his knights must cross in pursuit of the Grail. The Historian, too, who falls victim to the one mounted knight seen in the entirety of the film is slain by a transgression of temporal boundaries as past and present collide. It must also be noted that the animated aesthetic trespasses on the live-action narrative at two important junctures: when God, represented in a typically Gilliamesque visual pun by cricketer W. G Grace, appears to present Arthur with the Grail Quest; and, secondly, when the Beast of Caerbannog emerges from the darkness of its cave, rupturing the boundary between the 'real' and liminal spaces and allowing the knights to escape via another animated sequence. The betwixt and between are zones of transformation, and within the context of *Holy Grail's* formal construction Gilliam's animations serve as the liminal zones in which one narrative episode is effortlessly transformed into another. Although only three of the film's five animated sections, the monster of Caerbannog aside, have any direct involvement with its narrative, all five act as transformative boundaries between the live action episodes by disregarding even their tenuous logic in favour of sheer absurdism. Palin informs us in his diary entry from November 28th 1973, 'much of the absurd stuff that has already been written for the *Holy Grail* film has healthy precedents (e.g. taunting one's opponents and, as a last resort, firing dead animals at

⁵² Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), p. 16.

them during a siege – both quoted as mediaeval tactics by Montgomery'.⁵³ Yet Gilliam's animations, drawn from genuine manuscripts, observe the playful and nonsensical logic of their source material rather than that of the quest narrative, thus identifying themselves as fitting squarely in the tradition of mediaeval marginalia.

Meuwese observes that only two of the animated sequences in the film, 'Season Animation' and 'The Monster of Aaargh' actively participate in its narrative, but that this is 'a phenomenon that may occur in the marginal illustrations of manuscripts'.⁵⁴ The other three, 'The Quest for the Holy Grail', 'The Tale of Sir Launcelot', and 'The Tale of Sir Galahad' function independently of the film's plot and serve both as brief interludes and, as previously suggested, the historiated initials of new chapters of the film's text, literalised by the on-screen 'book of the film'. This is another trope that the Pythons adopt, sourced from both the tendency of mediaeval authors to cite an authoritative foreign text which they have translated and also from the cinematic cannon. In addition to the frequent use of the device of the opening storybook as a starting point for several of Disney's animated feature films between *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Robin Hood* (1973), British films such as David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946) and Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948) also employed the trope in order to pay homage to their literary sources. The Pythons originally incorporated the device of the storybook as a cost-effective means of quickly introducing the knights that make up Arthur's questing contingent, replacing a montage sequence that Larsen posits 'may also have been intended to be a completely animated sequence',⁵⁵ but like many of their money saving decisions it serves to strengthen the film as a whole. Not only does the invention of a specific source text provide the film with the sense of a loose narrative structure, it unites the Pythons' style of comedy with their source material. As Palin notes, 'the story could be broken down into an old university revue format – ten sketches and three songs [...] it went off in all sorts of different directions and everyone had their adventure which is very much like the Arthurian legends'.⁵⁶

Though it may initially appear as mere silliness masquerading in the trappings of Arthurian legend, *Monty Python* is in fact a highly complex engagement with and continuation

⁵³ Palin, p. 164.

⁵⁴ Meuwese, pp. 55–56.

⁵⁵ Darl Larsen, *A Book About the Film Monty Python and the Holy Grail: All the References from African Swallows to Zoot* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 226.

⁵⁶ Palin, p. 236.

of a wealth of literary, artistic, and historical traditions. By breaking down the division of labour between its creators to that of the primarily written and the primarily visual, Jones and Gilliam can be placed within the mediaeval tradition of manuscript illumination; by borrowing elements from a range of mediaeval films, such as the self-flagellating monks of *The Seventh Seal* and the musical revelry of *Camelot*, the Pythons engage with existing representations and appropriations of the Middle Ages on film; and, by incorporating a supposed source text into the body of the film, they draw directly on the same device of literary authority as do the likes of Chrétien and Malory. Furthermore, in both Gilliam's appropriation of mediaeval manuscript illuminations and the Pythons' postmodern interference with the quest narrative there is an echo of the relationship between the illuminator and the text that was to be illuminated. Camille writes:

Ironically, the medieval illuminator hardly ever read the text of a work he was formally illustrating – in the case of Bibles or Romances – where he followed earlier copies or models; but on the edge he was free to read the words for himself and make what he wanted of them. In this respect, marginal images are *conscious* usurpation, perhaps even political statements about diffusing the power of the text through its unravelling (the word 'text' is derived from *textus*, meaning weaving or interlacing), rather than repressed meanings that suddenly flash back onto the surface of things.⁵⁷

Amusingly enough, Gilliam continues to fit the model of the illuminator in that he approached two of his most notable projects, *Brazil* (1985) and the yet uncompleted *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, without reading the source texts. Moreover, the body of work that he has accumulated since the dissolution of *Monty Python* is threaded through by the recurring unravelling of reality as a means of conveying a message; as the filmmaker himself muses of his films, 'They're all didactic. I think it's a reaction against American films where the learning experience is easy and things work out well. I think it's much more ambivalent and uncertain'.⁵⁸ While *Holy Grail* marks the beginning of Gilliam's artistic engagement with his interest in the Middle Ages, the film ultimately denies the Grail Quest its resolution, Arthur's tale cut short as a policeman places his hand over the lens. This disruption of the narrative is something which Gilliam would leave behind in his subsequent career as a solo director,

⁵⁷ Camille, p. 42.

⁵⁸ McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*, pp. 98–99.

though his interest in the structure of the Grail Quest and the aesthetic sensibilities of mediaeval art would be carried forward.

The Earthly City

Having whetted his appetite for the Middle Ages with *Holy Grail*, Gilliam chose to return to the period for his first solo venture into narrative cinema, exploiting his creative freedom to test his visual, technical, and comedic boundaries. Though Gilliam's contribution to *Holy Grail* has thus far been examined primarily in relation to his animated illuminations, he brought far more to *Holy Grail* than just the means of connecting the still heavily sketch structured narrative. It was he, as Palin notes above, that recommended Pasolini's *Canterbury Tales* as a touchstone for the look of the film, and it was he who took such great pains to uphold the art cinema aesthetic, 'working away more quietly [than Jones] with the camera crew, checking the shot, placing a candle in the foreground here and there'.⁵⁹ Gilliam offered a painterly sensibility to the aesthetic of *Holy Grail*, drawing on existing traditions of mediaeval art and contemporary cinema to create a Middle Ages which stood in stark opposition to the sanitised and romanticised version presented by Hollywood cinema. In his illuminations of the Python text, there is a clear and equal fascination with both the earthy materiality of peasant life and the supernatural absurdity of the sub- or meta-human, the gods and monsters which populate Arthur's quest. In *Jabberwocky*, he returns to and embellishes several of the ideas that were visited only briefly by the Pythons.

Where *Holy Grail* heralded its intention to parody and demystify its subject matter with its mock-Bergman opening titles, complete with moose, llamas, and Swedish subtitles, *Jabberwocky* begins with a shot of an idyllic sunset over a lush green forest. This is followed by a sequence in which a hunter, played in cameo by Terry Jones, checks his traps and stuffs some luckless animals into a burlap sack before being summarily dispatched by the as-yet unseen beast of the film's title. It is a brief sequence, a prologue to the film that lasts an exact two and a half minutes, but it quickly sets out Gilliam's intention to depart from the Pythons' style and establish himself as a directorial individual; his use of depth of field and cinematic

⁵⁹ Palin, p. 194.

grammar (namely tracking and crane shots) mark the film's departure from the theatrical staging and dialogue-based humour of the Flying Circus. The idyllic atmosphere generated by the camera's focus on the greenery of the forest and the beauty of nature, as represented by a delicate butterfly and a voiceover reading of the Lewis Carroll poem from which the film takes its name, is unceremoniously ruined as Jones' boot crushes the insect – a reference, perhaps, to the Bronzino foot of *MPFC*. The focus on visual and physical comedy is established, and indeed the sequence's punchline is a visual one: the smoking, eviscerated carcass of Gilliam's ex-co-director, the butterfly perched smugly on his nose. *Monty Python* is dead. The only dialogue in this sequence is that of a voice-over reading of the Lewis Carroll poem from which the film takes its name, and so it is very swiftly made evident that the comedy of *Jabberwocky* will be in the vein of *Holy Grail's* animated marginalia rather than the primarily spoken comedy of the Pythons. Where the errant subtitles of *Holy Grail's* opening sequence set the stage for the film's irreverent disruption of its subject matter, *Jabberwocky's* prologue establishes the threat central to its story in a manner which indicates a much more conventional narrative style.

Once Jones has been executed by the Jabberwocky, a blood-spattered title card makes a brief appearance before ceding its place to a close-up shot of the rightmost panel of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503 - 1515), 'Hell' (Fig. 1). Momentarily focussing on a tortured soul hanging from a key on the end of a demon's spear, Gilliam next fades to a detail of the upper left section of the panel where buildings are seen to blaze in the depths of Hell. At this point, the voiceover resumes and begins to provide some context for the film's setting in 'the Dark Ages, Ages darker than anyone had ever expected', accompanied by the sounds of shouts, tolling bells, and crackling flames. The camera slowly tilts down to show an army and a red lake full of drowning sinners, before dissolving into a rightwards pan over Breugel the Elder's *The Triumph of Death* (1562) (Fig. 2). These shots are not animated but simply filmed in close-up. It's a clever trick that went unused in the 'Bring Out Your Dead' sequence of *Holy Grail* – the script calls for a 'CUT TO Terry Gilliam's sequence of Breugel prints'⁶⁰ – and one of several visual ideas that Gilliam would, over the course of his career to date, set aside only to recycle later. It functions in much the same way that 'The Book of the Film' does for *Holy Grail*; as a cost-effective way to film a short contextual

⁶⁰ John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin, 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail', Final Draft 20.3.74, p.4.



Figure 1: Detail of 'Hell' from Bosch's 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'. Still from DVD of Jabberwocky.



Figure 2: Detail of 'The Triumph of Death'. Still from DVD of Jabberwocky.



Figure 3: Detail of 'The Tower of Babel'. Still from DVD of Jabberwocky.



Figure 4: Detail of 'The Magpie on the Gallows'. Still from DVD of Jabberwocky.

montage. He films the paintings in the same manner that he would a real landscape, with a combination of tilts and pans that guide us through a grotesque mediaeval world, moving past a sprawling city as portrayed by Bruegel's *The Tower of Babel* (1563) (Fig. 3), to a peaceful woodland cottage, located in his *The Magpie on the Gallows* (1568) (Fig. 4), at which point a further dissolve brings us into the three dimensional world of the Coopers' home. The whole sequence takes a mere twenty seconds at most and succeeds in giving the impression of a much larger and more textured mediaeval world than Gilliam could likely have portrayed otherwise.

The aesthetic of the film is established, and having taken care of the establishing long-shots in such a manner, the director needed to maintain only the illusion of a larger setting by means of careful framing and some shrewd work on the parts of art director Millie Burns and costume designer Hazel Pethig: the royal halls of King Bruno, filched from a German production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, are given the illusion of expansiveness by walls draped in black cloth masquerading as shadow; a jousting tournament takes place in which most of the action is inferred by sound and the increasing amounts of blood that splatter over the spectators; and a town filmed on the discarded sets of the 1968 musical *Oliver!* gives the impression of being located behind the walls of Pembroke castle. The way in which the production design of the film is cobbled together is not dissimilar to the approach that Gilliam took in his animations in *Holy Grail*, plucking images from Randall's book of marginalia. The various set pieces, appropriated from the leavings of other contemporary productions, are referents to the canon of narrative cinema into which *Jabberwocky* at once ventures and mocks. As Gilliam explains:

One of the most important things about *Jabberwocky* to me was that it should be anti-American film-making – not in an explicitly political way, but in terms of being the opposite of the Hollywood distorting mirror I'd grown up with, whereby all the pores were mysteriously gone from the skin and everyone's teeth shone like Doris Day and Rock Hudson's [...] The one thing I most wanted to do with *Jabberwocky* - and in this at least I think I succeeded – was to make it as tactile as possible.⁶¹

⁶¹ Gilliam and Thompson, p. 172.

Gilliam's focus is on creating a palpable mediaeval world, one that his audience can almost feel, or indeed smell, rather than one that is necessarily authentic; as he recalls, 'I'd just steeped myself into the feeling of the period and wasn't interested in accuracy but the feeling of the thing'.⁶² Accordingly, he draws on the visual traditions of Bosch and Breugel as aesthetic keynotes, using the paintings in much the same way that John Huston did in *Moulin Rouge* (1952): as pseudo-historical documents, visual records that could be recreated. The crowded compositions of Bosch and Breugel, along with the former's penchant for the depiction of bodily functions, are gleefully translated into the director's wide-angle-deep-focus filming style, and his interest in the mechanics of the body, of business, and of society is worn on the film's sleeve. It is a film that has its flaws but is nevertheless a vastly interesting one. In its cartoonish humour we can see Gilliam transitioning from the role of animator to that of director, and in its smorgasbord of visual and textual quotations we gain a clear picture of his range of interests and influences.

Gilliam's interest in the visual traditions of the Middle Ages, made clear in *Holy Grail*, are compounded in *Jabberwocky* just as the literary canon is pushed into the background. The impact of Bergman, Pasolini, and Kurosawa that is evident in *Holy Grail* is also present here, now accompanied by direct references to scenes from other cinematic representations of the Middle Ages; the bell casting scene of Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966) is instantly recognisable in *Jabberwocky*'s trebuchet building religious fanatics, and *Camelot* is parodied once again, shot for shot, in King Bruno's jousting tournament. These appropriated and recreated snippets of mediaeval cinema are, in their usage, akin to the figures that Gilliam copied from Randall's book, his re-creation of the Middle Ages enabled by the visualisations of those directors who had previously portrayed them in much the same way that mediaeval scribes often worked from earlier copies of the text. *Jabberwocky*, however, cannot be considered an illuminated manuscript in the way that *Holy Grail* can; being an original story with an emphasis on visual style and physical rather than verbal comedy, *Jabberwocky* fits more easily into the category of illustration than illumination. In *Illustrating Camelot* (2008), Barbara and Alan Lupack examine some of the most notable artists to illustrate Arthurian literature, among them Gustave Doré, of whom Gilliam is a particular fan. They observe, 'In his vision of Camelot, Gustave Doré was able to blend realistic elements with the grotesque

⁶² Anne Thompson, "'Bandit'", in *Terry Gilliam: Interviews*, ed. by David Sterritt and Lucille Rhodes (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), pp. 3–15 (p. 9).

and fantastic, and to integrate “simple grandeur” with his “indulgence of love of the horrible”,⁶³ an observation which might just as easily be made of *Jabberwocky*. As Alexander Walker wrote, ‘Gilliam applies neo-realism to the Middle Ages and comes up with a comedy that looks like a dirtied-up Bruegel or a goonish Bosch’.⁶⁴

Indeed, this pleasure in the disturbing or the disgusting is a theme which is threaded not just through Gilliam’s pre-television work as a cartoonist and caricaturist, but all the way back to the paintings of Bosch and Breugel from which *Jabberwocky* takes its cues. Stefan Fischer, in his extended study of Bosch’s complete works, writes that:

two terms in particular are key to understanding what was distinctive about Bosch’s art: the grotesque [...] and the drollery. These were collective terms for a ‘lower-brow’ style and for ‘lower-brow’ art forms that were sometimes fantastical, sometimes genre-like, moral and satirical, and which offered artists the freedom to astonish and impress the viewer with their inventions.⁶⁵

The film may not present a moral in the sense of any religious dogma, but Gilliam insists that ‘in *Jabberwocky* you get the wrong fairy tale ending and that’s an awful lesson to learn’.⁶⁶ Though the film’s framework is the prototype for the filmmaker’s ‘dreamer vs the establishment’ narrative model, Gilliam’s purpose in *Jabberwocky* is to deliver an ironic deflation of the happy ending. Dennis, the accidental hero, has no lofty aspirations beyond setting up his own coopering business and marrying the ogre-like daughter of a neighbouring businessman. The death of the Jabberwocky, which should have dissolved the city merchants’ monopolising of a captive market, does not aid Dennis in his entrepreneurial ambitions, but in fact ruins them; his riding off into the sunset with the kingdom’s princess is the film’s final joke at the expense of the capitalistic American dream. For the economy is a central theme in *Jabberwocky*, its sorry state reflected by the Gormenghast-inspired heap of crumbling rubble that passes for Bruno’s castle. But this, like much of the imagery in *Holy Grail* and *Jabberwocky*, is an image which has mediaeval connotations as well as contemporary ones: Christine M. Neufield writes that ‘From *Beowulf* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the

⁶³ Barbara Tapa Lupack and Alan Lupack, *Illustrating Camelot* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), p. 31.

⁶⁴ *Monty Python: Complete and Utter Theory of the Grotesque*, ed. by John O. Thompson (London: BFI, 1982), p. 19.

⁶⁵ Stefan Fischer, *Hieronymous Bosch: The Complete Collection* (Cologne: Taschen, 2016), pp. 13–14.

⁶⁶ McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*, pp. 98–99.

fortress symbolizes a medieval ruler's success, a product of his unhampered access to material goods, and emblematic of his ability to provide materially for the community'.⁶⁷

In *Jabberwocky*, it is the merchants who have unhampered access to material goods while Bruno the Questionable's authority literally crumbles around him. Besieged by the Jabberwocky, the city's material needs are held at the mercy of the merchant's ever-increasing prices for an ever-decreasing quality of product. The only commodities Bruno has to trade are his daughter and his land which he offers as the prize for the slaying of the beast and the subsequent economic freedom of his (substantially diminished) kingdom. This relationship between the king and the beast bears examining not just in terms of the city's economics, however, but also in terms the tension between the urban and rural environments that it expresses. The Jabberwocky is firmly situated in the role of Grendel, to borrow from *Beowulf*, as a monstrous Other in opposition to the humanity of Bruno's city, though it is notable that the Jabberwocky makes no direct attack on the settlement. It reacts violently only to those who attack it, and by extension nature, such as the knights who hunt it and, of course, Jones' butterfly-squashing hunter. In *Beowulf*, Grendel's appearance can be directly linked to building of Hrothgar's hall and thus considered as a device for the disruption of human ambition. Similarly, the Jabberwocky is directly related to the economic health of Bruno's kingdom, rife as the city is with greedy merchants and impenetrable guilds. Its appearance can be linked to the corruption of the settlement's citizens, an embodiment of their greed and signifier of the city's 'earthly' nature. Indeed, for Gilliam the relationship between the natural and urban environments is ambivalent at best. As he explains, 'On the one hand, I love cities for their architecture and as hothouses of culture and art. On the other, I hate them as man-made excrescences conspiring to obscure our view of the natural world'.⁶⁸ Notably, the Jabberwocky's defeat is no show of male heroism; the brutish Black Knight falls, and the beast is slain inadvertently by Dennis' cowardice. The role of the hero is undermined, and all the more so when Dennis departs into the sunset, the city's corruption entirely unresolved by the monster's death.

⁶⁷ Christine M. Neufield, "'Lovely Filth': Monty Python and the Matter of the Holy Grail", in *The Holy Grail on Film: Essays on the Cinematic Quest*, ed. by Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson: Jefferson, 2015), pp. 81–97 (p. 84).

⁶⁸ Terry Gilliam and Ben Thompson, *Gilliamesque: A Pre-Posthumous Memoir* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2015), p. 7.

Though the merchants' monopoly may have been broken as inter-city trade opens up once more, Bruno's kingdom has been halved by the quest's reward and his monarchy continues to decay as quickly as his castle. The guilds have no reason to alter their policies and allow non-members to join, so figures such as the footless beggar (another image borrowed from Bosch) will remain poor and unemployed. But their squalor draws a final link between Gilliam's vision of the Middle Ages and the mediaeval mind-set – that of the association between excrement and money. While Bruno's monarchy is poor in gold, it is rich in filth, and as Camille observes with amusement: 'Just as scholars of the fabliau have begun to see excrement-making as a trope of fiction itself, the recirculation of dead matter, these latrines of faecal form swirling at the edges of the page can similarly evoke the artist's power to make forms from the "clay" of the earth'.⁶⁹ While this association may be of little use to the inhabitants of his film, the alchemical transformation of faecal matter into gold by means of the artist's creativity is an oddly apt comparison to be made of Gilliam's film. Working with a shoestring budget of \$500,000, Gilliam and his creative team were able to salvage discarded materials from other productions and, with a little ingenuity, transform a lacklustre script into a veritable masterpiece of production design that is still cited today for its remarkably tangible depiction of the Middle Ages.

⁶⁹ Camille, p. 115.

'The God Within': *The Fisher King* as Gilliam's Grail Quest

Just as David de Keyser, voice of the Tabernacle in John Boorman's *Zardoz* (1974), observes that the director's work always revolves around 'the same image: an isolated community, an island, a man alone fighting an apathetic society, a quest for an unattainable treasure',⁷⁰ so too does Terry Gilliam recognise that 'the Grail is constantly referred to as being central to the work I've done.' Situated, as Peter Marks notes, under the suitably encompassing headings of 'visionary'⁷¹ and 'cinematic fantasist',⁷² Gilliam has produced a filmography which refuses to be fitted comfortably within any one genre. The settings of his films vary wildly, from the Middle Ages of *Monty Python and The Holy Grail* (1975) and *Jabberwocky* (1977), through the Renaissance of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988) and *The Brothers Grimm* (2005), the various Classical periods of *Time Bandits* (1981), the steampunk Victoriana of *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009), and the contemporary backdrops of *The Fisher King* (1991), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) and *Tideland* (2005), to the dystopian futures of *Brazil* (1985), *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), and *The Zero Theorem* (2013). And yet, while the director points out that the Grail itself 'has only been in one film, and that's *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*',⁷³ each one of these narratives invariably centres on a hero in pursuit of an idealised goal in a blighted land; in short, a Grail quest.

Though the temptation in identifying these goals as Grails is to impose a set of connotations – ideas of chivalry, spirituality, and homosocial bonding - on the narratives of their respective films not necessarily intended by the director, he concedes that 'the Grail can be many, many different things [...] I suppose in my case it's understanding, or knowledge, or wisdom; it's trying to find that thing'. Indeed the Grail is 'not a mediaeval concept' for Gilliam but one 'that's around all the time',⁷⁴ a basic unit of storytelling that represents an individual's need for personal growth; within the context of his body of work, the Grail is an idea divorced from the religious and cultural contexts of Christ's chalice, representing instead an incorporeal yet attainable goal for his protagonists. By considering the Grail in this way, as a universal symbol of attainment rather than a religious relic, Gilliam strips away the trappings

⁷⁰ David De Keyser, *The Making of 'Zardos'*, dir. by Tim King (BBC, 1974).

⁷¹ Peter Marks, *Terry Gilliam* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 9.

⁷² Marks, p. 10.

⁷³ Terry Gilliam, commentary on *The Fisher King*, dir. by Terry Gilliam (Criterion, 2015).

⁷⁴ Criterion.

of its literature and is left with an archetypal object of desire. It becomes what Terry Eagleton, citing the theories of French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, terms a 'mytheme', 'which like the basic sound units of language (phonemes) acquired meaning only when combined together in certain ways'.⁷⁵ Gilliam, too, views myth as a language, and Tony Hood writes that 'a Terry Gilliam film is a site of a particular imaginative combustion of ideas and forms disturbed from their original historical contexts and set in collision, challenging conventional cinematic expectations of continuity and temporal cohesion'.⁷⁶ The worlds that he creates are oppressive to creativity, bound up with reason, science and logic, and shown to suffer for it; Hood continues, 'Gilliam's antipathy is directed at the vast apparatus of contemporary modernity constructed on the Enlightenment faith of progressive liberation from the capriciousness of fate through technology, science and systems – social, political and economic – to the detriment of other stories that once explained experience of the world'.⁷⁷ For Gilliam, the power of the imagination is synonymous with magic, and the magic of the imagination is inextricably tied to a rejuvenating sense of vitality for those who wield it.

To use the term 'imagination' to describe the attribute that Gilliam's characters bring to, or require to escape from, the stagnant societies in which they find themselves is to suggest a predisposition towards the fantastical and the imaginary, the illusory and the unreal. However, imagination in a Gilliam film signifies more than a childlike defiance of the constrictions of reality; it is the quality that allows his characters to transgress the hermetic systems of their rationalist environments and return to a space where the line between reality and fantasy is blurred and fluid, where their vision of the world is once again unbridled by the confines of fact and impossibility. As the director notes of his films, 'I think they're all about children and holy fools [...] children just seem to see the world through unfiltered eyes [...] they can put their finger on the truth much more accurately than all of our wise men'.⁷⁸ For Gilliam, there appears to be a distinction to be made between the concepts of truth and reality; where reality provides an understanding of the world based on fact, truth extends beyond reality to encompass other more subjective models of understanding. Though he

⁷⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Second Edi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1996), p. 90.

⁷⁶ Tony Hood, 'Grail Tales: The Preoccupations of Terry Gilliam', in *The Cinema of Terry Gilliam: It's a Mad World*, ed. by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (London: Wallflower Press, 2013), pp. 32–41 (p. 33).

⁷⁷ Hood, p.35.

⁷⁸ 'Terry Gilliam Interview with Karen Randell - 3 May 2012', in *The Cinema of Terry Gilliam: It's a Mad World*, ed. by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (London: Wallflower Press, 2013), pp. 9–15 (pp. 9–10).

points out of Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Emperor's New Clothes' that 'of all the people watching the king process, only one, a child, sees the truth, and that's the fact the king is naked, and it's all been a con',⁷⁹ the fantastical elements of his films are always tied to the viewpoints of his protagonists and there is generally a sense of ambiguity as to the actuality of these transgressions.

It is often difficult to pinpoint the exact moment in which fantasy begins to bleed into reality, or vice versa, in Gilliam's films, and the director often reveals his hand to the viewer with a jarring collision of the film's two realities in its concluding moments. For instance, the events of *Time Bandits* are introduced in such a way that they can easily be read as having been a dream, the key events, characters, and locales being identifiable in the mise-en-scène of Kevin's bedroom. However, the film's last moments bring the dream logic of its adventure narrative into the rational world of its 'present': Sean Connery's Agamemnon doubles as a fireman, Kevin finds the polaroids he took of his adventures in the pocket of his dressing gown, and his parents explode upon contact with the charred remains of 'the Sunday roast', in fact a piece of the recently destroyed Evil (David Warner). The final shot of the film tracks backwards, mirroring its opening sequence, from a quiet English suburb, through the cosmos, and finally out of the Supreme Being's map, further connecting reality and fantasy within the film and leaving the viewer with no clear sense of how to separate one from the other. Similarly, while *Baron Munchausen* begins with a figure claiming to be the eponymous adventurer interrupting a stage performance based on his exploits to offer a first-hand account of his adventures, it must be noted that the film's adventure narrative both begins and ends on a stage and it is nigh impossible to discern at which point the fantasy begins and ends. Although Gilliam cuts from the Baron's funeral back to the theatre, indicating that Munchausen's death took place only within his oration, the subsequent revelation that the Turks have quit their siege of the city once again blends the film's two narrative strands. This resolution leaves the audience non-the-wiser as to the authenticity of the Baron or his tale, but it serves to illustrate the film's theme of the importance of storytelling in society. It is only once the Baron has buoyed the townspeople's spirits with his fantastical tale that they are rallied into overthrowing the quietly tyrannical bureaucrat, Horatio Jackson (Jonathan Pryce), and Keith James Harrel suggests that 'Gilliam likely structured his narrative so that the viewer

⁷⁹ Ibid.

could understand it as all taking place “on stage”, the site of many medieval plays using allegorical modes of representation’.⁸⁰

This comparison to the form of the mediaeval play is an interesting, if throwaway, point of Harrel’s analysis of *Munchausen*, as it once again identifies Gilliam’s interest in allegorical and archetypal representations. However, despite his interest in the Middle Ages, Gilliam cannot be said to be drawing directly on the tradition of mediaeval theatre, for as A. C. Cowley explains, ‘the coalescence of religious and secular, Christian and Pagan, tradition produced in the fifteenth century a vernacular religious drama with a strong infusion of humorous and popular elements. Nevertheless, this drama remained fundamentally religious in subject and inspiration’.⁸¹ Infused with humorous and popular elements it may be, but Gilliam’s work is lacking in a specifically religious underpinning, despite his Presbyterian upbringing. His films may not subscribe to any one religious ideology, but the director insists that ‘they’re all didactic’,⁸² and as such they may be considered as cinematic fables. As he explains:

I grew up with the Bible. We were a very religious family. As you know in the Bible there are great stories, fantastic tales. I felt very sensitive about those type of stories. They always seem to have moral, especially in the Bible, and because of that they are like fairy tales or myths. They don’t only tell you something to entertain you, but they try to describe a way of life, a way of seeing the world. That is what I look for in my films. Because of that, when I read a script, I leave myself go with my searching spirit, and I love that from that search questions and answers arise. [sic]⁸³

In the same way that the Grail occupies a central position in the structure of Gilliam’s cinema, pared down to its most basic representation, so too does the myth. By stripping his narratives of any one ideology, the filmmaker allows his audiences to project their own impressions onto the mythemes of his films and decipher their combined meaning for themselves. He remarks,

⁸⁰ Keith James Harrel, ‘The Baron, the King and Terry Gilliam’s Approach to “the Fantastic”’, in *The Cinema of Terry Gilliam: It’s a Mad World*, ed. by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (London: Wallflower Press, 2013), pp. 54–65 (p. 59).

⁸¹ A. C. Cowley, ‘Introduction’, in *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, ed. by Cowley, A. C. (London: Everyman, 1993), pp. ii–xiii (p. xv).

⁸² Bob McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam* (London: Orion, 1999), pp. 98–99.

⁸³ Jordi Costa and Sergi Sanchez, *Terry Gilliam: Rebel Dreamer*, ed. by Pasca Arbe and Rosa Saez (San Sebastián: Euskadiko Filmatagia Vaska, 1998), p. 304.

'I find it intriguing that the films, well, they do exactly what I want them to do, they encourage other people's imaginations to take flight and so the films become their films and not mine'.⁸⁴ Where the Miracle Plays discussed by Cowley were performed in service of a distinctly religious ideology, Gilliam, with his blending of fantasy and reality, instead champions the power of the myth to excite in its audience a sense of imaginative wonderment for the world around them.

It is a purpose that can be seen in Kevin's futile attempts to interest his reality TV obsessed parents with Greek history and the Baron's regaling an audience of jaded townsfolk, in Sam Lowry's (Jonathan Pryce) flights of fancy in *Brazil*, and Jeliza Rose's (Jodelle Ferland) use of fantasy and play to deal with the horror of her familial circumstances in *Tideland*. But, most overtly, it is the purpose of Robin Williams' holy fool, Parry, in *The Fisher King*. The film charts the journey towards spiritual healing of disgraced radio shock-jockey Jack Lucas after an ill-advised comment to a frequent caller results in a mass-shooting at a local yuppie bar, Babbitt's – a reference, one suspects, to Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988) which pipped LaGravenese to the post with its idiot-savant character and necessitated an entire re-imagining of the script.⁸⁵ Three years after his tragic faux-pas, Jack, now depressed and drinking heavily, is set upon by some street thugs while attempting to throw himself into New York's East River. Just as he is about to meet an unpleasant end by gasoline fuelled immolation, Jack is saved by the Quixote-esque Parry, an eccentric bum who believes himself a knight. It soon transpires that Parry was a patron at Babbitt's the night that Edwin, Jack's caller, opened fire, and his wife was killed in the attack. Subsequently, Parry is driven to a psychotic break by the trauma of losing his wife, causing him to forget his identity as a professor of mediaeval literature and instead assume that of a questing knight. Upon discovering the identity of the 'knight', Jack agrees to help Parry obtain the grail in the hope that it will allow him to overcome his delusion and simultaneously assuage him of his own guilt; thus, both men will attain spiritual healing. *The Fisher King* occupies an interesting place in Gilliam's oeuvre, marking, at the time of writing, the midpoint in his career as a solo director, his first venture into the world of Hollywood filmmaking, and also the last milestone before a decided dip in quality with *Twelve Monkeys*, *Fear and Loathing*, *The Brothers Grimm*,

⁸⁴ Randell, p. 11.

⁸⁵ Richard LaGravenese, 'The Search for The Holy Reel', in *The Fisher King: The Book of the Film* (New York: Applause, 1991), pp. 123-137, p. 125.

and *Parnassus*. It was also his opportunity to redeem himself with the studio system, after the financial fiasco that was the production of *Baron Munchausen*, by taking on a script and scenario that was not his own, being the brain child of screenwriter Richard LaGravenese who was inspired by Robert A. Johnson's *He: Understanding Masculine Psychology* (1977).

Unsurprisingly, the film has attracted scholarship from a dearth of perspectives, inviting readings through the lenses of psychoanalysis, gender studies, 'cinema Arthuriana', and the politics and philosophy of the mythopoetic men's movement. Among these are some works of note which exemplify the application of theoretical frameworks to the film's text: Jacqueline Furby's 'The Fissure King: Terry Gilliam's Psychotic Fantasy Worlds';⁸⁶ Angela Stukator's "'Soft Males," "Flying Boys," and "White Knights": New Masculinity in The Fisher King';⁸⁷ Robert J. Blanch's 'The Fisher King in Gotham: New Age Spiritualism Meets the Grail Legend';⁸⁸ and Donald L. Hoffman's 'Re-Framing Perceval'.⁸⁹ These four essays represent not just a range of critical approaches to *The Fisher King*, but also a variety of reactions to the film; where Furby and Blanch respond favourably to Gilliam's New York fairy tale, Hoffman and Stukator offer rather fearsome criticism of its co-opting of elements of the Grail myth and portrayal of the city's socio-economic climate, respectively. It is not unusual for Gilliam's work to polarise opinions, but it is interesting to note that the opinions of the film expressed by these studies appear to relate directly to the focus of their analysis; where Furby and Blanch examine the film's use of mediaeval tropes to illustrate themes of trauma, mental illness, and psychic healing, Stukator focusses on the construction and interplay of gender and class politics, and Hoffman on the its (mis)translation of the Perceval myth onto a contemporary society.

The issue stems, it would seem, from LaGravenese's heavy use of Johnson's text as inspiration, for by placing the philosophy of the mythopoetic men's movement at the thematic centre of the film he encourages viewers to consider it as part of said movement, opening it up to the substantial body of criticism which condemns the mythopoetic men as

⁸⁶ Jacqueline Furby, 'The Fissure King: Terry Gilliam's Psychotic Fantasy Worlds', in *The Cinema of Terry Gilliam: It's a Mad World*, ed. by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (London: Wallflower Press, 2013), pp. 79–91.

⁸⁷ Angela Stukator, "'Soft Males," "Flying Boys," and "White Knights": New Masculinity in the Fisher King', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 25:3 (1997), pp. 214–21.

⁸⁸ Robert J. Blanch, 'The Fisher King in Gotham: New Age Spiritualism Meets the Grail Legend', in *King Arthur on Film: New Essays on Arthurian Cinema*, ed. by Kevin J. Harty (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1999), pp. 123–39.

⁸⁹ Donald L. Hoffman, 'Re-Framing Perceval', *Arthuriana*, 10:4 (2000), pp. 45–56.

misogynists and essentialists. I would contend that it was not LaGravenese's intention to espouse a particular alignment with this social movement, but merely, like Gilliam, to cherry pick from it certain themes and ideas to be used as a vehicle for his message about the perils of a narcissistic society and the importance of human connections in mitigating its effects. Furthermore, I suggest that though Stukator is justified in her assertion that 'by appropriating myth and archetypes [the film] invariably (and paradoxically) reduces and simplifies the ideas [it deals with] into ahistorical oppositions which stratify society, dictating social norms and endorsing patriarchal values',⁹⁰ it is only by doing so that LaGravenese and Gilliam are able to carry off a film that allows the phantasm of a flame wreathed knight to rampage through New York. To this end, I will make reference to writings on cinema Arthuriana, the mythopoetic men's movement, and the literature of the Grail quest, to show that their object was not to offer an in depth socio-economic critique of 1980s Yuppie culture, but to craft a fairytale of New York which would impart to its audience a moral and 'describe a way of life, a way of seeing the world.'

'Just guys and girls trying to get together'

America as we know it today is a relatively young nation, dating back only so far as the establishment of the first successful English colony, Jamestown, in 1607. A land seized from its previous occupants by force, it is a nation which has no true mythology of its own, its history being too recent and too well documented to allow for the evolution of a body of folklore which could equal the rich tales of European tradition. There were no medieval castles built in America, no knights, grail quests, or courtly romances. As Susan Aronstein observes, 'not only does America have no medieval past, but also it sees itself as a forward-looking nation, committed to technology and progress; in addition, it is the very remnants of the medieval past, with its hierarchical social structures, that the early Americans saw themselves as having fled upon leaving Europe'.⁹¹ And yet, the medieval past is a period which is repeatedly returned to as an area of interest by American writers and filmmakers alike.

⁹⁰ Stukator, p. 218 .

⁹¹ Susan Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.18-19.

Several studies have been made of what Aronstein terms ‘Hollywood Arthuriana’,⁹² a variation on the more encompassing term ‘cinema Arthuriana’ which was ‘coined in 1987’ by Kevin J. Harty,⁹³ such as her own *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia* (2005) and Rebecca A. and Samuel J. Umlund’s *The Use of Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film: From Connecticut Yankees to Fisher Kings* (1996), detailing the relationships between Arthurian legend and American film in light of periods of social, political, and economic upheaval. This appropriation of the grail quest structure, Aronstein suggests, ‘participates in [the] tradition of proposing an ideal medieval past as the solution to a troubled present’.⁹⁴ It is, she explains, ‘a hybrid genre forged from a variety of traditions: Western, swashbuckler, epic’ stemming from a ‘cluster of films produced in the 1950s’,⁹⁵ and it is one to which *The Fisher King* is often assigned.

As has already been established, Gilliam is not a filmmaker whose work can readily be fitted into any one genre; he is not a genre filmmaker, but a thematic one. Nevertheless, the hybridity of Hollywood Arthuriana is an aspect which works in favour of its application to *The Fisher King*: as the director recalls, ‘I had this weird idea that I was going to shoot the whole thing like a Serge Leone Western, and there’s only a couple of shots left that relate to that’.⁹⁶ He elaborates: ‘what I find interesting about the film itself, the actual structure of the film, at times I look at it and I think it’s three separate acts but they’re from three separate films, not the same film’.⁹⁷ This is admission of an interplay between style and genre to meet and illustrate the demands of the script is interesting not only because it can be used to engage with Richard H. Osberg’s paper on ‘Narrative Disintegration in Gilliam’s *The Fisher King*’,⁹⁸ but also because it once again underscores Gilliam’s magpie-like tendency to snatch up tropes and influences from an eclectic and often conflicting dearth of contexts. Osberg, after offering an expansive and exhaustive overview of critical receptions of the film, makes an argument for the representation of its themes of disconnection and fragmentation in its structure, positing that the ‘interlace of narrative styles and genres [...] is rooted in the film’s reflection

⁹² Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 1.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 2.

⁹⁵ Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 3.

⁹⁶ McCabe, p. 151.

⁹⁷ Criterion.

⁹⁸ Richard H. Osberg, ‘Pages Torn From the Book: Narrative Disintegration in Gilliam’s *The Fisher King*’, *Studies in Medievalism*, 7 (1995), pp. 194–224.

of modern life as episodic and incoherent'.⁹⁹ While this is an insightful and thoughtful analysis of *The Fisher King's* formal structure and incorporation of literary and mediaeval elements into its mise-en-scène, he goes on to suggest 'that narratives which in the past provided coherent models for heroism in everyday life have in the post-Nietzschean no power to integrate the lives of ordinary people; myths which once sustained the archetypes of individuation are in the modern Waste Land mere fragments',¹⁰⁰ and then drops this line of inquiry. He concludes, 'the cumulative effect of the visual leitmotif of pages torn from books, especially in the context of other verbal and visual clues about books, is to posit a nineteenth-century "medieval past" whose coherent narratives [...] survive only partially as an ephemeral "heap of broken images"'.¹⁰¹

What Osberg almost intimates but stops just short of saying is that Gilliam uses these fragments of the past in the same way that he employed fragments of classical artworks in his early animation for work *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-1974) – as an ahistorical and irreverent means of linking thematic ideas. For Gilliam, the fragments of genre and narrative style, of medieval images and contemporary settings, are nothing more than mythemes or found objects to be gathered and collided in interesting ways. Taking, for example, the director's proposed 'three separate acts [...] from three separate films' theory, the interplay of style and structure can be filtered through Aronstein's assertion that 'genre film functions as national myth'¹⁰² to show that Gilliam's use of stylistic markers of genre directly interact with and compliment the development of narrative and character. The first act, beginning with the scene in 'The Video Spot', after the prologue of Jack's fall from grace, and spanning to the introduction of Lydia, is the section which Gilliam equates to a Western. It is set mostly outdoors, against the backdrop of the city, and is structured around the introduction of Jack's lone, gruff wanderer into the 'other world' of Parry's New York. The film's structure as a whole follows the general trajectory of Joseph Campbell's Monomyth and Hero's Journey, in which 'a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder (x): fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won (y): the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (z)'.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Osberg, p. 201.

¹⁰⁰ Osberg, p. 205.

¹⁰¹ Osberg, pp. 214–15.

¹⁰² Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 3.

¹⁰³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (California: New World Library, 2008), p. 23.

If we regard Jack's natural habitat of 1980s capitalist New York as 'the world of common day', his awakening in Parry's basement constitutes his transgression into the 'region of supernatural wonder', for Parry is the viewer's gateway into the New York of the grail and the Red Knight, the latter of which represents the 'fabulous forces' to be overcome; the grail, the token of Jack's selfless act, is the boon.

By drawing on the genre of the Western to illustrate the first section of this framework, Gilliam translates the language of the written and oral myth into the grammar of cinema, uniting Campbell's theory with that of Aronstein: the monomyth is paired with the national myth of genre film. Indeed, Aronstein and Nancy Coiner point out that, in addition to the Middle Ages, 'the only other era in history that Americans revisit frequently, the American frontier, is based on a narrative that is essentially medieval romance in Western clothing. The Middle Ages speak to us as Americans because its dominant myth provided the plot and values for our own story'.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, they cite Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyper-Reality* (1986) as a key departure for their theory of 'an American Middle Ages: A Middle Ages of Democratic Possibility',¹⁰⁵ using his 'Ten Middle Ages' as a starting point: 'we will argue, Disneyland and Excalibur – "revisit the Middle Ages in the same way that Sergio Leone and the other masters of the 'spaghetti Western' revisit nineteenth century America, as heroic fantasy, something already fashioned by the early Hollywood studios"'.¹⁰⁶ Thus, by couching Jack's entry into Parry's mythologised New York in the trappings of the Western, Gilliam is presenting the film's story in the language of America's national mythology. He makes recurring use, for example, of the 'cowboy shot' (Fig. 5) – a mid-length shot framed at thigh height which places the gun hand in the foreground of a deep focus shot – and the sheets of paper that flutter across the screen from time to time, the sheets of paper which lie at the heart of Osberg's argument for narrative disintegration, are the contemporary New York equivalent of the tumbleweed.

The Western section of Jack's quest comes to end, as indicated above, in the scene in which Lydia is introduced, though, as Osberg points out, the two styles bleed into one another as Gilliam shifts genre. Lydia's introductory sequence begins after Jack returns to Parry's basement and, finding him absent, discovers his past with a little help from the building's

¹⁰⁴ Aronstein and Coiner, p. 229.

¹⁰⁵ Aronstein and Coiner, p. 213.

¹⁰⁶ Aronstein and Coiner, p. 213.

supervisor – dubbed ‘Mr. Exposition’ by the director.¹⁰⁷ Tracking Parry down by enquiring at the homeless encampment, Jack finds him at the Metropolitan Life Building, seated atop a car. This shot, from the first day of shooting,¹⁰⁸ repeats the cowboy shot from the earlier scene in which Jack is presented with the Pinocchio doll by an affluent child, and throughout the rom-com style following of Lydia’s lunchtime routine the director continues to make use of low-angle, deep focus shots that showcase the grandiose architecture which goes largely unnoticed by the city’s inhabitants. However, by the time we reach the hospital scene with Michael Jetter’s cabaret singer character – in which Gilliam admits to being inspired by Michelangelo’s ‘Pieta’ - after the Red Knight’s debut, the shooting style starts to become flatter and more people-centric. As he explains:

You know, we’ve had this first part where we had one style, and now this is the part where we start moving into the second stage: getting the friend a date. We’re actually coming down to a different style, and I actually shoot this part of the film differently – I almost shoot it like a sit-com. It’s much more level with the characters, it comes down to just the people now, the city’s now moving into the background. This is now a wonderful relief, we come into the centre of this film where it’s just guys and girls trying to get together.¹⁰⁹

Having spent the first hour of the film mythologising New York by means of low angle shots which reveal art deco skyscrapers (Fig. 6), gothic arches, and ornate iron gates, Gilliam has successfully brought not just Jack, but also the viewer into Parry’s vision of New York, and can now develop the relationships between the four characters. Now that Parry has initiated Jack into the city’s mystical underbelly and Jack has accepted Parry, their dynamic opens up to include Lydia and Anne, Jack’s girlfriend, allowing to step back a little and let the actors play against one another. The striking visuals of what Gilliam describes as the ‘textures’ of the city take a back seat for this middle segment of the film, along with the fiery phantasm of the Red Knight, and the tone shifts a little towards the comic as a disparity of personalities are brought into close proximity. It is of interest to note at this juncture that, before LaGravenese made his break into Hollywood with *The Fisher King*, he worked ‘as part of a comedy duo playing

¹⁰⁷ Criterion.

¹⁰⁸ McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*, p. 151.

¹⁰⁹ Criterion.



Figure 5: Example of a cowboy shot from The Fisher King. Still from BRD.



Figure 6: The old juxtaposed with the new in The Fisher King. Still from BRD.

clubs and colleges',¹¹⁰ and as he did with the first segment, Gilliam appears to have made his choice of shooting style to reflect the material of the script.

As has already been established, Gilliam's use of cinematography reflects and responds to the mood and narrative style of the film, drawing on cinematic mythemes to underscore the ideas of the screenplay. But this is not the full extent of its use; the viewer can also learn all that they need to know about the characters of the film by the way in which the director presents them visually. In the film's opening sequence, we are introduced to Jack through a series of graceful, swooping crane shots, his figure concealed by shadows, hidden behind dark glasses and fractured by carefully timed cuts which thwart audience expectations of a reveal. Though Gilliam attributes this opening sequence to the film's editor, Lesley Walker, who wanted a shorter, sharper beginning than that which the script originally called for, a montage of listeners waking up to Jack's show, her cutting together of these shots closely resembles the opening of a film that the director cites as one of the visual influences for the design of the Red Knight – Fellini's *Giulietta degli spiriti* (1956). In *Giulietta*, Fellini deliberately subverts his audience's expectations of a reveal, using the mirrors of Giulietta's dressing room not, as is conventional, to show her face from behind, but to tease his viewers, directing Masina to turn her head away at the last minute. It is not until Giulietta has finished dressing and deems herself presentable to her husband that we are finally allowed to see her face. In the same way, Gilliam shows only fragments of Jack: close-ups of his mouth, his sun glasses, glances of his profile or the back of his head, crane shots from above. Just as Fellini underscores the idea of Giulietta's public persona as a construction, Gilliam suggests that Jack's is a deconstruction, a shattered mirror which reflects the disconnection of a society concerned with wealth, status and appearance, in human connections have suffered as a result.

Jack utters obscenities in a throwaway manner, utterly unaffected by the crass vulgarities that shape his persona as a 'shock jockey'. Cloistered away in his high tower, he is separated not only from his listeners, with whom he interacts only through the distancing medium of radio, but from the city, the land over which he holds dominion as a minor celebrity. As Aronstein points out, grail narratives are 'chronicles of the interconnected healing of a land and its king',¹¹¹ and so from our first glimpses of Jack in the darkened cage

¹¹⁰ LaGravenese, p. 229.

¹¹¹ Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 145.

of his studio during the opening credits it is evident that he is a king distanced from the needs of his lands. The movements of the camera, which seems to slide away from Jack with every attempt to pin him down, are reflective of his constant dissembling in the face of human connections, while the same orbit it traces around the DJ is suggestive of his conception of a world centred entirely on him. However, the final shot in this sequence, in which the camera retreats upwards away from Jack, reveals the truth of his situation as Gilliam sees it. The chiaroscuro effect created by the various lamps on the desk throw long, bar like shadows on the walls of Jack's studio throne room, hinting at the emotional and spiritual confinement imposed on him by his position. Furthermore, the rectangular frame in the back corner of the room which may have been intended to hold a mirror, bears a sinister resemblance to a guillotine. Where a mirror would be in keeping with the vanity Jack later displays in his headshot decorated penthouse apartment and the affectation of lifting his forelock out of his face to light a roll-up, the chiaroscuro of the studio and the looming guillotine like frame are suggestive instead of *The Terror*. Located firmly in the upper echelons of the urban aristocracy, Jack, as someone in a position of power, is the first to fall to Gilliam's spiritual revolution. Indeed, the talk-show host's fall from grace is paralleled in Parry's later recounting of a version of myth of *The Fisher King*, 'who felt for a brief moment not like a boy, but like a god...And so he reached into the fire to take the grail. And the grail vanished, leaving him with his hand in the fire to be terribly wounded'. Jack is set to further his media career by appearing in a sitcom, gaining greater media presence and fame and thus, in building a larger fan-base, accruing his own worshippers to become not a boy, but a god. In his pride, he is blind to the coming fall, and the influence that he wishes so hard to build is his very undoing.

The invocation of imagery from *The Terror* is fitting for a reworking of a mythology drawn, in part at least, from a French source, which Aronstein outlines as such:

Chrétien's political arguments are couched within his central narrative of a knight's quest for "ideal knighthood;" this quest originates when a specific threat or challenge to the Arthurian court sends the romance's hero from the court into the forest. Once there, he encounters a series of adventures in which he proves both his physical prowess and the supremacy of the Arthurian order by defeating and either killing or converting various renegade knights. These adventures end with his acquisition of a "lady," whose approval of the knight signifies his successful negotiation of the path to aristocratic manhood. However, the lady also poses a threat to his manhood, as the knight's infatuation with her separates him from the homosocial order in which he

should be participating. This precipitates a second set of adventures in which the knight must reclaim his masculine identity by relegating the lady back to her proper place as symbol and adjunct.¹¹²

Although the application of this framework might initially be somewhat problematised by the fact that, as the Umlands point out, 'Jack and Parry share dual roles in the film, that of the wounded king and that of the fool who undertakes the task of healing him',¹¹³ it is worth noting that Rupert T. Pickens observes that 'emblematic of Chrétien's achievement in his transformation of the romance form are the ways in which the Perceval and Gauvain sections are conjoined via translation, for Perceval's accomplishments and his failures are mirrored in Gauvain'.¹¹⁴ In the same way, Jack and Parry can be seen to be performing two separate yet connected 'knight's quests'; while Jack, as protagonist, must venture into the 'forest', defeat various knights and (re)acquire a lady (Anne), Parry's quest is centred on his need to relegate his dead wife in order to overcome his psychosis. When the men unite, their quests intermingle, Jack acting as an Apollonian force to the Dionysian Parry. Alone, they are unable to attain spiritual healing, but the emotional bond which forms between them as they aid each other in the quest for the grail allows for a balancing of Apollonian and Dionysian forces. As he begins to care for Parry, Jack reconnects with the land, with his kingdom, and is thus able to facilitate the healing of his newfound friend with a selfless act, the stealing of the 'grail' trophy which revives Parry from his catatonic state.

Although it is this reduction to and perpetuating of patriarchal mythic archetypes that Stukator, perhaps justifiably, takes exception to, lambasting the film for its portrayal and treatment of women, 'gays, [and] the homeless',¹¹⁵ it must be remembered that Gilliam's treatment of the story is as a fairy tale, or, as the tagline of the 2005 DVD release would have it: 'a good old fashioned story of guilt, poverty, love, madness and free video club membership'. While her analysis, supported by evidence from the film, is thorough and informed in its examination of *The Fisher King's* treatment of gender and identity, it is also firmly rooted in her criticism of the mythopoetic men's movement. The film may, and often

¹¹² Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 33.

¹¹³ Rebecca A. Umland and Samuel J. Umland, *The Use of Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film: From Connecticut Yankee to Fisher Kings* (London: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 178.

¹¹⁴ Rupert T. Pickens, 'La Conte Du Graal: Chrétien's Unfinished Last Romance', in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 169–87 (p. 176).

¹¹⁵ Stukator, p. 218.

is, be considered part of said cultural movement given LaGravenese's use of Johnson's text as a jumping off point for his screenplay, yet the focus of *The Fisher King* is not on its protagonists' discovery of 'deep masculinity',¹¹⁶ but on the performance of a selfless act. This is not to say that the theories of the movement do not figure heavily in Jack's character trajectory, but merely to assert that LaGravenese's script, like Gilliam's film, draws upon the influences of its social context to tell a story of redemption, not to act as a vehicle for the archetypal theories set out by Bly, Moore, Gillette, and Johnson. To attempt to divorce the film from the mythopoetic men's movement is as futile an effort as to separate Gilliam from the grail, for the two are inextricably linked. And yet what Stukator, in her avid attention to the socio-economic problems presented by a reading of the film as a bona fide Hollywood Arthuriana presentation of a mediaeval structure as a model for an idealised future, is that Gilliam is a caricaturist. Just as he picked and chose his visuals and influences from the grab-bag of history and reduced them to playthings for his animated work, so too does he simplify the real world into a collection of archetypal units that he can manipulate within his own closed system. As he explains, 'such well defined social structures [as the Roman "sword and sandal" movie epics] give you something to react against and take the piss out of, and [I] always [...] tend to simplify the world into a series of nice, clear-cut oppositions'.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, to recall the director's declaration that his films should 'encourage other people's imaginations to take flight [so that] the films become their films and not mine', it can be asserted that his intention was not, as Stukator writes, 'to contextualize the crisis of masculinity within larger socio-economic structures',¹¹⁸ but to present an idealistic morality tale which would encourage his audience to contemplate the perils of a narcissistic capitalist society. Where Stukator argues that 'the correlation between the health of the male psyche with the health of capitalist patriarchy is established by clearly situating the protagonists as members of the middle and upper class',¹¹⁹ I would contend that Jack and Parry are in fact *victims* of said patriarchy; though Jack was, at the film's beginning, comfortably situated among its upper echelons, the very callousness that made him successful was the cause of his ejection.

¹¹⁶ Stukator, p. 218.

¹¹⁷ Costa and Sanchez, p. 112.

¹¹⁸ Stukator, p. 218.

¹¹⁹ Stukator, p. 216.

In the same way that he communicates Jack's character to the viewer with his use of cinematography, Gilliam encodes the mythic structure of the DJ's fall from grace and journey into the 'forest' in the film's visuals. Following the scene in which Jack sees the news coverage of the shooting at Babbitt's, Gilliam cuts to a card in order to inform us that the next section of the story takes place three years later. From here, he tilts downwards; the card disappears into the top edge of the screen as the camera descends the height of an apartment block to reveal Anne's video rental store at its base. The camera then dollies in slightly before cutting, in reverse shot, to the interior of the store to reveal Anne at work. In contrast to Jack's surroundings – his studio, his penthouse – which are modern, stark, clean-edged spaces, Anne's environment is vibrant and colourful, one that, as a rental store, invites other people into her space. Where Jack maintains his distance from other people by being part of the media, and with his sunglasses and tinted windows, Anne connects with strangers on a daily basis by distributing media. As Gilliam explains:

I liked the idea of the city being a kingdom with a moat around it, in the form of the Hudson and East rivers. Then the video shop became the little peasants' hut in the forest, nestling at the base of these skyscraper towers, that looked to me like the trunks of giant trees. When the king leaves his castle and gets lost in the forest, he ends up there: it's all earthy and messy compared with the world he's left, full of life instead of design. Lydia is the princess imprisoned in the tower, so we had her working in a stone tower-like insurance building.¹²⁰

LaGravenese's characters operate within this framework, but also on several other levels. In addition to playing the kindly commoner who cares for the wounded king, Anne is also a more primal, archetypal nurturing energy. As Marks puts it, 'Anne needs no rejuvenation, and as her name suggests, she functions more as the life-invigorating anima figure proposed by Jung'.¹²¹ But while he goes on to point out that Anne's wardrobe and sexuality paint her as something of a primeval, mother-goddess gypsy figure, Marks appears to be unaware that Anne's character is also drawn from real life; LaGravenese informs us that he based the character 'on a woman I know on Second Avenue who runs a video store, and Michael Jeter came into the auditions and read the script and said, "Oh! I know this woman, this is Annette!

¹²⁰ Christie, p. 195.

¹²¹ Marks, p. 146.

She's on Second Avenue!"¹²² And so while her character works as a neat counterpart to Jack's, as an anima to his persona, the peasant gypsy to his wounded king, Anne is also a prime example of a contemporary New York woman drawn from LaGravenese's own experience, just as Jack is drawn from the figure of Howard Stern. As such, the film makes myth not just of the landscape of the city, but also the people who populate it.

Given that LaGravenese was inspired by Johnson's study of the grail legend as a template for an understanding of the male psyche in terms of Jungian archetypes, it is inevitable that the film and its characters be viewed in terms of anima and persona, or persona and animus in the case of Lydia and Parry. But this is just one aspect of the relationship template within *The Fisher King*, and one which only underscores the theme of (re)forming human connections; if Jack represents the persona of the male psyche, the constructed and unfeeling outer image, and Anne the emotional and primal anima, the resolving of their issues is representative of Jack's rekindling of his emotional and empathetic core. Similarly, this relationship is mirrored and reversed in that of Lydia and Parry. It is tempting, at this point, for a psychoanalytic argument, especially one such as Stukator's which is concerned principally with the construction of masculinity within the film, to attempt to apply archetypal models of said masculinity to the film's four central characters, and indeed Marks cites Johnson in his explanation of 'Jung's belief "that every educated person has one superior function of the four functions of feeling, thinking, sensing and intuiting"'.¹²³ But this is the trouble with archetypes, especially in this instance where the screenwriter engages openly with a central tenet of the mythopoetic men's movement: when dealing in reductive generalisations, one opens up the scope of interpretation to encompass a dearth of readings which cast the use of such tropes in a variety of different lights. In the context of *The Fisher King*, I suggest that the relationships between the two couples, between men and women, serve less to address constructions of gender and more to engage with a social attitude which Gilliam and LaGravenese perceive to be sorely lacking in both empathy and community. While it is true that, as Stukator points out, 'heterosexual romantic love does not save Parry or Jack' but 'the restorative powers of male bonding'¹²⁴ do, she fails to realise why this is the case.

¹²² David Morgan, 'Interview with Richard LaGravenese: The Screenwriter on the Set of *The Fisher King*', *Wide Angle/Closeup*, 1990 <http://www.wideanglecloseup.com/fk_lagravenese.html> [accessed 12 May 2016].

¹²³ Marks, p. 147.

¹²⁴ Stukator, p. 219.

Jack's performance of a selfless act, which she terms 'a ritualized demonstration of male heroics',¹²⁵ does not facilitate the healing of the two protagonists by virtue of its perceived heroism and bravery, but because it allows Parry to overcome his psychosis by bringing its narrative to its conclusion. By helping Parry through his delusion, reassuring him that 'it's okay to miss her now', Jack has allowed both men to face their respective guilt and trauma, forgiving not just one another but also themselves.

Knightmares and Impish Gods

Despite his insistence that *The Fisher King* would be 'all Richard's stuff' and that he would be 'just the hand that's writing',¹²⁶ Gilliam was encouraged to indulge in his particular vision for the film, the result of which was one of the film's most iconic images: the Red Knight. Originally described in LaGravenese's screenplay as 'a helmeted figure with a beard in a flowing red cap [sic], holding a lance' astride 'a magnificent burnished red steed',¹²⁷ the Red Knight became a flame wreathed phantasm, a terrifying vision of crimson pennants and tarnished steel. The embodiment of Parry's psychosis, the Red Knight of *The Fisher King* is a twisted and corrupted reimagining of the figure that features in Chrétien's text, bearing more resemblance to the 'red horse' of Revelations, the second horseman of the apocalypse, than to a member of King Arthur's court. Designed to meet Gilliam's vision by artists Keith Greco and Vincent Jeffords, the Red Knight's appearance grew from the director's insistence on the use of a helm which 'looked like a furnace',¹²⁸ as Jeffords explains: 'The concept was of a knight as an incarnation of evil — disintegrating, burning away, rusting, with ash and embers, and the horse snorting like a locomotive'.¹²⁹ Drawn from Johnson's interpretation of Chrétien's text rather than from *Le Conte du graal* itself, the Red Knight is inflated from the blustering figure slain by Perceval into a demonised shadow of Parry's 'kighthood', a spiritual successor to Sam Lowry's samurai nightmare.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Christie, p. 196.

¹²⁷ LaGravenese, p. 50.

¹²⁸ 'The Tale of the Red Knight', *The Fisher King*, dir. by Terry Gilliam, BRD (Criterion, 2015).

¹²⁹ David Morgan, 'A Red Knightmare: Designing a Hellish Vision for The Fisher King', *Wide Angle/Closeup*, 1991 <http://www.wideanglecloseup.com/fk_redknightmare.html> [accessed 12 May 2016].

In Johnson's analysis, the Red Knight is described as 'the shadow side of masculinity, the negative, potentially destructive side' which 'must be struggled with, but it cannot be repressed'.¹³⁰ It is equated with violent and bullying traits, and represents a stage of psychological development which must be overcome in order to reach a state of fully developed masculinity. Within the context of de Troyes' text, the encounter with the Red Knight facilitates Perceval's first bleeding and initiation into the manhood of knightly combat. However, as Blanch points out of *The Fisher King*, 'Gilliam inverts the roles of winner and loser in the Red Knight battle of *Le Conte du graal*, thus transforming Parry into a "beaten and defeated shy man"'.¹³¹ The head wound caused by Perceval's lance becomes the gun wound in the head of Parry's wife, and so Furby suggests that the Red Knight is derived from 'a composite image of the sensory images Parry received immediately prior to and immediately after the traumatic moment of death. So the blast from the gun, the blood and the affect [sic] of fear and horror had metamorphosed into the Red Knight, both in Parry's mind and in our vision',¹³² going on to point out that many of the numerous manuscripts and murals that can be seen in Parry's basement feature red knights with splatters of red paint, or violent red scribbles and scratches, obscuring their heads, suggestive of his wife's gory end. And of course, the Red Knight appears only at moments when Parry is confronted with information or memories from his past, symbolising his trauma and also his inability to accept and assimilate the horror and grief to which it pertains. As Gilliam explains:

I have always been fascinated by the imagery of the Middle Ages. The demons are marvellous, much better than what Freud invented. Freud's theories can reduce the world to a series of nightmares, simplify the psychosis explaining how the mind works. My visual sense tends to be more literal. For me pain is not about abstract ideas, it is something that we really see: a monster with its jaws chewing my head. Recently, medicine has been trying to visualize illness. God, that's what they used to do in the Middle Ages! They simply saw it and now we are trying to repeat it. Freud put it all into an abstract world, and I prefer the literal worlds more than the abstract ones: the real demons, real angels and authentic monsters.¹³³

¹³⁰ Robert A. Johnson, *He: Understanding Masculine Psychology* (London: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 26.

¹³¹ Blanch, p. 135.

¹³² Furby, p. 86.

¹³³ Costa and Sanchez, p. 305.

Fascinated with the Middle Ages though he may be, the director's use of certain of their tropes and visuals places *The Fisher King* squarely in the first of Eco's 'Ten Little Middle Ages', 'the Middle Ages as a pretext [...] a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters'.¹³⁴ Though Gilliam makes a point of using the language of both classical and cinematic myths to tell the story of his modern fairy tale, it is important to note that the mythologised view of the city that we are presented with is tied to Parry's perception, a perception symptomatic of his trauma induced psychotic break.

As has already been established, Jack and Parry are interchangeable in their roles as holy fool and wounded king, and equally both experience the trauma of Edwin's shooting spree in different ways. For Parry, this manifests in the form of the Red Knight, the adoption of his own knightly persona, and a quest for the Holy Grail. For Jack, it means the complete destruction of his ego and an inability to feel love. Where Parry can, and does, feel love for Lydia, he is haunted by the guilt brought on by this subconscious realisation that he has begun to come to terms with the loss of his wife, and it is in these moments of guilt that the Red Knight appears. Indeed, Gilliam has repurposed the Red Knight slightly so that it no longer represents just a challenge for an adolescent masculinity to overcome as it does in Chrétien's text, but is implicitly connected to trauma. In the January 1989 draft of *The Fisher King*, LaGravenese portrayed Parry as a Quixote-esque Robin Hood figure, a defender of the realm of Manhattan who set traps for muggers and drug dealers in Central Park in response to attacks against the homeless. The Red Knight was set up as his imagined nemesis, a mysterious crime lord whose object was to stop Parry from obtaining the Grail. The alteration made to the scene in which the knight first appears outside Carmichael's townhouse between drafts is crucial to the Knight's portrayal as a manifestation of trauma; where in the 1989 draft, it appears outside Carmichael's abode in response to Jack's assertion that it does not exist, Gilliam has Jack try to tell Parry about his past, triggering a fit of madness and summoning the Knight. By shifting the association of the Knight ever so slightly from magic to madness, the director not only underscores its role as the dragon to be slain, but also allows for a moment in which Jack, trying to pull Parry out of his fit, grabs hold of him, and it is the first time in the film that we see him have physical contact with anyone other than Anne. In this instant he has not only breached Parry's persona, albeit briefly, but he has also allowed

¹³⁴ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality* (London: Picador, 1987), p. 67.

Parry to cross the boundaries previously established by his various distancing devices; his sunglasses, tinted windows, and abrasive attitude.

It is in this scene that we first see the extent to which Parry's wounded mind has transformed the city, and in the beginnings of the relationship between he and Jack can be identified Gilliam's hallmark trajectory of blending fantasy and reality until the two are inseparable. While the two realities, represented by Jack and Parry respectively, begin in contest with one another, they soon begin to blend as Jack attempts to draw Parry back to a semblance of sanity and Parry revivifies Jack. This contest and eventual union between chaotic imagination and logical reasoning is, as stated above, a hallmark of Gilliam's work, but whereas his films previous to *The Fisher King* focus on a single Dionysian protagonist whose adventures culminate in the reinvigoration of a sterile, oppressive society, the two knight figures of *The Fisher King* represent both Gilliam's established stance and the cynicism he felt in the wake of his battles over the release of *Brazil* and *Munchausen*. As the director explains, 'usually there's this central character that is me, but on this one I was totally schizophrenic [...] I was torn between which point of view to choose, whether it was Jack's or Parry's'.¹³⁵ These fiascos having left the director with a black mark against his name in Hollywood, he viewed *The Fisher King* as an opportunity to prove that he could work within the limits of a studio budget and production schedule. As such, the success of the finished film can be considered to be Gilliam's grail, its making, his grail quest. The director, as creative force, can be identified with the impulsive Parry and LaGravenese and his script might be seen as the grounding influence which imposes intelligible structure on the madness.

Where in his previous films Gilliam's avatars have always been the agents of imaginative chaos who bring vibrancy and magic back into their barren surroundings, *The Fisher King* offered him the opportunity to represent his post-*Munchausen* mentality through Jack's disillusioned cynicism, the talk-show host's journey of spiritual healing mirroring the filmmaker's own. Gilliam continues, 'I was serving Richard's idea, and I went at it very specifically in that frame of mind. I felt that after *Munchausen* I had to reclaim something by not doing my stuff. So the Jeff character is about learning to be selfless'.¹³⁶ When regarded in this light, the necessity of the two characters working together to surmount their spiritual journey takes on a new relevance. The two men are two sides of the same coin, Jack's initial

¹³⁵ McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*, p. 154.

¹³⁶ McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*, p. 154.

megalomania mirroring the director's own furious championing of his own work, and Parry's psychosis being representative of Gilliam's artistic vision. Prior to his mental breakdown, Parry was a Professor named Henry Sagan who specialised in the research of Grail literature, a preoccupation shared by the director. Similarly, his propensity for appropriation of materials and visualisation of ideas is evident in the cluttered *mise-en-scène* of his basement 'peasant's hut', full as it is with books, trinkets, and sketches of his nightmarish visions of the Red Knight. While within the diegesis of the film the Red Knight is representative of Parry's trauma, it also operates on a metatextual level as a symbol of the director's past experiences. Though its appearance, as Furby notes, appears to be drawn from Parry's memory of his wife's violent death, it is also possible, in certain shots of the boiler room painting (Fig. 7), to perceive in the image of the Knight the face of John Neville's Baron Munchausen (Fig. 8). The Knight's shield becomes a face, his shoulders the hat, and while the face may be intended, as Furby argues, as that of Sagan's murdered wife, in the context of Gilliam's grail quest it is Munchausen that is the demonic figure from the past which must be overcome.

Writing on the experience of trauma, Cathy Caruth explains that 'trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena'.¹³⁷ In the same way that the Knight functions in this way for Parry, appearing whenever the 'knight' is reminded of his painful past, it also serves as a symbol of Gilliam's desire to banish the pain of the *Munchausen* experience; as Jeffords recalls, 'the reason that Terry was so set on physical special effects is *Munchausen*. A lot of things were meant to happen in *Munchausen* that didn't happen, and Terry wanted to see it all in camera'.¹³⁸ In addition to Johnson's assignation of the Red Knight as a representation of the shadow side of masculinity, Gilliam's conception of the phantasm (Fig. 9) places in a very personal cinematic tradition of psychological battles; as aforementioned, the Knight is a successor to the Jabberwocky, Evil, *Munchausen's* spectre of Death, and *Brazil's* samurai, but its fluttering mantle also draws heavily from the visuals of a key scene in *Giulietta* (Fig. 10). Recalling an episode of her childhood, Giulietta returns to a staging of a martyrdom in 'the nun's little theatre'. Thinking that God hides behind 'a big, dusty door' above the stage, the

¹³⁷ Cathy Caruth, 'Unclaimed Experience : Trauma and the Possibility of History Author', *Yale French Studies*, 1991, 181–92 (p. 181).

¹³⁸ 'The Tale of the Red Knight'.



Figure 7: Parry's painting of the Red Knight



Figure 8: John Neville as Baron Munchausen. DVD still.



Figure 9: Gilliam's Red Knight. BRD still.



Figure 10: Paper ribbons simulate flames in Giulietta degli spiriti. DVD still.

young Giulietta is pleased to be chosen in the role of the martyr and, lying on a frame trimmed in fluttering flames of scarlet paper, she is slowly hoisted into the fly loft. But, at the last moment, her grandfather interrupts the play and disperses nuns and children-players alike, claiming that 'putting children on the stake' is indecent. In this short but key scene, we see Giulietta being denied what she perceives to be a spiritual experience, a connection with God, a narrative which bears more than a little passing resemblance to that of the Fisher King. The recurring visions of spirits that plague her throughout the film are manifestations of her subconscious fears and desires, much in the same way that the Red Knight is a representation of both Parry's trauma and his desire to overcome and assimilate his pain. Likewise, as the most fantastical and 'Gilliamesque' part of *The Fisher King*, the Red Knight represents the director's need to address the mistakes made on Munchausen, to address the film's painful legacy and put it behind him. Just as the Red Knight is a recurring vision of trauma for Parry, so too is the Baron for Gilliam; his face and influence are scattered throughout the film, in the form of the Red Knight, but more recognisably as a poster in The Video Spot alongside *Brazil*, and as a familiar profile in the psychiatric ward in the film's closing act. Though the man in the psyche ward is not in fact Neville, Gilliam notes that he bears a striking physical resemblance to the Baron and 'that this might have been where Baron Munchausen finally ended up'.¹³⁹ His image, then, is scattered throughout the film in the same way as that of Parry's wife, as a recurring referent to a previous catastrophic experience. Furthermore, given that Gilliam admits to identifying equally with both of the film's protagonists, Parry's wounding at the hands of the young delinquents, whom he perceives to be led by the Red Knight, can be read as the wounding of Gilliam's naïve creative persona by a dream project which got out of hand: Munchausen. Jack's subsequent willingness to venture into Parry's world and retrieve the 'grail' from Carmichael's townhouse can thus be understood as Gilliam's wounded and cynical professional self's attempt to heal his creative counterpart by means of performing a selfless act – the enabling of LaGravenese's vision.

Though this reading is based on the assignation of roles at the film's end, where Jack takes on the role of holy fool to heal Parry's wounded king, Hollywood Gilliam healing fantasist Gilliam, it is also supported in the initial portrayal as Jack as wounded king and Parry as fool. Having been established as fractured and impersonal in the film's opening sequence,

¹³⁹ Criterion.

Jack is connected to the role of king-come-fertility-god as outlined in Jessie Weston's seminal study *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) by his then girlfriend, Sondra's, drawing of a nude male whose torso is concealed behind the outline of the United States from which six stalks of corn grow. As Weston explains:

the distinctive feature of the Perceval version [of the grail myth] is the insistence upon the sickness, and disability of the ruler of the land, the Fisher King. Regarded first as the direct cause of the wasting of the land, it gradually assumes overwhelming importance, the task of the Quester becomes that of healing the King, restoration of the land not only falls into the background but the operating cause of its desolation is changed, and finally it disappears from the story altogether.¹⁴⁰

Similarly, and perhaps this is the root of Stukator's argument for the film's failure to present an alternative to its portrayal of the socio-economic climate that it portrays, the idea of New York, or indeed of America, as a blighted land quickly fades into the background as Jack and Parry's dual quests unfold. Gilliam notes, however, that his casting of Bridges brought an extra dynamic to Jack's cynicism. As he points out, 'when you first read the script, the first impression you have is not Jeff Bridges, it's a sleek New York, fast talking character. Jeff is almost the opposite, I think Jeff is middle American, he's from the Heartland'.¹⁴¹ To take someone from the Heartland, he argues, and recast them into a successful yet cynical media personality is to effect a greater change in character than to do so with someone who is a New York native, who is used to the environment. In this way, likely noticeable only to an American audience, Jack's role as wounded king is suggested as symptomatic of a wider society than that of just New York.

Viewing Jack's position as an allegory for an aspect of Gilliam himself, his trajectory as a filmmaker can be paired with Jack's career aspirations, he too having travelled from his homeland of Minnesota to the landscape of European film where he was professionally wounded while in the throes of ambition. In this sense, with Jack and Parry representing the roles of holy fool and wounded king, fantasist Gilliam and Hollywood Gilliam, the director's career can be read as the landscape which has become blighted by the sickness of its king. The structural motif of the grail quest allows for a pursuit of balance, and the homosocial

¹⁴⁰ Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 13–14.

¹⁴¹ Criterion.

bonding that takes place between Jack and Parry is representative of Gilliam's desire for a reconciliation between his instinctive, artistic vision, and his directorial ego. Similarly, the relationship between the media personality and the grail enthusiast is reflective of the director's appropriation of Arthurian myth within his filmic oeuvre, as well as his reintegration with American culture after years living in the UK. As Birkenstein, Froula and Randell write, 'as an American [...] who now also carries a British passport and has, since 1967, lived in the UK – working ostensibly as a British filmmaker, Gilliam, not surprisingly, defies categorisation even in terms of his national status'.¹⁴² In an inversion of the flight from Europe of America's progenitors, the illustrator turned filmmaker left America for the UK because:

in New York it was like being on a Roman warship where all the rowers are rowing to the beat of his drum. And the drum was the beat of the city being tamed and I wanted to work to a different beat, a different rhythm, and I couldn't while I lived in New York. It was overpowering, the beat of the city, so I left.¹⁴³

Like the Perceval of Chrétien's tale, Gilliam left an oppressive environment to pursue dreams of grandeur, wealth and status, was knighted as a member of Monty Python's court, and set about a series of filmmaking quests, recruiting such knights as Robin Williams and Jonathon Pryce to his cause. With *Brazil* and *Munchausen* he became like Jack, hung up on his own power and pride, and was burned in his battles with the studios over his creative rights; a black mark was put against his name, a reputation as difficult to handle garnered. His taking on of LaGravenese's script is thus his grail quest, his pursuit of a new balance and rejuvenation of the blighted landscape of his career.

Like the mortally wounded Arthur, Gilliam set out for the West to be healed, finding, as the Umlands put it, 'a vehicle through which to emphasize the individual's search for meaning and the difficulty of attaining insight in a world that would seem to hold so many obstacles'¹⁴⁴ in the script for *The Fisher King*. LaGravenese's tale of a selfless act was the perfect catharsis for Gilliam, and in subjugating his own artistic vision to that of another he was presented with the opportunity to perform his own selfless act, finding, as Jack does, that

¹⁴² Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell, 'Introduction', in *The Cinema of Terry Gilliam: It's a Mad World*, ed. by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (London: Wallflower Press, 2013), pp. 1–8 (p. 3).

¹⁴³ Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, 'Terry Gilliam Interview with Karen Randell - 3 May 2012', p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ Umland and Umland, p. 182.

his wounded career could be healed with a little humility; as Gilliam states, '[*The Fisher King*] was the second most profitable film of that year for Tristar, after *Hook*'.¹⁴⁵ Where the majority of American film which appropriates Arthurian legend does so for political ends, Gilliam, as Aronstein points out, 'translates Arthurian legend to twentieth-century New York City, [rewriting] the Grail quest in such a way that it can no longer be appropriated as mythological support for the social and economic agenda of the Reagan-Bush administrations'.¹⁴⁶ His agenda is much more subjective, much more personal, an indictment of the narcissism of America in the 1980s and which calls for, as the Umlands suggest, 'spiritual enlightenment [which] becomes a question of expanded consciousness, and the quest for the holy grail cannot but represent self-knowledge, which in Jungian terms can be discerned through one's dreams'.¹⁴⁷

Gilliam's use of Arthurian legend is thus focussed less on the reinstatement of an idealised society than it is on the revival of a state of mind, a reintegration with the 'God within' and the sense of magic and wonder which permeates the pre-Enlightenment mythology of Europe. As Hood writes, 'there is an invitation to megalomania implicit in the filmmaker's craft',¹⁴⁸ and in *The Fisher King* can be seen Gilliam's attempt to refute this invitation, to put aside his dictatorial demands for complete artistic control in the face of studio authority and re-establish himself as a respected name within the industry. In the context of the 1980s and the emotionally stunted Jack Lucas who represents them, the grail quest of *The Fisher King* can also be seen as an attempt by Gilliam to reintegrate into his home country as an expatriate, the Arthuriana obsessed Parry being symbolic of the myth, magic and history of Britain, and Jack the representative of forward facing America. As Gilliam suggests, 'really, there's no past anymore. People just don't seem to pay attention to what happened before, and there was a much more violent time'.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Christie, p. 214.

¹⁴⁶ Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 160.

¹⁴⁷ Umland and Umland, pp. 176–77.

¹⁴⁸ Hood, p. 32.

¹⁴⁹ Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, 'Terry Gilliam Interview with Karen Randell - 3 May 2012', p. 12.

A Fairytale of New York

Being a conflation of a diverse and eclectic range of influences, *The Fisher King* is a film that leaves itself open to criticism with a number of theories from a number of fields with a number of agendas, but it has been my object here to highlight some of elements which ring truest to Gilliam's creative ethos. Though it draws its name and basic structure from a rich tradition of Arthurian literature, and arguably adheres most closely to the French tradition as exemplified by Chrétien's *Le Conte du graal*, the film draws on a conflation of Fisher King myths which include Johnson's blending of French and Welsh traditions as well as the different versions of the story known variously by Bridges, Ruehl, Plummer, Williams, LaGravenese, and Gilliam himself. It draws on the imagery and tropes of these myths to tell a story of friendship and love, of guilt and forgiveness, and not necessarily to propose a new societal model for its viewers. While Hoffman laments the film's use of 'conventional methods to tell the story'¹⁵⁰ of Perceval, dismissing it as 'unhappily, a truly American film',¹⁵¹ he neglects to observe that Gilliam's use of 'conventional methods' reconfigures the set pieces of the redemption myth into a manner comfortably understood by a Hollywood audience whose myths are almost entirely cinematic.

Similarly, I have attempted to address the tendency of the film's critics to study it not just through the lens of the mythopoetic men's movement, but as a work which participates in the espousal of the movement's philosophies. Although LaGravenese was inspired by and makes use of Johnson's text in the film's screenplay, his focus is not on a construction of masculine identity, but the idea that one must 'feel within himself a connection to the world around him',¹⁵² an idea which perfectly encapsulated what the writer perceived to be missing from the culture of the 1980s. For though critics such as Stukator highlight the film's focus on the homosocial bond that develops between Jack and Parry over the course of the film, few observe that this relationship is less about redefining masculinity than it is about confronting the past, admitting guilt, and seeking forgiveness. The film's use of archetypes does not, I suggest, tie it to the men's movement, but merely allows it to present a moral in a simplified

¹⁵⁰ Hoffman, p. 45.

¹⁵¹ Hoffman, p. 55.

¹⁵² LaGravenese, p. 124.

fashion, associating itself with the tradition of mythic storytelling with which Gilliam is fascinated.

Finally, I contend that not only did Gilliam's decision to take on this project function as a mode of professional redemption within the Hollywood sphere, but also that the body of the film itself, its visuals and narrative structures, betrays his preoccupations with the blowback of *Baron Munchausen* and his desire to overcome the trauma of the Baron. Through comparison with the literature of Hollywood Arthuriana, theories on psychoanalysis and structuralism, and the body of written work which surrounds Gilliam's oeuvre, I have shown that *The Fisher King's* interest in the mediaeval does not extend to a true representation of the past, but instead to a mythic, archetypal, and humanistic understanding of the grail myth which permeates the director's body of work. By presenting a redemptive grail quest in the language of myth, both literary and cinematic, Gilliam crafts a fairy tale for a modern American audience, wrapping the film's themes of the importance of love, forgiveness, and human connection in a patchwork of transatlantic influences which speak to each of his viewers in their own unique way. Indeed, the plot of *The Fisher King* is ultimately hinged on facing up the violent events of the past and overcoming the associated trauma, a theme which rings true with filmmaker and American audience alike as they perform their own personal grail quests.

'Fancy chang'd every thing he saw into what he desir'd to see'¹⁵³:

Light and Vision in *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* and *The Zero Theorem*

Having made a thorough examination of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Jabberwocky*, and *The Fisher King*, this chapter has thus far identified two major strands of Gilliam's neo-mediaeval style: a methodology which can be likened to that of the mediaeval illuminator and a thematic interest in the narrative structure of the quest and the holy fool. In the first section, I identified similarities between the ways in which the illuminator and the filmmaker make use of light; in the second, I drew a parallel between *The Fisher King's* use of the *Parsival* myth and the director's own need for spiritual healing. In this final section I will tease out a third strand, a strand closely interwoven with those already identified: that of the relationship between light and matter, vision and reality, or the warp and weft of the universe. Gilliam's penchant for the figure of the lone dreamer seeking an idealised goal has been firmly established, but only passing mention has thus far been made of a key influence and the subject of Gilliam's Sisyphean project: *Don Quixote*. Cervantes' magnum opus is not only one of the most influential and frequently adapted texts in the canon of western literature, but also the quintessential touchstone for three of the director's major thematic interests: the holy fool, the magic of madness, and the collision of realities. Each of Gilliam's feature films centres on an idealistic dreamer trapped within an oppressive environment, generally in the form of an exceedingly rational or bureaucratic society. His oddballs, these holy fools, are pitted against their environments in a series of increasingly fantastical events as their personal realities collide with the established one; by the end of the film, we are rarely sure what is real and what is not, the director preferring to let his audience decide for themselves. Furthermore, after the highly publicised production battles of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* and *Brazil*, Gilliam began to be seen as something of a Quixotic figure in himself: a solitary dreamer pitched against the windmill-giants of the studio system.

In light of the biographical element that seems an inevitable component of Gilliam's films, exemplified by *The Fisher King*, it is both tempting and easy to cast the director in the role of the mad fantasist. This reputation stems in no small part from the perceived financial bungling of *Baron Munchausen*, though as Gilliam points out 'they didn't release it. They made

¹⁵³ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. by P. A. Motteux (London: Everyman Library, 1991), p. 140.

117 prints of the film. An art-house film goes out with 400 prints [...] I made one film that went over budget and that was it'.¹⁵⁴ It is no surprise, then, that the film did not return profits. While Hollywood portrayed Gilliam as a financially irresponsible ogre, Louis Pepe and Keith Fulton's documentary about the (un)making of *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote, Lost in La Mancha* (2002), paints a rather different picture. Watching *Lost in La Mancha*, we can see that the Gilliam is not quite the loose cannon that he is generally perceived to be. The demands he makes of his cast and crew are often challenging but never unreasonable. The film's finances are a problem only when the financiers fudge the books, and the succession of crippling blows struck to the production came from factors beyond Gilliam's control: Jean Rochefort's ill health, unpredictable weather, and low-flying military F-16s which disrupted shooting with the noise of their passing. While the film is notorious as a failed project, a fact that *Lost in La Mancha* capitalises on, its failure appears to lie less with Gilliam than with a remarkable amount of bad luck. And yet intentionally or not, the director's observation that 'with every movie I make, there's a connection between the making of it and what it's about'¹⁵⁵ holds true: his dream, like Quixote's, ultimately failed to be realised.

At the time of writing Gilliam has made several attempts to get *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* off the ground over the course of almost two decades, all without success, and the only material filmed is that featured in *Lost in La Mancha*. Consequently, the small body of scholarship that addresses the project does so through Fulton and Pepe's documentary, the most notable among which are the writings of Sidney Donnell and Brigitte Adriaensen. While Donnell writes that 'codirectors Fulton and Pepe's postmodern activity – the self-conscious, metatheatrical act of documentary filmmaking – is very much in keeping with the blurring of discourse and genre in *Don Quijote*, which itself is a self-reflexive, metaliterary text',¹⁵⁶ Adriaensen goes one further and suggests that *La Mancha* is an infinitely more Quixotic adaptation of Cervantes' material than Gilliam's film could ever hope to be.¹⁵⁷ She writes that 'far from announcing from the beginning that Terry Gilliam's Quixotic fantasies on

¹⁵⁴ Paul Wardle, 'Terry Gilliam', in *Terry Gilliam: Interviews*, ed. by David Sterritt and Lucille Rhodes (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), pp. 65–106 (p. 86).

¹⁵⁵ Bob McCabe, 'Chemical Warfare', in *Terry Gilliam: Interviews*, ed. by David Sterritt and Lucille Rhodes (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), pp. 135–40 (p. 139).

¹⁵⁶ S Donnell, 'Quixotic Storytelling, Lost in La Mancha, and the Unmaking of The Man Who Killed Don Quixote', *Romance Quarterly*, 53 (2006), 92–112 (p. 92).

¹⁵⁷ Brigitte Adriaensen, 'Getting Lost in La Mancha: The Unma(s)King of Gilliam's The Man Who Killed Don Quixote', in *International Don Quixote*, ed. by Theo D'Haen (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2009), pp. 251–69 (p. 259).

Don Quixote will fall apart, and will never take form as a real movie, the documentary maintains the illusion that everything will turn out well, thus inviting the spectator to share Gilliam's optimism',¹⁵⁸ drawing a parallel between the Don's idealism and the director's vision. However, the 2002 DVD release of *La Mancha* features a number of alternate openings to the documentary that were discarded during the editing process. In one, 'Alternate Opening #1', Fulton and Pepe begin the film by juxtaposing and eventually intermingling a reading of the *Quixote* script with footage of the disasters that would later befall the production. The blending of fiction and reality that lies at the heart of Gilliam and Tony Grisoni's script is thus neatly connected with the format of the documentary itself, as a self-reflexive account of a dream doomed to failure. This blending of fiction and reality is redolent not just of Gilliam's body of work, but also of Cervantes' novel.

It seems inevitable that discussions of *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, or any other iteration of Cervantes' novel, must address the methodology of adaptation. The novel has given rise to a multitude of texts, plays, operas, and orchestrations but only to a relatively small number of films. Indeed, although several filmmakers have made attempts to bring the Don to the screen, few have done so with any great success; there are only a handful of feature films and smaller number yet of television films that purport to be direct adaptations of Cervantes' text, Orson Welles' disastrous attempt among them. As Adriaensen writes, 'in many screen-adaptations of the *Quixote* Cervantes' complex poetics regarding lies and truth, or verisimilitude and history, lose their strength because the director tries to represent the original work in a truthful, mimetic, even mechanical way'.¹⁵⁹ Gilliam, however, does not attempt to translate *Quixote* directly from page to screen, explaining that he 'prefers to use what I think I remember of something as a template, rather than going back to check the actuality, because that way I know it's been through my alembic'.¹⁶⁰ *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* identifies itself as an addition to Cervantes' text by virtue of the addition to the novel's title and it features, in true Gilliam fashion, the inclusion of a contemporary protagonist and reality in collision with that of Quixote's La Mancha. While Donnell and Adriaensen concern themselves with examinations of the postmodern self-reflexivity and perspectivism of *Lost in La Mancha*, the attribution of authorial voice, and the comparison

¹⁵⁸ Adriaensen, p. 252.

¹⁵⁹ Adriaensen, p. 255.

¹⁶⁰ Gilliam and Thompson, pp. 216–17.

between Quixote and Gilliam, I shall make an examination of two draft scripts of *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* in order to show that Gilliam's adaptation represents not just a continuation of his idealistic dreamer narrative, but also of his interest in the mediaeval.

With reference to relevant theories of sight and vision, such as Roberto González Echevarría's study of the act of seeing in *Don Quixote*,¹⁶¹ I will perform a close reading of select sections of the May 2000 and March 2010 drafts of *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* with a particular focus on the way that Gilliam and Grisoni link the novel's themes of reading, seeing, and believing to both the cinematic form and the mediaeval philosophy of light. Furthermore, I will draw on Spike Bucklow's *The Alchemy of Paint* to connect the significance of light and vision in *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* to Gilliam's role as a modern illuminator as previously outlined in my examination of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and his most recent film to date, *The Zero Theorem* (2013). By applying relevant theories of colour in a comparison between the first draft of the script and the completed film, I will prove that *The Zero Theorem*, though a film about the digital age, contains a panoply of mediaeval elements which can be traced back to Gilliam's interest in such painters as Hieronymus Bosch. Finally, with brief reference to the beginning of this chapter, I will summarise my select examination of Gilliam's body of work in order to show that it is embedded with a mediaeval sensibility that extends far beyond a mere superficial interest in the narrative structure of the grail quest.

Who Killed Don Quixote?

Though their approaches to filmmaking may differ as greatly as their visual styles, Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam are of an ilk. While the spectre of Quixote cantered around the chaotic confines of Gilliam's skull, Chaucer occupied Jones'. But the scribe succeeded where the illuminator failed: after a gestation period of some thirty years, Jones' pet project came to fruition as *Who Murdered Chaucer? A Medieval Mystery* (2003), an academic study of the history and politics surrounding the father of English literature. The success of the two projects cannot be placed in direct competition given that one is an academic text produced

¹⁶¹ Roberto González Echevarría, 'Crossed Eyes and Vision', in *Cervantes' Don Quixote: A Casebook*, ed. by González Roberto Echevarría (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 217–39.

in collaboration with four noted historians and the other an international affair costing several million dollars, yet their aims and the stories they tell are not entirely unrelated. Where Jones and his co-authors offer a contextualised reading of Chaucer's work and read sinister implications into what is left unsaid, offering a fresh perspective on a familiar text, Gilliam wrangles a similarly idiosyncratic narrative from another cornerstone of western literature. In typically Gilliamesque fashion, the director adds a contemporary character and setting to Cervantes' tale and sets past and present in collision. By doing so, he levels the same interrogation at the institution of Hollywood filmmaking that Jones does at the mediaeval Church. *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, however, is less an inquest than an allegorical reconstruction of events leading to the death of its titular character. Gilliam and Grisoni root the reality of Quixote in the subjective perspective of their imaginatively titled protagonist, Toby Grosini, who slips between past and present with increasing frequency as his investment in the hidalgo's quest grows. As such, La Mancha becomes something of a dreamscape and the Don both a muse and guide.

To modern audiences, Quixote is a clownish figure engrossed in his own madness, unable to distinguish windmills from giants. However, he might also be viewed as a symbol of freedom in his rejection of societal convention and creativity in his complete absorption with fantasy, and this is evidently how he is seen by Gilliam. The relatively small number of screen adaptations of *Quixote* is due, as Adriaensen observes above, to the difficulty of condensing the considerable length and complexity of the novel into a matter of two or three hours. The numerous characters and tangential discourses make it almost impossible to translate the adventures of the would-be knight directly from page to screen, and so the question for the enterprising filmmaker is that of how to approach the text. As A. J. Close points out in his introduction to the 1991 Everyman's Library edition of the novel, 'Any attempt to interpret *Don Quixote* must take account of the literary principles which motivate it and explain its central place in Cervantes' literary career. It is, in basic conception, a debunking parody of Spanish romances of chivalry'.¹⁶² If we consider these principles of motivation to be, as Close identifies them, 'reason, harmony, taste and exemplariness, and more specifically, [...] the need to strike a just balance, in epic fiction, between the demands of the marvellous and

¹⁶² A. J. Close, 'Introduction', in *Don Quixote*, trans. by P. A. Motteux (London: Everyman Library, 1991), pp. ix–xxxii (p. ix).

those of verisimilitude',¹⁶³ Gilliam's adaptation is, on first appearances, somewhat dubious. Many would argue against the presence of reason, harmony, or taste in Gilliam's films, and perhaps by conventional standards these qualities are lacking, yet there are elements of *Killed* that are oddly, obsessively, rooted in verisimilitude. As Adriaensen points out, 'the landscape has to be mythical Castile, Don Quixote's armor has to be exactly as Cervantes described it, the F16s that deafen the actors cannot be integrated in the form of an absurd intermezzo on a story of a seventeenth century knight'.¹⁶⁴ Fabulist as his films may be, both visually and narratively, Gilliam retains a peculiar sense of authenticity.

It is this fidelity to his source material, or to his remembered impression of his source material, that is Gilliam's sole link to any claim of verisimilitude; his insistence on making use of specific locales and props anchors the worlds of his films, however tenuously, to a reality with which his audience is familiar. But where the principles observed by author and filmmaker overlap most clearly is in the aspect of parody. Gilliam's beginnings as a cartoonist with a bent towards caricature have coloured his entire body of work, from his days with *Mad*, through *Python* to his riffing on myth and genre in *The Fisher King*. Adriaensen is correct to suppose that 'Gilliam's aim was perhaps to parody commercial Hollywood films', though the likelihood of his doing so by 'choosing famous actors but casting them in a very different movie'¹⁶⁵ is less than that of his casting Depp because of their existing relationship, and for the very practical purpose of acting as a lure for international funding. Just as *Quixote* parodies the Spanish romances of chivalry, *Killed* is at once a parody of genre cinema, Hollywood, and Gilliam's own filmmaking experience. Indeed, the May 2000 draft of the film's script opens during the filming of an advertisement for a company named Powergrid. The story of Quixote has been appropriated, his chivalry and heroism repurposed and the episode with the windmills pastiched to sell the business of 'a marauding multinational giant'.¹⁶⁶ When a Powergrid representative voices concern about this representation of their company, Toby explains that 'it's the world seen through Quixote's eyes; twisted – distorted – like in the book'.¹⁶⁷ In this incarnation of Toby we can see both the frustrated artist and the capitalist sell-out, a spiritual successor to *Fisher King's* Jack Lucas and also a wry embodiment of

¹⁶³ Close, p. xiii.

¹⁶⁴ Adriaensen, p. 259.

¹⁶⁵ Adriaensen, p. 158.

¹⁶⁶ Terry Gilliam and Tony Grisoni, *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, 15th May 2000, p. 5.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Gilliam's own attitude towards Hollywood in the wake of *Brazil* and *Munchausen*. Most notably, however, this opening sets the keynote of *Killed*, the debasement of art through commercialisation and the Gilliamesque championing of idealist fantasy.

'Those whom thou see'st yonder'¹⁶⁸

Having highlighted the influence of *Don Quixote* on Gilliam's body of work, it is now pertinent to give closer consideration to the book's allure and the ways in which its parodying of mediaeval Romances compliment Gilliam's own archaic avant-garde style. Though not a mediaeval text itself, *Quixote*, by virtue of its titular hero's fancy, paints a depiction of the Middle Ages through the lens of their literature. As Donald D. Palmer puts it, 'the most famous neomedievalist who never existed was Don Quixote de la Mancha, who, with solely the help of his more-or-less dedicated squire, single-handedly attempted to impose the ethos and the rigors of the Middle Ages on his own "detestable age"'.¹⁶⁹ Palmer argues that although Quixote's vision of the Middle Ages is in rooted their fantastical representations in Romance literature, merged with an equally inaccurate conception of the Golden Age, 'Cervantes succeeded very well in communicating important aspects of the medieval mentality', citing Foucault's concept of the episteme: 'a way of conceptualising the world – a way of knowing it, and categorising it'.¹⁷⁰ The episteme of the Middle Ages, he explains, is one of similitude, of connections between signs and symbols, microcosms and macrocosms. Indeed, the book's very form is representative of this episteme as both a parody of chivalric literature and an allegorical criticism of seventeenth century Spain. Most important to this study, however, is not the form of the novel but the importance that Cervantes places upon the act of seeing, for this is the mechanism by which Quixote and Gilliam alike conjure up their respective neo-mediaeval realities.

In his introduction to the novel, Close draws attention to the importance attached to the act of reading as a process of understanding in *Don Quixote*,¹⁷¹ while Echevarría goes a

¹⁶⁸ Cervantes, p. 61.

¹⁶⁹ D D Palmer, 'Don Quixote and the Remembrance of Things Medieval', *Postmedieval-a Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 5 (2014), 10–20 (p. 10).

¹⁷⁰ Palmer, p. 14.

¹⁷¹ Close, p. xxxii.

step further to consider the role of the eye and its related faculty of vision in the hidalgo's adventures; 'looking is', he writes, 'a form of expression, not just of perceiving reality'.¹⁷² Encapsulated in these two arguments, of the eye as a passive recipient and vision as an active creative force, is the tack taken by Gilliam and Grisoni in their translation of the narrative from page to screen. In both form and content, *Don Quixote* is inherently literary; not only is Quixote driven to madness by an over indulgence in chivalric literature, but both volumes of the book are put forth as translations of historical accounts that Cervantes is merely transcribing. Furthermore, the narrative is strewn with instances of found letters and notebooks, and entire chapters are dedicated to the recounting of the events of a diegetic novel. The usual challenge of the filmmaker undertaking an adaptation, of paring away extraneous material and condensing key episodes of the narrative into a streamlined form in keeping with the essence of the story, is thus compounded by *Quixote's* formal complexity. Previous adaptations of the novel, to their detriment, place their focus on the comical aspects of the Don's madness: the encounter with the windmills, his battle with the wine skins at the Saracen Head Inn, and his humiliation at the court of the Duke. These, after all, are some of the most action oriented and consequently most visual moments in the novel. But while Gilliam does cherry-pick certain of these episodes from the novel for *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, his decision to mirror the Don's imposition of the Middle Ages upon his surroundings with the intermingling of Toby's contemporary reality and that of La Mancha adds a fresh spin to the story while also remaining true to both its story and formalistic play.

Gilliam had, in a loose sense, previously dealt with the process of literary adaptation while making *Brazil*, *Munchausen*, and *The Fisher King*, but only with the latter did he invest any particular effort in the translation of form in addition to narrative. In my discussion of *The Fisher King*, I suggested that the fluttering pages that Osberg connects to the literary form are also, within the language of Gilliam's visual mythologising of New York, referents of the Western genre. Similarly, *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* shifts the novel's emphasis on the written form to that of the visual media. As noted above, the 2000 script begins with the filming of a TV commercial based on the Don's encounter with the 'giants'. However, for the first few moments of the film we are unaware that what we are seeing is a fiction within a fiction, an illusory reality conjured up by Toby and his crew; only when the windmill grinds to

¹⁷² Echevarría, p. 222.

a halt and 'Quixote' is left dangling does the director shout 'cut!' and reveal the artifice. This is the first instance of a visual equivalent to Cervantes' emphasis on literature and the act of reading; Gilliam shifts this emphasis to the act of seeing, of perception, and the bleeding together of Toby's reality and Quixote's. This beginning not only nods to Cervantes' parodying of chivalric literature in its use of the text as a basis for a capitalist television advertisement, it is also a self-reflexive nod to Gilliam and his own career. Not only did Gilliam work for an advertising agency in his youth, he also, between 1991 and 1992, worked on a script for an adaptation of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the influence of which is more than evident in *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*:

As the OLD MAN speaks, we close in on his eyes – alive and fiery. TOBY is hypnotized. His attention is drawn to the bare light bulb. Moths flutter about it. As the voice and song continue the bright bulb becomes...

EXT FIELDS OF MONTIEL DAY

...A burning sun above a dazzling landscape.

DON QUIXOTE rides in with SANCHO PANZA on his tiny donkey.

[...]

We see SANCHO's face for the first time. It's TOBY! He looks confusedly from the GIRL to the windmills.¹⁷³

This scene from the 2000 draft of the film's script is the first in which Toby experiences a slippage and finds himself in La Mancha, and the manner in which this transgression is portrayed bears remarkable resemblance to that of Twain's Yankee:

He laid me out with a crusher alongside the head that made everything crack [...] When I came to again, I was sitting under an oak tree, on the grass [...] there as a fellow on a horse, looking down at me – a fellow straight out of a picture-book. He was in old-time iron armor from head to heel.¹⁷⁴

The loss of consciousness is a convenient literary device for the instantaneous traversal of time or distance, tied as it is to the perspective of the narrator, and one that has also made

¹⁷³ Gilliam and Grisoni, pp. 12-13.

¹⁷⁴ Mark Twain, 'A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court', in *Treasury of World Masterpieces: Mark Twain* (London: Octopus Books Limited, 1981), pp. 605–799 (pp. 609–10).

its way onto film. However, Gilliam opts for a means of ellipses that is not only inherently visual but is also linked to the idea of the filmmaker as modern illuminator: a match cut facilitated by light.

Gilliam's decision to draw on *Connecticut Yankee* is not rooted entirely in his tendency to recycle his unused material; there is an existing body of scholarship that identifies the respective adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer as continuations of Cervantes' legacy. As Theo D'haen explains, 'whereas the old and tired Don Quixote is destined to fail, reflecting Spain's slow decline as already initiated at the time of Cervantes' writing, youthful Tom Sawyer's success is emblematic of nineteenth century American prosperity and optimism'.¹⁷⁵ The inclusion of the Powergrid scenes is directly tied to Gilliam's decision to use Twain's time travel premise as a structural device. As he notes of *Connecticut Yankee*, 'it's got real weight to it because it's about American meddling – Yankee know-how, going out there and doing what the Yankee thinks is best for that particular society, and fucking it up totally'.¹⁷⁶ This is, in short, Toby's role in *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*: the meddling Yank who thinks he knows best but who is ultimately responsible for the death of Don Quixote. The theme of the meddling outsider is threaded through the script, but it is not confined simply to the surface level of the narrative. The scene in which Toby screens the commercial an audience of his 'eco-conscious'¹⁷⁷ clients featuring 'A toothy all-the-colours-of-Benetton / CocoCola-we-are-the-world choir [...] belting out a singing anthem'¹⁷⁸ is indicative of the same narcissistic and dismissive attitude with which Jack Lucas regards his listeners; the company's concern is evidently for their public image and gross profits rather than the people they purport to help, Toby rather tellingly stating that 'we can make people think they have power!'¹⁷⁹ Like Jack, Toby is portrayed as a slick American creative, arrogant, narcissistic, womanising, and utterly without conscience; he values little other than himself. Like *The Fisher King*, *Killed* can be read as a morality tale of male healing: where in the former film Jack must rediscover his humanity and his ability to love by bonding with the quixotic Parry, in the latter Toby is likewise encouraged to rediscover passion, both artistic and romantic, through

¹⁷⁵ Theo D'Haen, 'Don Quixote on the Mississippi: Twain's Modernities', in *International Don Quixote*, ed. by Theo D'Haen and Reindert Dhondt (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2009), pp. 237–50 (p. 240).

¹⁷⁶ McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*, p. 158.

¹⁷⁷ Gilliam and Grisoni, p. 14.

¹⁷⁸ Gilliam and Grisoni, p. 12.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

his encounters with the Don and Altisidora. Indeed, the two would-be-heroes follow a very similar trajectory in that they are toppled from the cold heights of capitalist self-obsession into the fantastical realms of the financially impoverished yet spiritually rich.

As has already been shown, *The Fisher King*, though garbed in lavish and fantastical visuals, is firmly rooted in a literary tradition; Gilliam's approach to filming contemporary New York in such a way as to instil it with the magic of a knightly romance is slave to the narrative of the redemptive journey. However, the script for *Killed* suggests that the director intended to further develop the visual alternative to the language of the literary myth that he developed on *Fisher King*. The excerpt above gives an example of the way in which Gilliam uses light and sight as a means to impose one reality upon another in much the same way that Echevarría observes of Cervantes. Toby's initial slip into La Mancha takes place in a gypsy tent as an elderly man, claiming to be a centuries old Quixote, recounts his past; a gypsy girl, Altisidora, sings a haunting melody; behind the old man hangs 'an aged, painted cloth backdrop – a bad copy of Goya's painting of a colossal giant'.¹⁸⁰ The transition from one reality to another is facilitated by established conventions of cinematic grammar – the sound bridge, the match cut – but the set up within the tent, of a wall sized cloth backdrop, a voice over, accompanying music, are all also suggestive of the cinema experience. Furthermore, the transition takes place when Toby looks into the light of the bare bulb, and as such we are led to assume that the reality of the story in which he finds himself is in fact of his own imagining, recalling Echevarría's assertion that 'looking is a form of expression.' In typically Gilliamesque fashion, the two realities of the film begin to intermingle until it is impossible to distinguish their borders. It may be that Toby is somehow transported to a mythical La Mancha, or it may be that his adventures with the hidalgo are a dream vision, the 'knight' his guide to the resolution of his personal crisis.

This collision of realities is not just a Gilliamesque affectation; though in Cervantes' novel we are only made privy to the world as seen by Quixote through his explanations of what he sees, Echevarría observes that:

Don Quijote's madness is inscribed in his good eyesight. He can see straight and clearly because he rarely has doubts about the things he sees [...] There is no split self within him; he is alternatively Alonso Quijano or Don Quijote de la

¹⁸⁰ Gilliam and Grisoni, p. 11.

Mancha, never simultaneously both [...] Don Quijote does not write literature or even read it as such: He lives it. The authors in *Don Quixote*, however, suffer a madness that does not allow them to live or write literature alternatively but concomitantly, never sure of which is which: The symptom of that madness is their defective eyesight.¹⁸¹

Little if any mention is made of the quality of Toby's eyesight but as the narrative progresses the generative power of his gaze is given increasing weight. At the story's beginning he is firm in his conviction that he is Toby Grosini mistaken as Sancho Panza by the delusional Quixote, yet by its close it is his belief in the threat of the windmill-giants that leads to the death of Altisidora. Fulfilling his role as meddling Yankee, Toby mistakenly pushes Quixote over the railings of a balcony in the Duke's castle, and the Don falls to his death. While fleeing the castle, Toby believes he hears giants in pursuit. Altisidora warns him not to look as 'looking makes things real',¹⁸² but like Orpheus before him, Toby ignores this instruction and succeeds only in entangling both Altisidora and himself in the sails of a windmill, from which she too falls to her death. Until this point in the narrative Toby has been occupying a dual role as both himself and Sancho, unsure which reality is the truth, but at the story's climax he is fully consumed by the madness of la Mancha; his identity as 'slick smug American - Toby Grosini' is entirely subsumed by that of Don Quixote. In script's final scene we are transported once more from la Mancha to the gypsy cave by means of the shared light of the sun and bulb only to discover that the old man claiming to be Don Quixote de la Mancha is now no other than Toby, reciting the knight's legend like a bard of old. He has taken up the mantle of madness and thus transitioned from being a participant in the story of the Don's adventures to being its teller. He is no longer, to adopt Echevarría's model, authoring stories as he did in his capacity as an advertising executive, but living one as Quixote. Donnell writes that 'Quixote's assassin – according to Gilliam – could only come from the present, a modern-day being who unmakes or destroys all voices of the near or distant past that disrupt progress'¹⁸³ and that 'the voice of reason cannot exist without its mad, show-stopping other'.¹⁸⁴ Although Toby, emblematic of a narcissistic and self-absorbed contemporary society, is the force that ultimately destroys Quixote, that symbol of idealism, it is also he that is consumed by

¹⁸¹ Echevarría, p. 236.

¹⁸² Gilliam and Grisoni, p. 121.

¹⁸³ Donnell, p. 95.

¹⁸⁴ Donnell, p. 96.

Quixote's madness. In a similar fashion to the unfortunate Sam Lowry of *Brazil*, Toby achieves a bittersweet freedom in fantasy.

The question of Toby's having aged to a degree that he resembles Quixote casts the usual degree of doubt on the distinction between reality and fantasy in a Gilliam film, but the closing lines of *Killed* go one further in a final show of the power of sight: 'some say I am mad...that I only inhabit my illusions. (Straight to camera) But then, how is it I see you? Unless... you are but one more of my dreams...'¹⁸⁵ Now completely inhabiting the character of Don Quixote de la Mancha, Toby is able to see so clearly that his vision pierces the fourth wall, blending narrator and narrative and embracing the metatextual spirit of Cervantes' novel. And, if the idea of the meddling Yankee is applied to the script alongside Gilliam's penchant for a degree of autobiography and his insistence upon the connection between the subject of his films and their production, the script as a whole can be read not just as an adaptation of Cervantes' novel but also as being *about* the adaptation of Cervantes' novel. The obvious parallels between script and reality were hit upon by Pepe and Fulton in *Lost in La Mancha's* original opening, but the very character of Toby and his Twain inspired adventures into Quixotic Spain might be regarded not just as a point of identification for a contemporary audience with no direct experience of Cervantes' text, but also as a loose reflection of Gilliam's encounter with the novel; as Cervantes himself wrote, 'Every Production must resemble its Author'.¹⁸⁶ In the script's beginning, Toby takes on the task of adapting, in a very loose sense, *Don Quixote* for his advertising campaign. The more that he engages with the Don the more the two realities begin to slip and intermingle, and so the more Quixote and his ideas weigh on Toby's mind. Finally, when Quixote dies, Toby inherits his madness and his vision, offering a final hint at the blending of realities by breaking the fourth wall. In this trajectory we can see an echo of the director's engagement with the novel, culminating in the death of his project and a lingering obsession with the Don that has lasted to the present day.

¹⁸⁵ Gilliam and Grisoni, p. 113.

¹⁸⁶ Cervantes, p. 6.

‘Putting the “you” back in Utopia’

At its heart, *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* is a story of self-inquiry, both for Toby and for Gilliam. Toby’s involvement with and eventual succession of Quixote takes place in a subjective reality, rooted entirely in his own perception; whether the la Mancha of the film is tangible or not for anyone but Toby we cannot say. The film’s ending, ambiguous as usual, can be interpreted as both a cautionary tale, a comment on the detriment of Gilliam’s own obsession with the project, and as a testament to the power of the imagination and a conviction in one’s beliefs. Like *The Fisher King*, it suggests that there is hope for those cynical and disenchanted figures in the transformative powers emblematised by a fictional past: these are films in which neo-mediaevalism is deeply embedded. While these films deal primarily with the spiritual health of a superficial individual, said individuals are symptomatic of their larger societies. In Gilliam’s most recent film to date, *The Zero Theorem*, society has evolved into a neon-clad ‘utopia’ in which street length advertisements keep pace with passers-by and cater their content according to the individual. The streets are filled with a cacophony that no longer stems from traffic but the myriad of gargantuan talking billboards that adorn every available wall space. Citizens dress in plastic clothing in gaudy neon colours while nuns wear plastic habits reminiscent of waterproof ponchos, and a church has formed around the worship of Batman the Redeemer. This is a consumerist ‘utopia’ where one’s materialist desires can be fulfilled with the touch of a screen, yet rife with boarded up shopfronts. Any sign of individuality, independent thought, or artistic expression has been exposed by the harsh glow of neon and utilised by Mancom to engineer further profit. At the heart of this fluorescent Pandemonium, Qohen Leth makes his home in a dilapidated church, a rare sanctuary from the superficiality of the world beyond its studded doors.

Qohen’s name, a compound derivation of Koheleth from the book of Ecclesiastes¹⁸⁷ and Lethe of Greek mythology, is essentially a double-barrelled declaration of emptiness or oblivion. An agoraphobic recluse with a particular fear of parties, Qohen is a gifted member of Mancom’s ‘Ontological Research Division’¹⁸⁸ who, after appealing to be allowed to work from home where he might better wait for his Call, is assigned to the mysterious Zero

¹⁸⁷ ‘Pat Rushin: Making The Zero Theorem’, *Pegasus* <<https://www.ucf.edu/pegasus/pat-rushin-making-the-zero-theorem/>> [accessed 18 February 2017].

¹⁸⁸ Undated draft of *The Zero Theorem* featuring Gilliam’s alterations - hereafter, ‘Gilliam Rewrite’ – p. 7.

Theorem project. The Zero Theorem, as it transpires in a climatic confrontation with Mancom's Management (Matt Damon), will prove that the entirety of existence is pointless. What better project for a man whose name is resounds with emptiness? Indeed, Qohen believes that his Call, a telephone call from a mysterious unknown, will enlighten him as to his purpose in life and thus alleviate his sense of dissonance. As an incentive to work on 'ZipT', Mancom allow Qohen to work from home and offer to help him receive his Call. And, as Qohen's work on ZipT nears completion, Management's son Bob, who has been assigned to assist Qohen in his work, suggests that the call may in fact come from inside Qohen. The spiritual dimension of *The Zero Theorem* is thus placed firmly in the foreground. Alone among a population of luridly dressed impulsives, only Qohen is concerned with the question of existentialism; his emptiness alone cannot be masked by the numerous opportunities for instant gratification offered by the society beyond his doors. Indeed, the one thing that Qohen wants is that which cannot be bought: the ephemeral, elusive, and ultimately unquantifiable meaning of life, being apparently unsatisfied with the Pythons' instructions to 'Try and be nice to people, avoid getting fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try to live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations'.¹⁸⁹

The word 'harmony', though intended here in reference to social attitudes, has a particular resonance when discussing mediaeval aesthetics. Harmony was an important philosophical concept in mediaeval music; as John Stevens informs us, 'the word is constantly in their mouths, and refers to the proportional harmoniousness of melody',¹⁹⁰ a philosophical derivative of Pythagoras' Harmony of the Spheres. The idea of harmony, of proportions, as a governing principle of reality is one that was pervasive in the Middle Ages and connected conceptions of the universe, the body, and the spirit. It is a world view quite at odds with the modern need to quantify and classify our surroundings, even those aspects of them that remain unseen and untouched. But nevertheless, the conceit at the heart of *The Zero Theorem*, of Qohen's mysterious call, is rooted in the idea that 'all knowledge is one'.¹⁹¹ Indeed, the film continually suggests that the only way for Qohen to obtain his call is to look inwards and confront the swirling black void that occupies his dreams. Looking within oneself

¹⁸⁹ *Monty Python and the Meaning of Life*, dir. by Terry Jones (Universal Pictures, 1983).

¹⁹⁰ John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050-1350* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 2.

¹⁹¹ Pamela Tudor-Craig, 'Foreword' in Spike Bucklow, *The Alchemy of Paint: Art, Science and Secrets from the Middle Ages* (London: Marion Boyars, 2009), (pp. 13-15), p.15.

to find the answer to a psychological problem is an idea that contemporary audiences consider inherently tied to the theories of Freud and Jung, and resultantly as a practice of relatively modern psychology. However, we can hardly forget that Jung's theories on archetypes are predicated on the study of the signs and symbols of the Middle Ages; indeed, what is Qohen if not the innocent fool? His quest is for a paradise of enlightenment, contact with a mysterious authority whom he believes to have access to truths that he himself does not. In this context, enlightenment is a term that denotes the acquisition of knowledge; in a discussion of mediaeval philosophy, it gains a religious dimension, suggestive of a higher power; and, as with *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, it also relates directly to the agency given to light.

Light in *The Zero Theorem* is a demystified commodity; it permeates the city in the form of neon signs and digital screens, in billboards and traffic lights. In a society that worships Batman as Christ, light has become the signifier of a new god, a god of commercial consumerism. Spiritual wellbeing has been forgotten, the incorporeal discarded; the moral tales depicted in stained glass have long been exchanged for beatific smiles peddling the latest in desirable products from glowing monitors. The only remnants of spiritualism to be seen reside with Qohen in his dilapidated church, its stained glass intact and its peeling walls adorned with Biblical murals. In his retreat from the offices of Mancom, Qohen has not only taken refuge from the hustle and bustle that he finds so distressing, but also located himself in an environment specifically designed to foster spirituality. The walls of the church, complete with religious iconography, encapsulate Qohen and his technology, positioned where the altar once stood. His computer, with its precision reduction of the physical world to a stream of ones and zeros, labels and categories, has at once usurped the religious paraphernalia and become a part of it, uniting a modern model with an old. As Bucklow explains:

Modern science primarily explores matter or *yin*, the weft of the fabric of the universe, and the traditional sciences practiced in the middle ages mainly explored form or *yang*, the warp of the fabric of the universe. Of course, the warp and weft of the universe have complimentary properties. So, in focussing on the weft, modern science has created a temporal, outward and quantative

view of the world. The traditional sciences – with their emphasis on the warp – created a more spiritual, inward and qualitative view of the world.¹⁹²

The science of the modern age, and indeed even more so the science of *The Zero Theorem*, has come almost full circle, interrogating the physical world of matter at a level that is invisible to the naked eye. A certain degree of faith is required to discuss the theoretical mechanics of particle physics, and the observation of the minute building blocks of the universe is not so dissimilar to mediaeval belief in proportional harmony; the micro affects the macro. Indeed, Qohen's investigation of the Zero Theorem directs the modern desire to quantify inside, into collision with the ephemeral form of his own being.

This is where the spiritual and the empirical converge in *The Zero Theorem*. Brief mention was made above of Bob and his suggestion that Qohen's call 'ain't carried by AT&T. It's coming from your soul'¹⁹³ and his attempts to help by designing a soul searching virtual reality suit. The purpose of this suit, as its descriptor suggests, is to utilise the processing power of Qohen's computer to analyse the deepest darkest recesses of his being. This may well be a modern, empirical approach to soul searching, but when we consider that the virtual reality suit is originally used so that Qohen and call-girl-cum-love-interest Bainsley can engage in the safest of sex, it becomes evident that these technological tools are a means of forging connections with others. The suit is connected to the computer, and through the computer to Bainsley's console via the complex hub of information that is the internet; their essential beings are reduced to code, and the code to light which travels by means of the cables that connect suit and computer. This is the phenomenon of the digital age, the isolation of the individual in an increasingly connected age. But by virtue of identifying the soul as a distinct component of Qohen's being, Rushin and Gilliam tap further into the mediaeval sensibility. As Bucklow writes:

When a man or a woman is considered as a body, a soul and a spirit, then he or she is not completely separate from the outside world. Nor are experiences divided and filtered through a mind or a body. As a composite of body, soul and spirit, the individual is an integral part of the whole of creation. Their body,

¹⁹² Bucklow, pp. 92–93.

¹⁹³ Gilliam rewrite, p. 69.

soul and spirit are connected, to a greater or lesser extent, with all other parts of creation.¹⁹⁴

Although Bucklow couches this description of the self in spiritual terms, the idea that the individual is an integral part of the whole of creation is not dissimilar to that observed by modern science: that energy can be neither created nor destroyed, merely redistributed. Furthermore, given that when Qohen attempts to use the suit for the purpose of soul searching, it is briefly shown to spark and short circuit before Qohen is transported to the Mancom server room. It is likely, from the way that Gilliam films this final sequence in which Qohen confronts Management, that Qohen is killed by this hardware malfunction – physically, at least. This leaves two interpretations of the scenes that follow: that the confrontation with management, destruction of Mancom, and eventual arrival in Bainsley’s paradise are Qohen’s dying thoughts. Or, that his incorporeal being is uploaded into the Mancom mainframe where he finds happiness in a virtual world. Either way, the post-credit scene in which the CCTV camera mounted atop the crucified figure of Christ that hangs above Qohen’s work blinks back to life indicates that Mancom is alive and well...

Neon Demons

Perhaps unsurprisingly given Gilliam’s hit-or-miss track record, *The Zero Theorem* received a lukewarm reception from critics upon its release in cinemas. Perplexed by the ‘abstract gobbledygook’¹⁹⁵ of the titular theorem and the similarities in theme with previous of the director’s works such as *Brazil* and *Twelve Monkeys*, reviewers fell back on the film’s production design and lurid colour palette. Matt Zoller Seitz of *RogerEbert.com* offers the amusing, if disparaging, description of Qohen in his V.R. suit as akin to ‘a porn-addicted Christmas elf’,¹⁹⁶ while Mike D’Angelo of *The A.V. Club* offers the equally disdainful description of the film’s fashion as ‘a DayGlo version of Lady Gaga’.¹⁹⁷ But what these critics failed to consider is the mediaeval element that underpins the aesthetic of *The Zero Theorem*. Among

¹⁹⁴ Bucklow, pp. 38–39.

¹⁹⁵ Mike D’Angelo, ‘Terry Gilliam Tediously Repeats Himself with The Zero Theorem’, *A.V. Club*, 2014 <<http://www.avclub.com/review/terry-gilliam-tediously-repeats-himself-zero-theor-209319>> [accessed 19 February 2017].

¹⁹⁶ Matt Zoller Seitz, ‘The Zero Theorem’, *RogerEbert.Com*, 2014 <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-zero-theorem-2014>> [accessed 19 February 2017].

¹⁹⁷ D’Angelo.

the touchstones of Gilliam's visuals, it must be remembered, are the paintings of Bosch and Breugel. Just as he drew on the manuscripts depicted in Randall's book for his *Holy Grail* animations and the paintings of Breugel for *Jabberwocky*, the director takes his cues from Bosch to bolster the spiritual and moral element of *The Zero Theorem*. As Stefan Fischer explains:

The late Middle Ages employed an especially complex system of colour symbolism. The symbolic value of individual colours varied depending on context, to the point that colours could signify partially contradictory meanings. Alongside black, grey, brown and white, Bosch uses the three powerful colours of green, blue and red for his devils. In this context green stands for inconsistency and unreliability, blue for trickery and illusion, and red for everything deviating from the Christian norm [...] These colours allude to some of the fundamental characteristics of devils as they were perceived in Bosch's day: they were thought to be constantly changing shape and assuming ever new guises, deceiving and confusing man about his true values and gods and upsetting his inner peace and equilibrium, until the sinner removed himself from the community or was expelled from it.¹⁹⁸

While the fluorescent hues of Gilliam's film are more likely to remind audiences of neon advertisements for cheap bars or kebab shops, the pervasive presence of green and red against the diminished splendour of the church's interior take on spiritual connotations. At the film's beginning, Qohen dresses from head to foot in black, the colour of humility or penance as worn by priests. Once Bainsley enters the narrative, so too does the scarlet V.R. suit, a garment whose colour reflects the lascivious purpose for which it is put to use. Furthermore, when connected to Qohen's computer, the suit's surface is revealed to be traced with neon green cabling.

Given their prominence at such vital junctures of the film's narrative, coupled with Gilliam's knowledge of mediaeval art, it is unlikely that these colours were chosen arbitrarily. While it is true that the decision to make the V.R. suit red stems from Rushin's script,¹⁹⁹ the addition of the green lies with Gilliam. Likewise, Rushin's initial descriptions of Qohen's world are considerably less ostentatious than the visuals of the finished film would lead us to

¹⁹⁸ Fischer, p. 167.

¹⁹⁹ Pat Rushin, *The Zero Theorem*, undated draft, p. 38.

believe; the only suggestions of the futuristic chaos of Gilliam's production design are the 'colourful graffiti' and 'caged shopfronts' which are his sole descriptions of the outside world.²⁰⁰ With the addition of *Minority Report*-esque advertisements, Gilliam is not only engaging with and commenting on the digital age, but also our changing attitude to our surroundings. Michel Cler writes:

The colour effects of new facades have become, for example, huge screens changing colours via digital programmes, or transparent glass membranes have become media screens with fluctuating colours. Facades that rapidly change colour while projecting large-format advertisements, however, not only have an irritating effect on people, but also proclaim the 'death' or 'end' of urban space.²⁰¹

Cler argues that urban spaces are characterised by the colours and textures of the materials used in the construction of their composite buildings. Colour, he argues, is a key component of a city; sometimes it is dictated by the local stone, other times by cultural tradition. In short, by obscuring the walls of the city with screens and billboards, Mancom is erasing its character, its history, and its culture. And, as the number of glowing screens grows, the importance and power of light and colour are methodically sapped; the darkness of night is no longer absolute, thwarted by artificial light which undermines the sovereignty of sunlight by reducing its opposition, and the traditional associations of colour are usurped by those of commercial branding. In an environment such as this, Qohen's choice of home and Gilliam's use of colour become all the more notable.

The use of red and green within the film is best exemplified in a single scene, some three quarters of the way through the narrative, in which Bainsley seeks Qohen's forgiveness for concealing the truth of her occupation as a call-girl from him. As the two converse, the background of the scene is bathed alternatively in red and green light which infiltrates the church via a window (Fig. 11). This recalls, as Gilliam is no doubt aware, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), a film similarly saturated in red and green as the identities of Kim Novak's Judy and Madeleine become indistinguishable for Scottie (Fig. 12). In *Vertigo*, each colour is associated

²⁰⁰ Rushin, p. 3.

²⁰¹ Michel Cler, 'Colour Appearance in Urban Chromatic Studies', in *New Directions in Colour Theory*, ed. by C. P. Biggam (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011), pp. 181–89 (p. 187).



Figure 11: Green and red light fills Qohen's church in The Zero Theorem. BRD still.



Figure 12: Red and green light signals the blending of Kim Novack's identities in Vertigo. DVD still.

with an identity, and yet the way that Hitchcock employs light achieves the same impression of inconsistency and unreliability that Fischer identifies in Bosch's devils. Similarly, the red and green light in *Zero* is deployed in such a way as to indicate the threat that Bainsley poses to the monkish Qohen; it is for the sake of her temptations, after all, that he first uses the V.R. suit. And indeed, it is the revelation of Bainsley's occupation and her subsequent departure that ultimately results in Qohen's final use of the suit; her failure to rescue him from his isolation seals his fate. His inner peace, or what little of it there was while he entertained ideas of romance, is most definitely unsettled, and his existing self-imposed exile from society is outdone by his retreat into virtual reality. And yet while the ending of *The Zero Theorem* may appear bleak due Mancom's post-credit return, it can be read in a similar manner to that of *Brazil* in that Qohen has escaped into fantasy. Furthermore, if the allegorical nature of the mediaeval sensibilities underpinning the film are observed, Qohen's escape into virtual reality and subsequent reunion with Bainsley can be read in a similar manner. Bucklow writes that:

The alchemical union of Sulphur and Mercury symbolises the inward re-integration of the divided spirit and soul. Vermilion is a chemical marriage that foreshadows a much more important mystic marriage. Of course, marriages have a sexual side and vermilion was able to spawn a family of golden pigments because Sulphur and Mercury are male and female – 'the Principles of Generation'. Their sexuality was acknowledged in allegories about the Philosopher's Stone. For example, a 17th century parable tells of a red youth (Sulphur, form, fire, or *yang*) and a white maiden (Mercury, matter, water, or *yin*) who make love, die and revive after forty days (a philosophical month) as King and Queen.²⁰²

Though a discussion of the alchemical properties of mediaeval pigments, Bucklow's allegory of the red youth and white maiden can be readily and literally applied to *The Zero Theorem*. Bainsley, while in the church, is dressed principally in white; Qohen, in his V.R. suit, in red. Their virtual union results in Qohen's physical death after which they are reunited on their paradisiacal beach. Given Gilliam's humanist bent it is possible to read this ending as a regeneration of the human sentiments that he deems lacking in the digital world, namely love and hope. Though perhaps, given its virtual location, this new paradise is a post-human one and reflects instead the usual Gilliamesque triumph of fantasy over stark reality.

²⁰² Bucklow, p. 107.

Chapter 2: Jarman

‘I was always a Pre-Raphaelite’: Derek Jarman’s Mediaeval Modernism

While he was not always, as William Fowler puts it, ‘the consummate, well-known artist-filmmaker we remember today’,¹ the life and work of Derek Jarman has amassed an ever-growing body of scholarship in the years since his death. Through the detailed volumes of diaries which he kept for the greater part of his adult life, his home-movie style Super-8 films, and the numerous interviews in type, radio, and television that he gave, the initiate into Jarman’s work may glean a palpable sense of the multi-faceted man as activist and writer, artist and filmmaker, gardener and man. In addition to the books written by his own hand, a wealth of scholarly studies has endeavoured to detail Jarman’s life from a range of critical perspectives: *Derek Jarman: A Biography* (1999), penned by Jarman’s literary agent, Tony Peake, is an authoritative text which offers a decade-by-decade account of the filmmaker’s career within its sociocultural contexts; similarly, the late Michael O’Pray’s *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England* (1996) examines both Jarman and his work against a sense of English patriotism. Michael Charlesworth and Rowland Wymer, whose studies share the helpfully distinctive title *Derek Jarman* (1994/2005), offer dedicated readings of each of the director’s eleven feature films, the latter emphasising the influence of Renaissance art and literature on his work, while Steven Dillon’s *The Mirror and the Sea: Derek Jarman and the Lyric Film* (2004) connects the poetic aspects of Jarman’s films with earlier traditions in avant-garde filmmaking. The painterly aspect of Jarman’s work has been likewise explored, most notably in *Derek Jarman: A Portrait – Artist, Film-Maker, Designer* (1996), edited by Roger Wollen, and Martin Frey’s *Derek Jarman: Moving Pictures of a Painter: Home Movies, Super-8 Films and Other Small Gestures* (2016). In addition to these book length studies is a plethora of shorter articles, conference papers, and retrospectives, along with a number of interviews with, and letters from, those who knew or worked with Jarman himself which discuss elements of his work ranging from sound and production design to queer theory and political activism. What few of those who study Jarman’s work investigate in detail, however, is the fundamental influence of the Middle Ages on his creative output.

¹ William Fowler, ‘The Many Faces of Derek Jarman’, in *Jarman: Volume One: 1972 - 1986* (London: BFI, 2018), pp. 3–6 (p. 3).

Most accounts of the artist's life, for artist is a broader and more appropriate term than filmmaker in this instance, detail his studies at the Slade and his friendships with such prolific figures of the fashionable British art scene as David Hockney and Ozzie Clarke, but few afford much time to the period preceding this in which Jarman read English, History, and Art at King's College, London. Wymer notes, however, that 'The English part of [this degree] was a (necessarily) cut-down version of the standard "Beowulf to Virginia Woolf" syllabus, though in Jarman's case the more appropriate end markers would be the Anglo-Saxon poems *The Wanderer* and *The Dream of the Rood* and the modernist poetry of Yeats and Eliot'.² While the details of this period of his life are given only passing attention in Jarman's own diaries, they contain some of the most overt references to the Early English texts³ and Gregorian chants that are indicative of the interest in mediaeval art which peppers his recollections of the years leading up to his initiation into the world of film production at the hands of Ken Russell. Jarman's interest in the mediaeval long pre-exists his studies at King's, however; in more than one volume, he makes mention of the fact that his aunt bought him his 'first grown-up book from a shop in Charing Cross Road: *The Cloister and the Hearth* – the exquisite bright painting irradiated with pure clear colour'.⁴ Scattered throughout the pages of his various journals are similar references in passing to the writings of Marjorie Kemp, Pliny, Chaucer, and Breugel, evidencing not just a keen knowledge of the artists of the Middle Ages, but also a keen interest in their works, their processes, and the philosophies underpinning them. Jarman himself made a claim to the brotherhood of the Pre-Raphaelites,⁵ proclaiming a love for Chaucer and *Piers Plowman*, and by doing so indicating an element of mediaevalism in his work; as Justin Wyatt observes, 'Jarman's approach to writing history – contrasting indeterminate periods and events through his editing – echoes Frederic Jameson's distinction between history and historicism, the latter defined as "the random cannibalization of all styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion"'.⁶ Indeed, Jarman's writings are fraught with poetic phrases which meditate on the passage of time: in *Chroma*, 'The present is filled by

² Rowland Wymer, *Derek Jarman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 21.

³ Derek Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 46.

⁴ Derek Jarman, *Up In The Air: Collected Film Scripts* (London: Vintage, 1996).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Justin Wyatt, 'Autobiography, Home Movies, and Derek Jarman's History Lesson', in *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian and Gay Documentary*, ed. by Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 158–72 (p. 155).

echoes of the past’;⁷ and in *Modern Nature*, ‘Time is scattered, the past and the future, the future past and present’.⁸ Moreover, in the latter volume he goes so far as to inform us that ‘For years the Middle Ages have formed the paradise of my imagination, the archaic half-smile on the Apostle’s lips at Chartres, the blisse that unlocks’.⁹

As Wymer has shown, Jarman’s work is permeated by the influence of Renaissance art and literature, and yet, ‘when examined closely, [this] interest in the Renaissance looks at times more like an extension of medievalism’.¹⁰ Of his eleven feature films, only *Sebastiane* (1976), a saint’s life set in the fourth century, might be said to be overtly mediaeval in its subject matter; later works such as *The Angelic Conversation* (1985), *The Garden* (1990), and *Edward II* (1991) are threaded through with mediaeval elements, but their sense of time and place is considerably less concrete. In these later works, Jarman developed a penchant for the elision of time, the collision of history with the present and an imagined future which results in sense of place and period that exists outwith the constraints of temporal reality. His mise-en-scène is characterised by an anachronistic fusion of period and contemporary elements, such as Baglione’s use of a typewriter in his criticism of the eponymous painter in *Caravaggio* (1986), which serve to put the past in dialogue with the present. Indeed, as Jim Ellis observes, Baglione’s ‘excoriating comments echo the Thatcherite historian Norman Stone’s infamous attack on Jarman in the *Sunday Times* (“Sick Scenes of English Life”), as well as a host of other reviews that thinly veiled their homophobia with aesthetic objections’ while his position in the bath tub simultaneously ‘reproduces Jacques-Louis David’s *Death of Marat*’.¹¹ In elisions such as these is made evident Jarman’s interest in his subject matter; it is not the period within which Caravaggio lived that is of particular interest to the filmmaker, but rather the painter himself. In the approach that he took to his art, and the possibility of homosexual tendencies that Jarman assumes to be fact, the seventeenth century painter becomes a point of identification for the filmmaker, another figure in his pantheon of gay artists which includes Shakespeare, Da Vinci, and Michelangelo.¹² As he attests:

⁷ Derek Jarman, *Chroma* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 57.

⁸ Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (London: Random Century Ltd., 1991), p. 21.

⁹ Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 207.

¹⁰ Wymer, p.7.

¹¹ Jim Ellis, *Derek Jarman’s Angelic Conversations* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 119.

¹² Derek Jarman, *Smiling in Slow Motion*, ed. by Keith Collins (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 179.

what I attempt in my films, in my art, is to uncover things about myself, and the world around me – things I might be only dimly aware of. That’s what interested me about *Caravaggio*, a film about the creative process; Caravaggio himself worked in the same way as I do, using people he knew in his paintings, so that his art is part and parcel of his life.¹³

The seventeenth century, then, is of interest to Jarman not for its own sake, but merely as the context against which Caravaggio’s artistry railed. It is the artist’s irreverence for his subject matter, for the traditions that preceded him, that appeal to the filmmaker: ‘Caravaggio was the first to take a bottle of paint-stripper to the Renaissance. He burnt away the decorum and the ideal, spattered the clear clean colours of Mannerism with his lamp-blacks, knocked the saints out of the sky and onto the streets, stole and smelted their haloes’.¹⁴ This approach to his art in many ways echoes Jarman’s own: in his blending of handheld, home-movie style filmmaking and a more structuralist avant-garde style influenced by the work of Deren, Brakhage, and Anger, Jarman levels a similar disdain or disinterest at the established mode of mainstream cinema.

In his approach to appropriating or recreating the past, too, Jarman echoes Caravaggio. He was vocal in his opposition of the costume drama, exclaiming that ‘there is nothing more excruciating than English Historical Drama, the stuff that is so successful in America and is usually introduced by Alistair Cooke as Masterpiece Theatre’.¹⁵ His view of the past and his manner of handling it, of ‘using people he knew’ in his art and puncturing any hermetic sense of period by including in it anachronistic or incongruous elements. By constructing the *mise-en-scène* of his films in this way, Jarman revolts against the romanticised, sanitised and standardised visions of the past presented by the mainstream dramas that he disliked so vehemently. The past in his films is less reconstruction that it is re-imagining; as Wymer states above, ‘Jarman’s interest in the Renaissance looks at times more like an extension of medievalism’ and the filmmaker himself admits to being ‘obsessed by the interpretation of the past’.¹⁶ Furthermore, in a letter written to *The Guardian* in protest of the impending closure of St. Bartholomew’s hospital, he opined that ‘Without our past our future

¹³ Jonathan Hacker and David Price, ‘Derek Jarman’, in *Take Ten: Contemporary British Film Directors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 229–70 (p. 250).

¹⁴ Derek Jarman, *Derek Jarman’s Caravaggio* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), p. 44.

¹⁵ Derek Jarman, *Dancing Ledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 6.

¹⁶ Jarman, *Derek Jarman’s Caravaggio*.

cannot be reflected, the past is our mirror'.¹⁷ Like Gilliam, Jarman makes use of the past as a means to interrogate the present and to speculate about the future, recalling once again Eco's model of the Ten Little Middle Ages.¹⁸ The 'neomedieval wave', he explains, uses the Middle Ages as a platform on which to address contemporary problems: 'all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages: Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks, and prime rate) are inventions of medieval society'.¹⁹ In keeping with Eco's model and Wymer's observation regarding Jarman's tendencies towards medievalism, the filmmaker may be fitted loosely into the ninth of Eco's Little Middle Ages, that 'of so-called *Tradition*, or of occult philosophy [...] Antiscientific by definition, these Middle Ages keep going under the banner of the mystical weddings of the micro- with the macrocosm'.²⁰ While Eco outlines this form of mediaevalism in a derisive manner, attributing it to 'Knights Templar, Rosicrucians, alchemists, Masonic initiates, neo-Kabbalists, drunk from reactionary poisons sipped from the Grail, ready to hail every neo-fascist Will to Power',²¹ it is a near equivalent to Jarman's preference for the holistic philosophy of the Middle Ages over 'the "scientific", archaeological method forged by Poussin' as a result of which 'painting turned into an obsessive catalogue of detail'.²² Jarman's art is a subjective one, rooted in the writings of John Dee and Carl Jung, a meeting point of the avant-garde style of Deren, Brakhage, and Anger with Shakespeare, Marlowe, and the poets who penned *The Wanderer* and the *Pearl* poem.

In this sense, Jarman's work is representative of the idea of the 'archaic avant-garde', a collapsing of past and present into a single period which at once examines the now and questions the soon. In features such as *Jubilee* (1977), *The Angelic Conversation*, *The Last of England*, and *The Garden*, Jarman makes use of mediaeval frameworks as the structural underpinnings of his films' narratives, dressing the archaic in images of the present. In *Jubilee* we see Elizabeth I escorted into a dystopian future-present by court magician John Dee and accompanying spirit, Ariel, the narrative presented in the format of a mediaeval dream vision; *The Angelic Conversation* is referred to throughout Jarman's journals as '*The Wanderer*',²³ and

¹⁷ Derek Jarman, 'Letter: Why Shutting Bart's Would Be a Crime', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 4th May 1993.

¹⁸ Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, pp. 68–72.

¹⁹ Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, p. 64.

²⁰ Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, p. 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Jarman, *Derek Jarman's Caravaggio*, p. 45.

²³ Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 285.

he candidly explains that it draws its theme of ‘service willingly given, not exacted’ directly from the Early English poem;²⁴ *The Last of England*, as Steven Dillon observes, is ‘part medieval allegory, part postmodern collage’;²⁵ and *The Garden*, with its dream vision structure and doubled Christ figures, draws heavily on a tradition of dream-poems which came to prominence in the fourteenth century.²⁶ Threaded throughout Jarman’s creative output, from his early paintings to set designs, his Super-8 work, his feature films, and his various writings is a fascination with and influence drawn from the Middle Ages; indeed, his bookshelves at Dungeness are populated by such names as Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe, Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich²⁷ (Fig. 13 – Fig 17).ⁱ Beginning at the end of Jarman’s career, and life, with *Chroma* and *Blue*, this chapter will begin an examination of the mediaeval strains of the artist’s work with an analysis of his theories and musings surrounding colour, its creation and its meaning. It will make reference to some of the most notable studies of Jarman’s work, as well as the extended writings on colour and culture by John Gage and Spike Bucklow, to unpack the connections between *Blue* and mediaeval theories of colour. Next, it will make use of Frey’s *Moving Pictures of a Painter* and Eco’s *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* to link Jarman’s painterly style to mediaeval aesthetics. Finally, it will employ Wyatt’s examination of Jarman’s home-movie aesthetic to connect select of his Super-8 works to the genre of auto/biography as it was understood in the Middle Ages. By doing so, it will tease out the mediaeval strain in Jarman’s work from beneath the layers of Renaissance and modernist elements and make a case for the artist as one who was profoundly influenced by the Middle Ages.

Under the Skin²⁸

Though it may seem backward to begin a study of a vein of influence which runs through an

²⁴ Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, p. 133.

²⁵ Steven Dillon, *Derek Jarman and the Lyric Film: The Mirror and the Sea* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 163.

²⁶ A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 4–5.

²⁷ Photographs of these shelves were kindly provided to Dr. Brian Hoyle and Dr. Jodi-Anne George by Jarman’s partner, Keith Collins.



Figure 13: Derek Jarman's bookshelves. Photograph provided to Dr. George and Dr. Hoyle by Keith Collins.

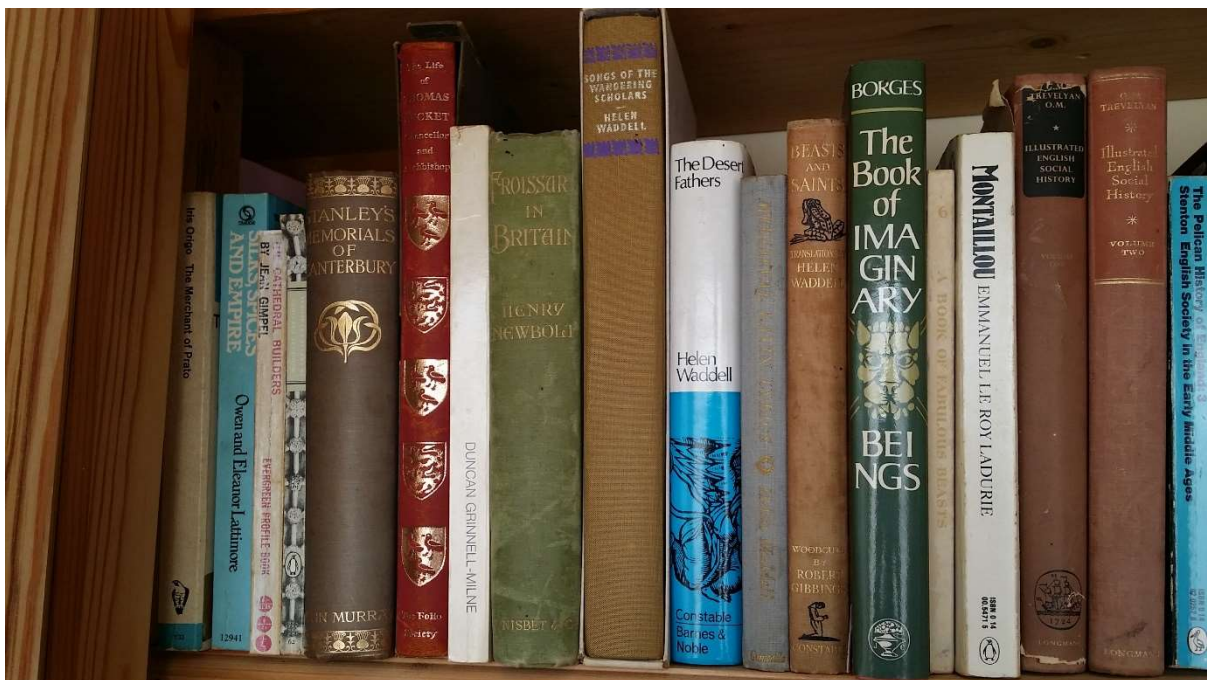


Figure 14: Jarman's bookshelves. Photograph provided to Dr. George and Dr. Hoyle by Keith Collins.



Figure 15: Jarman's bookshelves. Photograph provided to Dr. George and Dr. Hoyle by Keith Collins.

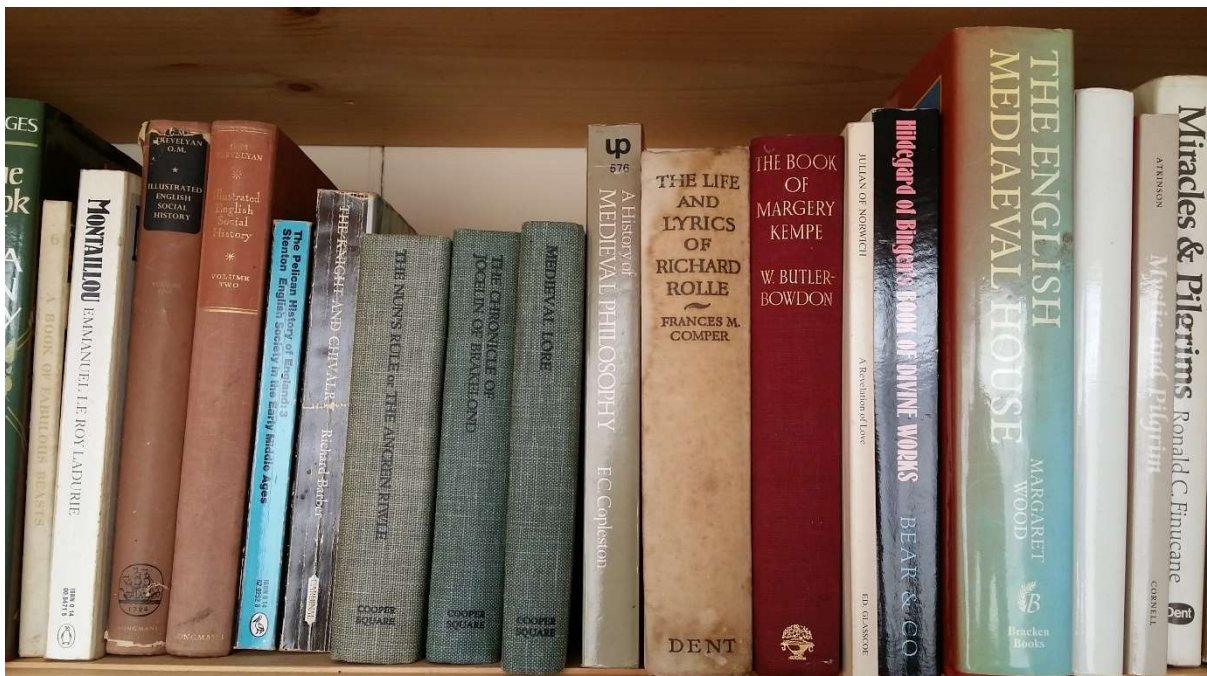


Figure 16: Jarman's bookshelves. Photograph provided to Dr. George and Dr. Hoyle by Keith Collins.



Figure 17: Jarman's bookshelves. Photograph provided to Dr. George and Dr. Hoyle by Keith Collins.

artists' work with the last of their projects, to begin such an examination of Jarman's in an achronological manner seems only fitting. Throughout his career, and indeed his life, Jarman maintained a conscious awareness of the past, its presence in the present, and its effect on the future; in *Blue*, and in *Chroma*, is embodied the culmination of his musings on colour and culture, time and mortality, life and philosophy, art and film. Part memoir, part philosophical exercise, and part formal experiment, *Blue* is a quintessential example of the fusion of the archaic and the avant-garde in Jarman's work. Although it has generated a not insubstantial body of scholarly attention in its own right, O'Pray observes:

Blue is a particularly difficult film to discuss. This is not entirely because its image is blue throughout, for there is a well-established discourse for the discussion of minimal art and avant-garde cinema from the 60s and 70s [which] has included directors who have subscribed to a minimalist or abstract aesthetic. But Jarman is not using the colour field in a modernist way, or at least there are other ways in which it has meaning. For Jarman, the blue is primarily a metaphor. It is also a self-reflexive statement about the medium of cinema. Interestingly for this project Jarman rejected a use of film that stressed its inevitable patina – the scratches, the slight flicker – in favour of a blue akin to the electronic video field, unadulterated by the human hand and sheer in the way only a pixel can attain (in this it is like Yves Klein's own use of vertiginous blue). Within the most electronic of the popular media, and one which he had resisted, Jarman found a ground for his most discursive and profound piece.²⁹

In much the same way that John Dee made use of a black mirror, a piece of scrying equipment which falls under the umbrella term of 'shew-stone', to summon visions of spirits, Jarman employs *Blue's* brilliant glow as an object of contemplation, as a platform for an elegy uninterrupted by the influence of a visual narrative. Free from any sense of physical imperfection, the scratches and flicker of the 'inevitable patina', the royal azure of IKB bathes its audience in a light which seems untethered to any earthly form. At first seemingly opaque, the blue screen begins, over time, to suggest depth as Simon Fisher Turner's score threads itself through a series of vignettes drawn from the director's memories, intermingled with his poetic meditations on the spiritual qualities of the colour blue. As we gaze into the unchanging hue, we begin to discern shadows, suggestions of movement just below the surface. The

²⁹ Michael O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England* (London: BFI, 1996), p. 206.

mind, focused on the aural dimensions of the film, begins to project onto the blue canvas the shadows of our own imaginings of the events we cannot see; as filmmaker John Waters puts it, 'It's hypnotising. You feel like you're tripping after a while'.³⁰ For this is the central issue of *Blue*: the issue of seeing, or of not seeing, concerning both Jarman's own failing sight and the larger issue of, as O'Pray writes, 'the "invisibility" of gay men, which has contributed to the number of gay casualties of AIDS'.³¹ *Blue* not only represents Jarman's refusal to be rendered impotent by his illness and loss of sight, but also, as João Florêncio points out, 'counteracts the dominant objectifying representations of people with AIDS by relocating Jarman's private encounter with AIDS onto the public space'.³² Understandably, *Blue* is often discussed in relation to the AIDS virus, its score, and its sound design, and relatively few of those who have written about it have engaged with the lineage of its hue in any great detail.

As is made evident by the film's script, however, the colour blue held considerable significance for Jarman, and he had given it, as well as the rest of his palette, a great deal of thought as he penned *Chroma*. For him, colour is something mediaeval, inextricably tied to the symbolic pigments of the Middle Ages; as he writes, 'To understand the passion for gemlike colour, look at the illuminated manuscripts – the passing centuries rubbed the colour off old walls, but in the manuscripts hidden from the light that creates and destroys, you can see the colour bright as the day it was laid down by the illuminator'.³³ In this statement is made clear Jarman's appreciation of mediaeval art as well as his understanding of its philosophical and aesthetic influences. Eco informs us that 'when it came to their experience of colour – of gems, materials, flowers, light, and so on – the Medievals revealed [...] a most lively feeling for the purely sensuous properties of things',³⁴ and much the same can be said for Jarman's films. He demonstrates, too, a means of thinking about light which is quintessentially mediaeval in its connection between light and creation. As Gage informs us, 'In the literature on the six days of Creation, which goes back to St Basil the Great, the primary light (*lux*) was distinguished from the light of the heavenly bodies (*luminaria*) created later as

³⁰ Hannah Lack, 'John Waters on Derek Jarman's Blue', *AnOther Magazine*, 11th September 2015 <<http://www.anothermag.com/design-living/7772/john-waters-on-derek-jarmans-blue>> [accessed 1 May 2018].

³¹ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 202.

³² João Florêncio, 'Evoking the Strange Within: Performativity, Metaphor and Translocal Knowledge in Derek Jarman's Blue', in *Queer Dramaturgies: Contemporary Performance InterActions*, ed. by A. Campbell and S. Farrier (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 178–91 (p. 178).

³³ Jarman, *Chroma*, p. 48.

³⁴ Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 43–44.

derivations from *lux*.³⁵ *Lux*, then, is the highest form of light, equated to the Divine, where *lumen*, that which is produced by *Lux*, is a lesser form; ‘Colour’, Gage continues, ‘was related to *lumen* rather than to *lux* and was thus at two removes from the highest form of light’.³⁶ Jarman, well versed in the writings of the Middle Ages, is familiar with such a model of thought, and the iconography of his films – mirrors, lightbulbs, reflected and refracted light – echo this interest in the spirituality of light. Furthermore, as evidenced by *Chroma* which features chapter titles such as ‘The Romance of the Rose and the Sleep of Colour’ and ‘Alchemical Colour’, his understanding of colour is firmly rooted in a fascination with the holistic relationships between colour and pigment, routed through the theories of Jung.

In Klein, Jarman found another kindred spirit. Wymer informs us that ‘Klein attached particular symbolic significance to certain colours, deriving some of this symbolism from the seventeenth-century Rosicrucian philosopher Max Heindl who believed that blue was the highest of all colours and represented the spirit freed from matter’,³⁷ a theory which draws directly on the mediaeval associations of ultramarine and the mineral from which it was produced, lapis lazuli. Discussing the mineral in its medieval contexts, Bucklow writes that ‘According to an artist’s manual, the pigment “comes from across the seas and so is called ultra-marine.” Marco Polo claimed that the finest came from Badakhshan [...] in north-eastern Afghanistan’,³⁸ and Jarman too refers to ‘the great lapis mine on the banks of the River Oxus’.³⁹ Bucklow goes on to explain, by means of reference to the Hereford *mappa mundi*, that mediaeval maps were oriented towards the East, where Paradise lay, rather than the modern North: ‘The word “orient” comes from the Latin word for “rise”. The sun, a symbol of God, rises in the orient and – with the east at the top – the sun does not circle around the world so much as descend into it’.⁴⁰ As a result, ‘in the medieval world, Afghanistan, on the edge of the Indian subcontinent, is right next to Paradise. Lapis and ultramarine come from overseas, from the doorstep of Paradise’.⁴¹ To the mediaeval mind, then, lapis and ultramarine held associations of divinity and spirituality, and not simply because their colouration mirrored

³⁵ John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), p. 70.

³⁶ Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, p. 70.

³⁷ Wymer, pp. 170 - 171.

³⁸ Bucklow, p. 44.

³⁹ Jarman, *Chroma*, p.48.

⁴⁰ Bucklow, p. 46.

⁴¹ Ibid.

that of the sky. What made these materials important to the mediaeval artist was not, however, their colouration, but their materiality; as Gage points out, 'A precious ultramarine in the fourteenth century had no more of an aesthetic value for its user than a synthetic or industrial paint for an American Colour-Field painter of the 1960s'.⁴² Ultramarine was valued because it was exotic, and it was the colour's relation to its source that made it such a costly and desirable material, as well as the complex process of refining the lapis into its resultant pigment. Bucklow cites recipes for the purification of the lapis, to separate the golden flecks of pyrite and veins of white calcite from the desirable blue mineral, which span from the third to the fifteenth century⁴³ and describe some rather arcane means of deriving the desired hue from the raw material, rooted in 'four element theory'.⁴⁴

Well versed in the writings of Jung, Dee, and the likes of such notable Classical theorists as Pliny, Jarman was well aware of, and deeply interested in, such holistic philosophies. As Wymer observes, 'In many of Jarman's films there is an alternation between red and blue, with red representing the carnal and blue the spiritual, in accordance with the Jungian chromatic symbolism he favoured',⁴⁵ and his body of work is permeated with alchemical imagery. Jung, building on the theories of Hippocrates, suggested that the human temperament might be characterised through a balance of four distinct elements, coded by colour: blue, red, yellow, and green, in correspondence with the mediaeval concept of the four humours. These four bodily fluids, blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile, were thought to dictate the constitution and disposition of a person; good health was understood to mean that the four were balanced correctly, the human microcosm of the elemental balance of the physical world. In Jung's model, blue represents the calm, the questioning, the analytical, and the spiritual; in other words, intellectual qualities distanced from impulse and physicality. Similarly, phlegm was the humour associated with the element of water. Cool and wet, it was thought to have purifying, healing properties within the human body and, as components of the macrocosmic world beyond the body, lapis and ultramarine were likewise believed to be treatments for 'hot' ailments resulting from an overabundance of black bile, such as fevers.⁴⁶ Bucklow lists a number of examples, spanning from first century Greece to

⁴² Gage, p. 9.

⁴³ Bucklow, p. 47.

⁴⁴ Bucklow, p. 49.

⁴⁵ Wymer, p. 96.

⁴⁶ Bucklow, p.67.

seventeenth century England, in which lapis is prescribed as an antidote to such maladies as headaches, snakebites, and fevers; of much greater interest to this thesis, however, is the number of examples he provides from the fourteenth century in which lapis (also referred to as sapphire) is cited as a cure for 'diseases of the eye'.⁴⁷

The importance of the medicinal use of the stone in a discussion of *Blue* is two-fold: firstly, International Klein Blue (IKB), the hue that Jarman chose for the film, was conceived by French painter Yves Klein as a representation of 'pure space and he associated it with immaterial values beyond what can be seen or touched',⁴⁸ and is a shade of pure ultramarine mixed with a fixative which did not dull the brilliance of the dry pigment; secondly, as stated above, *Blue's* imageless narrative relates both to Jarman's own failing sight and the invisibility of homosexuals afflicted with HIV. *Blue*, then, can be understood both as a final, cathartic expression of Jarman's creativity and also as an intended curative for the plight of those affected by the virus. By projecting these concerns into the public arena of the cinema, he can be seen to be offering a visual panacea to a society blind to them; for as Kassia St. Claire informs us, 'everyone, even the non-sighted, possesses a special receptor that senses blue light'.⁴⁹ However, such a reading of *Blue* depends on the healing properties of the lapis stone, and it must be noted that Klein made IKB from a synthetic pigment derived from that created by French chemist, Jean-Baptiste Guimet, in response to the demands of Société d'Encouragement in 1924,⁵⁰ and not the mineral itself. *Blue*, too, consists of projected light rather than physical substance, and so is precluded from the material associations of mediaeval lapis. And yet, Jarman's account of the colour, which threads backwards through Klein, Kandinsky, and Cézanne, the creation of a synthetic blue pigment in eighteenth century Russia and the banning of indigo in sixteenth century Germany, to Early English woad and Pictish tattoos, also makes repeated mention of lapis and sapphire.⁵¹ For *Blue*, as O'Pray observes above, makes use of its eponymous colouration primarily as a metaphor; by making use of IKB, Jarman could simultaneously evoke the painter's associations of pure, immaterial

⁴⁷ Bucklow, p. 67.

⁴⁸ Sophie Howarth, 'IKB 79', YVES KLEIN, 1959', *Tate*, 2000 <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/klein-ikb-79-t01513>> [accessed 4 May 2018].

⁴⁹ Kassia St. Claire, *The Secret Lives of Colour* (London: John Murray, 2016), p. 179.

⁵⁰ Ravi Mangla, 'True Blue: A Brief History of Ultramarine', *The Paris Review*, 2015 <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/06/08/true-blue/>> [accessed 4 May 2018].

⁵¹ Jarman, *Chroma*, pp. 103 - 105.

space, and also those of the lapis based pigment of the Middle Ages. It is useful, at this juncture, to consider *Blue* as an immaterial object. As Bucklow writes:

In terms of Plato's cave, colours or pigments like ultramarine or vermilion are parts of the movie – they are just shadows on a wall. They are the projection into the material world of their formal cause, a higher being, some of whose characteristics they share. Calling pigments 'shadows' does not imply that they are two-dimensional, but it does imply that a dimension has been lost or, more accurately, folded-up and hidden. That hidden part is a spiritual dimension.⁵²

As the auditory narrative of *Blue* progresses, the viewer begins to discern barely perceptible shadows and movements within the depths of the IKB. We begin to imagine, to project into the resplendent hue, our own vague impressions of the visual dimensions of the moments described in the voiceover. If we consider blue in the terms that Jarman favours, in the spiritual terms of Jung and the immateriality of Klein, it can be seen as a representation of the beyond, as an ephemeral patina which separates the audience from the realities of its narrative; a thin veil between the present and the past. To view *Blue* now is to gaze through Jarman's 'open door to the soul', to be bathed in the blue light of 'infinite possibility',⁵³ and to reflect on the spiritual dimension of the filmmaker's swan song.

⁵² Bucklow, p. 117.

⁵³ Jarman, *Chroma*, p. 112.

Distant Voices, Still Lives

The comparison of Plato's Cave Allegory with the cinema is a well-established one, both in film itself and in film-philosophy scholarship. In his scenario, a group of people are imprisoned below ground, restrained by the neck and ankle, able only to see that which is directly in front of them: shadows cast on a blank wall. Unable to see the light source behind them, or the figures who pass before it, the prisoners are inclined to suppose that the voices they hear emanate from the shadows cast against the wall, and thus that these shadows are living entities, an illusion that bears more than a passing resemblance to cinema. The object of Plato's allegory is an ethical one: it is the moral responsibility of anyone who discovers the truth behind this perception of reality to remove the scales from the eyes of their fellows. However, the play of the shadows upon the wall also presents an avenue for the discussion of their indexical relationship with the figures that produce them. As Mary Ann Doane observes, 'Photography and film would seem to be excellent examples of sign systems that merge icon, index, and to some extent, symbol. Although indexical because the photographic image has an existential bond with its object, they are also iconic in relying upon a similarity with that object'.⁵⁴ In the case of Jarman's *Blue*, the would-be shadows on the wall are replaced by a staunch denial of a visual narrative. The unrelenting blue screen offers no icon of the human form, no semblance or representation of any physical object from which we might divine meaning. Instead, it offers an empty space in which to contemplate the film's soundscape.

Originally to be based on a script which Jarman had written during his school days, stemming from 'his personal politics [...] raging against the times',⁵⁵ *Blue* evolved, as his illness did, to become a reflection on the plight of those afflicted with AIDS. As O'Pray and Florêncio observe above, by denying his audience any visual representation of himself, AIDS, or the scenarios described by the film's narrators, Jarman neutralises the spectacle of the illness and relocates the agency of the film to its soundtrack; the shadows on the wall become echoes, aural traces of the departed object. However, in his examination of *Blue*'s 'Queer Audiovisuality', Jacques Khalip writes:

⁵⁴ M. A. Doane, 'The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity', *Differences*, 18 (2007), 128–52 (p. 134).

⁵⁵ Simon Huggett, 'Simon Fisher Turner On Derek Jarman's *Blue*', *The Quietus*, 2014
<<http://thequietus.com/articles/05380-world-aids-days-simon-fisher-turner-on-derek-jarman-s-blue>>
[accessed 11 September 2017].

The sounds of the names in *Blue*, like the sounds of waves, the thunder, the *Song of Solomon*, or the conversation between Yves Klein and St. Rita of Cascia mark the unfurling of semantic meaning *from* sound, the very possibility of sound not referring to anyone at all.⁵⁶

Khalip rightly observes that, as a component of the film's soundtrack, the spoken word 'narrative' can also be treated as a sequence of sounds divorced from meaning. Each syllable becomes a note on the score, an element of Fisher-Turner's sound design, and thus the sound of each name becomes little but a hollowed out sign which refers to its speaker rather than the person to whom it belonged. Such a reading suggests, rather bleakly, that the listing of Jarman's departed friends and lovers is less an act of remembrance than it is a rollcall of those who have fallen to the virus; the names mean little to the film's audience. For Jarman, however, it was an intensely personal work, and despite their phonic status as part of 'an aural swarm'⁵⁷ there is a sense of intimacy in Jarman's inclusion of these names; they may be hollow signs to his audience, but for him they are signifiers of past loves, lives, and experiences. While Kalip's interpretation lends itself to a reading of the film as a means of drawing attention to the invisibility of gay men infected with AIDS, Wymer reminds us that 'Towards the end of his life, it felt more important to [Jarman] to have captured the smile on the face of a dead friend than to have invented a new cinematic language'.⁵⁸ Perhaps it is enough for Jarman that the names of these men are embedded in his film, signifiers of his personal recollections and simultaneously evocative of bittersweet loss. Indeed, as Fisher-Turner points out, *Blue* is 'an AIDS-related project which you can take one of two ways: you could say it was very depressing or you could take it the opposite way as very celebratory'.⁵⁹ Regardless of which stance one takes, viewing *Blue* is an incredibly emotive experience. Its denial of the image in favour of its titular IKB hue is at once the film's claim to structuralism and cinematic experimentation, and also an echo of a more contemplative mediaeval sensibility.

Seated before *Blue*, bathed in the light that spills from bounds of its frame, an audience is habitually bound to gaze fixedly at the 'image' before them. However, as Wymer

⁵⁶ Jacques Khalip, "'The Archaeology of Sound": Derek Jarman's *Blue* and Queer Audiovisuality in the Time of AIDS', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Culture*, 21.2 (2010), 73–108 (p. 87).

⁵⁷ Khalip, p. 87.

⁵⁸ Wymer, p. 28.

⁵⁹ Huggett.

notes, 'At the end of *Blue*, Jarman quotes an eloquent passage about the transience of all things from the Apocryphal "Wisdom of Solomon" where 'he would have found numerous warnings against the worship of images', citing this text as one of several which influenced Jarman's 'distrust of images'.⁶⁰ In its avoidance of the depiction of AIDS, *Blue* sidesteps the risk of sentimentalising or making a spectacle of the illness and those who suffer from it, usurping the image in favour of the word; Turner observes that '*Blue*, the film, the concept, and everything, what it's about is the writing, the beautiful writing'.⁶¹ Translated from page to spoken word, the episodic script becomes a series of contemplative meditations, not dissimilar in form, if not content, to a sermon. In her study of mediaeval theories of cognition, Michelle Karns writes that 'Depending for its value, in part, on an Aristotelian notion of imagination, whereby imagination enabled any transition from sensible to intelligible apprehension, imagining the life of Christ drew on the power of imagination to impel the meditant from Christ's humanity to his divinity'.⁶² A similar effect, where knowledge proceeds from the corporeal to the incorporeal, is achieved by Jarman in *Blue*: our first apprehension of the film's contents are auditory, its visual aspect yielding little; to follow a mediaeval model, we may then process this sensory information through the faculties of intellect and reason to produce understanding, and perhaps the desired state of wisdom. If *Blue* is considered as a panacea for the metaphorical blindness of its audience, it can also be reasoned that contemplating the film in this manner, as a meditation, is the means by which this antidote is administered; Martin Frey notes that 'the meditative immersion in the deep-blue projected light enables viewers to embark on an associative journey into their own selves, based on the perceived words, noises and sounds, and in doing so to find themselves in an inner dialogue with what they perceive'.⁶³ Of course, the film is identified above as an incorporeal object, and this holds true; though its colour may tint our surroundings, or ourselves, our experience of the film is not of a tangible, physical form. Nevertheless, its origins are earthly, and its auditory elements connect us with Jarman and, by extension, the larger community of gay men whose experiences reflect his. The audience, in the role of meditants, are impelled from

⁶⁰ Wymer, p. 10.

⁶¹ Huggett.

⁶² Michelle Karns, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 4–5.

⁶³ Martin Frey, *Derek Jarman - Moving Pictures of a Painter: Home Movies, Super 8 Films and Other Small Gestures* (Le Vergne: Ingram Content Group Inc, 2016), p. 86.

Jarman as gay man, filmmaker, and activist, signifier of gay AIDS sufferers, to Jarman as incredibly mortal man, and in the process are encouraged to see AIDS patients and homosexuals both in a more sympathetic, human light.

Beyond its metaphorical import as an audio-visual lapis, however, *Blue* is also in accordance with the aesthetic theories that surrounded light and colour in respect of art and beauty in the Middle Ages. As Eco informs us:

medieval theorists looked upon beauty as something intelligible, a kind of mathematical quality, even when they were discussing purely empirical matters such as the experience of metre or the design of the human body. But when it came to their experience of colour – of gems, materials, flowers, light, and so on – the Medievals revealed instead a most lively feeling for the purely sensuous properties of things. Their love of proportion was expressed initially as a theoretical doctrine, and was only gradually transferred to the sphere of practice and precept. Their love of colour and light, by contrast, was a spontaneous reaction, typically medieval, which only afterwards came to be expressed scientifically within their metaphysical systems. The beauty of colour was everywhere felt to be beauty pure and simple, something immediately perceptible and indivisible, and with no element of the relational as was the case with proportion.⁶⁴

There is of course much to be said about the effects of colour on mood and perception as discussed in modern colour theory, and yet Jarman's blue is best considered in the terms that he himself thought of it, as a spiritual infinite routed through the beliefs of Klein, Jung, and the mediaevals. From a mediaeval standpoint, the film's IKB represents an immediate and sensuous beauty which, as a purely visual experience, might be supposed to represent nothing other than itself. It was important to Jarman that *Blue* avoid representation; in a journal entry from August 1992, he writes 'I decided to make *Blue* without images – they hinder the imagination and beg a narrative and suffocate with arbitrary charm, the admirable austerity of the void'.⁶⁵ The film is not an imageless work simply as a result of his own failing sight but because the unadulterated IKB acts both as a modern day shew-stone, a blue descendant of Dee's black mirror which connects the imagination of the audience with that of the filmmaker, and also as a pure and sensuous experience of beauty. Indeed, the filmmaker's reaction to 'the exquisite bright painting irradiated with pure clear colour' of his

⁶⁴ Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, pp. 43-44.

⁶⁵ Jarman, *Smiling in Slow Motion*, p. 198.

‘first grown-up book [...] *The Cloister and the Hearth*’⁶⁶ betrays a distinctly mediaeval response to colour, and thinking about blue in this way reinforces the idea that *Blue* is a celebration of life as much as it is an elegy. At the same time, it emphasises the presence of a strain of mediaeval aesthetics which runs throughout Jarman’s artistic practices. In addition to the interest in the holistic philosophy of the Middle Ages and its associated colour theories expressed in *Blue* and *Chroma*, his body of work contains repeated engagement with the poetic framework of the dream vision (*The Angelic Conversation*, *Jubilee*, *The Last of England*, *The Garden*), a fascination with symbol and allegory (*The Art of Mirrors*, *In the Shadow of the Sun*), and a scattering of distinctly mediaeval figures and subject matter (*Sebastiane*, *Corfe Film*).

Such elements, however, are not confined to Jarman’s writing and filmmaking; they are equally present in his paintings. The *GBH* series that he produced for the ICA in 1984 represents a typically Jarman example of an artwork intrinsically linked to a specific socio-political moment but which, upon close examination, suggests more than a trace of mediaeval influence. Peake informs us that ‘Having originally thought of doing “a picture of Mrs Thatcher on a slashed through canvas entitled *Blood on Her Hands*”, then discarding this idea as “too obvious”, Jarman settled on the map of Britain, inspired by the Jasper Johns paintings of the American flag’.⁶⁷ Responding to the dominant mode of painting in the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism, Johns reproduced ‘common, instantly recognizable symbols—flags, targets, numbers, letters’ in ‘encaustic, a mixture of pigment and molten wax that has left a surface of lumps and smears; so that even though one recognizes the image in a second, close up it becomes textured and elaborate’.⁶⁸ In similar fashion, Jarman prepared the six *GBH* paintings, ‘large (ten feet by eight) and produced on specially prepared, canvas-backed newspaper’,⁶⁹ creating imposing images in an array of tarry blacks, sulphurous yellows, and fiery reds which both confront the viewer and compel them to scrutinise the Britain before them. Of the paintings’ composition, a map of Britain which becomes increasingly misshapen with each sequential image, Peake notes that Jarman opened an atlas and drew comparison between the shape of the country and that of a detonated hydrogen bomb; the circle which overlays

⁶⁶ Jarman, *Up In The Air: Collected Film Scripts*, p. 81.

⁶⁷ Tony Peake, *Derek Jarman* (London: Abacus, 1999), p. 318.

⁶⁸ ‘Jasper Johns Flag 1954-55 (Dated on Reverse 1954)’, *MoMA.Org*, 2004
<<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78805>> [accessed 3rd September 2018].

⁶⁹ Peake, p. 138.

each map represents a targeting reticule.⁷⁰ Charlesworth, devoting a rare amount of attention to a discussion of the *GBH* series, provides a detailed description of each painting in turn, connecting their textured surfaces with that which they depict by means of the relief map; the recurring motif of the circle reminds him of the late paintings of J. M. W. Turner; and, in the encompassing of the upper portions of the maps within circles, he sees an echo of ‘the one in the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* (c. 1300) which demarcates the temporal and the timeless realms of the world’.⁷¹ He explains, ‘The *Mappa* suggests harmony: a chart of the moral and spiritual order of the world, forming a contrast with Derek’s depiction of late twentieth-century misrule and chaos’,⁷² and though Jarman’s maps are not arranged in the Jerusalem centric T-O schema of the Middle Ages, the collision of and tension between the past and present that this comparison represents is in keeping with the ethos of his work.

If the circular motif of the *GBH* series recalls the *Mappa Mundi*, however, then so too does its colour palette echo the depictions of Hell envisioned by Bosch and Breugel. Although the blacks that Jarman employs in the *GBH* paintings are more suggestive of umber than the smoky blue-based blacks that Bosch employs, there is a violence in the fiery reds and coppery yellows that is suggestive of the *Hell* panel of ‘The Garden of Earthly Delights’. Furthermore, Fischer observes:

In formal terms, all four segments of the triptych are linked by the motif of the circle: the spherical body of the Earth on the exterior shutters; the convex disc with the owl in the centre and the birds around it in the left inner wing; the round pond with female bathers and men riding around it in the central panel; and the circular brim of the tree-man’s hat in the right inner wing, upon which three couples are walking around the bagpipes in the middle. Depending on context, the circle can symbolise the perfection of the cosmos, or it may be betoken to the sinner whose physical desires drive him to wander endlessly and meaninglessly in a circle, without ever reaching a destination.⁷³

The circle may, as Charlesworth suggests, be interpreted as a symbol of spiritual and moral order, or alternatively it can be read in relation to the sinner, as Fischer observes. In the context of *GBH*, either interpretation might be considered equally valid: if read as denoting

⁷⁰ Peake, p. 318.

⁷¹ Michael Charlesworth, *Derek Jarman* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), p. 97.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Fischer, p. 117.

harmony, the circular motif becomes a tarnished golden disc representing the corruption and ruin of a once idyllic Britannia; if read as 'betoken to the sinner', they might be read in a queer context as a bitter commentary on the situation of homosexuals as the AIDs epidemic took root. In either case, the coloration of the paintings and the sequential morphing of Britain into a plume of smoke and flames is inarguably hellish, conjuring visions of the burning buildings, fiery pits, and invading armies of Bosch's *Hell* or, perhaps, of Breugel's 'Dulle Griet' (c. 1562). Breugel's painting, in which a toothless and armoured woman flees a war-torn village with an armful of loot, is an equally riotous depiction of human vice; as Hagen and Hagen note, 'Bruegel has depicted a traditional figure as the embodiment of aggressive greed' and 'The Divine Order has no validity here'.⁷⁴ It is also not beyond the realms of possibility that Jarman would find a source of amusement in linking a depiction of Greed named 'Mad Meg' with a series of paintings conceived as a commentary on Thatcher's Britain. Indeed, as the series progresses his depiction of Britain gradually changes shape, appearing to extend vertically northwards in the fifth painting before collapsing in flames in the sixth, allowing further comparison to be made with Breugel's 'The "Little" Tower of Babel' (c. 1563) which depicts the infamous structure in an array of sunset reds. Perhaps Britain, too, was toppling in Jarman's eyes.

A Field in England

While in the early years of his artistic education Jarman had, as Frey writes, 'enthusiastically admired the works of the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists, studied the biographies of Monet, Gauguin and van Gogh and personally preferred to paint landscapes and still lives',⁷⁵ his diaries indicate that his tastes have always favoured the pre-modern. Similarly, although the Renaissance has an indelible presence in his work, Wymer notes that 'He did not greatly admire the major painters of the Italian Renaissance, finding in them an almost indecent interest in the flesh and contrasting them unfavourably with "the painters of the north" such as Brueghel and Dürer whose inward and spiritual qualities connected them more closely with the late Middle Ages'.⁷⁶ Indeed, though Jarman's films are rife with nudity, his displays of the

⁷⁴ Rose-Marie Hagen and Rainer Hagen, *Bruegel: The Complete Paintings* (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), p. 43.

⁷⁵ Martin Frey, *Derek Jarman - Moving Pictures of a Painter: Home Movies, Super 8 Films and Other Small Gestures* (Le Vergne: Ingram Content Group Inc, 2016) , p. 53.

⁷⁶ Wymer, p. 7.

male body and homoerotic acts are intended as much as an effort to normalise homosexuality as they are to exhibit the beauty he perceives in the male form. He identifies ‘an artificiality’ in the nudes of the Italian Renaissance, and, in a diary entry from 1983, suggests that ‘we are closer to Bruegel than to Titian; the former’s brooding, stormy skies and studies of work and play should have been the seed corn of social realism’.⁷⁷ Like Gilliam, Jarman exhibits a pronounced interest in the rich sense of time and place, and of human narrative, evident in the paintings of Bosch and Breugel. Just as Gilliam borrowed Bruegel’s ‘The Fight Between Carnival and Lent’ (1559) for *Jabberwocky*’s poster, as well as the series of paintings the film makes use of as shorthand for world-building in its opening sequence, Jarman shows that he too gave thought to the way in which these pre-modern painters viewed the world:

Stations attract all those who have no journey to take; they provide warmth, a roof in a sudden storm, and the illusion of being at the hub of things.

Breugel would have recorded this: a shrunken man on a wheelchair driving around in circles; old men shuffling past in shabby suits, demob refugees lost in time; tense, pale, clerks, their ill-fitting trousers shiny with wear, threadbare suitcases; bleach-blonde mismatched office girls, hairdos and bulging jeans.⁷⁸

The allegorical and symbolic elements of ‘The Fight Between Carnival and Lent’ are a rich vein of study, each figure having their own story to tell within the greater narrative tapestry of the painting, and the way in which Jarman records the station before him conjures a similar scene in his readers’ minds. The ‘shrunken man’, the ‘old men [...] in shabby suits’ and the ‘bleach-blonde [...] office girls’ suggest a grotesque vision of reality populated by modern incarnations of the figures one might expect to see in a painting by Bosch or Breugel. Implicit in Jarman’s phrasing is a way of seeing the world which echoes both that of the ‘painters of the North’ who he admires, and also that of the Pre-Raphaelites with whom he claims affiliation.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, as Raymond Watkinson informs us, began with Hunt, Rossetti, and Millais.⁷⁹ Stifled by the painterly practices espoused by the Royal Academy, the Brotherhood set out a mission statement:

⁷⁷ Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 27.

⁷⁸ Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 74.

⁷⁹ Raymond Watkinson, *Pre-Raphaelite Art and Design*, 2nd edn (London: Trefoil Publications Ltd, 1990), p. 49.

Rejecting as far as possible all the traditional conventions, this art should seek above all to project ideas in terms of a scrupulously faithful visual account of whatever figures, settings, details or circumstances might be needed to add up to a projection of the chosen incident, occasion, relationship, whether literary, illustrative or historical. In this respect their ideas about possible themes for paintings were not materially different from those of other painters: the critical difference was in their joint insistence on a regard for visual truth. For Rossetti, poetic or symbolic significance of some sort was most important; for Hunt, a moral idea; for Millais, the content was not deeply significant as long as the ostensible subject was appealing; but as to how they should work, the way in which their paintings should attack the public eye and win recognition away from 'the old gang', they were quite agreed.⁸⁰

In many ways, this ethos is mirrored in Jarman's own. A trained painter, a set-designer, filmmaker and writer, Jarman refused to be easily categorised: Frey points out that 'He was always focused on his desire to visually realise a message; the appropriate medium was selected during the search for the form of realisation corresponding to the given case'.⁸¹ Like the PRB, Jarman drew from a grab-bag of literary, contemporary, and historical sources in the creation of his own visual language, dressing scenes of the past in the trappings of the present. For all the abstract poeticism of *In the Shadow of the Sun* and the symbolic content of *The Art of Mirrors*, Jarman, like Millais, was most interested in the ideas behind or subjects contained within his work and constructed his own, often challenging, forms of narrative around them. Though many of the figures central to his later feature films are derived from history, such as Caravaggio, Edward II, and Wittgenstein, Jarman chooses to present them as 'projection[s] of the chosen incident, occasion, [or] relationship' rather than as de facto period pieces, a decision rooted as much in his dislike for the English costume drama as his view of film as an extension of his painterly practise. In the same way that Caravaggio produced realistic portraits of historical and Biblical figures by giving them the faces of his models, Jarman is conscious that the raw material of film is the present and that the faces he assigned to his characters were often those of his friends and acquaintances. As such, his approach to filming the past is a logical extension of the Pre-Raphaelite 'insistence on a regard for visual truth'; film cannot help but be scrupulously faithful to the figures before it, regardless of the illusory context within which they operate.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Frey, p.11.

This is not to say, however, that Jarman's work is by any means realist; while the figures and objects which feature in it are, by necessity, recorded from life, his presentation is often heavily abstracted. As O'Pray notes, with film 'He was able to explore formal techniques, especially superimposition and refilming at different speeds' while 'developing subject matter around his interest in alchemical and cabbalist symbolism and ritual',⁸² and in painting, too, Jarman experimented with form and style to find an expression all his own. In his teenage years, he informs us, he 'was hardly aware of American painting – the influences were English: William Scott and Paul Nash',⁸³ and Charlesworth likens a piece from his student days, 'his prize-winning painting, *We Wait*', to 'the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s'.⁸⁴ As he goes on to note, however:

By the late 1960s and the early 1970s there was none of the exuberant enjoyment of the fluidity of paint that we saw in *Painting A*. The works are almost all landscapes, and they had become colder, more distant, eventually smaller (after the Slade years), more dominated by one colour, often more geometrical, often flatter, or only schematically and minimally spatial, and painted in a hard-edged manner. Some of the smaller of these works are very beautiful. The 'Avebury' series from 1971-2 shows objects that resemble the standing stones of the prehistoric Avebury circle planted in wholly abstract settings that consist of horizontal lines crossed by a minimal number of uprights. Some idea of space is created from the intersection of horizontal and vertical forms, but there is no idea of surface or setting. Very few of these landscapes are populated (and then only with distant, schematic figures) and none are remotely picturesque. The paint is applied very thinly, with no visible brushmarks. Distant rocks and cliffs are represented by an interesting collaged element – black and white photographs of marble surfaces are cut up, backed on yellow paper so that a narrow border surrounds the 'rocks' and fixed to the right place on the canvas. Beauty might be present, but a feeling of human emptiness pervades, and a very minimal structure.⁸⁵

Empty or otherwise, space is a constant consideration in Jarman's visual work, be it represented by the bounds of the frame or the edge of the stage. The piece that Charlesworth designates 'Painting A', in which 'A green square frames the centre, within the overall square

⁸² Michael O'Pray, 'Derek Jarman: The Art of Films/Films of Art', in *Derek Jarman: A Portrait* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), pp. 65–75 (pp. 66–67).

⁸³ Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 151.

⁸⁴ Charlesworth, pp. 27-28.

⁸⁵ Charlesworth, p. 38.

of the painting, and focuses attention on the denser array of colours within',⁸⁶ is an abstract piece from Jarman's student days that demonstrates his enjoyment in exploring the bounds of his chosen medium; the importance of space is defined by the demarcation of the boundaries within which the colour and materiality of the paint can operate. The shift towards more constrained, overtly representational geometric figures in his landscapes of the 60s and 70s reflects the aesthetic decisions made in his set designs for Frederick Ashton's production of *Jazz Calendar*, and John Gielgud's *Don Giovanni*, in 1968, as well as those he designed for Ken Russell's *The Devils* and *The Rake's Progress*. Here, the configuration of space both creates its own meaning and influences that of the movement of the dancers who operate within it.

Like Charlesworth, and indeed Jarman himself, Frey identifies 'a mute emptiness and indefinable distance' in the landscape paintings of this period, designating them experiments in formalism directly inspired by Duchamp and 'the protagonists of Cubism',⁸⁷ lacking the human element which would later re-emerge in Jarman's work on film. Despite their empty spaces, however, these landscapes may be less devoid of human connection than they initially appear; the geometric figures of which they are comprised, often intersecting and perpendicular lines carefully arranged into fore-, middle-, and background, are suggestive not just of natural forms but also of the connections between them. First popularised by Alfred Watkins in his treatise on the subject, *Early British Trackways* (1922), and further expanded upon in his subsequent study *The Old Straight Track: In Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Mark Stones* (1925), ley lines are theorised to be just such connections. The ley, as Watkins first defined it, was a straight line which extended 'up to 50 or 60 miles in length'⁸⁸ between two sighting points, 'from natural mountain peak to mountain peak, usually not less than 1,000 ft. [...] such points being terminals'.⁸⁹ He would later express this as 'the alignment across miles of country of a great number of objects, or sites of objects, of prehistoric antiquity'.⁹⁰ Though they swiftly fell afoul of archaeologists, mathematicians, and statisticians who sought to highlight the factual improbability of his findings, Watkins' writings on leys

⁸⁶ Charlesworth, p. 29.

⁸⁷ Frey, p. 90.

⁸⁸ Alfred Watkins, *Early British Trackways* (Hereford: The Watkins Meter Co., 1922), p. 8.

⁸⁹ Watkins, *Early British Trackways*.

⁹⁰ Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track: Its Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Mark Stones* (Heritage Hunter, 2015), p. viii.

garnered a modest following, best represented by The Old Straight Track Club, which endured until some ten years after his death in 1935. While others, such as Dr. J. Heinsch, had arrived at similar conclusions to Watkins' in the following years, it was not until the publication of John Michell's *The View Over Atlantis* in 1969 that the ley returned to popularity. Paul Devereux and Ian Thomson observe: 'The decade of the Sixties was the time for the ley concept, amongst others, and it has moved with increasing momentum ever since. Ley hunting is a bridge-building study: the area of investigation it has created around itself is becoming known by the suitably all-encompassing term of "Earth Mysteries"'.⁹¹

Jarman is known to have read such works. In his published account of the careful creation and cultivation of his garden at Dungeness, entitled simply *Derek Jarman's Garden*, he writes: 'I have read all the mystical books about ley-lines and circles – I built the circles with this behind my mind'.⁹² While the conclusions that Watkins drew from his observations were of an ancient system of navigation, later writings on the subject, such of those of Michell, expanded on the geomantic possibilities of these alignments. Understood by Heinsch as 'the sacred layout of the landscape',⁹³ geomancy also refers to a form of divination in which meaning is derived from the spatial relationship between a handful of thrown stones, or other earthy materials. The Earth Mysteries of the 1960s incorporated such ideas, along with those of the dowsing or divining rod, to posit that the alignments between these ancient sites and landmarks was indicative of a lost system of knowledge and power of a mystical or magical nature. One such theory to which Devereux and Thomson devote considerable attention is that of one Tom Graves on the Rollright Stones of Oxon:

He found not only the energy or force present at the stones of the circle, but also that the stones were transmitting the energy from one to another so that a 'spin of energy or power' was created at the circumference of the circle, with a 'flow' of power from one stone to the next [...] Moreover, he observed that some of this 'flow' made exits at two points at Rollright and shot off across country [...] in *straight lines*. [sic]⁹⁴

⁹¹ Paul Devereux and Ian Thomson, *The Ley Hunter's Companion: Aligned Ancient Sites: A New Study with Field Guide and Maps* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), p. 53.

⁹² Derek Jarman, *Derek Jarman's Garden* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 47.

⁹³ Devereux and Thomson, p. 33.

⁹⁴ Devereux and Thomson, p. 65.

In the draughtsmanly construction of such paintings as 'Landscape with a Marble Mountain' and 'Landscape with a Blue Pool' (1967), as well as the Avebury Series (1971-2), Jarman foregrounds the geometry of the natural landscape before him. His compositions adhere to strict spatial relationships between figures; vertical and horizontal lines are placed with mathematical precision, and the semblance of depth is created by the careful alignment of each figure with a horizontal plane and a clearly defined vanishing point. The monoliths of 'Avebury Series no. 4', for example, can be easily traced back along a z-axis to connect with the established horizontal planes (Fig. 18). The central monolith occupies not just the upper two-thirds of the composition but is aligned with the foremost monolith and three of the four arrangements of boulders, as illustrated by the addition of the red, green, and blue lines to the image below. This configuration of objects is carefully calculated in its mathematical precision and minimalist representation of the English landscape, and yet in its combination with Jarman's choice of Avebury as his subject is suggested a deeper, primal connection between these ancient objects.

Common to many of the texts which constitute the theoretical strain of Jarman's literary interests is a Jungian fascination with the collective unconscious, as well as arcane symbols and practices which signify a larger force or truth to which the creative mind has access. Similarly, Devereux and Thomson's discussion of the ley line begins with a reference to 'A flood of ancestral memory'.⁹⁵ Though less than objective in the opinions it espouses, Devereux and Thomson's text provides a succinct and accessible overview of the culture which surrounds the theory of the ley line, in which is evident a strain of mediaevalism in congruence with the ninth of Eco's *Little Middle Ages*: that 'of so-called *Tradition*, or of occult philosophy'.⁹⁶ Outlandish though they may be, the theories of Michell and his contemporaries in the field of 'Earth Mysteries', as well as those of Heinsch and Watkins before him, rely on readings and re-imaginings of the past to structure their proposed systems of belief. In Jarman's *A Journey to Avebury* (1971), a ten-minute super-8 piece filmed at the titular henge, is expressed a similar meditation on the presence of the past in the present day. Originally a silent film, before experimental music group Coil added a score in 2006, comprised by a series of primarily static shots of the countryside surrounding the stones at Avebury, *Journey to*

⁹⁵ Devereux and Thomson, p. 9.

⁹⁶ Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, p. 71.

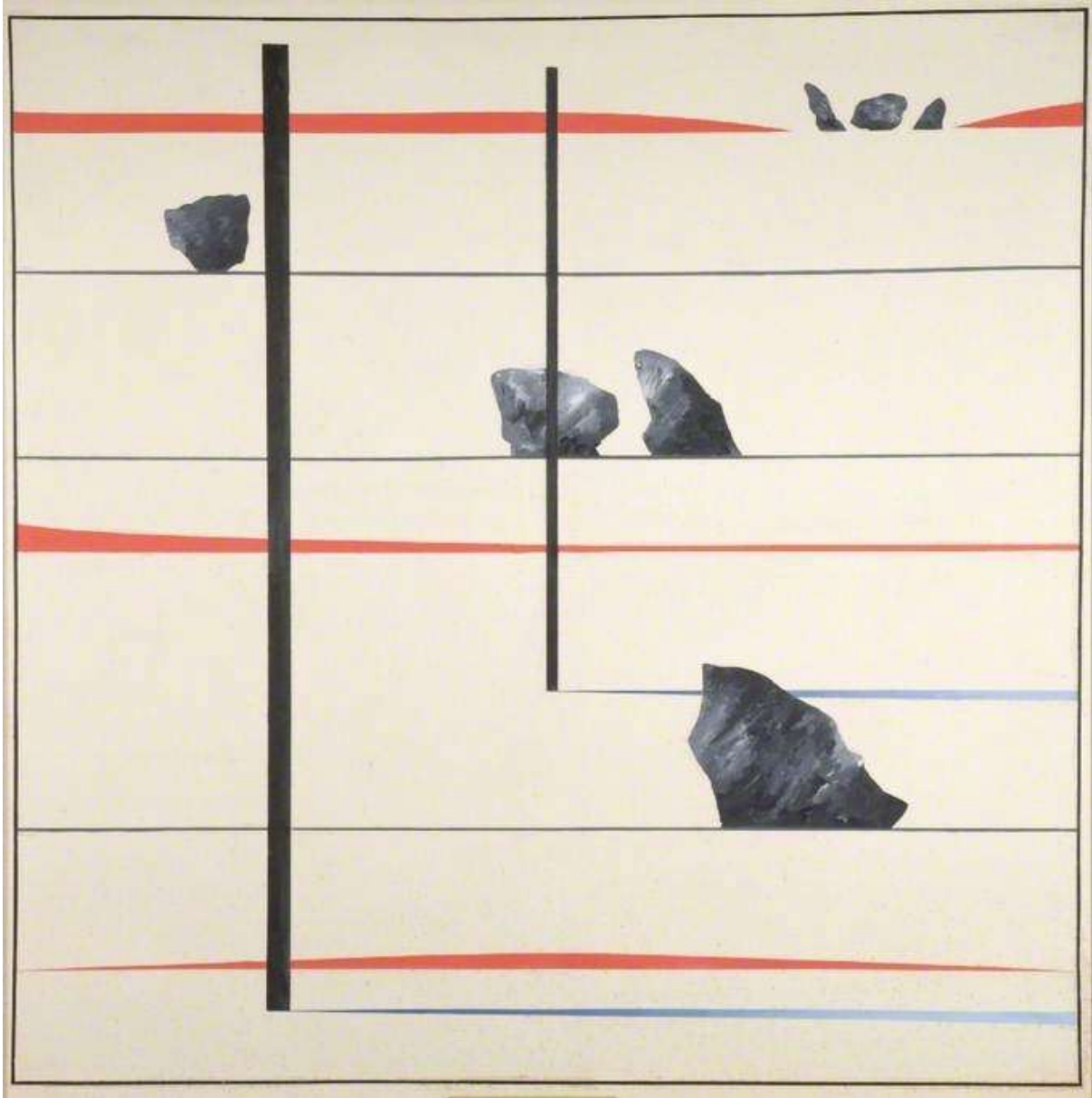


Figure 18: Derek Jarman's Avebury Series No. 4 (1973)

Avebury is a brooding and atmospheric piece which is almost as devoid of visible human life as the series of paintings that share its namesake. Where the *Avebury* paintings embody Jarman's interest in the signification of the world around him through representational figures by reducing the English landscape to a few arrangements of minimalist geometry, the film saturates its viewers in a sense of place which is equally steeped in time. As Ellis observes:

The film is interested not just in documenting space but in constructing a particular relation to it, through editing. History thus is introduced in a number of ways: most obviously in the subject matter, but also more subtly in the way that the audience is made conscious of its relation to the represented landscape and its imagined motion through it.⁹⁷

With the exception of a single shot of some children seated on a wall, and a solitary passing car in the background of an early shot, *A Journey to Avebury* shows almost no sign of modern life. Its stillness, and vast expanses of open country, are simultaneously suggestive of a historic landscape as yet undeveloped by man and a mystical space within which time is made palpable. The film's home-movie style title, a simple description of an activity, indicates a progression from point A to point B which is reflected in Jarman's editing; shots of the landscape, of trees, rocks, and hills, are intercut with occasional shots of dirt tracks that recede into the distance and invite the viewer to assume the role of (somn)ambulist. The result is that, as the film progresses, the audience is drawn further and further into the atmosphere of Jarman's *Avebury*, assisted in their immersion by the pulsations of Coil's hypnotic soundscape.

The original, silent, version of the *Journey to Avebury* is no less effective in this regard, creating a dream-like quality by means of its visual grammar. Although sparing glimpses of a dirt track suggest a sense of progression over the course of the film, the camera's static placement provides those unfamiliar with the site at Avebury with no means of orienting themselves within its space. Furthermore, the reduced frame-rate of the piece, coupled with its gold-tinged palette, compound the already subjective reality of its format and indicate a space beyond that recorded on film. The stillness that pervades it, too, implies an aspect-to-aspect approach to Jarman's editing which gives the sense that this film represents both a single, fractured moment, and a space outside of time entirely. As Wymer notes:

⁹⁷ Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations*, p. 23.

The series of static shots of the English countryside which make up *Journey to Avebury* seem relatively straightforward but succeed, through the warm, golden glow which pervades them, and the movements of grass and trees which they capture, in giving the landscape a magical life. His recording of apparently mundane events was rarely straightforward, and involved, no less than the “magick” films, a battery of filming and editing techniques with which he was constantly experimenting. These included the use of speeded up footage, slowed down footage, time-lapse photography, rapid pans and zooms, deliberate camera shake, deliberate moves in and out of focus, extreme close-ups, shots into a mirror or other light source, rapid montages, refilmed images, and superimpositions.⁹⁸

Encapsulated in *Journey to Avebury* is the collision of Jarman’s Romantic bent and his fascination with the capabilities of his chosen medium; his experimental ‘battery of filming and editing techniques’ houses a fascination with the ancient landscape at Avebury which borders on a celebration of the Sublime. However, where the sublime focusses on the terror and majesty of the Divine as embodied by the natural landscape, *Journey to Avebury* is saturated, by virtue of absence, in a distinctly more human presence. The perambulating structure of the film echoes the activities of the ley hunters, and its reverential gaze and golden hue make visible the temporal, perhaps mystical, energy of the monoliths and their surroundings. Jarman’s focus here is less the landscape than it is the traces of human life that remain upon it, and from which can be conjured a sense, perhaps even an image, of the distant past. It represents a typically Jarman experiment in form and subject, being at once a home-movie and a subjective meditation on time and place, recording both Jarman’s present and an England of the past which exists only in his imagination. The Avebury in Jarman’s film is a dream of the English landscape; it is a continuation of Jarman’s early landscape paintings, coloured by his interest in mediaeval and romantic poetry, and a pre-cursor to the later, inherently more experimental, mediaeval films such as *The Last of England* and *The Angelic Conversation*.

⁹⁸ Wymer, p. 26.

‘The still, sad music of humanity’: Poetic Landscapes in *The Angelic Conversation* and *The Last of England*

Time is a slippery concept in Jarman’s films; past, present, and future are in continual collision. Where, in the more conventional narrative features such as *Caravaggio* and *Edward II*, contemporary props are intermingled with a pseudo-period setting as a means of disrupting the conventions of the historical costume drama, *The Last of England* and *The Angelic Conversation* make use of fragments from a number of Jarman’s Super-8 films as a counterpoint to their expressionistic renderings of a dystopian Britain. In the former, we see images of bonfires in derelict streets, nuclear power stations, and armed militia that form a stark contrast to the snippets of the Jarman family’s home movies with which they are juxtaposed; in the latter, the burgeoning relationship between two men plays out against a barren wasteland, punctuated by Judi Dench’s reading of a selection of Shakespeare’s Sonnets. In a sense, these films are mirror images of one another: in *The Last of England*, images of Jarman’s idyllic past puncture and disrupt a vision of a dystopian future; in *The Angelic Conversation*, it is the dystopian future which threatens to disrupt the idyllic romance. In both films, the rural past and the urban present are clearly delineated as spaces which are diametrically opposed, highlighting the Romantic strain of Jarman’s artistic sensibility evident in *A Journey to Avebury*.

For poets such as Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron, the natural landscape represented a mirror for introspection, an external model upon which to project and analyse the inner workings of the human mind. Their imagery, coloured by Burke’s theory of the Sublime, often treats nature as a physical embodiment of a power much greater than man which instils in its beholder a reaction of wonder, tinged with fear or dread. Their poetry most often involves an exploration of emotion, meditative states, or elements of the supernatural; it is generally nostalgic, using the landscape as a means of measuring change in the poet’s character, as is the case in Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798’:

Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first
I came among these hills; when like a roe
I bounded o’er the mountains [...]
Wherever nature led: more like a man

Flying from something that he dreads, than one
 Who sought the thing he loved [...]
 That time is past,
 And all its aching joys are no more,
 And all its dizzy raptures [...]
 For I have learned to look on nature, not as in the hour,
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
 The still, sad music of humanity⁹⁹

At the centre of 'Tintern Abbey' is a melancholic acknowledgement that the carefree joy of the poet's childhood has passed, and his care-free enjoyment of the landscape with it. He goes on, however, to express hope that his younger sister will come to cherish a similar experience of her time in this rural setting. Jarman's rural spaces function in a similar fashion: they represent an England of years gone by, constructed from a blend of his own memories and those recorded in his family's home movies. Early in *Journey to Avebury*, he sandwiches a slow-motion shot of a group of children perched on a low wall, smiling and idly swinging their legs, between two shots of the empty landscape, effectively connecting the children's happiness with the natural environment. In *The Last of England*, segments from the Jarman family's home movies encroach on the industrial dystopia of the film's present; scenes of family picnics, of Jarman's sister running across a grassy field as a child, and of his mother, smiling and plucking a rose, give the viewer glimpses into an Edenic past in stark contrast with Thatcherite Britain. Furthermore, while the landscape which forms the backdrop for much of *The Angelic Conversation*, comprising mounds of huge boulders and clouds of smoke, is less evidently paradisaical than that of Jarman's childhood, it is only in this non-urban space that the film's homosexual relationship can blossom.

Landscape is not simply a backdrop in these films but a key theme, important for both its visual properties and its symbolic ones. Indeed, as O'Pray notes, 'The editing of *The Last of England* is determined by poetic and imagistic demands rather than the telling of a story',¹⁰⁰ and 'Jarman thought of the different films that make up *The Angelic Conversation* as poems, while *Caravaggio*, for instance, is a novel'.¹⁰¹ The poetic language of these films, particularly in their treatment of landscape, allows for a natural connection with the work of the Romantic

⁹⁹ William Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt, Eighth, Vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), pp. 258–62 (pp. 259–60).

¹⁰⁰ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 159.

¹⁰¹ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 132.

poets. And yet, Jarman's juxtaposition of rural and non-urban land suggests more than a fond remembrance of childhood; he longs for a space free from the politics of gender, sexuality, and socio-economic disparity associated with Thatcher's government, and draws on an idealised, if not imagined, past to conjure an idyllic counterpart to his modern Wasteland. Unlike those mediaevalists whom Eco decries, however, Jarman does not intend the models of the past with which he presents his audience as frameworks for a new society. He combines a Romantic nostalgia for the English landscape with a number of mediaeval influences, largely poetic in nature, and a distinctly modernist approach to filmmaking to present his viewers with a foil for the Britain of the 1980s. By contrasting the moments of carefree happiness encapsulated in his family's home movies, and the unconditional love expressed between two men in *The Angelic Conversation*, with images of a country beleaguered with financial problems and the looming threat of nuclear war, he, like Eliot before him, suggests that his society is spiritually wounded and in need of healing.

Brief Encounter

Foremost in many readings of *The Angelic Conversation* is a discussion of the interaction between the homoromantic, and homoerotic, images on screen and the selection of Shakespeare's Sonnets by which they are accompanied. Analyses are most often made of its romantic subject matter, its poetic nature, and the presence of the Renaissance in its make-up: Frey describes it as 'a very gentle film';¹⁰² O'Pray, as 'one of the most moving and beautiful of Jarman's works';¹⁰³ and Dillon, as 'the purest example of lyric cinema in Jarman's oeuvre'.¹⁰⁴ It glides along, its language of associative images lent further structure by Shakespeare's poetry, through a celebrative depiction of uninhibited gay romance, distinct from a purely carnal affair. As Frey puts it, 'the central theme here is the realisation of a love story between two men in tender, non-violent images before the backdrop of a heavily armed, violent and hostile society'.¹⁰⁵ The Sonnets form the framework around which Jarman could structure his visual poetry, and it is the Sonnets which occupy the body of Wymer and Frey's respective

¹⁰² Frey, p. 169.

¹⁰³ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 132.

¹⁰⁴ Dillon, p. 101.

¹⁰⁵ Frey, p. 179.

analyses. And yet, although the film is known primarily as a queer interpretation of Shakespeare, Wymer points out that ‘it is clear from [Jarman’s] own accounts of the film’s genesis that the fourteen poems [...] were something of an afterthought, a belated attempt to bring some structure and drama to a series of technically contrived lyrical effects’.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Jarman explains that it was not until ‘after everything was finished [that] I placed the Sonnets in the soundtrack that Coil composed’; up until this point, the film had been an ambient love story built around ‘the fight sequence and love sequence [...] both done in one day’.¹⁰⁷ While Shakespeare’s Sonnets are an intrinsic part of *The Angelic Conversation*, Jarman’s use of the poems has already been amply discussed elsewhere by Frey, Wymer, and in detail by Jim Ellis,¹⁰⁸ and so will be discussed only briefly in the following pages as a thematic touchstone.

The film begins with an epigraph quoted from Sonnet 151: ‘Love is too young to know what conscience is, / Yet who knows not conscience is born of love?’, announcing its intentions to depict a homosexual love which is primarily romantic in nature. This sonnet, a bawdy appeal to a lover for forgiveness, implies that the speaker is governed by lust: ‘I do betray / My nobler part to my gross body’s treason’; and yet, that sexual attraction does not preclude, and is in fact implicit in, his romantic love: ‘No want of conscience hold it that I call / Her “love” for whose dear love I rise and fall.’ This quotation serves as a thematic touchstone, a reminder to its audience that queer love is not just a sexual experience but an emotional one too. It also recalls, in its account of physical attraction, the film’s beginnings. Jarman informs us that the project began as an opportunity to film Paul Reynolds, whom he had long admired, and who he eventually struck up conversation with in a club one evening. To his surprise, Reynolds was a fan of *Sebastiane* and readily agreed to be in one of his films. It was Reynolds who was then responsible for the involvement of Philip Williamson. Jarman writes:

We started the film, I had no idea that I was going to make it a love story! The initial attraction was mine for him. This ‘love affair’ was purely cinematic. Out one evening, we saw Philip and Paul said ‘He looks great.’ I said, ‘Why don’t we

¹⁰⁶ Wymer, p. 85.

¹⁰⁷ Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, p. 143.

¹⁰⁸ Jim Ellis, ‘Queer Period: Derek Jarman’s Renaissance’, in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. by Ellis Hanson (London: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 288–315.

put him in the film, shall I go over?’ It was a sort of dare! I said ‘Let’s make the film a love story, because then it will be commercial’.¹⁰⁹

Williamson agreed, and the courtship of *The Angelic Conversation* began. The visual attraction of Jarman to Reynolds, and of Reynolds to Williamson, is reflected in the relationship between the two men, both on-screen and off, and in Jarman’s role as camera-man, or observer. Were this model of the three men’s relationship to be carried forward, one might expect Jarman himself to be the one reading the Sonnets on the film’s soundtrack, addressed to his ‘fair youth’. As he explains, ‘The boys fell in love during the holiday [County Dorset, 1984] and asked me to record a love scene with them. I was able to construct a film around this scene, and I had finally found a hook on which I could hang the wonderful sonnets by Shakespeare’.¹¹⁰ However, he informs us that:

I asked Judi Dench to read them, I wanted a woman’s voice so that there was no confusion. If I had used a man’s voice it would have seemed that one of the young men was talking about the other. One of them would have had the dominant voice, and I didn’t want that to happen, so the voice became that of an observer, leaving the imagery autonomous. It also established the feminine in the film, which otherwise would have been lacking.¹¹¹

This creative decision makes it clear that Jarman’s use of the Sonnets is as an accent for the imagery of *The Angelic Conversation* rather than as a mirror, undermining the film’s status as a ‘Shakespeare film’. Not only does the assignation of the Sonnets to a female speaker attribute their words to an offscreen presence, but it establishes a clear distinction between the poetry that we see and the poetry that we hear. Notably, the film’s epigraph is the only excerpt that is not read aloud but is instead presented as written text, situating it firmly in the visual poetry of the film.

As he indicates above, the autonomy of the imagery in *The Angelic Conversation* was important to Jarman. And yet, he observes that ‘Pictorial awareness is not part of our word-based culture. British cinema lacks this tradition’.¹¹² It is of little surprise, then, that few analyses of the film focus solely on its imagery in isolation from its soundtrack, and that much of the scholarship which surrounds it is produced by specialists on Shakespeare and

¹⁰⁹ Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, p. 142.

¹¹⁰ Translation of an interview in Dutch, conducted by Paul Verstraeten, cited in Frey.

¹¹¹ Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, pp. 144–45.

¹¹² Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, p. 148.

Renaissance culture who are drawn to the textual elements of the film. While the presence of the Renaissance can also be found in the film's visuals - the ornate window out of which Williamson gazes at the film's beginning can be found at Montacute House, an Elizabethan mansion in Somerset and, later, sporting a 'black dinner-suit and black fan he becomes the Dark Lady of the sonnets' - Jarman admits that he 'didn't make that connection until after the film was complete'.¹¹³ Indeed, as Dillon notes, 'While the film evolved, Jarman thought of the pictures as a visual accompaniment for the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wanderer* [...] the poet and the poetry changed, but the intention to join pictures to poetry was constant'.¹¹⁴ In Shakespeare, Jarman found a national treasure, a mainstream ready vehicle for his depiction of same-sex love, and an artist whose work also contains identifiable echoes of centuries past. As Joan Evans writes:

Shakespeare indeed is more mediaeval than the language of his greater speeches always allows us to realize. His chronicle plays are in the tradition of such dramas as the *Mystiere de Siege d'Orleans* [...] the mediaeval idea of courtly love is implicit in *Troilus and Cressida*; and Titania and Oberon and Puck are not of the Renaissance. Shakespeare's incidental lyrics remind us that snatches of 15th century song were still being sung in the Warwickshire woods and villages, as they were long after his day.¹¹⁵

Jarman's work, too, is peppered with snatches of works from centuries gone by and, like Eliot, he draws upon these influences to create something entirely new. With *The Angelic Conversation*, he offers a vision of homosexual love in romantic, reciprocal terms, employing an exaggerated model of a mediaeval homosocial relationship to embed a queer element in an ostensibly heterosexual body of Renaissance literature. There are three periods at work in the film: the 'present', as embodied by the film's visuals of men in contemporary dress acting out a romantic relationship; the Renaissance, represented by Dench's reading of Shakespeare's sonnets; and, perhaps less evidently, the 10th century setting of *The Wanderer* from which Jarman drew the film's central theme of 'service willingly given, not exacted'.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, p. 143.

¹¹⁴ Dillon, pp. 101-2.

¹¹⁵ Joan Evans, 'Foreward', in *The Flowering of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Joan Evans (London: Guild Publishing, 1985), pp. 8-10 (p. 10).

¹¹⁶ Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, p. 133.

The Wanderer, an Old English elegy in which the speaker laments the loss of his liege lord and, resultantly, his place in heroic society, contains a representation of individual male emotion, keenly felt, and of platonic love between a lord and his vassal. In Jarman's film, this love is translated into a depiction of a 'soft' homosexual relationship, emphasising romance over sex. However, considering *The Angelic Conversation* as simply an illustration of poetic ideas through a queer lens offers a limited view of its content. In their introduction to *Envisioning Experience in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Dynamic Patterns in Texts and Images*, editors Giselle de Nie and Thomas F.X. explain that 'In October 2006 the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame sponsored a workshop in which seven scholars of different disciplines explored the role and effects of what we have called "dynamic patterns of feeling" in a text or image'.¹¹⁷ Their book, produced as a continuation of the study undertaken during this workshop, aims to explore 'Not the relation between words and images [...] but the "reverberations" of images and the effects of the affective-emotional patterns that can only be made visible and directly transmitted by images – material, mental, and sounded',¹¹⁸ and each of its chapters considers a historical text which describes an encounter with, or response to, a real or imagined image or work of art. By doing so, it examines the individual experience of apprehending and subsequently comprehending a visual language. In a similar fashion, *The Angelic Conversation* can be understood as a dynamic response to the bittersweet experience of male love, and loss, represented by Jarman's selection of Shakespeare's sonnets and *The Wanderer*. As O'Pray observes, 'The films were not conceived originally as visual accompaniments to the Sonnets but rather as a Jungian reading of the Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Wanderer', reaching back to Jarman's Jungian ventures of the 70s, especially *The Art of Mirrors* and *In the Shadow of the Sun*'.¹¹⁹ Just as Jarman's images, inspired by the Early English poem, comprise a response to its text, so too do the Sonnets, by virtue of their retrospective inclusion, become a response to the film's images.

Jarman made clear, across his body of writing, that he did not care for the British costume drama, and those of his films which are inspired by or drawn from existing texts (*The Tempest*, *Edward II*) or from historical accounts (*Sebastiane*, *Caravaggio*) foreground the

¹¹⁷ Giselle De Nie and Thomas F.X. Noble, 'Introduction', in *Envisioning Experience in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Dynamic Patterns in Text and Images*, ed. by Giselle De Nie and Thomas F.X. Noble (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), pp. 1–8 (p. 1).

¹¹⁸ De Nie and Noble, p. 4.

¹¹⁹ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 132.

artificiality of their production by incorporating contemporary elements into their 'period' settings. These films are not direct adaptations of their source material but are instead Jarman's impressions of the texts, presentations of the "'reverberations" of images' triggered by his encounters with them. The film's opening sequence, begun by the epigraph from Sonnet 151, continues with a shot of Williamson, in silhouette, gazing wistfully through an ornate window at Montacute House. As the sound of strings fade into birdsong and the ticking of a clock, Dench begins to read from Sonnet 57: 'Being your slave, what should I do / But tend upon the hours and times of your desire?' Dillon connects the composition of these shots of Williamson at the window with 'the iconography of waiting in nineteenth-century painting, where so often a woman waits at a window',¹²⁰ and noting the sound of the ticking clock, observes that Sonnet 57 is 'one of the many time-conscious sonnets in the middle of Shakespeare's sequence'.¹²¹ Indeed, the atmosphere in this shot is melancholic, pensive; the stillness and the ticking suggest not just that Williamson is waiting but that he is lost in thoughts of the past. As Jarman notes, 'one of the most consistent feelings conveyed in the sonnets is loss'¹²² and, while Dillon goes on to suggest that Jarman's visuals are loose illustrations of Shakespeare's poetry, which plays a 'focussing' role on the film's narrative,¹²³ he does not engage with the presence of elements of *The Wanderer* in the film.

Intermingled with the sounds of birdsong and the ticking clock in these opening shots is the sound of a bare wind, whistling quietly yet persistently as Dench begins her recitation. This sound continues, intermittently, through the subsequent shots of the radar tower and the man who uses a mirror to reflect light back into the camera, until it gives way to the sounds of gulls and splashing water as we see a male figure walking away from the camera on what appears to be a beach. The sound of splashing water carries into the next shot, an inversion of the first, in which another man, laden with a metal barrel, walks towards the camera through wreathes of smoke. For Dillon, 'It is immediately clear that both mirror and water have everything to do with the relationship of the walking man and the man holding the mirror [...] Homoerotic desire is once again figured as mirroring in *The Angelic Conversation*',¹²⁴ and his treatment of the onscreen relationship between the two men is as

¹²⁰ Dillon, p. 103.

¹²¹ Dillon, p. 103.

¹²² Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, p. 140.

¹²³ Dillon, p. 104.

¹²⁴ Dillon, p. 103.

the two lovers of the sonnets. However, the sound of water and the image of a veritable wasteland strewn with boulders and wreathed in smoke, compounded with the introspective mood of the film's opening shots, are equally suggestive of the imagery of *The Wanderer*; the doubling of the men, a Jungian illustration of the speaker's turmoil. The third paragraph of the poem, as translated by E. T. Donaldson, begins:

Thus I, wretched with care, removed from my homeland, far from dear kinsmen, have had to fasten with fetters the thoughts of my heart – ever since the time, many years ago, that I covered my gold-friend in the darkness of the earth; and from there I crossed the woven waves, winter-sad, downcast for want of a hall, sought a giver of treasure – a place, far or near, where I might find one in a mead-hall who should know of my people, or who would comfort me friendless, receive me with gladness.¹²⁵

Bereft of hall, lord, and companion, the speaker laments not just the loss of material goods, but the absence of one with whom he can share his sorrow; he mourns the loss of his 'gold-friend [who] made him accustomed to feasting' and a life of 'hall-warriors and the taking of treasure',¹²⁶ and without whom his world has no structure or meaning. As Kathryn Hume observes:

Gifts [...] are not all that hall-life had to offer. As any student of the poetry knows, they are part of a larger pattern of interwoven obligations which gave the retainer the security of a defined position in his society. His status was unambiguous, formally acknowledged by his membership of *geoguð* or *duguð* and by his place on the bench.¹²⁷

Without a lord, hall, or hall-warriors, the wanderer has no sense of self or purpose. His identity is constructed around the hall-life, around the service of a lord in return for shelter, companionship, and material gain. As such, his sense of self is tied to the exchange of treasure for service, and this is made evident in the language of the poem: the speaker refers to 'his heart's coffer' and 'the hoard-case of his mind',¹²⁸ placing the exchange of treasure at the centre of his being and so linking the internal with the external.

¹²⁵ 'The Wanderer', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Eighth Edition, Volume 1*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), pp. 111–13 (p. 112).

¹²⁶ Greenblatt, 'The Wanderer', p. 112.

¹²⁷ Kathryn Hume, 'The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3 (1974), pp. 63–74 (p. 65).

¹²⁸ Greenblatt, 'The Wanderer', p. 112.

Indeed, this relationship between the internal and the external is sustained throughout the poem by means of a similarity in the language used to describe the speaker's emotions and that used for the landscape around him. He speaks of being 'winter-sad' and of 'frozen thoughts in his heart-case' while describing his surroundings as 'frost-cold',¹²⁹ 'wind-blown', and 'storm-beaten'¹³⁰ and, in so doing, establishes a connection between the psychic and the physical upon which Jarman could hang a Jungian interpretation: 'All earth's kingdom is wretched'¹³¹ for so too is the wanderer. While Dillon draws a connection between mirrors and water in *The Angelic Conversation*, suggesting that 'water has also come to denote a tender and sensuous aspect',¹³² the sounds of splashing water in the film's early minutes can be read as waves lapping at a shore and, as such, as connotative of an obstacle or boundary as in *The Wanderer*. In the poem's opening lines, the speaker informs us that 'he has long had to stir with his arms the frost-cold sea, troubled in heart over the water-way' and, later, 'His sorrow renews as the memory of his kinsmen moves through his mind [...] Again they fade, moving off over the water [...] Care renews in him who must again send his weary heart out over the woven waves'.¹³³ Water here represents desire in a nostalgic sense, a reminder of what has been lost and can no longer be experienced. It indicates both a boundary between past and present and the transient nature of that which has now passed, and this dynamic holds true for *The Angelic Conversation*: Williamson, gazing through the window, is lost in memories of the past; the shots of the man holding the mirror, intercut with shots of Williamson and of the radar tower, appear to stem from these thoughts and, by means of literal reflection, suggest introspection; the two men, walking towards each other out of darkness and smoke respectively, seem to be walking away from bodies of water. This landscape, which Dillon calls a 'dreamscape',¹³⁴ is clearly an internal one and the radar, which Jarman associates with 'Destruction [...] surveillance, the feeling one is under psychic attack'¹³⁵ and that Williamson longs to escape from, is representative of a present in which 'all the wealth of this world stands waste'.¹³⁶ His retreat into this psychic landscape is thus the

¹²⁹ Greenblatt, p. 112.

¹³⁰ Greenblatt, p. 113.

¹³¹ Greenblatt, 'The Wanderer', p. 113.

¹³² Dillon, p. 111.

¹³³ Greenblatt, 'The Wanderer', p. 112.

¹³⁴ Dillon, p. 104.

¹³⁵ Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, p. 133.

¹³⁶ Greenblatt, 'The Wanderer', p. 113.

equivalent to the wanderer's vision of his dead kinsmen who he 'greet[s] [...] with glad words' before they 'fade, moving off over the water'.¹³⁷

The body of *The Angelic Conversation* takes place against the backdrop of this psychic topography and, as such, the relationship between the two men can be understood in Jungian terms. In *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, O'Pray quotes from an interview in which Jarman notes that the ritualistic progression of action which takes place in film's images, beneath the *Sonnets*, came to him during the editing process. He identifies several symbolic landmarks in the film – a journey, a cave, a crossing of borders, an ablution, a restitution – and explains that 'Most of the things in the film were what anyone might do, except rather carefully chosen locations. It comes from a visual response to the place'.¹³⁸ As such, the short films which make up *The Angelic Conversation* can be understood as snippets of poetry inspired by the English landscape; each sequence is a reverberation of images which illustrate Jarman's emotional response to the location in which it was shot. The landscape in *The Angelic Conversation* thus functions in much the same manner as it did for Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, embodying a larger creative power and acting as a mirror for the mind. Williamson and Reynolds, who mirror each other physically, act out not just a romance but also the deep vein of introspection which runs through both the *Sonnets* and *The Wanderer*. They represent two aspects of the male self who seek reconciliation. The progression of a narrative presented as a series of Jungian symbols can thus be read as a journey of self-discovery, or perhaps self-acceptance; as a renouncement of violent masculinity and a Bly-inspired initiation into the 'deep male'.¹³⁹ The wrestling of the shadow figure as the men exit the cave, perhaps the most obvious of the Jungian imagery in the film, can be understood as the conquering of an inherently negative sense of self as a homosexual man, born from the hostile environment that Thatcher's Britain perpetuated for the gay community.

Perhaps the most-oft discussed sequence of the film, the washing of the tattooed man is the locus of Jarman's Jungian response to *The Wanderer*. It illustrates the idea to which he was drawn, of 'service willingly given', in a manner which speaks to both homosexual desire and to individuation. Regarding the first, Dillon notes that 'the appearance of the tattooed man rather brilliantly means that we will not see one man abasing himself in front of the

¹³⁷ Greenblatt, 'The Wanderer', p. 112.

¹³⁸ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 132.

¹³⁹ Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 6.

other. This third figure allows the two men's desire a trajectory, where they can each, equally, bow to him'.¹⁴⁰ Having knelt to this king's dominant position, and established a sense of equality, the lovers have equipped themselves for a relationship in which no one partner holds power over the other. This regal figure can also be read as an archetype of male psychology in direct opposition to the shadow-self that was defeated during the initial passage through the cave. In Jungian psychology, the 'shadow' represents those aspects of the self that we repress and refuse to acknowledge. Later, in such popular works of the mythopoetic men's movement as Moore and Gillette's *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*, this dichotomy of self is the basis for a model of male psychology formed of four archetypes, each with its own negative reflection. Drawing on Weston and Frazer, as well as Bly, Moore and Gillette argue the importance of ritual in the formation of a healthy male psyche and identify the King as first and foremost among their four archetypes: 'The good and generative King is also a good Warrior, a positive Magician, and a great Lover ... the King archetype comes close to being God in his masculine form within every man'.¹⁴¹ The King is a generative and organising force, a mature masculine state of awareness whose well-being is directly tied to that of his environment; so long as the king is in good health, so too will his lands thrive. In the context of the psyche, the successful attainment of the King archetype means an idyllic and bountiful mental landscape. The inverse of the King's generative energy is that of the Tyrant, whose passive form is that of the Weakling, and is an embodiment of violent and destructive tendencies. By defeating the shadow in the cave, the lovers of *The Angelic Conversation* have conquered such energies and embraced an archetype of male-self which allows their love to blossom, free from the repressive oversight of Nobodaddy's radar surveillance.

This model of male self is non-violent, possessed of power and the wisdom of how best to use it. Even the fight scene, which leads directly into the love scene, and which together form the bulk of the film's second half, is presented in such a way as to mute the violence of the lovers' wrestling. Its reduced frame rate and the failure, or perhaps unwillingness, of either man to dominate the other, results in a sequence that seems more preoccupied with the sensual beauty of the male form than its physical power. When asked

¹⁴⁰ Dillon, p. 109.

¹⁴¹ Robert Moore and Douglas Gillett, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* (New York: HarperOne, 1991), p. 49.

to explain his statement, 'Until I'd enjoyed being fucked I had not reached balanced manhood', Jarman responded 'It is about control. If you aren't the dominant partner in the sex act then you are emasculated, you are unsexed. It took a long time for me to realise the falsity of that',¹⁴² and indeed the 'fight' is made sinister only by the sequence's sound design; when viewed without sound, it reads as a playful scuffle, an exploration of the body that prefigures the tender embraces which soon follow. Jarman's admiration of the male form here echoes the gentle eroticism displayed by Genet in *Un Chant D'Amour* (1950), and his presentation of this tussle between the two men embodies the ethos of the 'mature masculine' energy of the King in its representation of a distinctly sensual masculinity. The encounter with the king figure is the instigator for the physical encounter between the two men, and it is only once their wrestling subsides into gentle embrace that the dreamscape in which their encounter has taken place begins to unravel.

At the film's close, we return with Williamson to Montacute house, this time to venture through its grounds. Having conquered his 'shadow', Williamson's character is able to embrace his own masculine, homosexual identity and thus revivify his mental landscape. His lover, as separate entity or as an aspect of himself, occupies a space from which he is separated by space, time, or otherwise. And yet the encounter has spurred him from his melancholic reverie into the gardens of the manor house, and images of blossoms have crept into the film's visuals in antidote to the intrusion of the radar tower. Like the Wanderer, Williamson has completed an introspective journey culminating in the possibility of a reconciliation of two aspects of himself. The natural landscape has been inextricably linked to his mental and spiritual wellbeing, and his move from the still interiors of the mansion to its gardens indicates the re-integration of his private sense of self with his public persona. He no longer fears the invasion of his privacy by the outside world; gone are the shots of the radar tower, now superseded by shots of waterlilies and blossoms. Here, at the end of his reverie, Williamson has reclaimed the paradisiacal space of his own private garden, both inside and out.

¹⁴² Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament*, ed. by Michael Christie (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 32.

(Re)Birth of a Nation

The garden, for Jarman, is a sacred space, a personal oasis in which to shelter from the outside world: 'painting was my secret garden. My art was an escape out of Heterosoc'.¹⁴³ The landscapes he conjures in his films, continuations of his paintings comprising snippets of super-8 film and his family's home movies, function as similar garden spaces in which Jarman's ideas can be developed and explored, and in which alternative realities can be cultivated. The Dorset coast became the bedding in which a healthy homosexual relationship could flourish, un-hindered by the smothering and insidious roots of a judgemental society. The bare coastline where the lovers met is linked, by means of Williamson's spiritual journey, to the enclosed gardens of Montacute House, and so landscape and garden become equally representative of an intimate paradise. Claire Noble informs us that:

In the past, appreciation of the role of the medieval garden in religious life has been confined to its evocation of Biblical gardens such as Eden and the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Songs. It is widely accepted that the small-scale enclosed pleasure garden was regarded as an earthly representation of the *hortus conclusus*. Within the imagery of the Song, the hortus was itself interpreted as symbolizing the Virgin Mary. Key features of such gardens were quartered lawns and a central feature such as a fountain; the gardens were, of course, enclosed. In a monastic setting, an enclosed garden along these lines was probably seen as symbolic of the Virgin herself and evocative of the spiritual longing and desire expressed in the Song. Even writers in the earthier world of secular literature equated the enclosed garden with notions of love, sometimes physical and portrayed with as much ribaldry as possible.¹⁴⁴

The gardens of Montacute House conform to this model; the northernmost garden features a quartered lawn, a central fountain, and a bounding wall, and it is at this fountain that we see Williamson fanning himself in the closing sequence of *The Angelic Conversation*. This choice of location parallels Jarman's use of the Sonnets as a structuring device, for the design of the property's grounds also contains echoes of a medieval past. As Paula Henderson notes:

In spite of the limited evidence, it is clear that medieval gardens survived well into and beyond the sixteenth century. Furthermore, medieval gardens

¹⁴³ Jarman, *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament*, p. 35.

¹⁴⁴ Claire Noble, 'Spiritual Practice and the Designed Landscape: Monastic Precinct Gardens', *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 20.3 (2000), 197–205 (p. 197).

already contained many of the most important features associated with Tudor and early Stuart gardens: galleries, banqueting houses, and complex earth-works, including water gardens. Certainly the Tudors knew far more about medieval gardens than we do today.¹⁴⁵

The gardens of Montacute thus operate as a symbol of both the inner landscape that facilitated Williamson's journey through the psyche towards spiritual healing and a sense of 'balanced manhood', and of an Edenic space in which love can prosper unhindered. Furthermore, Jarman's landscapes are conjured from images of the English countryside, and his inclusion of 'home-movie' footage as the material of his cinematic dreamscapes anchors his longing for Paradise to the topography of England.

This use of personal footage is a central component of *The Last of England* where it serves as a means of exploring the past as a healing influence on the present. Begun by a sequence of Jarman writing at his desk, *The Last of England* is framed from the very beginning as a self-reflexive conjuration of the filmmaker himself in which fragments of his past interrupt his vision of a post-apocalyptic England. These moment of familial bliss which puncture the hopelessness of Jarman's ruined Britain echo Eliot: 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins'.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, Dillon notes that 'The Super-8 camera paradoxically stands for both a personal, autobiographical point of view (mansized, home movies) and a more objective documentary perspective (linked to hand-held journalism)'.¹⁴⁷ By editing real, home-movie footage into the film Jarman creates the impression that these glimpses of the past are connected to the 'present' of the film's ruined future, eroding the boundaries between fantasy and reality. These family memories thus become the idealised past of a nation in crisis, emblematic of a harmonious model of society. In his discussion of *The Angelic Conversation*, Ellis argues that 'by invading the grounds of the home movie, which records the alternative time of leisure, and the alternative space of the garden, Jarman challenges the production of the nationalist present by intervening in the representation of its past'.¹⁴⁸ A similar argument can be applied to *The Last of England*: Jarman creates an alternative,

¹⁴⁵ Paula Henderson, 'Clinging to the Past: Medievalism in the English "Renaissance" Garden', *Renaissance Studies*, 25.1 (2011), 42–69 (p. 49).

¹⁴⁶ T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition, Volume 2*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), pp. 2294–2308 (p. 2308).

¹⁴⁷ Dillon, p. 165.

¹⁴⁸ Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations*, p. 110.

inherently personal, national myth from scraps of his family history with which to counterpoint his projected nightmare of the country's future. In much the same way that Joyce, to Eliot's praise, made use of 'a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity' as 'a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' in *Ulysses*,¹⁴⁹ Jarman scatters idyllic images of English family life throughout *The Last of England* as a means of illustrating the extent to which his present has devolved.

The sense of loss that permeates the film is linked not just to the disconnection Jarman feels between himself and his country, but also to the unattainable nature of the childhood that we glimpse periodically throughout the film. Like Wordsworth's treasured haunts on the banks of the Wye, the England of Jarman's childhood is forever changed and no longer evokes in him the same emotions that it once did. O'Pray observes that '*The Angelic Conversation* falls within the English pastoral tradition, found in some of the works of Michael Powell and Humphrey Jennings',¹⁵⁰ and it can be argued that *The Last of England* also exhibits aspects of the pastoral. Its contrast of past and 'present', of family among green spaces with the industrial and urban ruins, speaks to the city/rural binary of pastoral poetry. Indeed, the scenes of Jarman's mother plucking a rose; of his sister, Gaye, running through a field; of family picnics, and Jarman and Gaye playing together, are in stark contrast to the decaying red brickwork and smoke-wreathed rubble of the film's present. His use of real locations to create these disparate landscapes also recalls the work of Powell and Pressburger: Moor notes that 'While Powell and Pressburger's films often use real locations, this is never just a matter of naturalistic detail, but is for *effect*, for the cultural, poetic or pictorial connotations of the landscape, for a "spirit of place"'.¹⁵¹ A notable example of this use of location is *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) in which the landscape surrounding Canterbury becomes a symbol for the spiritual reconnection of the film's three modern 'pilgrims' to their cultural past. Like *A Journey to Aveybury*, *A Canterbury Tale* portrays the rural English landscape as a timeless space in which history can be felt as an almost physical presence. It is only by virtue of their being waylaid there that Alison, Bob, and Peter connect with each other and are bestowed with their individual blessings: Alison, the revelation that her boyfriend is still alive; Bob, overdue

¹⁴⁹ Eliot, p. 2294.

¹⁵⁰ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 136.

¹⁵¹ Andrew Moor, *Powell & Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), p. 3.

letters from his girlfriend; and Peter, the opportunity to play Bach on the cathedral's pipe organ. This wish fulfilment is facilitated by the development of their friendship, and their integration into village life in rural Chillingbourne, and represents the culmination of their pilgrimage.

Scott Freer notes, in his reading of the *A Canterbury Tale* through the lens of the 'mythical method', that 'Through an elaborate set of cross-cultural correspondences, the film is concerned with restructuring the disconnected desires of the contemporary individual towards a more communal and symbolically continuous society',¹⁵² and that 'the film goes beyond its 1940s propagandist agenda to suggest that modern life is the source of social alienation and cultural dislocation'.¹⁵³ *The Last of England* make a similar suggestion, implicating 1980s Britain as a *mise-en-abyme* of its own disquiet. Frey observes that 'the film is an autobiographical converging point, where multiple personal events come together before the background of the consequences of this political setting: Jarman's father died in 1986, and Jarman learned in December of the same year that he was HIV-positive. The political state of war was joined by a private one'.¹⁵⁴ *The Last of England* sees Jarman taking stock, not just of his own situation, but of the society in which he finds himself; he laments the disconnected nature of modern society, the alienation that he feels as gay man and as a sufferer of HIV. The continued disruption of the nightmarish present by moments from his family's past highlights the loss of childhood innocence, of the blissful ignorance of the world beyond the Edenic spaces of the family garden and the picnic rug. These snatches of memory are a brief respite from the horrors of the present and the ravaging spectre of HIV. Despite these momentary oases, however, the film seems less a shelter than a confrontation: the images of urban decay, of a naked Christopher Hobbs gnawing at a cauliflower, and an anguished Tilda Swinton tearing her dress to ribbons with a pair of scissors, suggest an attempt at catharsis rather than escape. O'Pray writes that 'There is no emphasis on homosexuality in *The Last of England*: the "heroes," who serve as symbols for contemporary Britain, are heterosexual', and that 'Perhaps, as [Anette] Kuhn suggests, *The Last of England* is "a less personal film ... than it might seem"'.¹⁵⁵ And yet, while the characters in Jarman's

¹⁵² Scott Freer, 'The Mythical Method: Eliot's "The Waste Land" and a Canterbury Tale (1944)', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27.3 (2007), 357–70 (p. 359).

¹⁵³ Freer, p. 361.

¹⁵⁴ Frey, p. 29.

¹⁵⁵ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 159.

film may not be homosexual, the intercutting of home-movie footage with his own staged material suggests, on a formal level, an attempt to challenge the demonization of HIV-positive homosexuals by heterosexual society.

The home-movie, as Wyatt puts it, 'can indoctrinate and educate the young into the family, its past, and acceptance of conventional forms of social interaction'.¹⁵⁶ He identifies the medium as exemplary of traditional family values, values which 'have been mobilized against gays and lesbians',¹⁵⁷ and suggests that Jarman's use of the format is intended to draw attention to its constructed nature. His deployment of these fragments of family history throughout *The Last of England* not only harkens back to the lost innocence of childhood, but also serves to derail the "'otherness" of homosexuality'¹⁵⁸ by transposing his own personal history into the public sphere of cinema. Where the use of super-8 film in *The Angelic Conversation* serves to offer an alternative to the traditional romantic model exemplified by the home-movie format, the footage that Jarman includes in *The Last of England* highlights the commonalities of childhood experience, regardless of sexuality. These moments thus become symbolic not just of an idyllic, pre-lapsarian garden in contrast to the hellish vision of England that the film offers, but also of the humanity of homosexuality. If the film's present is representative of Jarman's vision of 1980s Britain, the moments of family life that he intersperses with it are an expression of hope for 'a more communal and symbolically continuous society',¹⁵⁹ the Britain of the 1940s and 1950s becomes, in *The Last of England*, equivalent to the Chaucerian Kent of *A Canterbury Tale*. For Lavinia Bryden, this concept of the garden as a nostalgic and paradisaical space is central to Jarman's creative identity: she suggests that these gardens are metonymies of the English landscape, representative of Jarman's love for his country and the 'multiple pasts, including a personal history'¹⁶⁰ that it evokes. She goes on to argue that 'the making of *The Last of England* is itself an optimistic act',¹⁶¹ contrasting the images of Jarman at his writing desk with those of Spring abusing a Caravaggio painting: 'Spring's dependence on drugs combined with the dark, depressing *mise-en-scène* of empty buildings and crumbling walls', she writes, 'implies that his dismissal of

¹⁵⁶ Wyatt, p. 161.

¹⁵⁷ Wyatt, p. 163.

¹⁵⁸ Wyatt, p. 163.

¹⁵⁹ Freer, p. 361.

¹⁶⁰ Lavinia Brydon, 'The Nostalgic Gardens of Derek Jarman 's England', 2 (2013), 1–15 (p. 1).

¹⁶¹ Brydon, p. 7.

culture ultimately leads to spiritual and physical decline'.¹⁶² Jarman, on the other hand, whose medieval style garb and 'traditional ink pen' she identifies with 'past traditions'¹⁶³, suggests an alternative to this cultural dislocation. His participation in these traditions connects him with the fraternity of queer (European) artists, whose number include Caravaggio and Shakespeare, that he so admires and so puts him in direct opposition with the 'Little Englanders' represented by Spring.

In the early moments of the film, Spring literally rapes Caravaggio's *Amor Vincet Omnia / Love Conquers All* (1602), displaying a flagrant disrespect for its artistry, its message, and its history. His actions represent a rejection of non-British culture and embody the increasing insularity and nationalism of the 'Little England' era, the period of the mid-nineteenth century that, as John S. Galbraith explains, saw Britain's 'withdrawal of all financial support' from those of its colonies which 'no longer provided significant economic advantages'.¹⁶⁴ If Spring's dismissal of such culture implies, as Brydon suggests, 'spiritual and physical decline', his violent rejection of the painting can be read as the same 'historical severance' that Freer identifies in the cut from spitfire to falcon in *A Canterbury Tale*.¹⁶⁵ The fragments of home movie footage that Jarman intersperses throughout *The Last of England* are as echoes of a past rich in spiritual and cultural values, functioning in the same manner as the music of the pilgrims that Alison hears in *A Canterbury Tale*. Their repeated intrusion on the film's apocalyptic 'narrative' are an inverse of the continued intrusion of modernity, such as the moment when Alison reacts in fury to the presence of a tank in the countryside, on the Chaucerian atmosphere of the Powell and Pressburger film's landscape; like seeds scattered on a bare field, they represent the promise of rejuvenation. Indeed, Brydon points out that although the film's 'audiences were unable to perceive the film as a celebration of England and its ability to survive current ills',¹⁶⁶ 'the brief glimpses of gardens within *The Last of England* show that, as always, Jarman's concerns for the country never quite extinguish his faith in it'.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, unlike Spring's 'Little Englander' persona, Jarman echoes the sentiments of Gladstone who, Galbraith explains, 'conceived the proper relationship between Britain and

¹⁶² Brydon, p. 7.

¹⁶³ Brydon, p. 7.

¹⁶⁴ John S. Galbraith, 'Myths of the " Little England " Era', *The American Historical Review*, 67.1 (1961), 34–48 (p. 34).

¹⁶⁵ Freer, p. 360.

¹⁶⁶ Brydon, p. 7.

¹⁶⁷ Brydon, p. 8.

the colonies to be one of mutual interests, common ideals, and familial sentiments, not of paternalistic control and perpetual interference'.¹⁶⁸ He longs for a society in which diversity is accepted and respected, in which all races, creeds, and sexualities can co-exist without conflict, and in which England has not walled itself off from the wider world. As such, his portrayal of himself as a mediaeval scribe is significant not only because he demonstrates his participation in 'past traditions', but also because materials necessary to their work – chiefly paper and pigments – were imported from Europe and beyond until well into the 16th century.¹⁶⁹

In her examination of *The Last of England* and *The Garden* as trance films, Jo George highlights the (inter)national aspect of Jarman's artistic register by connecting his presence as author in *The Last of England* to Pasolini's portrayal of Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and so also to the visionary tradition in English poetry exemplified by William Langland's *Piers Plowman*.¹⁷⁰ Where George points to Bosch as the inspiration for Pasolini's vision of Hell, Brydon links the visual register of *The Last of England* to the paintings of J. M. W. Turner.¹⁷¹ Indeed, the film's grainy texture, desaturated landscapes, and burning red skies recall certain of Turner's paintings; the red-tinged shots of crumbling buildings in London's docklands are reminiscent of *The Burning of the House of Parliament* (1834-5), while the sequence in which Swinton tears at her dress echoes *The Angel Standing in the Sun* (1846). In Turner's painting, the Archangel Michael stands slightly off-centre, arms held aloft and wielding his flaming sword (Fig. 19). The semi-circular strokes of white paint which comprise the upper half of the painting suggest an aura of brilliant light that emanates from the angel, while the ochre and amber tones of the lower portion of the canvas suggest that he has let forth an eruption of flames which have burned away all that they touch; most notably, the skeletal figure in the lower left quadrant of the painting. Though shot from a lower angle, and more closely framed than the figure in Turner's painting, Swinton also stands on barren ground, arms held aloft and backed by flame (Fig. 20). Having laid waste to her wedding dress,

¹⁶⁸ Galbraith, p. 38.

¹⁶⁹ Pamela Robinson, 'Materials: Paper and Type', in *A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain, 1476-1558*, ed. by Vincent Gillespie and Susan Powell (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), pp. 61–74 (p. 62).

¹⁷⁰ Jo George, 'Derek Jarman, Trance Films and Medieval Art Cinema', in *British Art Cinema: Creativity, Experimentation and Innovation*, ed. by Paul Newland and Brian Hoyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 200–214 (p. 205).

¹⁷¹ Brydon, p. 1.



Figure 19: J. M. W. Turner, *Angel Standing in the Sun* (1846)
< <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-angel-standing-in-the-sun-n00550> >



Figure 20: Tilda Swinton dances in *The Last of England*. DVD still.

she thrashes in the wind, spinning violently; Jarman cuts between a series of mid-shots of her dance and close-ups of her face, head thrown back and eyes closed in emotion. He then dissolves into another close-up, reminiscent of Dreyer's *The Trial of Joan of Arc* of which he was so fond, in which her husband (Spencer Leigh) leans down to kiss her on the forehead. At this point, Jarman dissolves once more to a long shot of Tilda dancing at a reduced frame-rate, this time in colour. Her dance is an expulsion of emotion, an expression of grief, intercut with monochromatic footage of her thoughts of Leigh – their child, their affection, his execution – before she falls to her knees, catatonic. She resumes dancing but is swiftly interrupted by an explosion nearby; she pauses, staring into the camera, before Jarman match cuts to monochromatic footage of Tilda performing a similar dance in a wooded area, clearly in the narrative past. She locks eyes with her past self, via an eye-line match, and resumes her dance. This time, Jarman dissolves into a shot of a wooded landscape, filmed from a moving car, introducing pastoral imagery into the film's present. Swinton's ritualistic shredding of her wedding garments has been a catharsis; her dance, the instigator of the wasteland's rejuvenation.

Robert Mills, discussing the motif of the ruin in Jarman's work, traces the director's 'sense of *The Last of England* as facilitating a symbolic cleansing' back to the 'cleansing of Heorot' section of *Beowulf*.¹⁷² He notes the 'numerous thematic and formal parallels'¹⁷³ between *The Waste Land* and *The Last of England*, and observes that both Jarman and Eliot were influenced by Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* as they fused together 'an amorphous mass of resurrected fragments [...] into a new and vital – albeit chaotic – whole'.¹⁷⁴ Denis Donoghue writes that:

When he came to assemble fragments of poetry into the poem we know as *The Waste Land*, in the winter of 1921, Eliot not only added mythical and anthropological elements but gave them the ordering and controlling motive he found in *Ulysses*. He believed that the futility and anarchy of contemporary history could be redeemed for a work of literature only by showing contemporary events in the critical light of a myth, a coordinate story already significantly shaped. Such a myth would redeem the penury of mere events.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Robert Mills, *Derek Jarman's Medieval Modern* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), p. 120.

¹⁷³ Mills, p. 120.

¹⁷⁴ Mills, p. 121.

¹⁷⁵ Denis Donoghue, 'Yeats, Eliot, and the Mythical Method', *The Sewanee Review*, 105.2 (1997), 206–26 (p. 208).

Jarman, too, cobbled together *The Last of England* from family home-movies, snippets of super-8 footage, and sections of video in a blend of 'documentary' and dream-like imagery. His myth is that of Albion; of a past England which fostered a spirit of community, an England diametrically opposed to the society of victimisation and alienation that he sees under Thatcher. Just as Eliot threads his poem through a gamut of references to Petronius, Milton, Wagner, and Baudelaire, to name but a few, Jarman draws just as broadly on Eliot and Ginsberg; Madox Brown, Turner, and Goya; on Blake, and on Langland. From this host of prolific artists, Jarman borrows the language that he needs to express his feelings on Britain in 1986, conjuring images of an idyllic lost landscape of childhood from his family home-movies and colliding them with visions of an apocalyptic hell which rival those of Bosch. Like Pasolini, he draws on the traditions of European art cinema, and he shares ground with Powell and Pressburger in their Neo-Romantic portrayal of the English landscape. Beneath all of this, though, is an inherently medieval mode of practice. As George asserts above, Jarman consciously structured the film as a dream vision in the tradition of *Piers Plowman*. She elaborates: 'Like *Piers Plowman* [...] Jarman's film is a deeply political, apocalyptic attack on its contemporary society. In Langland's case, he was responding to the 'fallen' state of English society following the Black Death and the decline of feudalism. With Jarman we have a visceral attack on the "rotten crumbling walls" of Mrs Thatcher's Britain'.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, she connects Jarman's fondness for the collaborative aspect of filmmaking to the collective based approach of mediaeval artistry in which a workshop of apprentices often contributed to the completion of a commission.

Indeed despite, or perhaps because of, its avant-garde construction, *The Last of England* is one of Jarman's most mediaeval films. Its dream vision framework is a direct continuation of English poetic tradition which is melded, as George points out, with the 'trance film' as developed by Anger, Cocteau, and Deren. Its use of the garden space, encapsulated by the home-movie, taps directly into the concept of the garden as both a microcosm of England and as an Edenic paradise, closed off from the corruption of the outside world. True to dream vision form, it is a healing fiction: over the course of its approximately 90 minute run-time, we see a host of nameless characters who are left battered and broken

¹⁷⁶ George, pp. 206–7.

by the ruination of their homeland; and, at its close, Swinton's harrowing dance culminates in the hope of spiritual and cultural rejuvenation as natural imagery finally creeps into the cinematic wasteland. His use of landscape in *The Angelic Conversation* and *The Last of England*, as a symbol of the possibility of spiritual healing, recalls the work of Michael T. Saler's medieval modernists who 'desired to revive the spirit of the Middle Ages: to restore the conditions in which there would be no "dissociation of sensibility" but rather the organic integration of the individual within a temporal and spiritual community'.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Michael T. Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground*, *The American Historical Review* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), cv, p. 18 .

‘So short is life, so long to learn is art’: The influence of mediaeval dream poetry on *Jubilee* and *The Garden*

Time Bandits

Where *The Last of England* ends with an elemental dance of rejuvenation, *Jubilee* begins with one of gleeful destruction. Portraying the present as a hyper-commodified consumer state, conjured in a vision for Elizabeth I by magician John Dee, *Jubilee* is arguably Jarman’s most overt use of the dream-vision framework. However, in much the same way as Shakespeare’s Sonnets distract many viewers from the elements of *The Wanderer* that Jarman incorporated into *The Angelic Conversation*, the presence of the Elizabethan characters in *Jubilee* threatens to conceal the film’s participation in a distinctly mediaeval poetic tradition of visionary poetry. A self-confessed Pre-Raphaelite, the Renaissance is, for Jarman, a gateway to the pre-modern; the trappings of the idyll, of Powell and Pressburger’s Romanticism and Eliot’s modernism discussed above in relation to *The Last of England*, are a throughway to the poetics of Chaucer, Langland, and the *Pearl* poet. While it may seem at first glance to be a less personal film than *The Last of England* or *The Garden*, given that Jarman himself does not feature as a framing or structuring device, he writes that ‘With *Jubilee* the progressive merging of film and my reality was complete. The source of the film was often autobiographical, the locations were the streets and warehouses in which I had lived during the previous ten years’.¹ The absence of the filmmaker as ‘the visionary who conjures up the film’s dream-like imagery’² precludes it from sharing George’s assignation of Jarman’s later dream visions, *The Last of England* and *The Garden*, as trance films; and yet, the depiction of a fictionalised future-present constructed from autobiographical material and framed as a vision experienced by its Elizabethan characters bears many of the same markers. In his seminal study, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, P. Adams Sitney writes that:

The trance film as it emerged in America has fairly strict boundaries. It deals with visionary experience. Its protagonists are somnambulists, priests, initiates of rituals, and the possessed, whose stylized movements the camera, with its slow and fast motions, can re-create so aptly. The protagonist wanders through a potent environment toward a climactic scene of self-realization. The

¹ Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 168.

² George, p.204

stages of his progress are often marked by what he sees along his path rather than what he does. The landscapes, both natural and architectural, through which he passes are usually chosen with naïve aesthetic considerations, and they often intensify the texture of the film to the point of emphasizing a specific line of symbolism. It is part of the nature of the trance that the protagonist remains isolated from what he confronts; no interaction of characters is possible in these films.³

In *Jubilee*, it is Elizabeth I who figures as the somnambulist, an isolated observer of the proceedings of the film's present. She and Dee appear intermittently throughout the film, much as Jarman does in *The Last of England* and *The Garden*, emerging between narrative episodes to philosophise on the failings of modernity. They are a shorthand, like the home-movie footage deployed in *The Last of England*, for a more prosperous and spiritually healthy England. As Wymer observes, 'The most obvious function of the sixteenth-century characters and settings is to form an idealised contrast to the "waste land" of the present, in the way that T. S. Eliot had evoked "Elizabeth and Leicester beating oars" on the "sweet Thames" as a counterpoint to the polluted industrial river flowing through twentieth-century London'.⁴

In typically Jarmanian fashion, however, the sixteenth-century elements of the film are symbolic of a much greater continuum. Jarman was certainly aware, and largely in approval, of the filmmakers whose work Sitney identifies as generative of the trance film such as Brakhage, Cocteau, and Deren, and his own work is often compared to that of Kenneth Anger's for its incorporation of ciphers and alchemical imagery. Though Sitney identifies Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1930) as the model on which later trance films were based, he points to Deren's *At Land* (1944) as 'the earliest of the pure American trance films'.⁵ The beginning of Deren's film, in which she crawls onto the shore out of the receding surf, is echoed not only by the shots of Jarman's bed on the beach which appear in *The Garden* but is also suggested by the sounds of the waves which can be heard in the first external shots of *The Angelic Conversation*. These shots, discussed above, channel *The Wanderer* and are indicative of a vein of mediaeval influences that run below the Shakespearian surface of the film. Similarly, the sixteenth-century characters of *Jubilee* operate not just as foil for the present but as the connection between the experimental and traditional elements of

³ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, Second Edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 21.

⁴ Wymer.

⁵ Sitney, p. 21.

Jarman's creativity. While its structure is far more conventional than Sitney's outline of the trance film might allow, this narrative as experienced by Elizabeth I can be viewed as just as surreal and nightmarish as that experienced by the poet in Cocteau's film. This very same narrative structure, by virtue of its debt to both the poetic tradition of the dream-vision and to the guiding figure of the magus, connects the film simultaneously to Anger's *The Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954) and Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' (1797) from which it draws its title. Coleridge's poem, which he claims to have written while in an opium induced slumber, is subtitled 'Or, a vision in a dream' and describes an exoticised paradise rich in natural wealth:

So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.⁶

Despite their abject Orientalism, Coleridge's descriptions of the pleasure dome's grounds echo the speaker's account of the garden shown to him by Africanus in Chaucer's 'The Parliament of Birds' (1382-3):

A garden full of blossoming boughs I saw
Beside a river in a verdant mead,
Where lives abundant sweetness evermore,
With flowers white and blue, yellow and red,
And cool spring-water streams, by no means dead,
But swimming with little fishes darting light
With fins of red and scales of silver bright.⁷

Coleridge's 'gardens bright with sinuous rills' directly recall the 'river in a verdant mead' and 'cool spring-water streams' of the earlier poem, just as his 'forests ancient as the hills' mirror Chaucer's 'trees whose foliage would for ever last'.⁸ Furthermore, Coleridge highlights the

⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition, Volume 2*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), pp. 446 – 448, p. 447.

⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Parliament of Birds', in *Geoffrey Chaucer: Love Visions*, trans. by Brian Stone (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983), pp. 128–52 (p. 133).

⁸ Chaucer, p. 133.

role of the dream in the writing of 'Kubla Khan' in much the same way that Chaucer refers to Africanus and Scipio in 'The Parliament of Birds', connecting his 'fragment' with the tradition of the dream-vision.

Anger's film bears little to no resemblance to the poem from which it takes its title; Coleridge's eighteenth-century Romanticism is merely the jumping-off point for a visually rich and thematically complex rendering of myth and occultism inspired by the writings of Aleister Crowley. Nevertheless, the film's cast of emblematic mythic characters and dream-inspired logic connect it with the literary dream-vision, just as *Jubilee's* do. Jarman writes that 'The heroines have emblematic names – Bod, Boadicea, Anybody; Viv, Viva, Life; Mad and Amyl',⁹ suggesting that he views them in a similar manner to the way that Anger does the mythological figures in *The Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*: in Sitney's words, as 'most themselves when they assume the *personae* of gods'.¹⁰ This naming convention also recalls that of mediaeval dream poetry, such as the figures of Faith, Hope, and Charity in 'Piers Plowman'. Furthermore, the combination of such emblematic characters with Jarman's tendency to include his friends and elements of his personal life in his filmmaking echoes Spearing's observations on the evolution of the dream poem:

As the [14th] century proceeded, there was a tendency for allegory to move into the background, to be replaced by persons and scenes taken from real life, whose function is no longer merely illustrative, as it is in the *Roman de la Rose*. This movement towards a kind of realism, at least of surface, is typical of the later medieval arts in general, and it is of great importance for the development of the dream-poem, involving a new interest in the realities of sleep and dreaming, in the poet-dreamer's real life, and in his personality and social status.¹¹

Much of the same is true of Jarman and *Jubilee*. Among the film's cast are significant punk figures Jordan and Adam Ant, and Jarman himself cameos as a journalist at the latter's audition for Borgia Ginz. The anarchic and decaying vision of England that comprises the film's contemporary setting is also drawn from life, a caricature of Britain at the tail-end of the 1970s. As Jarman writes:

⁹ Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 162.

¹⁰ Sitney, p. 114.

¹¹ Spearing, p. 42.

The film was cast from among and made by friends. It was a determined and often reckless analysis of the world which surrounded us, constructed pell-mell through the early months of 1977. The shooting script is a mass of Xeroxes and quick notes on scraps of paper, torn photos and messages from my collaborators, and the resulting film has something of the same quality.¹²

This insight into Jarman's creative process rings true with Spearing's account of fourteenth century dream poetry, but it also reveals the aspects of medieval artistic practice embedded in Jarman's own methods. George, likening the apparent contrast between Jarman's auteur status and collaborative methods with that of Bergman, notes that 'just as the medieval artist did not work in isolation the modern filmmaker is similarly reliant on team work to realise his or her own creation'.¹³ Moreover, his sketchbooks, pasted full of news-clippings, pressed flowers, sketches, annotated photocopies, and scribbled notes, are reminiscent of manuscripts rich in marginalia.

When considered against the framework of the dream vision framework, then, the characters of Bod, Mads, and Crabs function as the personifications of psychic states or moral values from whom Elizabeth I and Dee seek answers. Bod, as the newly crowned queen of modern chaos, is Elizabeth I's mirror image, her shadow self. But Elizabeth I is also emblematic; as Jarman puts it:

Elizabeth I, the nation's anima, wanders in virgin white; while John Dee, the magus, inventor and universal man reveals to her the shadow of time. A bitter chill blows through the film. For an audience who expected a punk music film, full of 'anarchy' and laughs at the end of the King's Road, it was difficult to swallow. They wanted action, not analysis; and most of the music lay on the cutting-room floor.¹⁴

The language of this passage from *Dancing Ledge* is typically Jungian, mirroring the queen's 'virgin white' with 'the shadow of time' revealed to her by Dee, but it also contains a further kernel of Jarman's interest in the Middle Ages. The phrase, 'a bitter chill blows through the film', calls to mind a similar line from 'The Wanderer' in which the speaker cautions his listeners against valuing wealth over companionship: 'The wise warrior must consider how

¹² Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 168.

¹³ George.

¹⁴ Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 164.

ghostly it will be when all of the wealth of this world stands waste, just as now here and there through this middle-earth wind-blown walls stand covered with frost-fall'.¹⁵ *Jubilee's* England is driven by greed and base impulse. While Bod, Mads, and Crabs rob and murder as they see fit, the Mephistophelean Borgia Ginz carves up and colonises what remains of the country's spiritual integrity with offers of fame and fortune; 'they all sign up in the end one way or another', he sneers towards the film's close. Kid and Amyl have, by this point, gladly accepted Borgia's offer of stardom and, in doing so, have surrendered the anima of their artistry. Elizabeth I, embodying Jarman's conception of England's archetypal values, is at once the nations' soul and its ghost as she wanders the modern London conjured in front of her by Dee. The values espoused under her rule are long dead; substance has been replaced by surface and profit is the only value of concern. Having witnessed the shadow of her time, the film's final moments see Elizabeth I reminisce with Dee on the cliffs at Dancing Ledge, recalling with fondness 'The whispered secrets at Oxford like this sweet sea breeze the codes and counter-codes, the secret language of flowers'.¹⁶ Their archaic speech, Elizabethan garb, and the natural imagery present in both their exchange and their surroundings is the binary opposition of the violent urban landscape occupied by Bod, Mads, and Crabs. Elizabeth I's nostalgia for a culture of symbols, ciphers, and mysticism functions here in the same way as the speaker's advice to seek consolation from God does in the final lines of *The Wanderer*: Jarman presents a caricature of contemporary Britain as a cautionary tale for the sixteenth-century monarch, and so entreats his audience to scrutinise their society and take action to change it for the better.

Like George, Mills sees the influence of *Piers Plowman* on Jarman's films. Where George draws a connection with the apocalyptic vision conjured in *The Last of England*, Mills sees structural similarities between Langland's poem and *Jubilee*. Both, he argues, are 'rooted in a world contemporary with the poet's'; both begin with 'an evocation of an idealised monarch'; and both prompt their audience 'to search for meanings beyond the surface of what they are seeing'.¹⁷ Unlike *Piers Plowman*, however, the narrative of *Jubilee* is not obviously bracketed by the falling-asleep of its narrator. Instead, the body of film is presented as a magical vision conjured by the magus figure, Dee, and the spirit Ariel by means of various

¹⁵ Greenblatt, 'The Wanderer', p. 113.

¹⁶ Jarman, *Up In The Air: Collected Film Scripts*, p. 76.

¹⁷ Mills, p. 166.

scrying tools such as a mirror and, later, a crystal. Such artefacts are a recurring motif in Jarman's films and often relate to questions of the self-reflexivity of film, as well as introspection. They are used in transition shots, such as those in *The Angelic Conversation* in which Hobbs reflects light into the camera and transports us from the 'reality' of Montacute House to the shores of Williamson's psyche. In this sense, Jarman's pre-occupation with and use of mirrors is a marker of his postmodernism. However, the very same usage of the mirror as a tool to examine both the form and the contents of his work is in itself a reflection of a distinctly mediaeval viewpoint. Steven F. Kruger informs us that:

For the Middle Ages, mirrors were not solely agents of self-examination, and medieval dream poetry, even at its most self-conscious, is not narrowly self-concerned or solipsistic. The goal of looking into a mirror is in part self-knowledge, and the dream poem does mirror itself, examining its own constructs and movement. Medieval mirrors, however, serve not only to reflect the self, but also to reveal information about the world beyond the self. Similarly, the self-conscious dream poem is not independent of the external reality or truth that it attempts to represent. In its self-reflexive movements, the dream vision raises not only self-contained formal questions, but also questions about how literature grasps and represents real and true entities existing outside a strictly poetic realm. The dream poem's self-reflexivity, in other words, often leads it into questions of epistemology.¹⁸

In *Jubilee*, mirrors are associated with Dee and Ariel. It is Dee who facilitates the contemporary portion of the narrative by means of a shewstone, and it is Ariel who appears intermittently throughout the film holding a mirror with which he, like Hobbs, reflects light into the camera. When Elizabeth I implores Ariel to impart knowledge of God, Dee instructs her to 'gaze deeper into the crystal', and it is Dee who conjures for his queen 'the shadow of our time', the dark reflection of her England through which Bod and her cohort cavort, in the first place. Similarly, the diamond which is taken from the corpse of Elizabeth II (Fig. 21) by a child who is clearly desensitised to such sights, and is later coveted by Elizabeth I's handmaiden, eventually ends up in the hands of Ariel at the film's end.

The diamond appears throughout the film as it is passed from hand to hand, and clearly has symbolic import. Elizabeth II is the owner of a number of diamonds, cut from the Cullinan diamond, the largest of which – Cullinan I – is set in the head of the Sovereigns

¹⁸ Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 136–37.



Figure 21: Elizabeth II drops the diamond in Jubilee. DVD still.



Figure 22: Bod wears the crown. DVD still.

Sceptre with Cross which ‘represents the sovereign’s temporal power and is associated with good governance’.¹⁹ The second largest, Cullinan II, adorns the Imperial State Crown, worn by the monarch at the close of the coronation. It is this crown that Bod loots from the corpse of Elizabeth II and, when she crowns herself in a jubilant display of ‘high fashion’ (Fig. 22), it is evident that the setting which should hold Cullinan II is now empty. As is true of several other of the large stones set in the Imperial State Crown, the ‘Second Star of Africa’ is a storied jewel, presented to Edward VII as a goodwill gift following the Boer War.²⁰ Jarman’s interest, however, is clearly in the mystical import of the material diamond rather than the historical significance of the stone itself. In her thorough examination of medieval and Early Modern lapidaries, Joan Evans writes, ‘The most important lapidary of the seventeenth century was the *Gemmarum et Lapidum Historia* of Anselmus Boetius de Boot’,²¹ noting that ‘while he doubts the value of the use of diamond as a test of adultery, he agrees that it is possible that it may repel poison, pestilence, witchcraft, madness, terror, dreams, and evil spirits; it may even give victory, constancy, and serenity’.²² Similarly, Abby Jane Dubman Hansen sees great significance in the brief mention of a diamond in *Macbeth*, suggesting that ‘Banquo’s reference to the diamond Duncan sends Lady Macbeth (II.i.15) sheds great light on her fate - when we know the contemporaneous beliefs about the jewel’; namely, that ‘The diamond, generously bestowed upon one worthy of its purity, was thought to ward off demons and the evil dreams they inspire’.²³ Evans traces these beliefs back further, to the eleventh century lapidary of Renes Marbodes – ‘the lapidary *par excellence* of the Middle Ages’ – citing a passage from its first chapter, entitled ‘De Adamante’ (‘The Diamond’), in which he attributes the stone with the power to strengthen the heart, dispel nightmares, cure poison, and alleviate madness.²⁴ Furthermore, she notes that Sir John

¹⁹ ‘The Sovereign’s Sceptre with Cross 1661 with Later Additions’, *Royal Collection Trust* <<https://www.rct.uk/collection/31712/the-sovereigns-sceptre-with-cross>> [accessed 4 September 2019].

²⁰ ‘The Imperial State Crown 1937’, *Royal Collection Trust* <<https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/2/collection/31701/the-imperial-state-crown>> [accessed 4 September 2019].

²¹ Joan Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and Renaissance Particularly in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), p. 152.

²² Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and Renaissance Particularly in England*, p. 153.

²³ Abby Jane Dubman Hansen, ‘Shakespeare and the Lore of Precious Stones’, *College Literature*, 4.3 (1977), 210–19 (p. 212).

²⁴ Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and Renaissance Particularly in England*, p. 35.

Mandeville's fourteenth century lapidary 'states that it often happens that the good diamond loses its virtue by the sin of him who bears it'.²⁵

It is significant, then, that it is the crown's centrepiece, the large diamond, that Elizabeth II drops as she dies. When Bod claims her prize, the crown, from the fallen queen, it is concealed in a bag; the diamond, however, drops from Elizabeth II's hand as she collapses (Fig. 21), indicating that it was removed from its setting prior to the mugging. The implications are that the fugitive queen dismantled the crown jewels herself, perhaps with the intention of pawning the stones as her predecessors had, or that the diamond has become devalued in her possession and that, as a result, Bod considers it worthless. Perhaps both are true, for Elizabeth II's possession of the diamond does not protect her from the punk demons who assail her, nor from the nightmare that Britain has become under her reign. The stone is then picked up by a young boy, for whom it is little but a pretty trinket. He holds it up to his eye, recognising its faceted surface as that of a kaleidoscope. We next see him seated before a maze-like sigil he is burning into the grass. Startled by Elizabeth I's handmaiden, he drops the diamond. She picks it up and examines it curiously, holding it up to her eye, as the boy did, before slyly secreting it in her pocket. Here, Jarman cuts to a close-up of Ariel who gazes silently into the camera while fanning his hands up to slowly cover his eyes, drawing further attention to the theme of vision. He emphasises this further during the Elizabethan entourage's next appearance, following the murder of Lounge Lizard, in which he finishes Dee's observation of mankind's attraction to polarities with the example of 'seeing and not seeing'. Disturbed by what she has seen in modern England, Elizabeth I implores the spirit to give her knowledge of God, at which point he instructs her to 'gaze deep into the crystal' presented to her by Dee. The continued emphasis on the connection between the act of seeing, the diamond, and the presence of the Elizabethan characters in a contemporary setting reinforces the film's debt to the tradition of the dream vision as a structural and didactic template; Jarman asks his audience not just to look, but to see.

Throughout the film, Elizabeth I makes continued reference to the narrative's status as a vision, or a dream, and her reactions to the scenes of violence that she witnesses make it clear that she considers it a nightmarish one. As such, the handmaiden's relinquishing of Cullinan II to Ariel in the film's final moments is an act of great importance. Evans informs us

²⁵ Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and Renaissance Particularly in England*, p. 64.

that, once sullied by a sinful bearer, a diamond's power can be restored by means of a consecration.²⁶ While no blessing is performed on the crown jewel, its talismanic power appears restored by other means. It makes its way to Ariel via an innocent boy and a loyal servant; the former is associated with fire, through the sigil that he is seen sitting next to; the latter, to water by the Dorset coast. In Jungian terms, the diamond has been exposed to male and female energies; to fire, and to water; to matter, and to spirit. As such, it has been restored. Discussing the Tao, Christ, and self-realization, Jung writes of 'the diamond body', an 'incorruptible body, and 'a consciousness detached from the world'.²⁷ Clearly, the diamond here is both a mystical talisman in its medieval sense and a Jungian symbol of the individuated self. If Elizabeth I is the nation's anima, then the land itself is the animus; the diamond, having been replenished by fire and water, represents the healing of England's spiritual wounds. Having been dropped by Elizabeth II at the beginning of the film, the diamond also represents the nation itself which has literally slipped from the Windsor's grasp. That it eventually ends up in the hands of the spirit Ariel, its talismanic powers replenished, is a further indication of the reconnection of the nation with its spirit. Unlike the young boy or the handmaiden, Ariel does not hold the diamond up to his eye when it is presented to him: he holds it up to the camera so that we, the audience, can gaze into the crystal instead. Its power restored, it promises to guard against the dark dream of England to which we have borne witness.

Dead Ringers

Where *Jubilee* operates as a healing fiction on a national level, *The Garden* serves as Jarman's personal panacea. It is at once a love letter to the landscape on which Prospect Cottage sits at Dungeness, a re-imagining of Christ's Passion, as well as a reflection on the politics surrounding, and Jarman's own experience of, AIDS. It is also arguably the most mediaeval of Jarman's films: it is structured, like *The Angelic Conversation* and *Jubilee*, as a dream vision, and its retelling of Christ's Passion from the standpoint of an observer recalls 'The Dream of the Rood', an Old English religious poem from the 10th century. Its structure, too, though

²⁶ Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and Renaissance Particularly in England*, p. 64.

²⁷ C. G. Jung, 'Commentary on "The Secret of the Golden Flower"', in *Alchemical Studies*, ed. by Herbert Read and others (New Delhi: Isha Books, 2013), pp. 1–57 (p. 46).

almost entirely free of written or spoken narrative, owes just as much to mediaeval dream poetry as it does to the visual grammar of film. As O'Pray observes:

The Garden is framed not only by Jarman's dream but by the making of the film itself. It begins with the sounds and images of the studio, as Jarman calls on the crew to take a break. Then fairly early in the film this self-referentiality is consolidated when, immediately on the cut that ends the staged Judas scene, Jarman's voice can be heard giving a directorial instruction (it sounds like 'Go!').²⁸

This direct engagement with the film's constructed nature recalls the 'self-reflexivity' of the dream poem as outlined by Kruger,²⁹ and as further detailed by Spearing:

a dream-poem, from the fourteenth century on, is a poem which has more fully realized its own existence as a poem. Compared with other poems, it makes us more conscious that it has a beginning and an end (marked by the falling asleep and awakening of the narrator); that it has a narrator, whose experience constitutes the subject-matter of the poem; that its status is that of an imaginative fiction (whether this is conceived as a matter of inspiration, or of mere fantasy, or somewhere between the two); in short that it is not a work of nature but a work of art. It is a poem which does not take for granted its own existence, but is continuously aware of its own existence and of the need, therefore, to justify that existence (since it is not part of the self-justifying world of natural objects).³⁰

Jarman's interest in the artificiality of the film is thus as much an indicator of a postmodern approach to filmmaking as it is his characteristic interest in the artistic traditions of England's past. He considered *Jubilee* 'a fantasy documentary fabricated so that documentary and fictional forms are confused and coalesce',³¹ and in *The Garden* we see the almost total dissolution of the boundaries between the 'documentary' and the 'fictional' as Jarman appears as dreamer, filmmaker, and gardener in various degrees of performativity. It is not always immediately clear, in these moments, if the Jarman onscreen is recorded from life or a fictionalised iteration performed for the purposes of the film. This persistent transgression

²⁸ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 179.

²⁹ Kruger, pp. 136–37.

³⁰ Spearing, pp. 4–5.

³¹ Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 167.

of the filmmaker into the film, as filmmaker rather than actor, is a direct continuation of the conventions of the dream poem in which the author is also the dreamer.

In 'The Parliament of Birds', Chaucer's dreamer summarises *Scipio's Dream*, which he has been reading, as a means of prefacing his account of his own dream vision. *The Garden*, which all but dispenses with dialogue after an initial voice over read by Michael Gough and features the spoken word only as song or isolated phrases, acknowledges its lineage more obliquely. As the film's opening credits give way to hand-held night-shots of the lighting set-up, Jarman can be heard giving directions to his cast and crew. The darkness, and the distance from any perceivable human action, combined with ambience of Simon Fisher Turner's score creates a sense of waiting, as of that experienced in a theatre before the curtain is raised; the unscripted chatter and the sustained notes of the music suggest the tuning-up of an orchestra pre-performance. After a few moments, Jarman can be heard shouting 'Quiet!', at which point he cuts to a series of monochromatic close-ups of water dripping onto a collection of objects on a desk - a phallic rock, a rounded stone on a bed of nails, a crucifix - before settling on a mid-shot of Jarman slumped, asleep, on an open book. Naturally, the implication of this last image is that what follows is to take place in Jarman's dreams and, as such, this brief sequence is the visual equivalent of the opening section of 'The Parliament of Birds'. Furthermore, the lingering shot of water dripping onto the crucifix directly recalls the beginnings of the speaker's vision in 'The Dream of the Rood': 'I saw that bright beacon change in clothing and color: now it was wet with moisture'.³² Itself a retelling of Christ's Passion, the poem gives voice to the rood as an unwilling participant in, and sufferer of, the crucifixion as Christ's double. This image, then, provides an early key to both the film's influences and its content.

In typical Jarman fashion, however, these influences are a mish-mash of the contemporary and the historic. Following the sequence establishing him as authorial dreamer, we see a nude man and woman cowering under the glare of the lights glimpsed in the film's opening shots as a moustachioed man, clad in bondage gear and wielding a dildo, crawls menacingly towards them. Clearly this is a depiction of the temptation of Adam and Eve in which Satan, an Anger-esque Lucifer in leather whose fetish-wear is shorthand for the taboo and the alternative, represents a specifically carnal threat. Cocteau's influence is

³² 'The Dream of the Rood', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition, Volume 1*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), pp. 27-29 (pp. 27-28).

evident, too, in the flare-wielding man who appears in the mirror behind the sleeping Jarman, recalling the protagonist's journey through the looking glass in *Blood of a Poet*. It is no surprise then, given its lineage, that Tony Rayns dubbed *The Garden* an "'I"-movie', which O'Pray describes as 'a development of the psycho-drama film' as outlined by Sitney in *Visionary Film*,³³ just as George has placed it within the ranks of the trance film and Dillon, the lyric film. This focus on the 'I', on the personal elements in the film, is as much an indicator of the avant-garde elements of Jarman's work as it is the mediaeval aspects. As noted above, the boundaries between Jarman as director, Jarman as individual, and Jarman as actor in *The Garden* are continually blurred and, as Spearing writes:

There has been much discussion of the part played in medieval poems by such first-person dreamer-narrators. The simplest view of the matter would be that, being 'I', the Dreamer is identified with the writer of the poem. Even if we rejected the naïve supposition that Chaucer really had the dream described in his poem, there would still be the fact that the poem itself asserts by its conclusion that the narrator is in some sense the same as the poet.³⁴

By presenting himself, in George's words, as 'the visionary who conjures up the film's dream-like imagery',³⁵ Jarman establishes himself as the 'I' of *The Garden's* narrative even while his name in its opening credits identifies the film as a vision of Derek Jarman. As a vision at both a formal level and a narrative one, *The Garden* recalls the 'inner dream' structure of the 'Piers Plowman' B-Text. In this version of the poem, Passus XI and Passus XII, comprising part of the third vision, and Passuses XVI and XVII of the fifth vision, are presented as dream visions within the larger dream vision narrative in much the same way that Jarman presents his dream vision to us.

Passus XVI, begun when Will is driven into a faint at the mention of Piers Plowman, experiences a vision of the tree of Charity, tended by Piers himself. In this vision, Piers explains the concept of the Holy Trinity to Will through the form of the tree, which represents humanity, and its three supporting struts, which signify the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost respectively. This vision, which extends into Passus XVII to comprise the poem's second inner dream, directly precedes Langland's rendering of Christ's Crucifixion and the Harrowing

³³ O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, p. 178.

³⁴ Spearing, p. 67.

³⁵ George, p. 215.

of Hell and, as Schmidt explains, is the point at which Will ‘recovers his calling as a clerk, recognizing it for the first time as a *vindication* of the time he has spent on poetry. “Making” renews the belief that “thinking” had nearly destroyed’.³⁶ For Jarman, too, the act of making is a restorative one, embodied here by both his filmmaking and the tending of his garden. Charlesworth writes:

The garden is at Dungeness, the scenes of the film are around the garden as far as the Listening Wall at Greatstone; everything is integrated by this space that lies at the centre of the film. The mythic spaces that haunt the film are the gardens of Gethsemane and Eden, but the material garden is where we see Derek working and conceiving the film as well as participating in it by being shown working, so that the imagination of conceiving the film becomes part of the film: this is a meditation on creativity centred in the garden. The garden is a real and practical space of creation: the film tries to remind us of its multi-sensory and experiential character with shots of Derek working, planting, watering, burning in the sunshine.³⁷

The garden, for Jarman, is a healing space, ‘a therapy and a pharmacopoeia’.³⁸ For Mills, Jarman’s interest in gardens and horticulture is a means of ‘negotiating the losses of history through a process of reclamation and recycling’.³⁹ Seeing connections between the objects Jarman incorporates into his garden ‘as memorials: reminders of departed friends, experiences and sensations’⁴⁰ and his habit, in his writings, of ‘Assigning even to individual plants a history, which stretches from their present existences in unlikely locations to their links with ancient myths and folklore’,⁴¹ he goes on to suggest that Jarman’s use of unlikely plants and objects that others might find distasteful ‘draws parallels between queer love and the activity of gardening’.⁴² In *The Garden*, the titular space channels, as Charlesworth points out, Eden and Gethsemane, but it is also emblematic of the numerous other gardens scattered throughout Jarman’s films: those of his childhood as seen in *The Last of England*; the ‘emblematic garden’ space in *Jubilee*;⁴³ and the symbolic garden of the English landscape.

³⁶ A. V. C. Schmidt, ‘Introduction’, in *Piers Plowman* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2009), pp. xi–xlili (p. xxxiii).

³⁷ Charlesworth, p. 146.

³⁸ Jarman, *Derek Jarman’s Garden*, p. 12.

³⁹ Mills, pp. 124–25.

⁴⁰ Mills, p. 126.

⁴¹ Mills, p. 127.

⁴² Mills, p. 128.

⁴³ Jarman, *Up In The Air: Collected Film Scripts*, p. 73.

‘Paradise haunts gardens’, he writes, ‘and some gardens are paradises’;⁴⁴ it is these paradisiacal gardens, both nostalgic and mythic, that reverberate throughout his art as symbols of his personal mythology.

As he informs us on multiple occasions, flowers are an enduring memory of Jarman’s childhood: in *Dancing Ledge*, he devotes half a page to memories of ‘deep wine-coloured peonies’, ‘shirley poppies, jet-black and silky scarlet, and ‘Lupins [...] blue and magenta’, seen in the walled garden ‘through which we walked in a crocodile to Chapel’;⁴⁵ in *Modern Nature*, he writes that ‘Flowers spring up and entwine themselves like bindweed along the footpaths of my childhood’⁴⁶ and tells us that his parents gave him a copy of *Beautiful Flowers and How to Grow Them*, a ‘large Edwardian gardening book full of delightful watercolour illustrations and neat little line drawings’, shortly after his fourth birthday;⁴⁷ in *Kicking the Pricks*, he writes of becoming a ‘detached and dreamy child [who] spent hours alone painting or watching the flowers grow’,⁴⁸ while in *Chroma*, he tells us that, ‘At seven, [he] embarrassed his father by asking for a white arum lily for as a birthday present’;⁴⁹ and, in *Derek Jarman’s Garden*, he writes that ‘I was always a passionate gardener – flowers sparkled in my childhood as they do in a medieval manuscript’.⁵⁰ However, flowers represent more than a personal history to Jarman. His writings, particularly *Modern Nature*, are peppered with musings on the literary, historical, and mythical contexts of these plants and, as such, they function as symbolic links to a cultural past as well; as Ellis puts it, ‘The plants begin to function as material, living connections to history, to gardens of the past, and to past gardens’.⁵¹ Furthermore, Jarman’s interest in the cultural lineage of the plants that he cultivates relates, more often than not, to their alchemical, artistic, or medicinal properties. His books are packed with medieval recipes for pigments, quotations from alchemical texts, and extracts from pre-modern herbals which detail the restorative powers of his plants, and *Modern Nature*, which covers the period in which Jarman was planting his garden at Dungeness, is a herbal in its own right. Indeed, for Ellis, the book represents a further symbolic garden, a textual pharmacopoeia to mirror that

⁴⁴ Jarman, *Derek Jarman’s Garden*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 40.

⁴⁶ Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Jarman, *Chroma*, p. 16.

⁵⁰ Jarman, *Derek Jarman’s Garden*, p. 11.

⁵¹ Ellis, *Derek Jarman’s Angelic Conversations*, p. 184.

of the garden at Prospect Cottage;⁵² its pages record the lineage of Jarman's plants, forging links with their textual pasts just as the planting of the flowers themselves connects Jarman with other, past, gardens.

Gardening is a pastime perceived as quintessentially English. As with *The Last of England*, Jarman employs the garden space as a means of repurposing and reclaiming the past and so re-establishing the underpinnings of the present. Feeling something of an exile in modern England, Jarman's horticultural endeavours represent an effort to heal himself spiritually rather than medically; the pharmacopoeia of plants that he nurtures on the barren shores of Dungeness are not intended to be used for their own medicinal purposes, but the *histories* of these properties are, for Jarman, a balm in their own right. The act of gardening, of designing, building, and nurturing a garden is also a historically therapeutic one. Claire Noble notes that in the Middle Ages,

Gardens, in fact, contributed to health, physical and spiritual, in numerous ways. Sweet scents were believed to be physically beneficial, while the act of gardening, an emulation of Christ the Gardener, was seen as a re-creation of Eden amid a post-lapsarian landscape and thus spiritually beneficial in the most direct fashion.⁵³

Again, a parallel emerges between Jarman, *The Garden*, and Passus XVI of 'Piers Plowman'. Piers, as stand-in for Christ and custodian of the Tree of Charity, explains the Christian ethos to Will in terms of gardening and, in so doing, connects spiritual well-being with the natural world. Will, moved by this encounter, reconnects his creativity with his faith and so rediscovers his sense of self. Jarman's aim is similar; by establishing his garden on the bare land at Dungeness, he is literally reclaiming the English landscape and reconstituting his sense of self as an Englishman. His plants, the historic and folkloric associations of which he is well versed in, provide links to a cultural past that he is free to curate and configure as he chooses. The stone fairy rings, memorials to dead friends, demarcate the garden as a queer space and so, like *The Angelic Conversation* and *The Last of England*, *The Garden* utilises its namesake space as a symbol of a queer Eden. Of Alain de Lille's twelfth century poem *De Planctu Naturae*, Spearing writes: 'it makes explicit the link between human love, that central concern

⁵² Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations*, p. 185.

⁵³ Noble, p. 202.

of medieval dream-poetry, and the larger philosophical conception of Nature',⁵⁴ and *Modern Nature* and *The Garden*, as companion pieces, can be said to do the same.

The Eden that Jarman evokes has a counterpart, too, as Charlesworth observes above: Gethsemane, the garden in which Christ grapples with his fate on the eve of his crucifixion. The act of gardening is therapeutic for Jarman, being a creative endeavour which soothes the soul, but it also creates the very space in which the gardener can quietly contemplate his mortality, and indeed, where the shot of water dripping onto the crucifix in the film's early moments recalls 'The Dream of the Rood', Jarman's slumped posture in the succeeding shot echoes Heinrich Hoffman's 'Christ in Gethsemane' (1886). Ellis notes the film's allusions to the identification of Jarman with Christ have 'led some critics to talk about what they see as Jarman's martyr complex, an investment in passivity and suffering that starts with *Sebastiane* and encompasses any number of the subsequent gay characters in his films, many of whom do end up dead'.⁵⁵ Regardless of whether this is the case, *The Garden* is an unapologetically introspective film that makes use of Christ's Passion as a vehicle for the filmmaker's examination of himself as an individual, an artist, and an Englishman. In this respect, he mirrors not just Christ during the Agony in the Garden, but also the most prolific of the medieval English dream poets; as Spearing informs us:

Chaucer comes more and more to use the dream-poem as a means of meditating on his own situation as a courtly poet of love; and similarly, Langland uses the dream-poem to explore his vocation as a religious poet and the difficulties he had in writing the kind of poem he felt called on to write.⁵⁶

The parallels the film strikes between Jarman's gardening and his filmmaking, between Christ's agony and his own, achieve a similar purpose. A number of binaries are established in the film's imagery: the rural and the urban; the modern and the traditional; and the useful and the moral, this last represented by moments such as the Judas episode in which a Luciferian Pete Lee-Wilson extolls the virtues of the credit card. There is a parallel here, too, with another take on Christ's Passion: Denis Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) that Jarman may or may not have seen. Arcand's film, in which actor Daniel (Lothair Bluteau) is tasked

⁵⁴ Spearing, p. 23.

⁵⁵ Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations*, p. 188.

⁵⁶ Spearing, p. 6.

with staging a revitalised enactment of the crucifixion, blurs the boundaries between performance and reality within the diegesis of the film to highlight the spiritual bankruptcy of contemporary Montreal. The distinctions between art and life, the church and the theatre, are continually and progressively blurred over the course of the film's narrative until, at its climax, Daniel becomes a modern Christ. Reality in *The Garden* is similarly malleable as Jarman slips between various iterations of himself and, by virtue of the film's iconography, is also associated with the gay couple who stand in for Christ in the film's Passion. Though only a part of the film, it is impossible to overlook the connection struck between the sufferance of Jesus and the demonization of those afflicted with the virus by scenes such as that in which the couple are tarred and feathered by Wilson, or in which Jarman himself harasses Spring with a camera.

The twin Christs of *The Garden* serve a similar purpose to Swinton in *The Last of England*, or Elizabeth I in *Jubilee*, or indeed Daniel in *Jesus of Montreal*: to rejuvenate, and replenish, a landscape which is spiritually and culturally barren. At the end of the film, we see them happily burning biscuit wrappers over a candle as part of a familial unit of which Swinton too is a part. This activity is natural, intimate and uninhibited, free from the oppressive eyes of the media as depicted by the masked paparazzi earlier in the film. If *The Garden* is Jarman's Agony in the Garden, his taking stock of his situation and his examination of the openness with which he discusses his sexuality and his illness, then this final scene signifies an optimism that the film will act as something of a panacea for the stigmatism experienced by his fellow homosexuals, particularly those who have contracted HIV. His fondness for his garden reflects this optimism; the rationale behind his stone rings, his sympathies. His fondness for the structure of the dream poem, too, is significant, particularly insofar as the influences of 'The Dream of the Rood' and 'Piers Plowman' present themselves: the shared suffering of Christ and the Rood can be seen in the doubling of Jarman's Christ figures, but also in the identification of Jarman himself with their suffering. This sharing of pain extends beyond the Christ figure, too, to connect Jarman with those of his friends who succumbed to the illness before he did. Similarly, Passus XVI of 'Piers Plowman' sees Will reconcile his creativity with his faith in preparation for the Harrowing of Hell episode of the poem, just as *The Garden* records Jarman's horticultural efforts in connection with his other creative outputs: writing, painting, and filmmaking. In its fusion of personal and artistic elements, and collision of the past with the future, the film is typically Jarman. These same characteristics, shown above to

be drawn as much from a long tradition of English poetry as from avant-garde cinema, constitute Jarman's mediaeval modernism: his archaic avant-garde.

Chapter 3: Boorman

'A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero': Men, Monsters, and Mythic Structures in *Point Blank* and *Zardoz*

Where Gilliam is a fantasist, and Jarman a visual poet, Boorman may be described, broadly, as a genre filmmaker, albeit an unlikely one. He has dabbled in the musical (*Catch Us if You Can*), comedy (*Where the Heart Is*), the war movie (*Hell in the Pacific*, *Hope and Glory*), the crime thriller (*Point Blank*), the gangster film (*The General*), science fiction (*Zardoz*), horror (*Exorcist II: The Heretic*), the spy movie (*The Taylor of Panama*), and the Western (*The Emerald Forest*). None of these films, however, readily conform to the conventional expectations of their respective genres. Like Gilliam, Boorman treats the conventions of genre as the cinematic equivalent to Levi-Strauss' mythemes: as the basic language units of a mythic narrative. *The Emerald Forest*, for example, constitutes an eco-centric answer to John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) by transposing the Western onto the Brazilian rainforest, eschewing the iconography of Stetson, horse, and pistol in favour of natural imagery and the mysticism of the forest's indigenous people; *Exorcist II*, in a departure from William Friedkin's original film, offers psychological and existential horror in place of demonic threat and gore; *Zardoz*, ostensibly set in a dystopian future, presents itself as a science fiction film while incorporating several elements of fantasy; and *Hell in the Pacific*, is a war film in which no shot is ever fired. These are just four examples, but it is enough to demonstrate the fact that Boorman is interested in subverting generic tropes and clichés and bending these well-worn forms to suit his preoccupations. As Michel Ciment observes:

However varied the settings of Boorman's films and the cinematic genres to which they belong, all of them are based on the notion of a quest. Each is the story of a journey – a journey undertaken by a hero who, at the conclusion of a series of tests and ordeals, finds himself radically transformed. As in Jung, a crucial influence on the film-maker, the hero personifies the evolutionary urge and the power of the mind; his first victory – sometimes his only victory – is that which he wins over himself.¹

Ciment views the filmmaker's propensity for engaging with, and subverting, generic conventions as 'a kind of classical-romantic opposition',² but one might just as easily typify it

¹ Michel Ciment, *John Boorman* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 14.

² Ciment, p. 9.

as ‘archaic avant-garde’. Although he has made only one film that is ostensibly set during the Middle Ages, *Excalibur*, the (re)-presentation of themes, traditions, and practices of mediaeval art and culture is as endemic to Boorman’s filmmaking as it is to that Gilliam or Jarman.

There is little, at first glance, to suggest the presence of mediaeval traditions in a film like *Beyond Rangoon* (1995). On the surface, this story of an American doctor, Laura Bowman (Patricia Arquette) who becomes stranded in Burma and witnesses the 8888 Uprising and the military government’s brutal attempts to suppress it, is a political thriller in the mould of Costa-Gavras’s *Missing* (1982) or Roland Joffe’s *The Killing Fields* (1984). But as Boorman notes, a subplot in which Bowman has visions and dreams of their dead son, who was killed in a seemingly motiveless act of gun violence back in America, directly relates back to the Middle English poem, *Pearl*.³ This trauma, and wounds it has inflicted in Bowman’s psyche, make her a kind of Fisher King figure, who over the course of the film is healed. Moreover, the film’s central relationship, between Bowman and U Aung Ko, an aging Burmese tour guide who helps bring Laura to safety across the Thai border, directly mirrors that between King Arthur and Merlin. A similarly unlikely medieval subtext can be found in a work like Boorman’s first Hollywood film, *Point Blank*. The film tells the story of Walker (Lee Marvin) who, double-crossed and left to die by his best friend during a money-grabbing scheme on Alcatraz, sets about dismantling a racket known only as ‘The Organisation’ to re-claim his share of the loot. The original script, given to Boorman by aspiring producer Judd Bernard, was based on Richard Stark’s 1962 pulp novel *The Hunter* (which Boorman admits he never read)⁴ and was, he writes, ‘appalling’.⁵ Nevertheless, a meeting was arranged with potential leading-man Lee Marvin, to whom Bernard had also given a copy of the script. As Boorman remembers:

I showed it to Bill Stair. Bill knew everything about comic books and pulp fiction. We explored the character. Bill did some drawings. When I finally called Lee, he invited me for a drink at the flat he was renting. I talked about the character. I suggested that he had been emotionally and physically wounded to a point where he was no longer human. This made him frightening, but also pure, in a certain sense. He was beyond vanity and desire. His only connection with life was through violence, yet he lacked the conviction or cruelty or

³ Brian Hoyle, *The Cinema of John Boorman* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press Ltd., 2012), p. 188.

⁴ Stephen Farber, ‘The Writer in American Films’, *Film Quarterly*, 21.4 (1968), 2–13 (p. 4).

⁵ John Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 126.

passion to take pleasure from it, or satisfaction from vengeance. I realised I was painting a bleak picture. But Lee was intrigued.⁶

Several drinks later, Marvin accepted the role on one condition: that the script be, quite literally, tossed out of the window.⁷ Both men agreed that the script held a single merit: the protagonist, left for dead and hell-bent on what Boorman calls a 'quest for revenge';⁸ their interest, it is clear, lay in paring away the noir-ish aspects of Parker's character to fully expose and explore the psychological impact of his trauma. And yet *Point Blank* is not an introspective film. There is no voiceover, no expository inner monologue such as might be expected of Sam Spade or Walter Neff, from which an audience can gain insight into Walker's character. Excepting a brief summary of his relationships with Lynn and Mal, delivered by the former via flashback, his character is defined by his tendency for action over speech.

Boorman's use of the word 'quest' is telling and it indicates that he was already thinking about the story in mythic terms. Indeed, he would later explicitly connect it with Arthurian legend, noting that 'The woman's betrayal is, of course, the story of Lancelot, Arthur and Guinevere'.⁹ The film's screenwriter, Alex Jacobs, shares this outlook. Discussing the differences between his script and the finished film with Stephen Farber, he mused:

I would argue that the film would have been even more popular with this warmer quality to it. I don't mean by that pandering to the audience, but I mean making Lee more human, less monsterish, less zombie, less killer, if you like - although he doesn't actually kill a single person in the picture. I think the problem is that that sort of implacable, never-let-up drive is not human, and while it would have been marvellous to have continued our myth that he literally comes from the underground, roams over the surface of the earth for a brief while, then goes back into the shadows - well, by introducing the girl and all sorts of other things, we obviously go away from the essential myth. But by making him variable, by giving him variations of pace, by giving him changes of character, we would have made him human, and I think much more understandable.¹⁰

⁶ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 127.

⁷ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 128.

⁸ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 127.

⁹ Ciment, p. 79.

¹⁰ Stephen Farber and Alexander Jacobs, 'The Writer II : An Interview With', *Film*, 22.2 (2019), 2–14 (p. 7).

Like Boorman, Jacobson considers *Point Blank* to be structured around an ‘essential myth’, indicating a conscious reduction of the film’s characters from fully formed personalities to essential archetypes. In Yost, the mysterious figure who periodically appears to point Walker towards a new lead, we have the Merlin-esque Trickster; Chris is the double of her sister, Walker’s wife Lynn; and Walker himself is the wounded King. The terms ‘quest’ and ‘myth’ point towards classical narratives, but Jacobs’s succinct outline of the film’s structure – ‘he literally comes from the underground, roams over the surface of the earth for a brief while, then goes back into the shadows’ – suggests a distinctly European influence: as Nancy Caciola informs us, ‘Belief in corpses coming back to life is well attested for parts of medieval Europe, most notably Iceland, but also England, the Low Countries, northern France and parts of Germany’.¹¹ These beliefs, she explains, distinguished between ‘revenants as possessed by demons’¹² and living corpses presented ‘not as possessed, but as coming back to life on their own’.¹³ Significant to this line of inquiry is the decision to change the name of the film’s protagonist from Parker, as it is in the original novel, to Walker. In doing so, Boorman and Jacobson distance the character from his humanity. His first name is never given, and Reese tells Organisation bigwig Carter that ‘he never called himself anything but that’; Walker becomes not so much a name as a description, a means of identifying an entity or force not quite human.

On the one hand, ‘Walker’ may remind contemporary audiences of the name ‘Strider’, the pseudonym adopted by the exiled king Aragorn in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954 - 1955; filmed by Peter Jackson between 2001 - 2003) or of the ‘Walkers’ and ‘White Walkers’ depicted in the television adaptations of *The Walking Dead* (2010 – present) and *Game of Thrones* (2011 - 2019) respectively; on the other, it might just as easily be inferred to imply a traveller, or a wanderer. For Boorman, Walker’s death is more than simply the impetus for the narrative:

His only motivation, the one thing that keeps him alive, is his quest. When it’s completed, he ceases to exist. Seeing the film, one should be able to imagine that this whole story of vengeance is taking place inside his head at the moment of his death. In any case, that’s a possible interpretation. He’s

¹¹ Nancy Caciola, ‘WRAITHS , REVENANTS AND RITUAL IN MEDIEVAL CULTURE’, *Past & Present*, 152.1 (1996), 3–45 (p. 15).

¹² Caciola, p. 14.

¹³ Caciola, p. 17.

powerful, he can destroy the whole world, because his values aren't those of the gangsters; he isn't afraid of the same things, he isn't afraid of dying. He exposes their weaknesses. He's a catalyst who exposes the corruption of their world.¹⁴

Suggestions that Walker did in fact die on Alcatraz are scattered throughout the film, haunting its plot as Walker does *The Organisation*. As Brian Hoyle notes, 'The waitress in Chris's club says, "Walker, are you still alive?" and Chris tells him he "should just lie down and die."' Additionally, the image of Reece [sic] shooting Walker recurs constantly, as if to remind the audience that Walker could not be alive'.¹⁵ These comments create ambiguity around both the reality of the narrative and Walker's state of being; he is simultaneously a miraculous survivor, a vengeful revenant, and a ghost in the machine of his own dying fantasy. For Hoyle, 'this ambiguity and the influence of modernist writers such as Beckett once again tie the film in with figures such as Alain Renais and Michelangelo Antonioni and their contemporaries in European art cinema'.¹⁶ It might also be reconciled, however, by viewing the film through a medieval lens. To his quarry, he seems an unstoppable force, risen from the grave with the sole intention of tearing down anyone and anything that stands between him and his goal; to Chris and the waitress, he is a relic of a past epoch, incompatible with modernity. From both points of view, he is an outsider, a professional criminal expelled from the underworld and doomed to wander the earth in search of a goal which may or may not exist. Sarah Tarlow and Emma Battell Lowman inform us that 'a sentence of banishment or exile in the medieval period was almost equivalent to death';¹⁷ so too might Walker's ejection from the criminal territories occupied by Reese and *The Organisation* be considered not only a literal death sentence, but also a metaphorical one.

Above, Boorman describes the character as 'emotionally and physically wounded to a point where he was no longer human'. He also admits that 'In one sense, *Point Blank* was a study of Marvin, and I saw it as an extension of my documentary work, the studies I had made of individuals. The young Marvin, wounded and wounding, brave and fearful, was always with him'.¹⁸ As such, it is significant that, following his attempt to murder Reese by shooting the

¹⁴ Ciment, p. 79.

¹⁵ Brian Hoyle, *John Boorman* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), p. 31.

¹⁶ Hoyle, p. 32.

¹⁷ Sarah Tarlow and Emma Battell Lowman, *Harnessing the Power of the Criminal Corpse* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 45.

¹⁸ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, pp. 135–36.

bed, Walker was originally supposed to interrogate Lynn but that, Boorman reveals, Lee made the decision not to ask these questions as scripted; the scene was then quickly re-written so that Sharon Acker both asked and answered his unspoken demands. The Fisher King, of course, is revived only when Perceval asks the correct, healing question of him. Boorman no doubt also recalled that, in Malory's text, it is the relationship between Launcelot and Guinevere that sets in motion the chain of events leading to Arthur's downfall at the hands of Mordred, and that Launcelot's punishment for coveting the queen is to be expelled from Camelot and exiled to France, a sentence which causes him great grief (Vol.2, chapter XX, book XVIII). To equate Walker with both Arthur and Lancelot would be erroneous; nevertheless, the question of exile hangs over *Point Blank*. Walker is a marginalised figure and, as he advances on The Organisation's territory it, like Camelot, crumbles. As Bronislaw Geremek explains:

The concept of marginality in the Middle Ages was derived from spatial metaphors and it directly regarded space, perceived as "inside" or "outside," center or periphery, the first term in these pairs always being judged preferable. This image of spatial differentiation was superimposed on social organization, separating out from the "center" – that is, from society organized into family and group solidarities – all sorts of marginal figures – the excluded, criminals and outlaws, protesters, heretics, and dissidents. The same dichotomy operated on the highest scale of the *ecumene*, the human species, or Christendom, where the ranks of the "different" were filled by monsters, savages, pagans, and infidels.¹⁹

This model of social exclusion proves a useful tool with which to examine Boorman's film. Geremek notes that those among the marginalised were 'the "different"', 'the excluded, criminals and outlaws, protesters, heretics, and dissidents' – company among which Walker, Reese, and their comrades can be easily placed. Walker, however, exists outside of the criminal solidarity, too. Like the titular character of Chad Stahelski's revenge thriller *John Wick* (2014), Walker has become an almost supernatural threat among criminals: 'John wasn't exactly the Boogeyman', the Russian ringleader of *John Wick* explains; 'he was the one you sent to kill the fucking Boogeyman.' *Point Blank*, as Boorman and Jacobson make clear, operates in mythical terms, and so it is ultimately unimportant to the film's narrative whether

¹⁹ Bronislaw Geremek, 'The Marginal Man', in *The Medieval World*, ed. by Jacques Le Goff (London: Parkgate Books Ltd, 1997), pp. 347–73 (p. 352).

the events it details are happening in the course of reality or are, in fact, Walker's dying thoughts. In either case, his character is cast as a marginal, an Other, a monster or savage who upsets The Organisation's equilibrium.

'*ða se ellengæst*'

The uncertainty of Walker's status as either living or dead, man or monster, is further indication of a mediaeval mindset: it is the cinematic equivalent of the ambiguity with which we understand monsters to be described in the poetry of the Middle Ages. Risen from the grave with unfinished business, motivated by treasure owed him, he might just as easily be a revenant as an unlikely survivor; he speaks rarely, acts with single-minded purpose, and lacks the capacity to feel human emotion. Like a golem, activated by placing a command bearing scroll into its mouth, he is stirred into action only when Yost hands him the slip of paper containing Lynn's address. Ármann Jakobsson informs us that 'medieval Icelandic ghosts were physical and [...] were endowed with full-sized human bodies, and this makes them the exception among medieval ghosts', leading contemporary scholars to use the word *draugr* to make this distinction. He notes, however, that there are few examples of *draugr* being used to refer to such creatures in mediaeval Icelandic, and that 'Instead we see words like *aptrgongur* (revenants) and *reimleikar* (haunting) in these stories.' Furthermore, he observes that while 'The word *draugr* is etymologically related to various terms for the dead in the Germanic languages [...] Early on it seems to have been used for an "opponent" or a "fiend"'.²⁰ Similarly, there exists a sizeable body of scholarship concerning the language employed to describe the monster Grendel in *Beowulf*, to which Tolkien's essay 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics' (1936) is of key importance. Tolkien makes an examination of the terms used to refer to Grendel and, to a lesser extent, his mother, to argue that the monsters are physical beings couched on the threshold of the transition of such monsters from the beasts of Northern myth into the devils of Christian mythology. He observes:

he and his mother are actually called *deofla*, 1680; and Grendel is said when fleeing to hiding to make for *deofla gedræg*. It should be noted that *feond*

²⁰ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 110.3 (2011), 281–300 (p. 284).

cannot be used in this question: it still means 'enemy' in *Beowulf*, and is for instance applicable to *Beowulf* and *Wiglaf* in relation to the dragon. Even *feond on helle*, 101, is not so clear as it seems (see below); though we may add *wergan gastes*, 133, an expression for 'devil' later extremely common, and actually applied in line 1747 to the Devil and tempter himself. Apart, however, from this expression little can be made of the use of *gast*, *gæst*. For one thing it is under grave suspicion in many places (both applied to *Grendel* and otherwise) of being a corruption of *gæst*, *gest* 'stranger'; compare *Grendel's* title *cwealmcuma*, 792 = *wælgæst*, 1331, 1995. In any case it cannot be translated either by the modern *ghost* or *spirit*. *Creature* is probably the nearest we can now get. Where it is genuine it applies to *Grendel* probably in virtue of his relationship or similarity to bogies (*scinum ond scuccum*), physical enough in form and power, but vaguely felt as belonging to a different order of being, one allied to the malevolent 'ghosts' of the dead.²¹

The ambiguity of the poetic language is largely due, no doubt, to contemporary scholars' interpretation of the original Early English. As Tolkien observes, terms such as '*feond*' and '*gæst*' muddy the waters by mixing words which may just as easily refer to a human opposition, or Other, with those which refer to the explicitly monstrous.

In the original text, *Grendel* is first described as 'ða se ellengæst', which Seamus Heaney interprets as 'a powerful demon'.²² Kevin Crossley-Holland understands this as 'the brutish demon'²³ while Tolkien, whose translation of the poem remained unpublished until 2014, renders it as 'the fierce spirit'.²⁴ All three translations agree that this being 'abode',²⁵ 'lived',²⁶ or was a 'proowler through'²⁷ the darkness in a state of anger or pain, treated variously as 'torment',²⁸ 'a hard grievance',²⁹ and 'frustration'.³⁰ The poet withholds *Grendel's* name for several lines, likely to build suspense, before introducing him as follows:

Swa ða drihtguman dreamum lifdon

²¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2006), pp. 5–48 (pp. 34–35).

²² Seamus Heaney, 'Beowulf', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), pp. 29–99 (p. 36).

²³ Kevin Crossley-Holland, 'Beowulf', in *British Myths and Legends*, ed. by Richard Barber (London: The Folio Society, 1998), pp. 223–303 (p. 225).

²⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2014), p. 15.

²⁵ Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, p. 15.

²⁶ Crossley-Holland, p. 225.

²⁷ Heaney, p. 36.

²⁸ Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, p. 15.

²⁹ Heaney, p. 36.

³⁰ Crossley-Holland, p. 225.

eadiglice, oððæt an ongan
 fyrene fremman feond on helle.
 Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,
 mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold,
 fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard
 wonsæli wer weardode hwile,
 siþðan him scyppend forscriften hæfde
 in Caines cynne.³¹

Heaney renders this as:

So times were pleasant for the people there
 until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
 began to work his evil in the world.
 Grendel was the name of this grim demon
 haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
 and desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
 in misery among the banished monsters,
 Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
 and condemned as outcasts.³²

While Crossley-Hall suggests:

So those warrior Danes lived joyful lives,
 in complete harmony, until the hellish fiend
 began to perpetrate base crimes.
 This gruesome creature was called Grendel,
 notorious prowler of the borderland, ranger of the moors,
 the fen and the fastness; this cursed creature
 lived in a monster's lair for a time
 after the Creator had condemned him
 as one of the seed of Cain – the Everlasting Lord
 avenged Abel's murder.³³

Tolkien, for his part, translates these lines in prose as:

Even thus did the men of that company live in mirth and happiness, until one
 began to work deeds of wrong, a fiend of hell. Grendel was that grim creature
 called, the ill-famed haunter of the marches of the land, who kept the moors,

³¹ 'Beowulf (Old English Version)', *Poetry Foundation*

<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43521/beowulf-old-english-version>> [accessed 20 October 2019].

³² Heaney, p. 36.

³³ Crossley-Hall, p. 226.

the fastness of the fens, and, unhappy one, inhabit long while the troll-kind's home; for the Maker had proscribed him with the race of Cain.³⁴

Whether 'hellish fiend' or 'fiend from hell', 'grim creature' or 'gruesome creature', all three translators identify Grendel as, in some manner, abhorrent and threatening. The nature of this horror is associated less with his physical appearance or make-up, however, than with his status as a 'proowler of the borderland, ranger of the moors', or 'haunter of the marches of the land'. Grendel treads the boundaries of the Early English world, circumscribing the circle of firelight represented by Heorot; he is external to the structures and strictures of Heorot's society, contrary to its moral and social values. His lineage, traced back to the murderous Cain, is significant not only because it reveals his amoral character to the audience, but also because it roots him firmly in the physical world. As Tolkien notes of the phrase '*feond on helle*', 'Grendel is not "in hell", but very physically in Denmark, and he is not even yet a damned spirit, for he is mortal and has to be slain before he goes to Hell'.³⁵ He is horrifying, therefore, precisely *because* he is a mortal being whose ancestry was exiled to a life of wandering for committing the first act of murder.

Furthermore, several scholars have noted that the Beowulf poet employs a similar vocabulary to describe Beowulf as he does the monsters of the story. Michael Livingston and John William Sutton, for example, note that:

Beowulf himself might be seen as monstrous, as Stanley Greenfield argues in his essay "A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero, or Beowulf Re-Marvellized." After all, Beowulf is far different from the other men in the poem: he possesses superhuman strength, in combat he grapples his foes like a beast, he seems to be able to breathe underwater, and he has amazing vigor even at the end of his long life. Interestingly, the poet refers to both Beowulf and Grendel with the term *aeglaeca* (or *aglaeca*), an Anglo-Saxon word with a range of meanings, according to Bosworth and Toller, including "miserable being, wretch, miscreant, monster, fierce combatant." The term is also used in reference to creatures as varied as the legendary hero Sigemund, the dragon, various sea-monsters that Beowulf slays, and a feminine form is used to describe Grendel's mother. The word seems to be a catch-all term for supernatural beings on the margins of the human world.³⁶

³⁴ Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, p. 16.

³⁵ Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', pp. 158–59.

³⁶ Michael Livingston and John William Sutton, 'Reinventing the Hero: Gardner's "Grendel" and the Shifting Face of "Beowulf" in Popular Culture', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 29.1 (2006), 1–16 (p. 10).

The distinction between the marvellous and the monstrous, embodied by Beowulf and Grendel in the first instance, appears to be rooted in societal, and moral, status. Beowulf, who alone among the Geats and the Scylds has the physical strength to battle Grendel one-to-one in unarmed combat, occupies a heroic space in which Greenfield places such figures as Gilgamesh, Sigemund, Siegfried, and Grettir.³⁷ These heroes are placed not on ‘the margins of the human world’, but on the margins of humanity; they comprise elements of the human and the meta-human. Where Grendel, descended from Cain, is monstrous because of his lineage and the application of his physical abilities to violence towards the human Scylds, Beowulf’s violence is heroic and marvellous because it is exercised on those who oppose Heorot. These enemies, it must be remembered, are not exclusively children of Cain, for Beowulf is also the deterrent against the advances of King Ongentheow’s armies who bear a grudge against the Geats. His acts of violence, and his superhuman feats of strength, are considered heroism and marvellous because they are performed, with honour in, service of a lord; indeed, in line 2183 of the poem, ‘geongum ond ealdum, swylc him god sealde’,³⁸ the poet attributes Beowulf’s strength to God (Heaney: ‘his God-sent strength’;³⁹ Crossley-Hall: ‘given him of God’;⁴⁰ Tolkien: ‘those lavish gifts which god had granted him’).⁴¹ Grendel, the ‘hell-fiend’, on the other hand, appears to act on base instinct, motivated by bitterness and hatred. It is notable, however, that Grendel’s mother attacks only once her son has been slain, and takes only one life in return before retreating to her grotto beneath the mere. Similarly, the dragon is roused only when a treasure is stolen from its hoard. In both instances, it is Beowulf who then becomes the aggressor.

³⁷ Stanley B Greenfield, ‘A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero, or Beowulf Re - Marvellized’, *English Studies*, 63.4 (1982), 294–300 (p. 295).

³⁸ ‘Beowulf (Old English Version)’.

³⁹ Heaney, p. 79.

⁴⁰ Crossley-Hall, p. 267.

⁴¹ Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, p. 76.

'The meaning of all corn is wheat'⁴²

In *Beowulf*, the subdual of each monster represents a feat of strength for the hero. Grendel and his mother are defeated in quick succession, while the encounter with the dragon takes place some fifty years later, but each episode pits the hero against a larger and more lethal threat. By besting Grendel, he proves himself to Hrothgar as a defender in the world of men; by pursuing Grendel's mother and facing her in her underwater lair, he proves himself capable of triumphing in the world of the monsters; and, by bravely facing and defeating the dragon at the cost of his own life, he achieves a good, honourable death in service of his people. Each battle presents the hero with a new, greater, challenge that must be overcome and, by doing so, pre-figures the next. Similarly, each of Walker's encounters with the increasingly senior members of The Organisation seems to pre-figure the next. Reese, like Grendel, poses the 'hero' the least difficulty; Yost provides Lynn's address which leads Walker to Stegman; from Stegman, he learns Chris' location and, with Chris' help, is able to infiltrate Reese's penthouse suite. From Reese, Walker learns of Fairfax, Brewster, and Reese's immediate superior, Carter. Following this interrogation, Reese falls to his death from the roof of the hotel; Walker, unmoved, sets about hunting down Carter. Carter, in an attempt to neutralise Walker in a fake money-drop, is killed by the sniper that he himself hired. Learning Brewster's location from Carter's pocketbook, Walker heads to his home to lie in ambush but, finding that Brewster too is unable to pay him his \$93,000, uses him as a trade-off with Organisation money-man Fairfax. Brewster, like Carter, is shot from off-screen and, stepping out of the shadows, Fairfax reveals himself to be none other than Yost, the orchestrator of Walker's systematic dismantling of The Organisation. Fairfax offers Walker his money and asks him to join The Organisation but Walker, remaining silent, steps backwards into the shadows and disappears.

Where each of *Beowulf*'s encounters result in a victory, Walker's yield little but the revelation that his quest is not yet complete. To defeat Grendel, *Beowulf* lies in wait; so too does Walker when he comes for Lynn. To challenge Grendel's mother, *Beowulf* must first swim to the bottom of the mere and infiltrate her lair; so too must Walker penetrate the defences first of Reese's penthouse, then of Carter's office. To challenge the dragon, *Beowulf*

⁴² Emma Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, ed. by Andrea Dykes, Second (London: Coventure, 1986), p. 54.

dons mail, helm, and shield and advances on its barrow to face it directly; Walker, using Brewster as a shield, also enters a dark 'earth-fort'⁴³ to face Fairfax, though he does not do so head on. Common to both men is an indifference to the possibility of their own death: for Beowulf, to die bravely is to die with glory; Walker, however, is merely unable, or unwilling, to do otherwise than pursue his goal. While Beowulf, even in death, has achieved something, there is a sense of futility in Walker's engagements. There is the impression that no matter how many of the hydra's heads he severs, he will never reach his goal. This cyclical, Sisyphean structure is an important element for Boorman. He explains:

Everything that happens to Walker has happened to him before. There are two parallel stories: that of his wife and that of his sister-in-law. Everything that happens to him with his wife, ending with his betrayal when he is shot, happens to him all over again. His wife dies from an overdose of sleeping pills; and when he goes to see his sister-in-law, he finds her asleep, with sleeping pills beside her bed. I wanted increasingly to create the feeling of a nightmare, the impression that he is caught in a revolving door, that his life is repeating itself. For that it seemed to me necessary to use flashbacks.⁴⁴

For Boorman, the repetition occurs in the parallels struck between, and occasional blending of Walker's memories of, the relationship with Lynn and that with Chris. The two women act as doubles, and inversions, of each other. Lynn is characterised as cold, dead, and disloyal; her clothes, and her apartment, are all in shades of grey, creating the impression of a mausoleum. Chris, on the other hand, is primarily dressed in warm earth tones, interspersed with russets and mustard yellows. Walker, too, is characterised by means of the film's colour palette: Boorman writes, 'I decided to design each scene in a single colour. I would start out in the cold colours, greys and blues, then move through the spectrum as the character warmed up, ending in a sombre red'.⁴⁵ Interestingly, he also divulges that Walker's suits 'were severely tailored to allow no wrinkle or ruck – they were armour', and that 'The polished brogues beat a knell on the concrete floor, the rhythm of the reaper'.⁴⁶ On one hand, thinking of Walker's suits in terms of armour is suggestive of the element of Arthurian romance that Boorman sees in the relationship between Walker, Lynn, and Reese; on the other, when

⁴³ Heaney, p. 86.

⁴⁴ Ciment, p. 78.

⁴⁵ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 129.

⁴⁶ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 136.

coupled with the language of death the filmmaker uses to describe Walker's footsteps, an implacable monster hunter, a super-human warrior like Beowulf.

As an exile, however, and external force which disrupts an established organisational system, Walker has more in common with Grendel than he does Beowulf. He comes to the city from underground, here represented by the shadowy cells of Alcatraz, traversing an expanse of water to do so – much as Grendel emerges from his grotto beneath the mere to harass Hrothgar and the Thanes of Heorot. Shot and left for dead, he is exiled from the criminal underworld over which The Organisation holds dominion; he treads the boundaries of their system, the urban marches, and strikes from the shadows. As Ciment observes, 'The Boormanian hero is a "heretic"',⁴⁷ an outsider who sees the world in a way contrary to the established norm, and there are frequent reminders in *Point Blank* that Walker conducts himself in accordance with an outdated model of behaviour; as Carter tells him, 'things aren't done this way anymore, Walker'. In typical Boorman fashion, this is a subversion of the archetypal gangster figure as outlined by Thomas Schatz:

The classic screen gangster represents the perverse alter ego of the ambitious, profit-minded American male. His urban environment, with its institutionalized alienation and class distinction, has denied him a legitimate route to power and success, so he uses the depersonalizing milieu and its technology – guns, cars, phones, etc. – to plunder its wealth. But somehow the massive, unthinking city, that concrete embodiment of civilization and urban order, is more powerful than either the self-reliant criminal or the generally inept police who pursue him. The ultimate conflict of the gangster film is not between the gangster and his environment, nor is it between the gangster and the police; rather, it involves the contradictory impulses within the gangster himself.⁴⁸

Walker is a direct inversion of the characterisation that Schatz here outlines: he has no contradictory impulses, being in single-minded pursuit of his money; he appears, for all intents and purposes, more powerful than his environment, traversing the city unimpeded; with the exception of his failed attempt to shoot Reese when invading Lynn's apartment, Walker employs his gun as a threat rather than as a weapon; he is shown, in the sequence in Brewster's home, to be at odds with technology, struggling to switch off the myriad of devices that Chris turns on, shooting a speaker phone to silence it; and, as made evident by his refusal

⁴⁷ Ciment, p. 28.

⁴⁸ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1981), p. 85.

of Fairfax's offer, he has no ambitions for power or success beyond obtaining that which is owed to him. His character, then, in its relationship to the established system of power as embodied by The Organisation, bears more than a little resemblance to that of Grendel. Grendel, as the poet notes, waged a private crusade on Heorot for some twelve years, raiding the hall each night as soon as darkness fell. Walker, too, wages a 'lonely war'⁴⁹ against The Organisation, though it is not he but they who 'refuse to pay the death-price'⁵⁰ – the sum of \$93,000 stolen by Reese when he shot him and left him for dead. Whether alive or dead, a hero or a monster, Walker is portrayed as a man with qualities, or powers, not quite human. At once heroic and monstrous he is, as Boorman would have it, 'the catalyst that exposes the corruption of their world.'

'The brute existent by which they learn to define themselves'⁵¹

Written, produced, and directed by Boorman, *Zardoz*, like *Point Blank*, may at first belie its mediaeval influences; set in a dystopian future where humanity has divided into two distinct evolutionary tracts, the Brutals and the Eternals, it initially appears more suggestive of the director's admitted appreciation of Ray Bradbury, John Wyndham, and Frank Herbert⁵² than of Tolkien. Much like *Point Blank*, however, it contains a number of mediaeval elements, not least that of the border-treading hero pitted against an insular society. Its narrative, too, is steeped in the mythic. By examining its structure, one may see that it fits neatly into Joseph Campbell's framework of the monomyth: 'the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rite of passage: *separation – initiation – return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.' Campbell further explains that 'a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder (x): fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won (y): the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (z)'.⁵³ Zed (Sean Connery), appointed as an Exterminator of the Brutals by the titular god Zardoz, stows away inside the literal god-head in order to cross the threshold

⁴⁹ Heaney, p. 37.

⁵⁰ Heaney, p. 37.

⁵¹ John Gardner, *Grendel* (London: Gollancz, 2015), p. 51.

⁵² Ciment, p. 114.

⁵³ Campbell, p. 23.

between 'the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder', where he does battle with the 'fabulous forces' of the Eternals. In the process of completing his quest, Zed must overcome several trials, the completion of which earn him new tools and tokens - rings, crystals, and spiritual power gained by means of a meditative exploration of the self - with which to surmount further obstacles. Eventually, he destroys the source of the Eternals' immortality, the Tabernacle, winning his 'decisive victory' and so gaining the power to shatter the Vortex and restore life and death to its impotent immortal denizens.

Of the tools and treasures that Zed obtains during his time in the Vortex, the home of the Eternals, the ring is perhaps the most easily associated with the Middle Ages. Not only does it recall Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, for which Boorman developed a script with collaborator Rospo Pallenberg in the years preceding *Zardoz*, but also the culture of the Early English mead hall as depicted in *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*. The lords are referred to in these poems as 'gold-friends', or 'ring-givers', their titles describing the exchange of treasure and community for the loyalty and service of their Thanes. In a sense, this relationship is mirrored in the exchange conducted by Zardoz and the Exterminators of crops for guns. The latter offer their 'god' sustenance in exchange for the power to dominate the Brutals of the wasteland, their violent devotion elevating them to the status of de-facto leaders in a clearly barbaric society. Indeed, given that the manipulating force behind Zardoz is no other than Arthur Frayn, a jocular trickster in the mould of Merlin, the Exterminators may be thought of not just as their namesake but as knights. As with the Western, their guns can be understood as stand-ins for swords. There might be detected, in Zardoz's mantra of 'the gun is good; the penis is evil', an echo of the chivalric lifestyle: to live by the sword and tarry not overlong with any woman. The conduct of Zed and his comrades, however, contravenes the will of their Zardoz: they hunt, rape, and kill the weak, respecting no other but themselves; they fight for no welfare but their own; and, most tellingly of all perhaps, they abandon their faith and murder their god. Like Walker before him, Zed is a stoic hero possessed of seemingly superhuman qualities. May, the Eternal who discovers Zed's infiltration of the Vortex, conducts a battery of studies on him, concluding that he is evolutionarily superior to the Eternals in both strength and intellect. Again, Boorman presents us with the figure of the exile who straddles the line between the marvellous and the monstrous.

Like Grendel, Zed occupies the marches of the land, the wild and Brutal spaces beyond the protective barriers which shield the Vortex in a transparent dome. Like Gardner's Grendel,

the Executioners are ‘world-rim-roamers, walkers of the world’s weird wall’.⁵⁴ While Zed presses against the wall from the inside, testing both its strength and his own, they circle its exterior for any trace of weakness. The Vortex, like Heorot, demarcates a circular territory of metaphorical firelight, staving off the monsters hidden in the dark beyond. Zed too is a motivating force, a physical embodiment of vitality that stirs up the petrified Vortex; a droplet of his sweat alone is enough to cure the malaise of the Apathetics, those among the Eternals who have retreated into catatonia rather than face an eternity of living. He has little trouble infiltrating the Vortex by means of stowing away in Zardoz’s head, breaking down the doors of the Eternals’ metaphorical mead hall and wreaking havoc on their way of life. Consuella, May’s opposition in the argument on whether to spare Zed’s life upon his discovery, views him as a monster; May, as a marvel. Both, perhaps, are true, for while the Eternals view Zed as their savour by the film’s end, the boon that he is able to bestow upon them is that of death, of execution. These deaths are not, by any means, good deaths either; they are executions at the hands of Zed’s brothers-in-arms. It is only this destruction of the Vortex, however, and the re-instatement of the Eternals’ mortality that restores their humanity and gives their lives meaning. As Gardner’s dragon observes of Grendel, Zed is ‘The brute existent by which they learn to define themselves’.

‘Gaze deeper into the crystal’

Like Walker before him, Zed is set upon his path by a Merlin-esque trickster figure: Arthur Frayn, the man behind the curtain and the mastermind behind the cult of Zardoz. As was the case for Bilbo in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937), itself a reworking of *Beowulf*, Zed, having entered a dark cave of unknown dangers, obtains a ring of mysterious power from a guardian of the threshold who speaks in riddles. It is Frayn, we learn, who teaches Zed how to read, who raises him up from ignorant Brutal beast to a being capable of questioning his god. It is interesting to note that in the 1972 draft of the *Zardoz* screenplay the Eternals do not access the Tabernacle with crystal rings, but with ‘communicators’. Zed, referred to as ‘2030’, discovers that the projections he sees in Arthur’s room issue from ‘a rectangular box, about 9 inches by 4 inches and 2 inches thick [which] has a set of keys along its top like a miniature’

⁵⁴ Gardner, p. 2.

piano'.⁵⁵ The substitution of the communicators for rings (Fig. 23) makes not only for a more practical tool for Zed, a wearable accessory and visual motif, but also lends itself to the organic aesthetic of the director's dystopian future. The Vortex's apparent utopia is, quite clearly, built on a past which has roots in the world as we know it, and Hoyle therefore sees a parallel with William Morris's utopian fiction, *News From Nowhere* (1890), 'in which a gentleman in late-Victorian London wakes up to find the smoggy, industrial landscape around his home replaced by a pastoral idyll. He has not gone back in time though, as he first assumes, but rather forward, into a futuristic society based on socialist principles, where men and woman work with their hands and have banished machines'.⁵⁶ The compound in which the Eternals live, and work, is created from a blend of eighteenth-century architecture and futuristic additions, such as the giant inflatables that serve as vivarium and, although this aesthetic may initially be somewhat jarring for its audience, it instantly and effectively visualises the film's internal history. This was Boorman's goal: to present a society which appeared simultaneously futuristic and archaic, both temporally removed from his audience and connected to them from fore and aft.

The film began, he explains, as 'the story of a scientist whose hobby was futurology, the study of the future in terms of structures'.⁵⁷ As part of his research, he visited the counterculture communes of North California, at which point, he recalls:

a new idea began to evolve, a different one from my original project, the idea of a semi-mystical, semi-scientific community which has survived a holocaust or, if you like, the end of the world. A group of scientists, who continue to possess the technology of space, find the means of isolating themselves with all the treasures of civilization, all its accumulated knowledge, as happened with monasteries during the Middle Ages. One of the problems posed by the conquest of space, for example, is that journeys through the cosmos are too long in relation to the length of a man's life which leads to the desire to prolong it. These scientists, therefore, live on earth as though in a spaceship, with a closed economy; and they're immortal.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ John Boorman, 'Zardoz', December 1972, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Hoyle, p. 93.

⁵⁷ Ciment, p. 141.

⁵⁸ Ciment, p. 141.

The science fiction elements of the film are made clear in Boorman's premise,⁵⁹ but even when looking to the future he has one eye trained steadily on the past. The comparison he draws between his scientific community, as a repository for 'all the treasures of civilization', and the monasteries of the Middle Ages is also suggestive of the dragon's hoard from *Beowulf*; the dragon, too, guarded the treasures of civilization. By sourcing its model for a future society from the Middle Ages, *Zardoz* illustrates Eagleton's concept of the archaic avant-garde; and yet Boorman's mediaevalism paints this society as inherently flawed, causing Frederic Jameson to situate the film within an anti-utopian 'strategy, which begins to be elaborated with the Soviet revolution (*We, Brave New World*) and knows its climax in the U.S. apologists of tie [*sic*] Cold War', invoking the 'classical representation of the opposition between barbarism and Utopia' in H. G. Well's *The Time Machine* (1895) as a point of comparison.⁶⁰ Indeed, the iconography of the science fiction film is much more prevalent in the 1972 script than it is in the final film. In place of a giant stone head, *Zardoz* took the form of 'the old-testament Jehovah, an ancient, bearded man with a huge, deep voice. He is just a ghostly outline, but three times life-size'.⁶¹ He is later described as 'an amplified hologramme [*sic*]',⁶² and 2030 infiltrates the Vortex by stowing away in a craft described simply as an 'airship'.⁶³ This airship was envisioned to be futuristic in appearance with 'smooth rounded walls' and a 'control-room' replete with 'seats and banks of controls' where 'lights flash, dials and meters function'.⁶⁴ By contrast, the finished film depicts the society of The Eternals as a community which has surpassed the need for electronic communication, being able to contact one another instantly through the crystals implanted in their foreheads and the network provided by the Tabernacle. Their earthly ties are tenuous, their food prepared by hand only because they perceive it to be, as Consuella remind Friend, 'fundamental to our society that we do everything for ourselves on a basis of absolute equality'.⁶⁵

The finished film sees the majority of the 1972 script's sci-fi iconography recast into forms which, while evidently not of the now, are just as suggestive of the past as they are the

⁵⁹ Echoes of this premise can be found in Vincent Ward and John Fasano's script for *Alien III*, dated March 29, 1990, in which the story unfolds on a man-made planetoid clad in wood and inhabited by heretic monks.

⁶⁰ Frederic Jameson, 'History and the Death Wish: *Zardoz* as Open Form', *Jump Cut*, 1974, 5–8.

⁶¹ Boorman, 'Zardoz', p. 1.

⁶² Boorman, 'Zardoz', p. 62.

⁶³ Boorman, 'Zardoz', p. 2.

⁶⁴ Boorman, 'Zardoz', p. 2.

⁶⁵ Boorman, 'Zardoz', p. 34.

future. By replacing the rather bulky communicator device with a jewelled ring, for instance, Boorman invokes a wealth of cultural and historical associations. Furthermore, the replacement of the communicator for a ring gives added significance to Zed's theft of Frayn's device upon discovering it in his study. The result of this exchange is that, intentionally or not, Boorman presents us with an invocation of *The Hobbit*. In Chapter 5 of the novel, 'Riddles in the Dark', Bilbo awakens in the pitch-dark cavern occupied by the predatory, Grendel-inspired creature Gollum who, planning to eat the hobbit, challenges him to a game of riddles: Bilbo's life against the gold ring that he believes is still in his possession. The hobbit emerges victorious and, having stumbled upon the ring in the tunnels above the cavern, escapes with it in his possession. Zed also awakens in a cave – in this case, emerging from the pile of grain inside Zardo – to be faced with a creature fond of riddles: the trickster and orchestrator of his adventure, Frayn. He defeats Frayn not with riddles, however, but with the gun bestowed upon him by Zardo; as with the ring, the trickster's tool is used against him.

Further comparison can be made with Zed's subsequent acquisition of Frayn's communicator ring, Bilbo's theft of a goblet from the hoard of the dragon Smaug in the book's third act, and the theft of a cup from the dragon's hoard in *Beowulf*. As Tom Shippey notes:

Chapters 12 to 14 of *The Hobbit* follow the plot of *Beowulf*'s last great fight closely. In the poem a thief stumbles upon the hoard of the sleeping dragon and steals a cup. The dragon wakes, notices the theft and flies off to burn *Beowulf*'s own hall. *Beowulf* then marches on the dragon, with eleven companions and the thief – making thirteen in all – to kill and be killed by it. In *The Hobbit* there are twelve dwarves plus Thorin – again making thirteen – and Bilbo is added by Gandalf to make up 'the lucky number'. By the time they arrive at the dragon's lair, Gandalf has left them, so Bilbo is once again lucky fourteen. As thief, or 'burglar', he goes down the tunnel to the sleeping dragon and steals a cup just as in the poem, and eventually the dragon flies off likewise to burn down the halls of Laketown.⁶⁶

The dragon in *Zardo* is not a literal beast, however, but a metaphorical one. In an analysis of Arthur's dream vision as related in 'four major Arthurian texts from the medieval English tradition—Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Lazamon's thirteenth-century *Brut*, the fifteenth-century *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, and Sir Thomas

⁶⁶ Tom Shippey, 'Tolkien and "That Noble Northern Spirit"', in *Tolkien: Maker of Middle-Earth*, ed. by Catherine McIlwaine (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2018), pp. 58–69 (p. 66).

Malory's late fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur*,⁶⁷ Melissa Ridley Elmes suggests that the dragon he sees pitched in battle against a bear is an alchemical symbol for the King's identity as Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon. She reasons that 'The name "Arthur," or "Arturus" in Latin, is also the Latin term for "bear" and "artur" in the Welsh language similarly translates as "bear"'⁶⁸ and, as such, 'that Arthur's conflict in this dream vision is between his personal and public self, Arthur the Bear and Arthur the Pendragon. That the dragon wins [...] suggests that, ultimately, Arthur will undergo a transformation by fire that destroys the individual man and leaves in his place the king in a more ideal form'.⁶⁹ Boorman, much like Jarman, is a devoted Jungian, and a similar transformation takes place for Zed in *Zardoz*. Hoyle observes that:

One can read Zed as an example of pure masculine animus. Friend, an impotent man, is his shadow. May and Consuella represent two facets of the feminine anima, the mother and wife respectively [...] As the film progresses, Zed's feminine side begins to emerge (the Renegades even dress him in a bridal gown), while Consuella becomes increasingly masculine in her behaviour. By the close of the film, the couple has achieved a balance, neatly visualized in the final images, in which they sit side by side, occupying equal parts of the frame.⁷⁰

In this final image, the dualities of masculine/feminine and Brutal/Eternal have been resolved. Zed and Consuella both have been transformed, through their union, into something other than they were. This is made explicitly clear when Zed, having faced and killed his own reflection in the depths of the Tabernacle, is unable to come through on his promise to end Avalow's life in the film's finale, explaining simply: 'all that I was is gone'. His Brutal self has been destroyed so that he might become something else, something better; but, in doing so, he has lost the ability to kill without apprehension.

In order to confront and overcome the power of the Tabernacle, Zed has embraced the power that the Eternals wield: May returns his revolver to him, and 'through osmosis' he has absorbed the knowledge and she and her followers; from Avalow, he gains the crystal vessel containing the Tabernacle; from Arthur, he obtains the crystal ball; and, from Consuella, he receives the ring which allows him to penetrate the heart of the Tabernacle

⁶⁷ Melissa Ridley Elmes, 'He Dreams of Dragons: Alchemical Imagery in the Medieval Dream Visions of King Arthur', *Arthuriana*, 27.1 (2017), 73–94 (p. 74).

⁶⁸ Elmes, p. 81.

⁶⁹ Elmes, p. 81.

⁷⁰ Hoyle, p. 94.

itself. In the novelisation of the film, penned by Boorman and collaborator Bill Stair, the sequence in which Zed prepares himself to confront the Tabernacle is presented in terms



Figure 23: Zed finds Frayn's ring in Zardoz. DVD still.



Figure 14: Consuella gifts her ring to Zed. DVD still.

of a warrior of legend arming himself for battle: 'May and her women were the objective teachers. Each was a messenger and a communicant with a special branch of knowledge. They would individually give Zed weapons of knowledge with which to fight the dragon'.⁷¹ It is this final gifting of the ring which finally allows Zed to confront the Tabernacle's power, for it is a fragment of the Tabernacle's nexus. As such, Zed's obtaining it can be understood as a further analogue with the theft of a treasure from the dragon's hoard; for it is only once this treasure has been obtained that the 'dragon' makes itself known to him, instigating the final confrontation. It is also of interest to note that Consuella, like the other Eternals, wears her ring on the third finger of her left hand. In a society which the director explains has 'no further need of procreation',⁷² the Eternals are wed to the Tabernacle and, through it, to one another as part of a collective hive mind. By presenting her ring to Zed, Consuella, as Boorman and Stair write, has thus 'resigned her position in favour of his, joined him in action, and awarded him equality with her';⁷³ she has renounced her status as an immortal and placed her faith in Zed and his uncertain world of mortality (reminiscent of the relationship between Arwen and Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*), symbolically wedding the destructive and impulsive energies of the Outlands with the rational and spiritual energies of the Vortex. While Boorman and Stair specify, in the novelisation of the film, that Consuella places her ring on 'the third finger of his left hand, the finger on which all Eternals wore it',⁷⁴ it must be noted that this becomes the fourth finger of Zed's right hand in the film (Fig. 24). This may have been a logistical problem – Charlotte Rampling's fingers were most likely smaller than Connery's – but it may also suggest a signet ring rather than a wedding band. For although Zed has gained power equal to, or indeed surpassing, that of the Eternals, he has no intention of submitting to it. If the communicator ring is read as a signet ring when placed on his little finger, it can be understood to indicate his dominion over the crystal and his impending transformation into an archetypal king. In either case, Zed and Consuella have enacted Weston's model of a land rejuvenated by the restoration of its monarch.

⁷¹ John Boorman and Bill Stair, *Zardoz* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1974), p. 94.

⁷² *Ciment*, p. 141.

⁷³ Boorman and Stair, p. 111.

⁷⁴ Boorman and Stair, p. 111.

'In this secret room from the past, I seek the future'

As we learn during the montage in which May prepares Zed to face the Tabernacle, the Eternals are linked to one another by crystals embedded in their foreheads. It is of notable interest, then, to consider Zed's initial discovery of Frayn's ring in his study. When activated, the ring projects an eye, firstly onto Zed's hand, then his forehead. Hoyle suggests that 'one may read the image of the eye in the hand in relation to palmistry [...] where it denotes psychic powers and wards off the "evil eye"',⁷⁵ and that the image of the eye on the forehead is indicative of 'the Buddhist notion of a third eye representing inner vision'.⁷⁶ He thus implies that, in the course of his quest, Zed will gain both the power to ward off evil and of inner vision. That the eye settles first on the palm of his hand is also suggestive of a palm reading, and the subsequent cut to the eye's projection onto Zed's forehead indicates a prediction of his eventual enlightenment and empowerment. The motif of the eye, roving around the room as Zed handles the ring, is also highly suggestive of the influence that *The Lord of the Rings* had on *Zardoz's* creation. Having been presented with the offer to film Tolkien's trilogy as a compromise over the rejection of a treatment he had prepared about the life of Merlin, entitled *Merlin Lives*, Boorman was daunted by the task of condensing the story into a three-hour film but was nevertheless 'grateful to have the chance to try'. He writes that he 'was interested in the central metaphor, that the One Ring is of such power that it corrupts whoever possesses it' but makes it clear that his interest stemmed primarily from the fact that Tolkien's text is a reworking of 'various Celtic and Norse sagas' as well as the Grail myth itself.⁷⁷ Though it is Frayn who, as the Merlin-Gandalf figure and trickster-orchestrator, has set Zed upon his path, it is not his eye that issues from the ring. Having been killed by Zed, he is in the process of being 'repaired' by the Tabernacle, and it is the Tabernacle that presents Zed with the information he requests from the ring. Like Frodo, Zed is left the ring by the magician, and like Frodo he is thus put at odds with the force behind the device. The eye that roves the room (Fig. 25) recalls the Eye of Sauron and, just as Sauron's power is tied to the twenty rings of Middle Earth, his power having been instrumental in their creation, so too is the Tabernacle inextricably linked to the rings worn by the Eternals.

⁷⁵ Hoyle, p. 99.

⁷⁶ Hoyle, p. 100.

⁷⁷ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 178.



Figure 25: The communicator ring projects a Sauron-like eye onto Zed's forehead.



Figure 26: The Zardoz head drifts over the lake and prepares to land on its shores. DVD still.

Furthermore, The Vortex, situated beside the scenic Loch Tay in the Wicklow mountains (Fig. 26), the same loch upon the edge of which Camelot was later superimposed for *Excalibur*,⁷⁸ is reminiscent of Rivendell. In their screenplay for *The Lord of the Rings*, Boorman and Pallenberg describe the first sighting of Rivendell as follows: ‘on the other side of the placid river, behind great trees, a light glows, and SAM catches a glimpse of a palace of crystal’.⁷⁹ This description is not far removed from the post-title sequence establishing shots of *Zardoz* in which we see stone head gliding down to land in the lake-side Vortex (Fig. 27). Though the 1972 draft of the *Zardoz* script is somewhat removed from this mythic iconography, the corresponding sequence featuring ‘a robot lifting device’, an ‘airship’, and an ‘airfield’,⁸⁰ the Vortex itself is still described, superficially at least, as a verdant paradise:

It is a perfect sunlit morning. The valley is wooded with mature oak, elm, chestnut and larch. Willows mark the twisting route of a fast running stream. Beyond on the hill-sides are meadows and above them soft mountains, purple with heather [...] The birds sing, shafts of sunlight halo the leaves. 2030 is full of wonder as he takes in all this vegetation.⁸¹

The society of ‘youthful and attractive’⁸² immortals who, in the filmed version of *Zardoz*, seem able to relate to the natural world only at a remove, studying it objectively, dissecting and recording, were originally envisaged as elegant, Elvish figures: 2030 first observes the Eternals ‘standing in a triangle facing each other. They seem to be singing. Their voices are very expressive. There are no words but the melody is comprehensible and even sweet’.⁸³ Boorman explains that his idea for *Zardoz*

was an extension of *Leo the Last*, the rich exploiting the poor. We, of the people of the developed world, are extending our lifespan through advances in medicine, while the majority of the world is getting poorer and more abject. I wanted to project this tendency into a future where immortality had been achieved. How would the elite protect itself from the huddled masses?⁸⁴

⁷⁸ John Boorman, Director’s Commentary, in *Zardoz*, DVD (Twentieth Century Fox, 2002).

⁷⁹ John Boorman and Rospo Pallenberg, ‘The Lord of the Rings’, June 1970, p. 27.

⁸⁰ Boorman, ‘Zardoz’, p. 5.

⁸¹ Boorman, ‘Zardoz’, p. 8.

⁸² Boorman, ‘Zardoz’, p. 18.

⁸³ Boorman, ‘Zardoz’, p. 9.

⁸⁴ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 204.

This being the case, and his interests lying as they do with Arthurian myth and Tolkien, it is no surprise that the director draws on the author's conception of the Elvish race as a model for his immortals. In a letter to Milton Waldman of Collins publishing house, Tolkien explains:

The 'Elves' are 'immortal', at least as far as this world goes: and hence are concerned rather with the griefs and burdens of deathlessness in time and change, than with death. The Enemy in successive forms is always 'naturally' concerned with sheer Domination, and so the Lord of magic and machines; but the problem: that this frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others — speedily and according to the benefactor's own plans — is a recurrent motive.⁸⁵

Encapsulated here in Tolkien's 'brief sketch of my stuff which is connected with my imaginary world'⁸⁶ is, more or less, the skeleton of *Zardoz*. The Eternals, with the exception of Arthur and Friend, are concerned not with death but with enduring immortality. The Outlands are controlled by Arthur under the guise of Zardoz in order to produce enough food to maintain the growing populace of Apathetics, immortals who have grown disenchanted with their deathless state and become vegetative husks. May, when asked what she intends to do with Zed, states that she wishes to 'break its DNA code, see if there are any structural or evolutionary changes since ours were analysed 200 years ago. Discover any new hereditary diseases that may have emerged, which might result in broadening our immunization spectrum'.⁸⁷ 'The Enemy', from the Eternals' point of view, is Zed; he wishes to dominate and destroy the puppet master behind the giant floating god that duped him and his comrades into doing its bidding. Conversely, the film's narrative identifies the Eternals with 'the Enemy' and the Tabernacle with 'the Lord of magic and machines', whose 'frightful evil' stems from its charge to protect the collected knowledge and culture of mankind.

Within the context of *The Lord of The Rings*, Tolkien equated the systems of magic with that of machinery,⁸⁸ and Boorman takes a similar approach in *Zardoz*. The Eternals' 'kind of mystical technology' which 'invests them with unparalleled power' fuses alien-looking hardware, such as the inflatable vivarium and the oven which bakes bread in a matter of

⁸⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1995), p. 146.

⁸⁶ Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, p. 143.

⁸⁷ Boorman, 'Zardoz', p. 18.

⁸⁸ Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, p. 146.

moments, with a transcendental harmony with nature; though plated in chrome, the bread oven's design is helical and evidently sourced from nature. Similarly, while they raise animals, the Eternals appear to be strict vegetarians: in the scene in which Zed serves as butler, their table is laden with fruit and vegetables and no meat is in sight. This transcendental lifestyle is no doubt drawn from Boorman's research into the counterculture of the 1970s and can be considered an alternative vision of the future. But, as has been indicated, a sense of history is just as present in the film's design. Its score was composed by David Munrow, a specialist in the study and performance of mediaeval music, who had not only worked with Peter Maxwell-Davies to compose the score to Russell's *The Devils* (1971) but had also written the music for Michael Kilgarriff's 1968 adaptation of *The Hobbit* for BBC Radio 4. The design of the Eternals' 'clothing style', Boorman explains, was also 'arrived at after several different stages of research and it does carry an historical weight: they're not just pretty costumes'.⁸⁹ A similar intention was kept in mind during the film's casting; Boorman informs us that 'what I needed were young faces with malicious, prematurely ageing expressions, wide eyes and thin lips'.⁹⁰ Even the language and behaviours of the Eternals were meticulously researched specifically to create a sense of a future built from elements of the past. He writes: 'I decided on a language that would be simple, as unidiomatic as possible, cold and neutral. I merely used certain archaic words and neologisms to create a sense of strangeness and rhythm'.⁹¹ The result is a community of immortals who, while seemingly youthful, are granted an ageless quality by means of their behaviour.

What truly interested Boorman about *The Lord of the Rings*, however, was 'its mythic content' for, as he writes, '*Zardoz* is also a mythic story.' He goes on to reveal that 'The essence of *Zardoz* came to me in a dream; and since I believe, as Jung claimed, that these myths exist inside us, I was waiting for them to be released, to emerge into the light'.⁹² Just as Frodo must venture into Mordor in order to destroy the corruption which dwells there, so too must Zed infiltrate the Vortex. The object of Campbell's hero's quest is to restore balance, and both the hobbit and the Brutal are agents of destruction, charged with toppling an existing system so that a new one may take its place. The Vortex is a time capsule, a

⁸⁹ Ciment, p. 144.

⁹⁰ Ciment, p. 153.

⁹¹ Ciment, pp. 148–53.

⁹² Ciment, p. 140.



Figure 27: The Zardoz head, landed at The Vortex, can be seen with the lake in the distance. DVD still.



Figure 28: May's acolytes resemble Elves as they leave the Vortex. DVD still.

hermeneutic hermitage designed to preserve the best of humanity's legacy through whatever apocalyptic catastrophe befell the Outlands; from the descriptions of the prey Zed hunts in the novelisation of the film, it must be supposed that Boorman has some sort of nuclear disaster in mind: 'Some ran on monstrous distorted limbs, were many-headed, some slithered, others eyeless sensed his presence with antennae; still more gazed at him with red and green eyes, mottled skins blending them with the earth. These were not men and yet they all echoed that frame'.⁹³ Though less humanoid than Tolkien's creations, these monstrous inhabitants of The Outlands suggest, in their visions of corrupted humanity, Orcs of Middle Earth. The Outlands themselves are characterised as a corrupted wasteland, the Vortex as a seed ripe with the potential to rejuvenate the land but which is, as yet, ungerminated. It is to this end that Arthur Frayne 'led and bred' Zed, a perfect genetic specimen capable of igniting the stagnancy of the Vortex with his vitality, of breaking down its barriers and progenerating a new breed of humanity. His hero's quest grants him the ability to bestow the boon of death on the languishing Eternals, releasing them from their duty as the caretakers of culture and knowledge, but in doing so he also grants life.

With the timelessness of the Vortex destroyed, the time of the Eternals is ended and, just as Tolkien's elves leave Middle Earth for the Grey Havens of the West in echo of King Arthur's departure from Britain, May and her acolytes are shown riding off to pastures new (Fig. 28). To this end, they are shown on horseback with long cloaks fastened around their shoulders, riding through the woods as sunlight streams in from above. In isolation, this shot might easily be mistaken for one from a fantasy film. The film's final sequence shows that Zed and Consuella have also made a new beginning, producing a child of their own. Zed has become a duality of creation and destruction, at once the archetypal warrior-hero and the progenitor of new life; the final shot of the film shows Zed's rusted gun hanging next to two handprints, a reminder that although Zed has left his lifestyle of violence behind in favour of love, peace, and family, this new world order sprung from violence and destruction. As Boorman further explains, the handprint is 'like the cave painting of primitive man in Lescaux, suggesting that this future world could have been in the past, and that as that civilisation ended, ours began'.⁹⁴

⁹³ John Boorman with Bill Stair, *Zardoz* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1974), p.5.

⁹⁴ Boorman, *Suburban Boy*, p.211.

‘A Quest for Images’: Magic, Mysticism, and Thematic Distillation in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Merlin Lives*

It swiftly becomes evident to those who view multiple of Boorman’s films that the filmmaker has a fondness for certain images, themes, and motifs. De Keyser notes ‘an isolated community, an island, a man alone fighting an apathetic society, a quest for an unattainable treasure’,¹ and Ciment, ‘the theme of the hero and the quest, and frequent recourse to a symbolic nexus’ consisting of water, ‘the crystal, the sword, the forest, the bow-and-arrow, the island, the dragon, the tree and, finally, a rich and colourful bestiary’.² The Arthurian legends, specifically that of the grail quest, and a Jungian interest in mythic structures and archetypal figures form the foundations of his cinematic language. His protagonists are outsiders, exiles, who disconnected from both their surroundings and often themselves, and his narratives involve a ritual discovery of the self and a reconnection with nature as a form of healing. Indeed, the ritualistic element of his films is so prevalent that Moore and Gillette cite *The Emerald Forest* as a key example in their explanation of the male initiation ritual.³ They see such rituals as a transformative experience for the male psyche in which the boy is fundamentally changed into a man; the boy, they argue, must die so that the man can emerge. Boorman’s interest in rituals, however, lies in their mysticism. For him, they are a means of aligning oneself with the natural world, of occupying a state of being in which the mystical energies of the land can be felt. His diaries, published in *Adventures of a Suburban Boy* and *Money Into Light*, are peppered with talk of planting trees, lyrical descriptions of the Irish landscape surrounding his home in Wicklow, and of the spiritual experiences he himself has had against this backdrop.

Trees, light, and water, particularly in the form of lakes and rivers, are of great importance to Boorman, forming something of a secular Trinity. He is, as has already been established, a dedicated Jungian and sees a direct connection between the self, the past, and man’s connection with the natural world:

¹ David De Keyser, *The Making of ‘Zardos’*, dir. by Tim King (BBC, 1974).

² Ciment, p. 18.

³ Moore and Gillett, p. 4.

The Middle Ages, according to Jung, was something which, like the unconscious, we ought to study in order to gain a better understanding of ourselves. For a century now, we've been rushing headlong into the future; we've made a cult out of progress and we've forgotten our former selves, our former patterns of behaviour, whose origins can be traced to the Middle Ages. We no longer have roots; and today, in particular, when we contemplate the possible destruction of our planet, there is a pressing need to investigate the Matter of Britain.⁴

The Matter of Britain is of importance to Boorman because it is, in effect, the country's mythology and, as such, provides a means of understanding the construction of our national identity. The matter of Britain, however, is of greater importance to the filmmaker, for he defines his sense of self in relation to the nation's landscape rather than its societal makeup. Of his beginnings, he writes 'I was born in a faceless, mindless London suburb amongst people who had lost their way in the world, who had forgotten who they were, and had fallen from grace',⁵ and of his 'fellow countrymen': 'There is no grace nor dignity in these people, no harmony in their dress, no art in their play. Here is a tribe gone sadly wrong, mutated'.⁶ Evident here is the Romanticism that Ciment identifies in Boorman's work, and in his being, which presents itself in his distaste for industrialism and capitalism. He favours instead the model of a tribal society, bonded with nature, exemplified by the Xingu tribe of Brazil among whom he spent time while filming *The Emerald Forest*. He remembers this time fondly, revelling in the immersion in the Amazon, the total integration of the tribe's way of life with their environment and, like Markham (Powers Boothe), he too experienced a moment of this harmony:

I step into the water feeling reverence for the lagoon, which is sacred, trying not to ripple the glassy surface. A memory is triggered. I was 16, making a journey alone up the Thames in a kayak. Camping on Runnymede Island. Awaking to a dawn of such stillness as this. Stepping into the water, sensitivity acutely sharpened by days without language, I felt a oneness with that place, realizing that it was a place of power, not chosen by chance for the Magna Carta ceremony. I entered the water with great care so as not to ripple its perfect smoothness. If I succeeded, I felt I would live forever and discover hidden truths. And I did succeed, a head moving across a mirror where the liberties of man had been won. That experience, so profound, sent me

⁴ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, pp. 138–39.

⁵ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 1.

⁶ John Boorman, *Money Into Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 216.

searching for images, through cinema, to try to recapture what I knew that day.⁷

A more detailed recollection of this trip up the Thames is given in *Suburban Boy*, framed in language which is explicitly mystical. Boorman writes:

I would fall into a rhythmic trance as I paddled [...] The island tossed and turned, coughing and whispering [...] Wild dreams, fragments of a deep past, contended with the night noises of the island [...] I knew myself to be in a state of grace [...] That experience, so profound, sent me on a quest for images, through cinema, to recapture what I knew that day.⁸

Boorman's here paints Runnymede island as a double of himself, a living, slumbering being; its voice, comprising the nocturnal fauna and the flowing water of the river, speaks to him from the present just as it stirs up ancestral, instinctual memories from a Jungian deep. The state of grace of which he speaks is one in which man is in complete harmony with his environment.

Just as Beowulf's battle with Grendel prefigures his encounters with subsequent monsters, as do Walker's confrontations with the members of The Organisation, Boorman's films show the progressive evolution and distillation of a handful of key images and themes. Ciment makes extensive use of stills to highlight certain of these: a hand rising from concealed depths, often from water (Fig. 29, Fig. 30); a protagonist pointing a weapon at the camera; figures submerged or floating in water; fire, air, and earth; the presence of the past, represented onscreen by statues and paintings; and reflections and doubles. These images are pinned to the underlying structure of a grail quest in which a lone, liminal hero seeks an elusive goal that will, directly or otherwise, lead them to a better understanding of themselves. Boorman is the first to point to the Arthurian legends his guiding myth, but the interpretation of his narratives as reworkings of the grail quest often obscures other aspects of his mediaevalism. In its discussion of *Point Blank* and *Zardoz*, this chapter drew comparison between Boorman's protagonists and the figures of Beowulf and Grendel, as well as with the

⁷ Boorman, *Money Into Light*, p. 82.

⁸ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, pp. 44–45.



Figure 29: Zed's hand rises from a pile of wheat in Zardoz. DVD still.



Figure 20: The Lady of Lake's hand rises from the water in Excalibur. DVD still.

mythic structures of Campbell's 'Hero's Quest' and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Where Ciment calls Boorman's marginalised figures heretics, and they have here been described as exiles, they also conform to another well-established figure in mediaeval literature: the Wild Man. Verlyn Flieger explains:

A familiar figure in the literature and folklore of the Middle Ages, he was called *wudu-wása* in Anglo-Saxon, *wodwos* in Middle English, *sylvestre* in Old French. His proper title is Wild Man of the Woods. A refugee from civilization, he is a prowler lurking both actually and metaphorically on the borders of society.⁹

Ciment observes that, in Boorman's films, 'the hero's trajectory is described by images of penetration, emphasized by the ubiquitous weapons', and that 'Boorman's vision of mankind is therefore purely dynamic, founded on a process of evolution and transformation, underscored by images of emergence and intrusion'.¹⁰ Walker and Zed, Bowman and Markham, all fit this model: they are successive iterations of Wild Men, Grendel figures who have been marginalised and who must either be rehabilitated or destroyed.

Zed, as a hirsute, violent and near silent invader of the Vortex is the most obvious illustration of Boorman's use of the Wild Man but, as Flieger explains, 'The paradigm is roomy enough to hold a number of variations from the Grendels and Glamrs, bestial or uncanny but clearly related to humanity' to 'a psychological variation on the type [...] with what we would now call a severe personality disorder'.¹¹ Zed is also, as has been shown, a recasting of Tolkien's ring-bearer; *Zardoz*, a reworking of several elements of *The Lord of Rings*. Not only did Tolkien's mythology, one step removed from the Arthurian legends and galvanised with elements of Celtic and Germanic folklore, present Boorman with the opportunity to engage with his guiding myth as directly as had thus far been possible, the writer's blending of mediaeval and modern material mirrors his own. Flieger writes that 'Tolkien puts a modern spin on many of his characters, reconfiguring the contexts and situations in which they play a part while at the same time keeping faith with the medieval types from which they derive',¹² an observation which might also be made of Boorman's characters; though they generally subvert the expectations placed on them by generic conventions, they conform, more often

⁹ Verlyn Flieger, 'Tolkien's Wild Men: From Medieval to Modern', in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. by Jane Chance (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 95–105 (p. 95).

¹⁰ Ciment, p. 32.

¹¹ Flieger, p. 98.

¹² Flieger, p. 95.

than not, to archetypal or mediaeval models. Furthermore, Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers argue that:

Key to understanding Tolkien's modern medievalism is his emergence from a Victorian tradition of literary medievalists. In his recuperation and memorialization of a distant past, Tolkien fits into a line with earlier (mostly nineteenth century) writers and composers such as James Macpherson, Mary Shelley, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Sir Walter Scott, William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites, and Richard Wagner.¹³

Much the same might be said of Boorman, upon whom several of these figures were influences; traces of Tolkien and Morris can be seen in *Zardoz*, while elements of Tennyson and Wagner can be found in *Excalibur*. He writes, 'We define ourselves in the stories we tell of ourselves. We hone them; repeat them until we no longer remember the memory, but only the story of the memory',¹⁴ and in Tolkien's text, he found many of the same themes and images that he wished to express himself. *The Lord of the Rings* was both a prefiguration of his own work and an opportunity to further refine these elements of his personal language, another step on his quest for images.

The History of Middle-earth

Though eventually brought to the screen in Peter Jackson's tripartite, the production history of *The Lord of the Rings* overshadows that of even *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*. The idea of adapting Tolkien's trilogy was first proposed in 1957 when, Carpenter informs us, the author was sent a synopsis of a potential adaptation by an 'American company which was interested in making an animated film of *The Lord of the Rings*'.¹⁵ In a letter to his publisher, Rayner Unwin, Tolkien reveals that was bemused by the offer and unimpressed by the synopsis's 'compression with resultant over-crowding and confusion, blurring of climaxes, and general degradation' of his novel. Nevertheless, he was 'quite prepared to play ball, if they

¹³ Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, 'Introduction: Tolkien's Modern Medievalism', in *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–16 (pp. 2–3).

¹⁴ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, p. 260.

are open to advice'.¹⁶ A later letter, in which Tolkien provides detailed feedback on the treatment of the film, reveals his dismay and disgust at the way in which his material had been handled. '[Morton Grady] Zimmerman', he writes, 'has made no serious attempt to represent the heart of the tale adequately: the journey of the Ringbearers. The last and most important part of this has, and it is not too strong a word, simply been murdered.'¹⁷ Needless to say, the project was shelved. It would, Ross Plesset informs us, be considered by several others in subsequent years; The Beatles were interested ('John would have been Gollum, Paul – Frodo, George – Gandalf, and Ringo – Sam'), as was the director of *The Yellow Submarine* (1968), Heinz Edelman.¹⁸ In 1978, Ralph Bakshi succeeded in releasing a 133 minute rotoscoped adaptation of the story's first half through United Artists. While he never made a sequel, Jules Bass and Arthur Rankin, Jr. created the 1980 animated musical *The Return of the King* (featuring John Huston as Gandalf) for American network ABC. Tolkien would likely have been horrified by these films, but Boorman assures us that he was 'comforted' by the assurance that his 1970 version of the film would be live action, not animated.¹⁹

The Lord of the Rings was the first project on which Boorman collaborated with Pallenberg (they would later write together for *Exorcist II: The Heretic*, *Excalibur*, and *The Emerald Forest*), and was Pallenberg's first venture into the film industry. A practising architect, Pallenberg had seen *Point Blank* and, impressed by Boorman's workmanship, determined to meet the filmmaker. In 1970, he succeeded; 'we hadn't talked for more than ten minutes,' he recalls, 'when he offered me the possibility of working on the screenplay of Tolkien's trilogy'.²⁰ The pair retired to Boorman's home in Annamoe where, Boorman writes, 'we covered the walls of a large room with a breakdown of all the scenes in the three volumes. We made a detailed map of Middle Earth and an analysis of the characters. It took us several weeks'.²¹ The scale of the work was daunting, and Boorman had 'thought it was impossible to adapt to the screen',²² but:

¹⁶ Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, p. 261.

¹⁷ Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, p. 270.

¹⁸ Ross Plesset, 'Tolkien: The Old, the New, the Never', *Outre #26*, 2001, pp. 42–46 (p. 43).

¹⁹ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 179.

²⁰ Ciment, p. 238.

²¹ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 179.

²² Ciment, p. 228.

Eventually we started writing. I wrote the first scene, Rospo wrote the second. We leapfrogged each other. At night we would study each other's work and make notes. My own valley is as close to Middle Earth as you can get in this depleted world. Rospo and I spent a wondrous six months in a mythical space [...] This could be the one, the ultimate movie.²³

Boorman's investment in the project is clear, as is the connection he draws between Tolkien's mythology and the landscape of Wicklow; the 'mythic space' he here refers to applies both to the physical, geographical space in which the writing process took place, but also to Tolkien's Middle Earth with which he and Pallenberg had literally surrounded themselves. While he is a great fan of Tolkien's work, Boorman approached its adaptation as a vehicle for the mythic images that make up his visual register. The screenplay that he and Pallenberg penned is, naturally, condensed, but several of the key scenes included in it have been significantly altered in such a way that it has become much maligned among Tolkien purists; a cursory examination of the results for a Google search on 'Boorman Lord of the Rings script' yields a host of message board threads describing the screenplay as 'crazy' or 'crappy'. Indeed, readers approaching the Boorman and Pallenberg script with the expectation of slavish fidelity to Tolkien's text are likely to be taken aback by the sexualisation of Frodo's interaction with Galadriel, or that or Aragorn's revival of Eowyn in Rohan. Such readers are likely to also be disquieted by the pageantry of Elrond's council in Rivendell during which the history of the ring is rendered in a highly stylised performance of play-actors.

Straight adaptation, however, has never been Boorman's favoured approach, and these alterations to Tolkien's material themselves embody the author's own 'medieval modernism' as described by Chance and Siewers above. Unlike Zimmerman, Boorman and Pallenberg immersed themselves in their source text and, Boorman tells us, 'After six months of intensive work we had a script that we felt was fresh and cinematic, yet carried the spirit of Tolkien, a spirit we had come to admire and cherish during those months'.²⁴ Certain of the amendments they make to Tolkien's text are clearly motivated by the transposition of the story from the medium of prose to the cinema; Boorman observes that 'The text is very visual, but at climactic points Tolkien would often resort to poetic evasion'.²⁵ Scenes such as the

²³ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 179.

²⁴ Boorman, *Money Into Light*, p. 20.

²⁵ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 179.

performance in Rivendell, too, represent an attempt to translate several pages of expositional text into the language of cinema, providing a dynamic visual accompaniment to Elrond's recounting of the Ring's history. The approach that to the text that he and Pallenberg took, of condensing, conflating, and re-visualising elements of the narrative to synthesise the three-volume saga into a two-and-a-half hour film cements the project's status as a dry-run for their subsequent treatment of the Arthurian legends in *Excalibur*. Of the latter film, Boorman writes, 'We both felt that we were not inventing, but rather rediscovering lost fragments of the story, uncovering hidden truth. [...] I was simply the latest in a long line of minnesingers and storytellers, and my task was to pick up the story where the last man left off'.²⁶ With *The Lord of the Rings*, he and Pallenberg sought to excavate the mythic content of Tolkien's saga and, by doing so, reinvigorate the symbols and truths there embedded. As Boorman would have it, 'The only worthwhile purpose of cinema now is to connect to that past, lost magic, and carry it into the future'.²⁷

My(themes)

Among the images that recur throughout Boorman's cinematic output, that of a hand, or figure, emerging from submersion is one of particular personal importance to the director. As above, Boorman considers water a mystical substance, a symbol of both the Jungian unconscious and Britain's pagan past. It is a threshold in his films, a boundary that must be crossed and from beyond which power greater than man can issue. His protagonists are seen at the water's edge, contemplating; they enter, by choice or, as in the case of Ed (Jon Voight) in *Deliverance*, otherwise. This image, and variations thereof, is foremost in his visual lexicon, proliferating from the 'state of grace' he experienced upon entering the Thames as a teenager. It emerges in his diaries, too, underscoring his conviction in the mysticism of water:

24 July 1984, *Annamoe, Ireland*

Finally home. A balmy summer, hotter than anyone remembers. We were dreaming of soft Irish rain, heavy skies, but this will do [...] Glad to see the pair of grey herons still gliding under the tunnel of trees that enfolds our little river

²⁶ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 238.

²⁷ John Boorman, 'Foreword', in *Edge of the Earth: Stories and Images From the Antipodes*, by Vincent Ward and others (Auckland: Heinemann Reed, 1990), pp. viii–x (p. ix).

where the water has warmed itself, flowing over the sun-baked rocks that turn the river wild with white water in winter. I stripped off and entered the peat-brown water. A benediction. A pair of ducks scuttled away. The Wicklow hills recede in soft folds, dissolving in heat haze. Back in Middle Earth.²⁸

Boorman's description of this section of river, near his home in Annamoe, is extremely evocative and paints an idyllic picture of the landscape as a restorative for the soul. It also recalls Tolkien's descriptions of Lothlorien, the forest in which the Elven queen Galadriel dwells: 'the trees stood tall before them, and over the road and stream that ran suddenly beneath their spreading boughs'.²⁹ Tolkien, too, describes a river which has the power to replenish those who bathe in its waters: "'Here is Nimrodel!" said Legolas [...] I will bathe my feet for it is said that the water is healing to the weary"',³⁰ and Rivendell is ascribed similar restorative qualities in *The Hobbit*:

Bilbo never forgot the way they slithered and slipped in the dusk down the steep zig-zag path into the secret valley of Rivendell. The air grew warmer as they got lower, and the smell of pine-trees made him drowsy, so that every now and again he nodded and nearly fell off, or bumped his nose on the pony's neck. Their spirits rose as they went down and down. The trees changed to beech and oak, and there was a comfortable feeling in the twilight. The last green had almost faded out of the grass, when they came to an open glade not far above the banks of the stream.³¹

Rivendell is a site of respite, a stop-gap on Bilbo's journey in which he can enjoy the luxuries of a prepared meal and a bed for the night before ascending the Misty Mountains. Its comfort stems from its balmy climate and rich foliage; in contrast to the Shire, it is an uncultivated space that exists in harmony with its natural surroundings, sheltered from danger and the elements by virtue of its location. There is a clear connection here too between Rivendell's restorative air, the river that runs through it, and the Elves that occupy it, and *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* both are strewn with instances in which a connection is struck between nature, particularly in the form of rivers and forests, and magic.

²⁸ Boorman, *Money Into Light*, p. 201.

²⁹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1999), p. 442.

³⁰ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 444.

³¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (London: Collins Modern Classics, 1998), p. 66.

Of the many changes that Boorman and Pallenberg made to Tolkien's novel in preparing it for the screen, their handling of the 'The Mirror of Galadriel' is the one which Tolkien purists find most galling. In the text, the hobbits first encounter Queen Galadriel and King Celebor in their tree-top hall. Shortly thereafter, the queen invites both Frodo and Sam to gaze into her mirror:

Tall and white and fair she walked beneath the trees. She spoke no word, but beckoned to them.

Turning aside, she led them toward the southern slopes of the hill of Caras Galadhon, and passing through a high green hedge they came into an enclosed garden. No trees grew there, and it lay open to the sky. The evening star had risen and was shining with white above the western woods. Down a long flight of steps the Lady went into the deep green hollow, through which ran murmuring the silver stream that issued from the fountain on the hill. At the bottom, upon a low pedestal carved like a branching tree, stood a basin of silver, wide and shallow, and beside it stood a silver ewer.³²

When prompted to look into the basin, Frodo asks simply 'What shall we look for, and what shall we see?' to which Galadriel replies 'to some I can show what they desire to see. But the Mirror will also show things unbidden, and those are often stranger and more profitable than things which we wish to behold.'³³ Frodo then has a vision of the eye of Sauron; Galadriel, guessing what he sees from his reaction, reveals that she too bears a ring: 'Nenya, the Ring of Adamant'.³⁴ The hobbit, impressed by her wisdom and power, offers her the One Ring which, after briefly entertaining the notion, she rejects, electing to 'diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel.'³⁵

Boorman and Pallenberg, however, render this sequence rather differently; while Frodo bathes in the waters of a lake outside the mines of Moria, Galadriel 'surfaces out of the waters before him. She is a tall and beautiful woman of elven features, sparsely clad, statuesque, aloof. As she rises to her feet, the others see her too and start in wonder and alarm, ready to draw their weapons'.³⁶ Inviting the hobbit into her tent, she offers him, and only him, the opportunity to look into the Mirror:

³² Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 474.

³³ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, pp. 474–75.

³⁴ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 479.

³⁵ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 480.

³⁶ Boorman and Pallenberg, p. 69.

INT. GALADRIEL'S PAVILION NIGHT

It is a soft space defined by drapes, at the summit of the great tent, partially open to a bright starlit sky. GALADRIEL and FRODO are seated on a floor of carpets and cushions. Between them is a small silver basin on a tripod. In the basin there is water. FRODO looks into it and sees only the water.

FRODO

I look and I see nothing.

GALADRIEL

You look and you see nothing, for you are not yet ready.

FRODO

When, when shall I be ready? And how?

GALADRIEL

With knowledge. And I am that knowledge.

FRODO

I – I don't know what questions I should ask.

GALADRIEL

Your eyes ask questions... already.

Accepting the invitation, his eyes wander over her body, drinking in its loveliness. GALADRIEL's austere and aloof features soften. GALADRIEL's hand touches the chain from which the ring dangles. And FRODO's hand takes hers.

FRODO looks again into the basin and sees their two faces come together and kiss.¹

There is a brief cutaway, to a discussion amongst the rest of the party, before we return to Frodo and Galadriel the following morning:

EXT. THE LAKE DAWN

GALADRIEL and FRODO are floating in the waters of the pool. It is very still. They do not move for fear of disturbing the perfection of the moment. Finally FRODO sighs a sigh of sadness.

FRODO

I will look into the Mirror. I am ready. I feel ready.

But FRODO makes no move. GALADRIEL's hair drifts through the water and rests on FRODO's chest. A ring that he has not seen before lies on her finger and a halo of light emanates from it. FRODO is fascinated.

GALADRIEL

So you see it. It is one of the Elven Rings of Power, that are hidden. But it cannot be hidden from the Bearer of the One, who will know the eye.

FRODO is overcome by the wonder of GALADRIEL. He looks into her eyes.

FRODO

You are wise and fearless. To you the Ring should be entrusted.

He takes off the Ring and hands it to her. But FRODO does not release the chain. She handles it, and is about to put it on.

She holds it against the Elven Ring, to see how they look together. An ugly grimace comes over her face. She is afraid, trembles. FRODO sees her reaction and pulls back the chain. She regains her radiant beauty and her warmth.

FRODO

I cannot give it to you, and you cannot bear it.

GALADRIEL seems to diminish, and FRODO to grow in stature. He is ascendant now, greater than she.³⁷

While lengthy, this extract from Boorman and Pallenberg's screenplay serves to illustrate the extent to which this episode of the story was altered and, by contrast with the corresponding passage from the original text, shows how Tolkien's vision was transposed into his own mythic language. Galadriel's character here bears little resemblance to her namesake; her association with the colour white and so the evening star have been omitted and she has been recast in the mould of the Lady of the Lake. Her enclosed garden, suggestive of the space of the dream vision as discussed in relation to Jarman, has become a natural body of still water.

³⁷ Boorman and Pallenberg, p. 75.

There are no gifts, no tools given to the hobbit by Galadriel in Boorman's version; his boon, it would seem, is to sleep with her.

At first glance, this revision seems little more than a peculiar attempt to introduce an element of sexuality and romance into Frodo's narrative. A similar sequence would later appear in *Zardoz*, however, when Zed agrees to inseminate May's followers in exchange for obtaining their knowledge via 'osmosis'; Galadriel's diminishment as Frodo grows in stature also prefigures the change in dynamic between Zed and Consuella when she presents him with her ring in the film's final act. As such, we can understand this scene between Frodo and Galadriel in a similar, ritualistic sense. She, as a member of the Elven race, is closely associated with the natural environment, especially water; he, grief stricken over the loss of Gandalf, is unable to ask the question that needs to be asked of her Mirror, an object which bears more than a little resemblance to a grail. By sleeping with Galadriel, Frodo reconnects with nature and emerges from the lake spiritually healed. Like Zed, he has gained something from his tryst, a moment of grace that motivates him to see his quest through; as he tells Galadriel, 'Never will the power of the Elves die, for what I have felt in you is the stuff of which all life is made'.³⁸

A similar moment occurs between Aragorn and Eowyn during the film's second act after the latter is struck down by one of the Nazgul. During the corresponding chapter of *The Return of the King*, 'The Houses of Healing', Aragorn is revealed as king when he is able to heal those who have been wounded by the Nazgul's blade. He does so by crushing a herb thought useless by Gondor's healers into hot water and allowing the wounded to breathe its vapours. The herb is effective, but Tolkien makes it clear that this is only the case because it is applied by Aragorn: 'Thus spake Ioreth, wise-woman of Gondor: *The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known*'.³⁹ Once again, however, Boorman and Pallenberg took a different approach:

ARAGORN sees the lifeless body of EOWYN. He takes her in his arms.

GANDALF rises trance-like and rips the banner of Elendil from its mast.

ARAGORN summons all his strength, and grasps EOWYN'S body tightly to his. The onlookers are deadly silent. EOWYN does not stir. ARAGORN spreads out

³⁸ Boorman and Pallenberg, p. 76.

³⁹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1999), p. 157.

her arms, and covers her with his body. He presses his palms on her palms, his legs on her. After a moment, she moans, and her body writhes, trapped under ARAGORN's great weight.

When he feels her stir, he rises, lifting her with him, enfolding her in his arms, pressing her mouth and body to his.

GANDALF folds the banner, as if performing a ritual.

ARAGORN releases her mouth, and she sucks in a breath, gasping. He looks into her face, enraptured by her pale beauty. ARAGORN whispers to her in a low voice.

ARAGORN

My breath I give you, lady EOWYN.
My life I give you.
By the ache of exile, I draw out your ache.
By the long nights I have lain alone,
I call you back to me.

She stirs. Her eyes flutter open for a second, but she fades again. ARAGORN grasps her, and kisses her with passion and intensity.

GANDALF dips the banner, now tightly folded, into the blood of DENETHOR. The blood soaks into the white cloth.

EOWYN floats out of her deep coma, and looks into ARAGORN's sad, loving eyes. Her face flushes with colour, as the greyness fades. She smiles. They look into each other's eyes, with love.

GANDALF unfurls the banner with a sweeping gesture. On the white flag is a beautiful mandala in blood, radiating from the centre of the white tree. It is as though the bare tree had burst into blossom.⁴⁰

This time, Boorman and Pallenberg go so far as to use the word 'ritual'. This revivifying of Eowyn is, like the encounter between Frodo and Galadriel, suggestively sexual. It is implied that vitality is transferred by physical contact and, that by pressing his body against her, Aragorn can restore the shieldmaiden. Again, a similar scene would later find its way into *Zardoz* when the Apathetics are re-animated and driven into an orgiastic frenzy by a droplet of Zed's sweat. The alteration of this scene is another example of Boorman and Pallenberg's transposition of the spiritual element of Tolkien's work from a Christian model to a secular

⁴⁰ Boorman and Pallenberg, pp. 149–50.

one; the king with the hands of a healer is a clear allusion to Christ, but in the hands of Boorman and Pallenberg Aragorn instead becomes a restored Fisher King, capable of rejuvenating his kingdom. The blood-soaked flag which, by Gandalf's hand, appears to depict the white tree of Gondor bursting into bloom underscores this characterisation and finds a companion the sketch drawn by Jeff's girlfriend in Gilliam's *The Fisher King*, in which the modesty of a male nude is covered by an outline of the U.S. from which several stalks of corn are sprouting. This recalibration of the king figure would also find its way into subsequent films in the figures of Zed and, more importantly, King Arthur.

Concerning Wizards

A further fixture of Boorman's films is the figure of the magician, or trickster, who orchestrates the quest for his protagonist and manipulates events from behind the scenes. These figures are, of course, all derived from Merlin, and in Gandalf Boorman found a ready-made template that could be adjusted to suit his ends: 'he was, after all, Merlin in another guise'.⁴¹ In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf is characterised as a mischievous magician, a figure of mysterious power and closely guarded knowledge. He frequently leaves the questing party to attend to his own secret business, only to re-appear suddenly in their moment of need, and his 'magic', when he makes use of it, is closer to trickery: throwing his voice, mimicry, and flashbangs. He is an instigator and orchestrator, a guide and a puppet master; like Frayn, he sets events in motion and then watches them unfold from the side lines with glee. The Gandalf of *The Lord of the Rings* is a sterner figure, but also a more authoritative one. He relies less on tricks than on knowledge and negotiation; he has real power but makes use of it only sparingly, such as in the encounter with the Balrog which removes him from a substantial portion of the narrative. This later incarnation, for which Tolkien had devised a surrounding mythology, offered Boorman the opportunity to experiment with the representation of Merlin-esque wizard directly. 'I wd. venture to say', Tolkien writes, 'that he was an incarnate *angel* – strictly a *ἄγγελος*: that is, with the other *Istari*, wizards, 'those who know', an emissary of the Lords of the West, sent to Middle-Earth, as the great crisis of Sauron loomed on the

⁴¹ Boorman, *Money Into Light*, p. 20.

horizon'.⁴² Gandalf, like his fellow wizards, is both mortal and not, man and otherwise. The *Istari's* incarnation in mortal forms was intended, Tolkien notes, 'to limit and hinder their exhibition of "power" on the physical plane, and so that they should do what they were primarily sent for: train, advise, instruct, arouse the hearts and minds of those threatened by Sauron to a resistance with their own strengths; and not just to do the job for them'.⁴³

The spirits of Tolkien's mythology are, however, susceptible to mortal folly and the story's second wizard, Saruman, has fallen victim to greed and lust for power. Among their number, Gandalf alone remains true to his purpose and so, when he falls into the depths of Moria in combat with the Balrog and his mortal form is destroyed, he is allowed to return to Middle-earth in a new, more powerful one; in narrative terms, Gandalf the Grey is destroyed to make way for Gandalf the White. The wizard is absent from the narrative for several chapters, reappearing at last in *The Two Towers* to recount the events leading to his return. He fell, he tells Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, through fire and water, to the bottom of the chasm, 'beyond light and knowledge'; next, he fought his foe 'far under the living earth, where time is not counted' before climbing 'From the lowest dungeon to the highest peak', where 'A great smoke rose about us, vapour and steam'.⁴⁴ This passage, comprising a series of elemental dualities, no doubt appealed to Boorman's sensibilities. Having fallen from the bridge, Gandalf is faced by a trial by fire and a trial by water; he is buried deep beneath the earth before facing his foe high in the air, atop the mountain, where the Balrog's flames turn the snow to mist, fusing fire with water. Although Tolkien describes his wizards as angels incarnate, Gandalf is here connected very much with the physical matter of Middle-earth, and his fall into a dark pool of water in the depths of the earth, 'beyond light and knowledge', has a distinctly primeval and mythic flavour.

Boorman and Pallenberg relocate this speech from Fangorn forest to the throne room of Rohan where it is delivered for the benefit not of the wizard's comrades, but the sickened and untrusting King Théoden who must be stirred into action. Where Tolkien has Gandalf deliver his tale casually, if wearily, by means of explaining his presence to those who thought him dead, Boorman and Pallenberg present this speech as an oration:

GANDALF has become trance-like. He begins to speak softly.

⁴² Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, p. 202.

⁴³ Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, p. 202.

⁴⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1999), pp. 122–23.

GANDALF

In Moria I fell, caught in the coils of the Balrog.

At the mention of this name, a gasp breaks out from the court.

GANDALF

Deep into the abyss; beyond light and knowledge we fell. His fire was about me and I was burned. But his fire was quenched by a cold that was the tide of death. And now he was a thing of slime, strong as a strangling snake. We fought under the living earth where time is not counted. Far below the deepest delvings of the Dwarves, the world is gnawed by nameless things. Even Sauron knows them not. Darkness took me. I strayed out of thought and time. I was broken: naked on the hard horn of the world. Long lay I so, then came faint to my ears the gathered rumours of all lands: the springing and the dying, the singing and the weeping, and the

GANDALF (Cont)

slow ever-lasting groan of over-burdened stone. Then came a vision of the agony of Middle-earth. My heart was open to all the hurts of the world. The Evil of Sauron pressed upon me, crushing me. The life that has lived in me, in all my forms, ebbed away. But a silly voice called me back, a Hobbit voice. And I had a dream of Halflings. They were sore afraid, yet braver than many wizards; they lived in despair yet they found hope. Their spirits drew me back from the everlasting night.

His voice now rises and grows, he thunders out.

GANDALF

Now in this world, there still remains a short time of doubt. Now we must risk all, for one last battle against the Evil that would overwhelm us. And you, Theoden, Lord of these great lands, shall turn the scales. Ride out once more, old man! Listen to the hooves

that surely beat in your great heart.⁴⁵

The wording here is lifted from the source text almost verbatim, though abridged and with a few notable alterations. In typically Boorman fashion, Gandalf has ‘become trance-like’, lending a performative element to what was, in Tolkien’s hands, merely a recounting of events. Tolkien’s Gandalf, when asked to tell ‘how he fared with the Balrog’ baulks at the mention of its name, ‘and for a moment it seemed that a cloud of pain passed over his face, and he sat silent, looking old as death’.⁴⁶ In Boorman and Pallenberg’s script, however, he takes on a prophetic air; his speech becomes a rallying cry, a tool, in Tolkien’s words, ‘arouse the hearts and minds of those threatened by Sauron to a resistance with their own strengths’. The cause of his resurrection, too, has been redirected; he returns to middle-earth not because, as he states in the book, ‘I was sent back – for a brief time, until my task is done’,⁴⁷ but because ‘a silly voice called me back, a Hobbit voice. And I had a dream of Halflings.’ In Boorman’s film, he would return not at the behest of a higher power, but because he is roused by the voice of the story’s hero – a clear prefiguration of Merlin’s return, in dream form, in *Excalibur*. Other elements of this speech are also suggestive of Boorman’s subsequent characterisation of Merlin. Again, a clear link is established between Gandalf and the physical matter of Middle-earth, for he hears ‘the gathered rumours of all lands: the springing and the dying, the singing and the weeping, and the slow ever-lasting groan of over-burdened stone’, and he refers to ‘the life that has lived in me, in all my forms’. The implication that he has, at some point or another, occupied forms other than that of a wizard points not only to Tolkien’s mythology, but in Boorman’s hands suggests that Gandalf, like the Merlyn of T. H. White’s *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), has the capacity assume the forms of other animals.

The suggestion of White’s Merlyn is present, too, in Boorman and Pallenberg’s rendering of the confrontation between Gandalf and Saruman. The wizards face off twice in Tolkien’s saga: once in *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Gandalf recounts a visit to the white wizard in which, having discovered that Saruman had succumbed to greed and ambition, he was imprisoned on the roof of the tower of Orthanc; the second encounter, in *The Two Towers*, takes place after Gandalf has become Gandalf the White and, with his new

⁴⁵ Boorman and Pallenberg, pp. 116–17.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, p. 122.

⁴⁷ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, p. 123.

authority, he compels Saruman to stand down. There is little in the way of spectacle in either encounter, though Jackson chose to embellish the earlier with a magical duel in which the wizards strike each other with invisible force. Tolkien presents Saruman's defeat in *The Two Towers* as a contest of will; the magic here lies in the wizards' abilities to influence their listeners, not to strike them. Having defeated the Balrog and returned more powerful than before, Gandalf is able to best his opponent with relative ease. Unlike Jackson, Boorman and Pallenberg opted to stay away from special effects in this confrontation, adhering to Tolkien's idea of a battle of words:

GANDALF

Saruman, I am the snake about to strike!

SARUMAN

I am the staff that crushes the snake!

GANDALF

I am the fire that burns the staff to ashes!

SARUMAN

I am the cloudburst that quenches the fire!

GANDALF

I am the well that traps the waters!

For a second SARUMAN hesitates, unable to continue the contest.

SARUMAN

I am... Just words, old fool.⁴⁸

Gandalf's battle here is won, it seems, through a show of mental agility; it is only when Saruman is unable to produce a counter to the well that he has lost. The spirit of Tolkien's passage remains, but the dialogue has been shorn of its debate like quality in favour rapid-fire dialogue. 'I was inspired by an African idea of how magicians duel with words,'⁴⁹ Pallenberg tells us, but the magician's duel also has precedent in English literature. In the original edition of White's novel, preceding its revision and inclusion in *The Once and Future King* (1958), Arthur and Kay are rescued from the house of the child-eating Madame Mim by

⁴⁸ Boorman and Pallenberg, p. 158.

⁴⁹ Plesset, p. 46.

Merlyn, who defeats the witch in a shape-shifting ‘sorcerer’s duel’. This episode would later form a set-piece in the 1963 Disney adaptation of White’s novel. There are also several instances of shape-shifting to be found in the eleventh century folktales of *The Mabinogi*.

In the story of Taliesin, compiled by Lady Charlotte Guest in her collection of eleven such Welsh folktales, *The Mabinogian* (1838 – 1845), a woman named Caridwan gives birth to ‘the ugliest man in the world, Afagddu.’ Due to his ugliness, she fears that he ‘was not likely to be admitted among men of noble birth unless he had outstanding merits or knowledge’. To remedy this, ‘she resolved, according to the arts of the books of the Fferyllt, to boil a cauldron of inspiration and knowledge for her son’.⁵⁰ This potion, however, takes a year and a day to brew, at which point it produces only three droplets of knowledge. She hires a man, Gwion Bach, to stir the cauldron for this period while she herself gathers the herbs and materials necessary for her spell. Misfortune strikes when the three drops of the potion splash from the cauldron onto Gwion’s hand and he, scalded, licks them from his fingers and gains the knowledge intended for Afagddu. Realising what he has done, he flees, and Caridwan, incensed, gives chase:

And she ran after him. And he saw her, and changed himself into a hare and fled. But she changed herself into a greyhound and turned him. And he ran towards a river and became a fish. And she chased him in the form of a she-otter under the water, until he turned himself into a bird of the air. She, as a hawk, followed him and gave him no rest in the sky. And just as she was about to stoop upon him, and he was in fear of death, he espied a heap of winnowed wheat on the floor of a barn; and he dropped among the wheat, and turned himself into one of the grains. Then she transformed himself into a high-crested black hen, and went to the wheat and scratched at it with her feet, and found him out and swallowed him.⁵¹

This seems a likely framework for White to have based Merlyn and Mim’s duel on, for it concludes with Merlyn defeating the witch by turning himself into a virus which she inhales. Gwion, having been consumed by his opponent, is tied in a leather bag and tossed into the sea only to emerge later as the titular Taliesin. The duel between Gandalf and Saruman echoes

⁵⁰ Lady Charlotte Guest, ‘Taliesin’, in *British Myths and Legends*, ed. by Richard Barber (London: The Folio Society, 1998), pp. 181–87 (p. 181).

⁵¹ Guest, p. 182.

the episode from White's novel, a source which Boorman is known to have read,⁵² and the eccentricity of the Merlin of *Merlin Lives* and *Excalibur* recalls that of White's.

Merlin Lives

The first draft of the script that would later become *Excalibur*, dated October 1975, is entitled 'Merlin Lives or The Knights of King Arthur' and credits Boorman alone as its writer. It begins with an image of Excalibur held out against the night sky and, when the shot widens, revealed to be held aloft by King Arthur. He is aged, and shouts an address to the night sky, imploring Merlin, who has been 'sealed' into 'a mountain cave' by 'the enchantress Vivien', to return to Camelot. In response to his call, Merlin 'catapults' from his prison in 'a shower of boulders [...] rolls down the rock slope [...] and walks off without glancing back.'⁵³ Following this brief prologue, the story centres on Perceval and borrows several elements from Chretien's account of *The Story of the Grail*, interspersed with some typically Boorman episodes featuring druids and trances. Perceval, 'a boy of twenty, strong as an ox and cheerful as a sparrow', lives in the woods with his mother. He encounters a Red Knight and, coveting his armour, slays the man and takes it for himself. Leaving his mother and riding for civilization, Perceval runs into some farmers from whom he demands water. His manner is found wanting, and the farmers drive him away by throwing stones at him. Next, he encounters a rag-tag group of children who suffer from the plague and who demand that he tell them stories of his exploits. Having undertaken no quests, he is once again unable to behave as a knight. The children charge him with seeking out King Arthur, who they believe can cure them of their disease and return them to society. He vows to champion their cause and rides off in search of Camelot. Having been given directions by two old women he encounters in the woods, he stumbles upon the Giant of Cerne Abbas, a figure delineated in chalk on a hillside Dorset. The area is a hive of activity: druids chant and sacrifice animals while Christian priests flagellate themselves and condemn their pagan counterparts; mummers and prostitutes abound, and men and woman cavort in an orgiastic frenzy.

⁵² Ciment, p. 192.

⁵³ John Boorman, 'Merlin Lives Or The Knights of King Arthur', October 1975, p. 1.

Perceval, riding up to the giant's face where the activity of the druids and the priests is concentrated, asks for directions and, as he is wearing a knight's armour, is immediately identified as a knight of Christ and seized by the druids as a sacrifice. At the last moment, Merlin appears, once again erupting from a hole in the ground – this time, the mouth of the giant which the druids have excavated a boulder from. Merlin, demanding to know why the fanatics are dedicating sacrifices to an old fertility god when the drought and failing crops are caused by the loss of the Holy Grail, disperses them and demands to know Perceval's business. The young Fool clearly reminds Merlin of a young Arthur, for he decides to accompany Perceval on his travels with the intention, we later discover, of preparing him to attain the Grail. They pass a band of knights clad in black armour and wearing dragon's masks; they have kidnapped a girl from the band of children Perceval swore to help and Merlin bemoans Mordred's rise to power while Arthur is enfeebled. The pair visit a church bedecked with a mixture of pagan and Christian iconography where Perceval witnesses a vision of the Grail's arrival in Britain in the hands of Joseph of Arimathea, during which Ithea is raped by a man wearing a devil mask and the Grail is stolen. Merlin and Perceval ride out once again and Merlin, weary of Perceval's persistent questioning, shows the boy more visions: episodes from the wizard's boyhood and his assistance of Uther during the King's war with the Saxons. Uther's connivance to sleep with Igraine is then intercut with Perceval's own to win Blancheflor's heart. While Merlin aids the former by luring the Duke of Cornwall away from his wife, to his death, he helps the latter by instructing him in the art of the duel. The duel, between Perceval and Blancheflor's father Bagdemagus, eventually ends in a stalemate which Merlin resolves by suggesting that Bagdemagus hand the suit of red armour, belonging to the knight who has wronged him, in place of Perceval, who merely wears it. 'Part One' ends with Merlin claiming the infant Arthur from Uther.

In 'Part Two', Perceval and Merlin take up residence in Badgemagus' castle where the magician tutors the boy, just as he did Arthur. Boorman intercuts scenes of this education, echoing those of White's novel, with further flashbacks to Merlin's past where we learn of his infatuation with Morgan-La-Fay and her use of this attraction to get to Arthur. Bagdemagus' castle is then besieged by Mordred and, knowing that Mordred and his mother will break the siege if he gives himself up, Merlin determines to do so. He tells Perceval that he must go to Arthur and identify himself as the Grail seeker and then, through an extended flashback, Boorman recounts Lancelot's quest for the Grail and Arthur's wounding. Merlin then reveals

that Perceval is the son of Lancelot and Guinevere and that it was their love affair that doomed the Grail quest to failure. Merlin surrenders himself and, wracked with grief, Perceval sets out for Camelot where he is granted an audience with Arthur and charged with seeking the Grail. While doing so, he is captured by Mordred's men and taken to Tintagel where Morgan-La-Fay/Vivienne has installed herself. She and Mordred demand to know the location of the Grail and, when receiving no answer, resort to sending a girl to Perceval in the night, in the guise of Blanche-Flor, to wrest information from him. The girl, it turns out, is the orphan who was kidnapped by the knights in dragon masks, and she leads Perceval to the castle's dungeons where Merlin is being held. The three escape and, while Merlin and Esthel head to Camelot, Perceval goes in search of the Grail. Falling from his horse, he has a vision of Lancelot who is pointed back towards Camelot by Excalibur; understanding, Perceval too heads back to Camelot where he recognises the cup in Arthur's hands as the Grail. Arthur is healed and prepares to go to war with Mordred. The battle ends when Perceval shatters Longinus, the spear that killed Christ, just as Mordred prepares to strike Arthur, beheading Mordred in the process. The film ends with Perceval happily married to Blanche-Flor, Arthur's body sailing off to Avalon, and Merlin disappearing into the forest.

This script is sprawling, and Boorman supposes that it would have made for a four-and-a-half hour film were it to be committed to screen in its entirety.⁵⁴ The numerous flashback sequences incorporate material from White, Malory, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*, and Robert de Boron's *Merlin* – in short, the gamut of the Arthurian canon. The story of Arthur's rise to power, the creation of Round Table, Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, and Mordred's uprising are all told through such sequences as Merlin gradually relates the story of the Grail to Perceval over the course of the film. This Merlin is not quite yet the mysterious and impish sorcerer portrayed by Nicol Williams, but a tired and fading magician who recalls, in his exasperated and fatigued manner, Gandalf the Grey as he appears in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. He is an avuncular figure, in the vein of White's Merlin, who is compelled to tutor Perceval in preparation to seek the Grail and restore king and country just as previously he had taught Arthur. And yet, as the one god of Christianity rises, his powers are fading, and with them, his vitality.

⁵⁴ Ciment, p. 192.

Several elements of the unrealised *Lord of the Rings* project have evidently been incorporated into the *Merlin Lives* script. As suggested above, Boorman appears to have been drawn to Gandalf's account of his rebirth; his Merlin, like his Gandalf, is drawn back to the mortal coil by the voice of a pure-hearted hero in need of his guidance. The cave in which he is sealed is situated under the Giant, its mouth forming one entrance and another leading in from the forest. The cave is described as a network, containing 'a cavern, like an underground cathedral', and it is here that Merlin leads Vivienne shortly before his imprisonment; his intention, to distance her from Mordred and so render him powerless:

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MERLIN'S CAVE

NIGHT

VIVIENNE draws MERLIN seductively deeper into the caves. The way plunges downwards and opens into a dark cavern. MERLIN hurls his torch in the air and it illuminates the cavern, like an underground cathedral. There are no crystals now to light it up, nothing but a fetid green slime. She takes him in her arms.

MERLIN

I took her to the depths of the hills where my powers were greatest. Where I could best withstand her forces, dark places of slime, beyond time, where the secrets of the earth can be learned, the laws that hold the world together.⁵⁵

Delivered in a flashback, this scene again bears clear traces of Gandalf's tale of his battle with the Balrog. Merlin's objective here, like Gandalf's, is to neutralise a powerful enemy and so protect his friend, and Boorman's phrases such as 'fetid green slime' and 'beyond time, where the secrets of the earth can be learned' are evidently derived from Tolkien's text. Vivienne, who Boorman has by this point in the story conflated with Morgan-La-Fay (Vivienne is her true, 'hidden name'), is able to seal Merlin in his cave by blocking the entrances with boulders and so remove him from Arthur's narrative. This is, however, only a set-up for the 'present' story centred on Perceval in which she represents true evil, the dark reflection of Merlin as orchestrator. Just as Gandalf refers to 'The Evil of Sauron', Merlin discusses Mordred in similar terms: 'You cannot destroy Evil, Perceval. You can only bring it into balance with good'.⁵⁶ This

⁵⁵ Boorman, 'Merlin Lives Or The Knights of King Arthur'.

⁵⁶ Boorman, 'Merlin Lives Or The Knights of King Arthur'.

idea, as Boorman makes clear, was one of the aspects of Tolkien's saga that most interested him: 'Good and evil represent two diametrically opposite poles; but when, at the end of the book, the evil is vanquished, it doesn't disappear but is diluted, or dissipated, in the good, which creates a complex condition, one again with which we're familiar, the two being inextricably linked'.⁵⁷ This duality is embodied in Merlin, the son of a demon and a mortal woman, neither one nor the other, 'born of the devil but exorcised of his powers'.⁵⁸

Boorman was keen to cover as much of the canon of Arthurian literature as was possible in his film and, although his first run at the script clocked in at almost twice the length that *Excalibur* would come to be, he made a valiant attempt to condense his source material by conflating and connecting characters and events. The two most infamous female antagonists of the Legends, Morgan-La-Fay and Vivienne were merged, as were Arthur, the Fisher King and the oft differentiated Maimed King. Blancheflor's father, Bagdemagus, as Hoyle observes, is also 'conflated with Gornemant, Blancheflor's uncle, who becomes Perceval's teacher in Chrétien's tale of the Grail knight'.⁵⁹ The relationship between Perceval and Arthur is solidified, too, when it is revealed that Perceval was born from the love affair between Launcelot and Guinevere. Merlin, for his part, draws a parallel between his own birth, which is connected to the loss of the Grail, and Perceval's, which will lead to its rediscovery. The relationships these confluations create are not accurate to the source material, but they help to weave together into a comparatively cohesive whole the various elements of the Legends that Boorman draws from. His views on adapting the Arthurian Legends are clear: he considered himself 'simply the latest in a long line of minnesingers and storytellers, and [his] task was to pick up the story where the last man left off'.⁶⁰ The Legends themselves, he considers myths, and 'A myth', he writes, 'can be defined as a story that can be turned inside out, stood on its head and yet mysteriously remain itself'.⁶¹ Hoyle writes that 'There are simply too many characters and subplots here, and the script is sometimes confusing',⁶² and indeed there is a definite sense that Boorman was using the writing process here to further explore, refine, and distil his ideas around the Grail myth. *Merlin Lives* is

⁵⁷ Ciment, p. 140.

⁵⁸ Boorman, 'Merlin Lives Or The Knights of King Arthur'. Shot 161

⁵⁹ Hoyle, p. 120.

⁶⁰ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 238.

⁶¹ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 238.

⁶² Hoyle, p. 121.

messy; its chronology, jumping back and forth through time, threatens to complicate the plot for those unfamiliar with the source texts, and its scope is simply too broad. When viewed as a historical document, however, as a stepping stone between *The Lord of the Rings* and *Excalibur*, it provides a fascinating insight into Boorman's mediaevalism.

‘A dream to some, a nightmare to others’: *Excalibur*’s Middle Ages

In *Excalibur*, Boorman was at long last able to address the underlying structure of his previous films and fully realise his ambition of filming the Grail myth. Having realised that *Merlin Lives*, even with its various confluences and revisions of events and characters, was a huge and sprawling story, Boorman asked Pallenberg for his help in further condensing the script. ‘He had several terrific ideas’, Boorman writes: ‘The first was to tell the story chronologically but with major leaps between each stage’ which ‘gave the story a dynamic narrative power. Pallenberg’s other clever idea was to have the dying Uther Pendragon plunge Excalibur into the stone to prevent it falling into the hands of his enemies’.¹ He also attributes the merging of Arthur and the Fisher King to Pallenberg, though this characterisation is already fully integrated into the narrative of *Merlin Lives*. As was the case with *The Lord of the Rings*, Pallenberg was able to pare the material down while retaining its epic scale and essential spirit; although Boorman’s first edit was around three hours long, the finished film clocks in at a respectable 141 minutes. While the flashback structure is removed and Arthur replaces Perceval as the focus of the narrative, much of the skeleton of *Merlin Lives* survives in *Excalibur*. The scene in which Uther discovers his lust for Igrayne survives almost unchanged, though the magical mist by which he gains admission to Tintagel in order to seduce her is an entirely new addition. The druids and priests that amass over the Cerne Giant survive in *Excalibur* as the priest who blesses the hands of those who attempt to draw the sword from the stone. An elderly man, robed in black, he appears to wear a crucifix around his neck and asks God to ‘send us a true King [...] for the land bleeds, the people suffer’; he then anoints each knight with a green branch, dipped in water from a wooden bowl held in the boles of a nearby tree. He speaks of Christ, and Easter, but Excalibur is clearly an object of worship that he connects with the prosperity of the land and thus, it is symbolic of the moment in time in which Boorman is particularly interested: the transition from the pagan to the Christian.

Merlin’s (Nicol Williamson) entrapment by Vivienne, now Morgana (Helen Mirren), retains its basic dynamic in which the enchantress tries over-power Merlin by rousing his passion and he, simultaneously, prepares to destroy her with his magic. In this version, however, the wizard’s cave is not below the Giant but a small henge on a hilltop overlooking

¹ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 138.

Tintagel and, rather than stopping the entrances to his cave with boulders, Morgana seals him in crystal with his own 'Charm of Making'. The majority of Perceval's backstory is cut from the film and, after his initial introduction in which he convinces Lancelot to take him to Camelot as his squire, his narrative is confined to the latter stages of the Grail quest. The substantial section featuring Blanche-Flor and Bagdemagus did not survive the cut, nor did the sequence in which Joseph of Arimathea brings the Grail to Britain. Similarly, Perceval is no longer Lancelot's son, and Merlin's suggestion that he is Arthur's brother is also removed. Following Pallenberg's input, *Excalibur* bears a much closer resemblance to *La Morte d'Arthur* than Chrétien's text. In an inversion of the structure of *Merlin Lives*, *Excalibur* begins with the events leading up to Arthur's birth and the main body of the film is structured around three distinct periods of Arthur's life: his youth, his prime, and his decline. The first twenty-three minutes of the film act as a prologue for the main event and cover Merlin's presentation of the sword to Uther, Uther's brief attainment of peace, his breaching of said peace for the sake of his lust for Igrayne, and his thrusting of the sword into the stone. The second segment of the film, spanning from the twenty-three minute mark to approximately forty-five minutes into its run-time, covers Arthur's successful acquisition of Excalibur and his development from boy into king; it ends with his admission of love for Guinevere, in a positive reflection of Uther's earlier desire for Igrayne. The third segment, ending at approximately ninety-four minutes, introduces Lancelot and the adult Morgana, the instigators of Camelot's decline, and deals with the gradual decay of Arthur's rule. The last segment, in which Arthur has become the wounded Fisher King, follows Perceval as he seeks the Grail. It ends with the defeat of Mordred, the death of Arthur, and the committal of Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake.

The scope of the Pallenberg script is narrower than Boorman's, more focussed. It contains several of the better-known episodes of the Arthurian legends and omits those from *Merlin Lives* that do not directly serve the Grail narrative, such as the story of Merlin's birth. Despite this streamlining of the, however, *Excalibur's* source material ensured that it would be subject to close scrutiny. Hoyle, citing John Aberth, writes that 'The story is credited as being "adapted from Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*," and a good deal has been written assessing the validity of this claim [...] several "Arthurian scholars have pointed out the many omissions that Boorman has made from Malory's original"'.² Norris J. Lacy, however, asserts that 'there

² Hoyle, p. 119.

is little point in assembling a catalog [sic] of Boorman's departures from Malory: the result would be too extensive to be of value, and it would demonstrate little beyond Boorman's independence from his putative source'.³ Boorman, for his part, explains that:

Oddly enough, I was more interested in works deriving from the legend, such as White's *The Once and Future King*, which really marked my childhood. Then, at school, it was *Idylls of the King*, the Victorian version which Tennyson wrote as a favour to the Queen. But I'd never studied the original texts. It was later that I came to them, and I was extraordinarily impressed by them: Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, the works of Chrétien and, especially, the most fascinating and modern of them all, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parsifal*. There are the three great books, English, French, and German, in which our respective national cultures are inscribed. Malory leads directly to T. H. White, Chrétien de Troyes to Bresson and Rohmer, von Eschenbach to Wagner.⁴

The influence of White, primarily in the figuration of the relationship between Arthur and Merlin, has already been established, and Hoyle notes that 'the final stretch of the film owes far more to Alfred Lord Tennyson's recasting of the legends, *The Idylls of the King* (1885), than it does to Malory'.⁵ He goes on to suggest that 'by announcing Malory as the primary source for *Excalibur* he is aligning himself with a remarkably rich English tradition of poets and writers, from Tennyson and William Morris to White, who have drawn on this work', and that by doing so 'his film would have more success in reconnecting his countrymen with this shared national origin myth'.⁶ Furthermore, he reasons that 'by playing fast and loose with his source Boorman is simply following the lead of Malory, who did more than his fair share of "editing and condensing"' and, as such, *Excalibur* is less an adaptation of Malory than it is a continuation of the Arthurian tradition.⁷ This observation is borne out by Boorman, who informs us that, during the writing process, he and Pallenberg 'both felt that we were not inventing, but rather rediscovering lost fragments of the story, uncovering hidden truth'.⁸

Indeed, Boorman has clearly stated on multiple occasions that he thinks of the Arthurian legends in terms of mutable myths and not in terms of fixed narratives. For him,

³ Norris J. Lacy, 'Mythopoeia in *Excalibur*', in *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, ed. by Kevin J. Harty, Revised (London, 2002), pp. 34–43 (p. 35).

⁴ Ciment, p. 192.

⁵ Hoyle, p. 125.

⁶ Hoyle, p. 131.

⁷ Hoyle, p. 120.

⁸ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 238.

the characters are archetypal, mythemes, single units that can be rearranged and reconfigured to create and reveal new meaning. It was Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, he recalls, that 'got me thinking about Merlin again',⁹ and so:

I began to formulate the idea that the Grail cycle was a metaphor for the past, present and future of humanity. In the early chapters, the Uther Pendragon period, man is emerging. He still has an unconscious magical connection with nature, both in its violence and its harmony. That could be said to represent the deep past. What if Merlin were to summon Excalibur from the lake? The sword would focus the chaotic unconscious forces that lie beneath the surface. He could then give it to Uther, who would abuse it. Violence and anarchy reign. Merlin would arrange that the sword pass to Uther's son, Arthur, and its power allows him to impose his rule and make peace. As law and reason are imposed, Arthur gradually forfeits his connection with nature. Camelot is established, a place of learning and science and order. Man becomes the master of the world. He cuts down the sacred forest. He loses his way. Sadly, this feels like our present.¹⁰

Boorman is not interested in presenting these stories as historic events, or as fixed to specific period of history, for 'political interpretation', he explains, 'is not, in my opinion, where the real interest of the story lies'.¹¹ His goal is to find the fundamental truths of these myths, to reduce them down to a timeless essence which reminds its audience of the roots of their national identity, the fundamentals of their being. This metaphor for the continuity of human existence bears all the hallmarks of Boorman's iconography: mystical water, a guiding magician, a disconnection from nature, and a quest for spiritual healing. It offered him the perfect symbolic matrix with which to interrogate the myths that had fascinated him since childhood and to finally express all of the themes and images that had been gestating in his work to date. If it was to be a metaphor for all of humanity, though, and not simply a historical epic, toothless fantasy film, or a romantic studio effort in the vein of *Camelot* or *Lancelot and Guinevere*, *Excalibur* would need to look and sound as operatic as its script suggested.

⁹ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 236.

¹⁰ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, pp. 236–37.

¹¹ Ciment, p. 196.

***'Somewhere between a comic strip and a Bosch painting'*¹²**

Excalibur wears the influence of Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* on its sleeve, and Boorman admits that he 'studied her theories well'.¹³ Just as Arthur's life and reign progress from their respective springs, through summer to autumn, and so to winter, so too does the film's landscape. When Uther plunges Excalibur into the stone, the woods around him are grey, bare, and muddy; the ground is wet and trampled underfoot, the result of the battle which has been fought there. The only green visible in the shot is that of the moss on the boulder and the green light that seems to emanate from it, reflected in the blade of the sword. By contrast, the reverse shots which show Merlin carrying the new-born Arthur off into the woods are dappled with sunlight and leaves can be glimpsed in the canopy overhead. When the next segment begins, the landscape is visibly changed; grass has reclaimed the earth and the trees are thick with leaves. The priest has set-up shop to pray in front of Excalibur, and the ground clearing below has been occupied by players, revellers, and a jousting contest. The natural light is still grey and is diffused by both the naturally moist air and the smoke that issues from the reveller's fires, but there is also an abundance of green light reflected in the metallic surfaces of the knights' black armour. The overall effect is one of civilisation still very much in the process of taming the surrounding environment, an environment still shrouded in the mists of time and the glow of an inner magic. Sunlight appears only once Arthur has freed the sword from the stone and Merlin has re-emerged from the trees. The second segment is perhaps the most verdant. Boorman stages Arthur's duel with Lancelot in an open meadow at the foot of a waterfall, against the backdrop of the Wicklow mountains; the patch of forest where Lancelot later encounters Perceval is carpeted in bluebells, which Boorman painstakingly re-arranged the shooting schedule to capture;¹⁴ the wedding between Arthur and Guinevere takes place in a clearing lined by pillar like trees which Boorman likens to a natural cathedral; and the scene in which Arthur discovers Guinevere and Lancelot's betrayal in the forest is awash in green.

This segment of the film shows Arthur's gradual detachment from the landscape as he sets about building Camelot and establishing his laws. Camelot itself is constructed from gold

¹² Boorman, 'Zardozi', p. 10.

¹³ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, p. 236.

¹⁴ *Behind the Sword in the Stone*, dir. by Mark Wright and Alec Moore (Mossy Hare Productions, 2013).

and silver; its walls are bright and brilliant and untarnished but they stand in stark contrast to their natural surroundings. It is emblematic of scientific progress and prosperity, but it also walls Arthur off from the magic of the forest. The knights' armour has, by this stage, also changed from the black iron of the first segment to the resplendent chrome of Lancelot's suit. The knights now resemble those that Perceval sees in Chrétien: 'he saw the glittering hauberks and the bright, shining helmets, the lances and the shields – which he had never seen before – and when he beheld the green and vermilion glistening in the sunshine and the gold, the blue and the silver, he was captivated and astonished'.¹⁵ Gradually, however, as the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere blossoms, Arthur's jealousy grows. Eventually, he drives Excalibur into the ground between the two lovers and abandons it; in doing so, he relinquishes the symbol of both his political and spiritual power. The kingdom, and the land, begin to wane, and the landscape once again becomes grey, muddy, and bleak. In the film's final act, we see Perceval traversing a wasteland in search of the Grail, riding through bleak moors and frozen mountaintops. Arthur and his knights are no longer glistening and brilliant, but grizzled, tired, and dirtied. Once Perceval finds the Grail, however, and successfully answers its questions, Arthur is healed and, revived, rides out to challenge Mordred. As he does so, Boorman, in a striking sequence, illustrates the rejuvenation of land and king by having the trees burst into colourful bloom as Arthur and his retinue ride past.

Each segment of the film, which corresponds to a different period of both Arthur's life and rule, and also to Boorman's 'metaphor for the past, present and future of humanity', has a distinct aesthetic. The look of the prologue, he tells us, was 'influenced by an artist like Frank Frazetta, who knows how to create an elemental, primitive feeling.' Arthur's youth 'corresponds to a more bucolic, perhaps more "conventional", image of the Middle Ages', while in Camelot, 'imagination runs riot [...] with a high degree of stylization in sets and costumes.' The last section, he supposes, returns 'to the atmosphere of the beginning'.¹⁶ Frazetta, a renowned and highly influential fantasy artist who produced art for comics, album covers, and the occasional movie poster, captured the public imagination with his paintings for the paperback copies of Robert E. Howard's sword-and-sorcery adventure series *Conan* (1966-1977). His paintings are dynamic, fraught with the tension of suspended movement;

¹⁵ Chrétien De Troyes, 'The Story of the Grail (Perceval)', in *Chrétien De Troyes: Arthurian Romances*, ed. by William W. Kibler (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 381–494 (p. 382).

¹⁶ Ciment, p. 197.

their subjects are muscled barbarian heroes, shapely women, bearded warriors, and fearsome beasts. His cover for *Conan the Adventurer* (1966) (Fig. 31) features the eponymous warrior standing bare-chested in the centre of the composition, his sword thrust into the bone-littered mound on which he stands; his pose is confident, defiant, assured; a nude and buxom woman clings to his right ankle, the curve of her hip outlined against a wall of fame which fills the background of the painting's lower half. At her hip is a battle axe, and her challenging expression suggests that she too is dangerous. In the background can be made out a giant skull and some other indistinct figures along with the suggestion too, perhaps, of a castle. The mood of Uther's prologue can clearly be traced to this image: fire permeates the images of his brief rule, and Gabriel Byrne's Uther exudes a similar sense of violent masculinity. He is a primitive conqueror, incapable of maintaining peace.

The film's opening shots are of a group of knights, clad in black armour reminiscent of the depiction of Arthur and Mordred's last battle in the fifteenth-century *St Alban's Chronicle* (Fig. 32), riding over a wooded hilltop, burning torches in hand. It is night, and smoke or mist billows through the air, and the knights, faces obscured by helms and those on foot scuttling through the flames in a crouch, take on a demonic air; the overall effect is an air redolent of the 'Hell' panel of Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Screams and shouts can be heard over 'Siegfried's Death and Funeral March', borrowed from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* (1833), as Merlin emerges from the haze as though from the mists of time. Boorman had been to see *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Wagner's cycle of four operas, with his daughter Telsche in preparation for undertaking the *Excalibur* project, and he tells us that:

It inspired my writing and eventually insinuated its way into the movie. The theme of 'Siegfried's death' from *Götterdämmerung* heralded Merlin's entrance and mourned Uther's primal and bloody battles; the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* with its ever-rising erotic tension underscored the tryst of Lancelot and Guinevere; and the prelude to *Parsifal*, with those impossible chords that elevate the spirit, became the motif of the quest for the Grail.¹⁷

Hoyle notes that, in addition to opening and closing the film, 'Siegfried's Death and Funeral March' 'accompanies several other crucial moments involving the titular sword' and so

¹⁷ Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, pp. 239–40.



Figure 31: Frank Frazetta's Conan <<http://frankfrazetta.net/Barbarian.html>>



Figure 32: "Battle between Arthur and Mordred (15th Century), manuscript image from St. Alban's Chronicle at Lambeth Palace Library," Medieval Hollywood <<http://medievalhollywood.ace.fordham.edu/items/show/32>>

becomes its aural motif. ‘This is an apt choice’, he continues, for ‘associating this motif with Excalibur reminds one of that weapon’s similarities to Nothung, the sword that Wotan thrust into a tree and that only Siegmund, Siegfried’s father, could remove’.¹⁸ The effect, for those familiar with the *Ring* cycle, is that the film announces its mythic intentions by connecting itself with an existing Germanic epic. *Excalibur*, its opening credits announce, is set rather non-specifically in ‘The Dark Ages’, a period spanning from the fall of the Roman Empire through to the Renaissance; indeed, as Boorman informs us, ‘This is a mythic story, I wasn’t really interested in trying to specify a period’.¹⁹ This section of the film is Boorman’s ‘deep past’ in which man still ‘has an unconscious magical connection with nature, both in its violence and its harmony’, and the invocation of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* creates an aural illustration of this connection.

The scene in which Merlin prompts Uther, during the negotiations with the Duke of Cornwall’s men, to ‘show them the sword’ is composed in long shot with Uther and Merlin on the far right of the frame, separated from Cornwall’s men by a stream (Fig. 33). Uther is backed by flaming torches which stands in stark contrast to the luminescent green moss so predominant on the far side of the brook. In typical Boorman fashion, this shot displays the four base elements of mediaeval alchemy and also divides the frame: fiery red and earth green are separated by water, and the presence of air is indicated by the smoke that drifts across the screen. On the one hand, this speaks to Boorman’s idea of a world in which magic is still very much present; on the other, it is symbolic of the relationship between the sword, the king, and the land. In the hylomorphic terms of mediaeval alchemy, Sulphur, the principle of fire, and Mercury, the principal of water, represent form and matter respectively. Bucklow informs us that ‘When “passive” mercury combines with “active” sulphur, it is given form’.²⁰ The lowercase nouns here indicate the physical materials mercury and sulphur, while the uppercase refers to their abstract principles. Excalibur, in Boorman’s myth, represents a locus of power, a tool for focussing the power of the king and a symbol around which his people can rally. Merlin summons the sword from the water, and rare is the shot in which its blade does not seem to emit the green light that Boorman associates with Merlin, magic, and the

¹⁸ Hoyle, p. 126.

¹⁹ ‘Director’s Commentary’ on *Excalibur*, dir. by John Boorman (Warner Home Video, 2011) BRD.

²⁰ Bucklow, p. 86.

forest. It is magic, then, given form; it cannot unite the people on its own and requires a king to wield it. The reaction between the two, however, is volatile and Uther's inability to govern his base desires means that the land is not transformed as Merlin had hoped. And yet, his experiment does yield the birth of Arthur, a refined and improved form of king that Merlin can once again attempt to shape into the philosopher's stone that the land requires to be healed.

Muriel Whitaker, in her reading of Boorman's use of said rock, fire, and water in the film, has suggested that 'Fire can be used apocalyptically, too. Merlin's brightening staff symbolizes the light of civilization, a significance reinforced by the curtain of white candles which illuminates the Round Table in Arthur's new hall'.²¹ This may be true, but following Uther's death and the film's transition into its second age, that of Arthur's youth, fire is gradually relegated from an almost constant presence to a rarely glimpsed utility; by its third segment, the torches and roaring hearths of Uther's scenes have been tamed and have given way to small candles, cooking fires, and a single symbolic brazier on Camelot's ramparts. This brazier, framed over Arthur's shoulder in the scene in which he and Merlin say their goodbyes, immediately follows Arthur's discovery of Lancelot and Guinevere's betrayal and subsequent relinquishing of Excalibur. It simultaneously represents his jealousy and recalls Uther, thus signalling the impending decay of his utopia. Rather, the third age of the film, that of Arthur's summer, contains the majority of the film's scenic Irish landscapes. As the new king heals rifts and solidifies bonds, unifying the people around him, the land flourishes too. This segment of the film is the sunniest and the warm light, naturally diffused by the moist Irish air (Fig. 34, for example),²² results in an aesthetic not unlike that of Turner's *The Golden Bough* (1834) (Fig. 35) or perhaps *Story of Apollo and Daphne* (1837) (Fig. 36). Both paintings are suffused with light and depict idyllic natural landscapes, and both illustrate episodes from myth. Boorman is vocal about his love for the landscape around his home in Wicklow, and this love is made evident in this section of the film. *Zardoz* was filmed in the same area, with the Vortex occupying the same shores as Camelot, and Boorman had identified several locations in the woods and hills surrounding his home for use in *Lord of the Rings*. As Pallenberg recalls,

²¹ Muriel Whitaker, 'Fire, Water, Rock', in *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, ed. by Kevin J. Harty, Revised Ed (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002), pp. 44–54 (p. 46).

²² *Behind the Sword in the Stone*.

'Among the locations scouted for this picture that were used later in *Excalibur* were the waterfall, where Arthur meets Lancelot and



Figure 33: Uther offers peace in exchange for fealty in Excalibur. BRD still.



Figure 34: Arthur refuses to cede to Lancelot. BRD still.



Figure 35: Turner's The Golden Bough.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-golden-bough-n00371>



Figure 36: Turner's Story of Apollo and Daphne

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-story-of-apollo-and-daphne-n00520>

where the Lady of the Lake appears, a “beautiful, round lake,” [...] and “a lake with a small stone henge that’s about a cannon shot from Boorman’s house”²³. The arena in which Guinevere’s trial is held, too, was originally intended to be used for the Council of Elrond.

Boorman and Pallenberg’s efforts to condense *The Lord of the Rings* into a single film pale in comparison to their subsequent work on *Excalibur*, but these efforts parallel Tolkien’s own in the gargantuan task of crafting his own mythology. Boorman has melded together elements of the English, French, and German traditions of the Arthurian legends in much the same way that Tolkien cherry picked from Norse and Celtic myths. But Tolkien was also an accomplished artist and he produced dozens of illustrations of scenes from his novels, some of which were included in the books by his publishers. Much of this artwork, like his writing, is directly influenced by mediaeval styles, and Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull note that ‘He also designed, more deliberately, “heraldic devices” for characters in “The Silmarillion”’.²⁴ It is unlikely that Boorman would have seen any of Tolkien’s drawings by 1980, other than those in *The Hobbit*, but there are striking similarities between the ways in which he and Tolkien treat nature as their subject. Tolkien’s *The Forest of Lothlorien in Spring* (Fig. 37), for instance, shows a bend in a wooded path which leads off into the distance between rows of slender trees in full, golden bloom. The ground is coated in leaves in autumnal shades, and a beam of golden sunlight breaks through the trees to cross the path in the middle-distance. Rendered in crayon and incorporating the white of the paper, the drawing has a soft-focus effect, a softness that resembles *The Golden Bough*, *Apollo and Daphne*, and the refracted light of the forest scenes in the third segment of *Excalibur*. Boorman’s Camelot, too, bears some resemblance to Tolkien’s painting of Rivendell (Fig. 38), a watercolour which looks up the river and the dell to see the Last Homely House nestled among the trees on the left bank. Camelot, filmed by reflecting a small model directly into the camera so that it appears to occupy real space in the landscape, sits perched on the edge of Lough Tay, framed by the valley and the hills behind it. Boorman makes repeated reference, on the director’s commentary for the film, to a ‘heightened sense of reality’ that sees signalled by the lush

²³ Plesset, p. 46.

²⁴ Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, ‘Tolkien’s Visual Art’, in *Tolkien: Maker of Middle-Earth*, ed. by Catherine McIlwaine (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2018), pp. 71–81 (p. 80).



The Forest of Lothlorien in Spring
Figure 37: Tolkien's The Forest of Lothlorien in Spring

<http://tolkiengateway.net/w/images/e/e3/J.R.R. Tolkien - The Forest of Lothlorien in Spring.jpg>

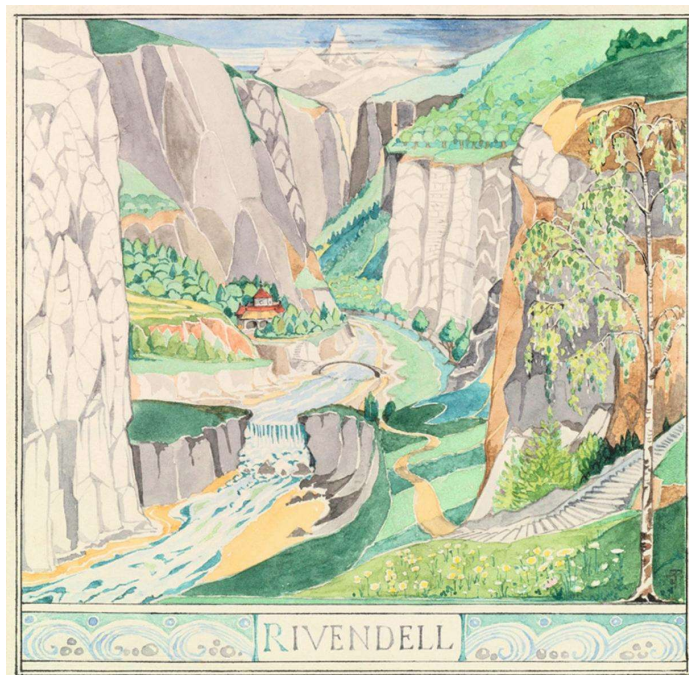


Figure 38: Tolkien's Rivendell

[https://museoteca.com/r/en/work/7376/j_r_r_tolkien/the_fair_valley_of_rivendell_/!/>](https://museoteca.com/r/en/work/7376/j_r_r_tolkien/the_fair_valley_of_rivendell_/!/)

greens of the forest, the luminous mosses and the carpets of bluebells, the sight of the silver armour shining in the sun during the wedding of Arthur and Guinevere. He explains that this was part of his strategy for separating the story from its historical contexts and giving it a mythic quality instead:

What I had to do – with my set designer, Tony Pratt - was include the iconography and, at the same time, play with it by creating a “Middle Earth”, in the sense intended by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*: which is to say, a parallel world, similar to our own but somehow different, with numerous allusions to the Middle Ages.²⁵

His treatment of the landscape of the Irish summer in this section of the film is this attempt to create a ‘Middle Earth’. The soft, diffused light and the vivid greens of the deep woods, augmented by green light, suggest a primacy, an ancient landscape which has been lost to modernity. This section of the film represents the country’s golden age as Boorman sees it, poised between nature and progress.

Illustrating Camelot

Approximately halfway through the film’s third section, and indeed halfway through its runtime, Camelot is introduced. Built from walls of burnished gold and silver, the construction of Arthur’s beacon of civilisation marks a distinct break in visual style from the idyllic landscapes of the previous section. Boorman calls the Camelot sequences stylised, and notes that his production designer, Tony Pratt, loaded his sets with so much dressing that the interiors of Camelot spilled beyond their confines.²⁶ The knights’ armour changes during this period, too; following the single instance of warfare in which we see Arthur partake during his period of prosperity, a night-for-night sequence showing the fellowship’s celebration of having roused ‘invaders’ from their shores, the dark blue-black armour that Arthur and his knights have worn thus far is replaced with resplendent chrome in the style of Lancelot’s. Boorman capitalises

²⁵ Ciment, p. 196.

²⁶ Director’s Commentary, Boorman, *Excalibur* BRD.

on this change during the wedding between Arthur and Guinevere by lining the natural 'cathedral' in the forest with dozens of actors wearing suits of highly polished silver armour. Third assistant director John Lawlor recalls the lighting cameraman struggling to achieve the level of lighting that Boorman required in the shot when, as if on cue, the sun broke through the clouds and dappled the space in light. The result is striking; the armour seems to shine with a light of its own, and Arthur, in whose armour the reflection of the surrounding foliage can be seen, seems suffused with power, a divine king in Weston's terms. Boorman explains that 'What we wanted, at the beginning, with all those sombre colours and forests and suits of armour, was to express the reptilian nature of man. This is man emerging from nature'.²⁷ In the wedding scene, we see Arthur put warfare behind him in favour of love and peace. His enemies have been conquered, his country is safe, and he is now free to take on the role of 'the armchair king', as Boorman describes him, dispensing wisdom and meting justice. Mankind is no longer reptilian and primeval; it has evolved.

In Camelot, the elemental iconography of the film's first half is restrained. Fire has been tamed, reduced from roaring fireplaces and handheld torches to walls of candles backed by mirrors; Camelot's interior is, like its exterior, golden and metallic, suffused with a warm golden glow. There is less and less green to be seen in these interior shots, too, as Guinevere exchanges her green dress for a gold one and even the green glow of magic is pushed out to the edges of the frame. It has been relegated to the heights of the wall, the depths of the corridor, and the backrooms and dungeons from which Merlin comes and goes. It is clearly fading, however, as order and science take precedence over magic. Gold, green, or otherwise, Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz see light as a primary element in *Excalibur*. They suggest, as I have of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, that *Excalibur* indicates the interest of its director not simply in the subject matter of the mediaeval past, but also in its artistic practices. They argue that Boorman's affordance of such prominence to the visual theme of light in the film evidences his participation in a model of mediaeval thought which 'involved a certain fluidity between material and spiritual realms: there was no ironclad division between physical form and spiritual effect'.²⁸

²⁷ Ciment, p. 200.

²⁸ Raeleen Chai-Elsholz and Jean-Marc Elsholz, 'John Boorman's *Excalibur* and the Irrigating Light of the Grail', in *The Holy Grail on Film: Essays on the Cinematic Quest*, ed. by Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), pp. 98–111 (p. 101).

This philosophy has already been touched upon above, in reference to the alchemical symbolism of Boorman's composition during Uther's peace negotiations. Where my observations are based on the colour of the light in this sequence, and the demarcation of elemental iconography, Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz draw a comparison between the textual aesthetics of the Arthurian romances and Boorman's cinematic response to them:

Boorman achieves visually, in the aesthetic storyline of *Excalibur*, what medieval romance established lexically in *vermeil* as a basis of unity of physical matter. A kind of shared beauty results from the fluidity of identity between material things, since the fundamental substance of each thing – however imperfect and dim, or perfect and luminous – is light. Indeed, Boorman's use of cinematic effects translates medieval thinking about visual perception, specifically in relation to the possibility of portraying inexpressible mysteries.²⁹

They argue that what Boorman identifies as the signifiers of his 'heightened sense of reality', the lustrous colours and luminosity of plants and water, clothing and metal, accord with a distinctly mediaeval worldview. They go on:

The world of *Excalibur* is created by projecting light through film; this "extradiegetic" light-projecting process informs and inhabits the created diegesis. In *Excalibur*, the oneness of the material world is expressed in the figure of the dragon and the gleams and glimmers of its metallic reflections that are an integral part of everything and vice-versa.³⁰

The emblem of the dragon, like the green light, is omnipresent in the film. It is in Arthur's surname, Pendragon; it adorns his heraldry; statues of the dragon are built in gold at the gates of Camelot; the brazier on the castle's roof, too, are dragon shaped. The dragon is also associated with Merlin, and with the land, and also with Excalibur. Gold, however, is established as a symbol of Camelot's progress. Guinevere wears gold following the wedding, and Mordred's armour is gold – both so coloured, most likely, in accordance with the colouration of the Pendragon heraldry. The golden dragon, then, becomes a symbol of the unified Arthur, the king who is one with the land. This reading also bears out the alchemical

²⁹ Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz, p. 101.

³⁰ Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz, p. 102.

symbolism of the film's opening section, for the ultimate goal of alchemy was create the philosopher's stone which would facilitate the transmutation of lead into gold.

The luminosity of Boorman's colours, however, and the suffusion of the film with light, also suggest the look of a mediaeval manuscript illumination. The verdant greens of the foliage, the deep blacks of Merlin's cloak, the dappled palette of earth tones and interspersed with soft pastels in the wedding sequence, and most of all the reflective metallics of the armour and Camelot's walls all speak to vivid colouration of a manuscripts such as the *Très Riches Heures*. Eco is often quoted for saying that a 'love of light and colour [...] is typically medieval', and Jarman wrote that 'the passing centuries rubbed the colour off old walls, but in the manuscripts hidden from the light that creates and destroys, you can see colour bright as the day it was laid down by the illuminator'.³¹ Boorman's light is a light that creates and, like Gilliam, he can be considered a cinematic illuminator in the literal sense here: he captures images in light, and also illuminates the Arthurian legends. Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz, however, write that:

To transpose these effects from the illuminated page to the big screen is a technical challenge. Cinematographic images cannot refract light as gold leaf or other metals can, and, in fact, analysis of Boorman's film reveals through freeze frames and screenshots that the films images are actually quite dull. The matte screen has minimal reflective capacity, and so images that are projected onto it cannot shine or reflect light. The title image of the film presents the word EXCALIBUR as glistening metal. Boorman achieves this effect with glistening light, in other words, light that is portrayed by the movement of the film through the projector. By making the Grail in *Excalibur* 'shine' through his use of kinetic light, Boorman's creative genius offers new possibilities in the quest for the irrigating light of the Grail. The filmmaker's innovative application of kinetic light to depict the Grail stands within the tradition of medieval authors and artists who invented ways of expressing and performing luminosity as a representation of the indescribable mystery of the Grail.³²

Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz's mistake here, perhaps, is to look for reflections in the film's projection. The film image is itself composed of light and so any luminosity must, therefore, be captured on film. Indeed, for the film to be viewed at all, light must be shone through the celluloid, and they need look no further than the wedding scene to see the lustre of *Excalibur's*

³¹ Jarman, *Chroma*, p. 48.

³² Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz, p. 109.

reflective surfaces. They are, however, correct to place Boorman in an existing tradition of medieval authors and artists. Although *Excalibur* has often been criticised for its lack of faith to its purported source text, it has rarely been considered as part of the tradition of Arthurian illustration practiced by such artists as Arthur Rackham, Aubrey Beardsley, and Gustave Doré. For these artists, Lupack and Lupack write, 'representation is always a form of revision or rewriting of the text: illustrators imbue their work with their own values as well as the values of their age'.³³

Like Boorman, these artists sought to capture the spirit of their source material in their work and not to merely literalise it. Doré's illustrations for Tennyson's *Idylls*, the Lupacks note, were not even credited with this by his critics who believed, as some of Boorman's do of him, that he had made no attempt whatsoever to be faithful to the text. 'What in fact makes Doré's illustrations of such interest to readers today', the Lupacks write, 'is the degree to which they depart from – and reimagine – the Arthurian world. By focusing so much of his attention on the legend's physical geography [...] Doré effectively ignored much of the psychology of Tennyson's story, that is, the moral quandaries and complexities of the characters'.³⁴ Julia Margaret Cameron's 'illustrations of Guinevere', they note, 'are equally interesting, especially in the ways that they merge secular and religious imagery'.³⁵ With *Excalibur*, Boorman follows in the footsteps of these artists. With his proclamation that 'the land and the king are one', he privileges the tension between the generic figure of man and the landscape over the complexities of his characters interactions; divorced from any specific period of history, the relationships between these characters are rendered generic and archetypal, their personalities two-dimensional. Foremost among these illustrators, however, is Arthur Rackham, whose influence is clearly seen in the final confrontation between Arthur and Mordred. The scene, filmed on a sound stage, is highly impressionistic and quotes the style and composition of Rackham's 'How Mordred was slain by Arthur' (1917) directly. There are also echoes of Rackham's Arthurian paintings in the film's idyllic scenes, however; the suggestion of 'How Queen Guinevere rode a-maying' (1917) can be seen in the shots of Guinevere riding to the wedding, and the white shroud and corona of light that surround

³³ Lupack and Lupack, p. 2.

³⁴ Lupack and Lupack, p. 17.

³⁵ Lupack and Lupack, p. 50.

Perceval's vision of Arthur as the Grail recalls Rackham's 'How at the Castle of Corbin a maiden bare in the Sangreal' (1917).

Boorman's intention with *Excalibur* was to create a metaphor for the span of human history; a myth which would reconnect his audience with their spiritual lands. To do so, he not only drew from three of the primary source texts of the Arthurian legends, but also the most notable of the works that had evolved from them, such as those of Wagner and White. His visual register, it has been shown, ranges from the iconography of the Middle Ages and the illuminated manuscript, through Bosch to the Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites, to the comic books and pulp fantasy novels of the 1960s. In *Merlin*, too, he has created a character who steps out of the past to guide humanity towards the future, a purpose reflected in his costume design, for the combination of druidic robes and chromatic skullcap, added because Williamson refused to shave his head, make the magician look both ancient and futuristic. Boorman's range of influences for *Excalibur* is vast, and the sheer number of elements that he attempted to incorporate into the film result in some rough edges. Boorman confesses, however, that it is the only one of his films that he is happy to watch time and again, for the strength of its mythic content speaks to him; completing it, he says, left him with the sense that a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.³⁶ Like Tolkien before him, he seeks to revitalise the mythology that he handles by identifying the fundamental spirit of his source material and incorporating it into something entirely new, and entirely his own. It has aged well, he supposes, for it still enjoys a following today, and collaborators such as Helen Mirren, Patrick Stewart and Gabriel Byrne remember it fondly.³⁷ While some viewers may find it kitschy, or silly, or overwrought, Gabriel Byrne describes the *Excalibur* as a work of 'pure imaginative cinema';³⁸ truly, in *Merlin*'s words, 'a dream to some, a nightmare to others.'

³⁶ Director's Commentary Boorman, *Excalibur* BRD.

³⁷ *Behind the Sword in the Stone*.

³⁸ *Behind the Sword in the Stone*.

Conclusion

This thesis has made a thorough examination of a selection of films by Terry Gilliam, Derek Jarman, and John Boorman. It has considered their films as acts of mediaevalism – both engaging with the past to create a dialogue with the present and incorporating elements of past traditions into their creative process – and shown that some of the most influential works for these filmmakers are mediaeval, or at least pre-Modern, in nature. It has acknowledged that these three filmmakers, though primarily visual stylists, are equally as interested in the literary traditions that underpin their output. It has shown that Gilliam and Boorman are active participants at all stages of their filmmaking process, from script to screen, and that Jarman’s process was often collaborative, inviting friends to contribute ideas and change the shape of a project on the fly.

I have shown throughout this study how a modern medium such as cinema can interact with, and indeed further the spirit of, some of the oldest examples of English art and literature. I have shown, too, how these films draw upon and interlink with both past and existing trends in neo-mediaevalism such as cinema Arthuriana and the Pre-Raphaelites. And, lastly, I have shown how, in films such as *Holy Grail*, *Excalibur*, and *The Garden*, these directors succeed in merging their cinematic modernism with existing traditions in pre-modern art and literature.

The scope of this thesis has been necessarily restricted, however, by its length. Given adequate time and resources, several books over could be written about the mediaeval, and neo-mediaeval, influences on and elements in their work. Further connections might be struck with filmmakers with similar preoccupations and visionary tendencies, such as Vincent Ward. Another avenue of study might be to consider current practitioners of Jarman’s queer mediaevalism, for instance in the work of Jo Clifford. Furthermore, large volumes could be prepared on the design elements of these filmmakers’ works alone; or, alternatively, on the considerable body of unrealised scripts that each has to their name. There is a rich vein of study here to be mined; to borrow Boorman’s analogy, it waits only for next storyteller to come along.

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