



Homosexuality, AIDS and Representation in Jarman's Modern Nature and Smiling in Slow Motion

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UNIVERSITA': Università degli Studi di Milano

ANNO ACCADEMICO: 2007/2008

Sexuality could be a potentiality for choice, change and diversity.
(J. Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, 1985)

This work looks at two diaries, *Modern Nature* (Vintage Books, 1991) and *Smiling in Slow Motion* (Vintage Books, 2001) by D. Jarman (1942-1994). Jarman was an English writer, painter, film-maker and designer, but, above all, he was a story-teller of gay love and desire. Homosexuality is indeed inextricable from his art. In 1986 he discovered that he was body positive, he moved to Prospect Cottage, a fisherman's cottage in Dungeness, far from the busyness of London life and the savagery of politics. There he continued to paint and write and he created a garden, which has subsequently become very famous.

Since sex and gender are the keystone of Jarman's artistic commitment, the first chapter delineates the theoretical and historical context of the notion of sexuality, mainly referring to the studies of the sociologist and historian J. Weeks: the concept of sexuality is analysed from an essentialist and an anti-essentialist point of view, in particular focusing on the work of M. Foucault (1976) and therefore on a definition of sexuality as a historical construct which is moulded on social meanings and regulated by relations of power. Additionally, an excursus on the historical construction of homosexuality, from its criminalisation in the 19th century to its decriminalisation in the second half of the 20th century, traces the political, historical, social and cultural context in which Jarman lived and worked: that of the sexual liberation movements in the 1970s



(Gay Liberation Front), 1980s and 1990s (OutRage!, Act Up) and of the regulation of homosexuality in homophobic and conservative Thatcherite Britain at the outset of the AIDS epidemic. Juxtaposing the theories of S. Sontag and P. Brooks and considering the work of V. Berridge, a paragraph examines the way in which the AIDS crisis has been socially constructed as the "gay plague" and the importance of the materiality of the physical body, which cannot hide the visibility of illness and is therefore perceived as a risk, discriminated and marginalised by the social community.

The cultural representation of the queer body at risk is one of the most important features of Jarman's poetic. Although *Modern Nature* and *Smiling in Slow Motion* are not so angry and provocative as his other autobiographical texts – their tone is thus calmer and more nostalgic – they are still in some way "political" as they explore, through the narration of small gestures of daily life, the cultural relation between homosexuality, illness and death. The second chapter analyses the two journals from a stylistic, a linguistic (keywords and semantic clusters) and a thematic point of view (the selected keywords are considered in relation to the context, in order to understand the meaning of the text) and focuses on Jarman's self-representation as a gardener, as a queer, as a Person with AIDS and as a dying man. The two diaries are a work of relocation and rebuilding, Jarman reinvents his self and his past through gardening and writing. As the garden is slowly built, the gardener recovers himself from the fragmentations of these years. Moreover the diaries are the most appropriate form for a real representation of the AIDS experience, as they record the physical pain and ache.

The third chapter contains also a brief comparison between Jarman's diaries and T. Kushner's play, *Angels in America*. Referring to the documentary film *Wrestling with Angels*. Playwright Tony Kushner directed by Freida Lee Mock, the third chapter explores Kushner's theatre, focusing on the relation between gender and power, history and representation of the oppressed subcultures. The analogies and differences between Jarman and Kushner are hinted at through the analysis of the stories, hopes and fears of the main characters of *Angels in America*. Both Jarman's diaries and Kushner's play are a work of celebration of gay love and desire, of melancholia and mourning, of change and hope, in an inextricable relation between the personal and the political.

This work includes, in the fourth chapter, a translation of selected abstracts from *Modern Nature*. The most interesting ones are those referring to the garden, which is not merely described as a collection of plants and flowers, but represents a timeless Eden, queer love, past memories, the retreat to childhood and a place of allegory and visionary perceptions. The translation aims to render the same atmosphere of the entries: Jarman's ironic tone, the healing sound of the names of the flowers, the pleasing lyricism of the language of a painter.

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