

# Pietistic Penetration: Aesthetics of Queer Sacrality in Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976)

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## Introduction

*Sebastiane*, Derek Jarman's first feature film, is noteworthy for being one of the most homosexually explicit feature films ever made. Both at the time of its release in 1976 and in subsequent histories of gay and queer cinema, *Sebastiane* has been regarded as an innovative work that broke with the classical style of film narration to offer a sustained homoerotic celebration of the male body and alternative paradigms of masculinity, unusual for a commercially released British film of that time.<sup>1</sup> In some contexts, *Sebastiane* might be considered a work of high culture, an art house film made by a painter who inhabited the London counterculture of the early 1970s, and who as a filmmaker would develop a post-cinematic denunciation of queer desire.<sup>2</sup> In *Sebastiane*, Jarman rewrites and reappropriates the traditional story of Saint Sebastian through a gay yet predominantly queer lens; the saint whose near-naked body, tied to a stake and pierced with arrows, has been a staple of religious iconography for centuries. Indeed, masterly painting his vision onto

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<sup>1</sup> Although *Sebastiane* was co-directed by Paul Humfress and co-scripted by James Whaley, it has since taken up a place in the analysis of Jarman's auteurist oeuvre as his first feature film. Therefore, this article shall refer to it hereafter as solely Jarman's work. On Jarman's auteurist conception of cinema see Roland Wymer, *Derek Jarman* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 3-4. For recent studies on cinematic auteur theory, moreover, see Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du cinéma: 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Virginia Wright Wexman (ed.), *Film and Authorship* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003); and Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Maria Wyke, 'Shared Sexualities: Roman Soldiers, Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane*, and British Homosexuality,' in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, eds Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 231.