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

George Ioannides

**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.¹ 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 new cinematic enunciation of queer desire.² 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 wracked with arrows, has been a staple of religious iconography for centuries. Indeed, masterly painting his vision onto

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1. 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 of cinematic auteur theory, moreover, see Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); 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).

film reel rather than canvas, Jarman’s *Sebastiane* primarily operates on the experiential and meditational level, evincing a stunning piece of cinema and a prototypical religious film. This article examines Jarman’s construction of a visually sacred and sexual reality by commencing with a methodological meditation on religion, film, and queer theory, proposing a theoretical model that most effectively elucidates the religious subjectivity that *Sebastiane* engenders, and what will be argued as the queer, rather than gay male, conception of its protagonist. An investigation into Saint Sebastian’s representation in earlier iconography and Jarman’s personal predilection to the re-reading of religious history subsequently follows, revealing *Sebastiane* as both innovative and imitative in the psycho-sexualised conception of its protagonist. An exposition of Jarman’s sanctification of narcissism and sadomasochism in their queer form, and their sublimation onto the body of Sebastian, then takes place in order to argue for *Sebastiane* as a queer religious work of art. As spectators of *Sebastiane*, we witness the construction of a religious and queer reality, eroticising and sanctifying a sadomasochistic and narcissistic sexual subjectivity. Overall, it is averred that *Sebastiane* harbours an excessive aesthetic of sexual sacrality, reverential self-abolition, and queer desire, with its cinematic experience of queer excess analogous to an act of worship.

**Methodological Meditations: Aesthetics of Religion, Film and Queer**

*Sebastiane* opens with a riotous party held by the Roman Emperor Diocletian on 25 December, 303 CE, to celebrate the birth of the sun and to honour Sebastian as captain of the palace guard and the emperor’s favourite. Sebastian, however, protests against the subsequent execution of Christians at the imperial party and is banished to a remote outpost of the empire. There he is treated with suspicion by almost all of his fellow soldiers for his Christian mysticism and renunciation of the flesh, and develops a sadomasochistic relationship with his commanding officer that leads to his torture and eventual death.3

Before we examine the aesthetics of excess in this filmic, queer, and religious work of art, it must be noted that the relationships between religion, film, and queer theory have yet to be adequately theorised. Indeed, studies abound on the connections of religion to film, religion to queer theory, and

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queer theory to film, but sustained reflections on queer films imbued with a particular manifestation of sacrality are comparatively rare. Combining the insights of these three disciplines, however, allows us to develop a new way of interpreting queer films that harbour narratives and images imbued with religiosity, and which produce specific kinds of religious subjectivities, such as Jarman’s *Sebastiane*. This reading thus evinces interesting insights into postmodern and contemporary manifestations of religious sentiment, particularly in terms of the aesthetically visual and queerly sexual.

It is wise to begin with a consideration of the links between religion and film. Although in its current form the study of the relationship between religion and film is relatively recent, the connection between religion and film is as old as film itself; dating from the late nineteenth century, some of the earliest films were representations of the biblical narrative. According to the highly efficacious typology devised by S. Brent Plate, there are three key scholarly approaches to the relationship between religion and film. The first might be called ‘religion in film,’ a way of analysing the religious dimensions of film by focusing primarily on its narrative content. ‘Film as religion’ is the second key approach, and is based on formal parallels between the aesthetic styles of film and religious practices. Finally, there is an interest in ‘cinematic experience,’ where a focus on spectatorship takes precedence. These categories often overlap in individual studies, and are charted here for heuristic reasons. The key question that divides these approaches seems to revolve around the location of meaning: is religious meaning found in the subject matter of the film, in the aesthetic form of the film, or in the experience of viewing the film?

Whether a film plot is based on a messiah, a saint, a bodhisattva, a pilgrimage, a re-enactment of a sacred text, or whether religious performances are displayed in documentary film, religion shows up in film on a regular basis. As the twentieth century progressed, religious ideas, rituals, and communities came to be represented or alluded to in a vast number of films, from Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (1928) to Martin Scorsese’s *Kundun* (1997). Most recently, however, the study of religion in film has exploded to include analyses of just about any film for its religious or quasi-religious content; as the academic study of religion has matured, the definition of *religion* has expanded so that almost anything can be examined using the tools of the field. This has enabled scholars of religion to investigate any film.

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as valuable for the study of religion within society and culture. Surveys exist on how religious symbols have been depicted in film, how the symbolic properties of such symbols are set within the framework of popular film, and how this compares to the meaning these symbols represent when used in a religious context. There is also work that, through explorations in theology and film, explicitly intends to stimulate dialogue among theologians and film scholars, and work that discusses the use of film for explicitly religious purposes. There are theorists who explore religion, myth, ideology, and values in popular ‘secular’ film, such as Margaret Miles, Joel Martin, and Conrad Ostwalt. Drawing on the tradition of cultural studies, these studies recognise film as one voice among others in a complex social conversation. Furthermore, this voice is recognised as capable of catering to the human need of stories and myths by which the chaotic flow of experiences in everyday life can be meaningfully structured. Employing this latter approach to religion and film thus construes Sebastiane as a film heavily laced with elements of religiosity, presenting highly charged reflections into early Christianity, queer eroticism, and religious martyrdom.

This way of thinking about the relationship between religion and film, however, discloses a sole focus on the narrative content of a film. Highly conducive to the textual and narratological predispositions of religious studies scholars, this approach has hence become the most prominent method of examining religion and film’s relationship. An investigation into film as religion, therefore, evinces a deeper analysis of the religious dimensions within various films. This methodological approach takes as its framework Paul Schrader’s Transcendental Style in Film, which examines the aesthetics of

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sparseness in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Dreyer. Even though these directors had differing religious backgrounds, Schrader sees them each using a filmic style that emerges through pared-down filmmaking techniques, including austere cinematography, inexpressive acting, and light-handed editing. Thus, the properties specific to filmmaking itself allow access to the transcendental; a long take of a close-up of an expressionless face, no matter whose face it is, can evoke an experience of transcendence.

In the case of Jarman’s cinematic style, for example, this approach would examine how Sebastiane’s slow-motion techniques foreground the static, pictorial quality of the film’s compositions; how the frequently frontal orientation of these compositions slide into lingering *tableaux vivants*; and how the absence of significant character development, the employment of only brief amounts of dialogue delivered in Latin, Brian Eno’s ambient soundtrack, and the desolate desert locale all draw the attention of spectators away from the film’s narrative drive and towards the transcendental.

Nonetheless, this particular approach to religion and film harbours the potential for greater convolution by differing theoretical frameworks. Apart from the formal style, plot, and characters of film, there is also the cinematic experience – the reception of film – which is a critical point of interrogation for the scholar of religion, and the methodological approach to religion and film that most effectively elucidates their mutually embedded relationship. The religious implications of film reception are most obvious when the experience is here understood and analysed in terms of visual culture, investigating the

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11 Plate, *Religion and Film*, p. ix.
cross-cultural dimensions to visuality. Seeing the cinematic experience located within particular cultures, at particular times, paying attention to the gendered, ethnic, sexual, and religious differences of the activity of seeing, the larger religious questions involved in the social construction of reality through visual terms come to be examined. Filmic images, both in how they are shot and from whose eyes they are seen, produce a specific kind of religious subjectivity; within this paradigm, Sebastiane attests to a construction of religious reality and subjectivity through the visual terms of queer cinematic spectatorship.

It is here where the associations of queer theory to film, and queer theory to religion, gain the greatest credence. Studies of filmic spectator subjectivities readily map onto queer theories of film, which propose renegotiated, multiple spectator positionalities, imbued as they may be with sacral significations. This concept of ‘queer’ is envisioned in the same manner as that suggested by Teresa de Lauretis who, in a landmark edition of the feminist cultural studies journal *differences*, used it as a means to counter what she saw as the cultural fiction of “compulsory heterosexuality.” Emerging from and in reaction to Gay and Lesbian Studies, queer theory proposes an analytical model with the key aim of exposing the instability of dominant ‘heteronormative’ paradigms and practices of gender and sexual identity. In particular, queer theory critiques those entrenched gay/straight oppositions that shape and condition social understandings and representations in order to both regulate and sustain specific balances of power, exclusion, and oppression – legitimising the (‘normal’) heterosexual over the (‘abnormal’)

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queer. Therefore, in an extension of earlier writings by Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, de Lauretis called for the rejection of more established and apparently limiting “gay and lesbian” identity politics.\(^\text{16}\) Instead, she proposed the re-appropriation of ‘queer,’ a previously derogatory term of abuse, to designate a more inclusive frame within which to incorporate a diverse range of ‘non-straight’ formulations of gender and sexuality. Encouraging a radical challenge to the monolithic foundations of a naturalised heterosexual social contract, queer theory reconfigures social identity as a postmodern state of continual flux and indeterminacy, precariously yet productively situated at the point of convergence between political resistance and ‘deviant’ self-invention: “another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual.”\(^\text{17}\) Marking a very real shift in thinking around issues of gender and sexual subjectivity, queer theory thus reveals those differences and silences that had long been suppressed within such a hetero-centrically inclined social matrix.

Queer theory, moreover, views gender as a performative effect; ‘a doing’ that, within a recognised cultural matrix, constitutes ‘a being.’\(^\text{18}\) It wishes to expose the incoherencies in the sex-gender continuum and show that masculinity and femininity are not the inherent, respective qualities of male and female. Queer theory thus emphasises that the sex-gender grid largely supports the heterosexual matrix (as gender is still the defining attribute in sexual object choice). It is queer theory’s belief that the exposure of gender as a performative effect will destabilise the sex-gender matrix and therefore rattle the dominance of heterosexuality.\(^\text{19}\) Additionally, queer theory develops this argument by questioning if desire is necessarily circumscribed by the gender of the subject’s sexual object choice. Surely, factors other than gender may equally determine sexuality, such as a preference for a specific activity or sensation. Overall, the goal is the destabilisation of rigidity in sexual identity.

It is noteworthy that queer theory’s connection to the study of film has been evident from the moment of its inception. As de Lauretis and many of her contemporaries concede, queer cinematic images have been quick to respond to


\(^{18}\) See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

the transgressive capacities of film as a means for subversive reimagining; creating as they do a simulative, voyeuristic space for the restaging of an endless array of sexual meanings, pleasures, and interpretive strategies. These cinematic images help shape our understanding of whom and how we desire, and with whom and how we identify; they potentially open up spaces from which to develop erotic, sensual, multiple, and desirous subjectivities as they ‘trouble’ and ‘confuse’ the intelligibility of the sex/gender/desire matrix. They are moments, moreover, of narrative disruption, which destabilise heteronormativity, and the meanings and identities it engenders, by bringing to light all that heteronormative logic disavows.

In this sense, Sebastiane can be read as a queer, rather than specifically gay male, filmic and imagistic moment in its entirety. ‘Queer’ is here used as an interpretive tool to decipher the film, as a facilitative environment within which the spectator’s relationship with the film develops, and as an ontological property waiting to be uncovered within the film itself. This article seeks out the ways in which the film is constructed by interrogating and denaturalising its manifold assumptions, and by exposing its internal contradictions and reliance upon excluded properties to evoke a sense of unity. In applying this disruptive sense of queer to Sebastiane, and in valorising audience reception over authorial intent, it is argued that the film interrogates the looks and gazes that structure traditional (heteronormative) cinematic spectatorship, and rejects the binary categorisations of ‘gay’ and ‘straight.’ The film is not simply interested in replacing the traditional, hetero-centric gaze with a gay one (with men gazing upon other men, and openly fetishistic images of men’s bodies) but in instead queerly interrogating the gaze of traditional cinema, forcing the spectator to question how their own sexual subjectivity is interpolated by traditional (heteronormative) narrative film. Sebastiane does not always permit the invisible, empowered gaze of the spectator to objectify, classify, and...

regiment the bodies on the screen. In terms of aesthetics, this is at times expressed when Jarman effectively blinds the spectator – often by a dazzling light shone directly into the camera – in order to prevent the regimenting gaze of cinematic spectatorship.

Furthermore, the bodies of Sebastiane refuse to be classified within traditional sexual taxonomies of gay or straight. This is made evident through Sebastian’s sadomasochistic and narcissistic activities, which challenge the authority of the homo- and heterosexually dichotomous structure of the film’s self-contained male community. The sexually voracious soldier Max acts as a brutal guardian of the community’s heterosexual morals at the same time as he states “boys are okay for a quick one.” Jarman’s bodies not only interrogate notions of appropriate masculinity, but also investigate cultural clichés that conflate specific bodies with specific sexualities, as evident in the sadomasochistic power play between Severus and Sebastian, and Max’s obsessive concern to perform and to instate in others an aggressive hyper-masculinity at the same time as he involves himself in violent sexual horseplay. The result is that Sebastiane, with its strikingly queer disassembling of sexual dimorphism and its depiction of sadomasochistic and narcissistic sexuality, asks the spectator to not only reconsider how they look at specific male bodies, but also to question the very concept of the body as a prescription of sexuality and gender.

In the preceding explication of the relationship between film and queer theory, and religion and film, Sebastiane further evinces a cinematically queer subjectivity that is imbued with a heavy strain of sacrality and religious signification. Through these visual terms, Sebastiane thus attempts to revise religious history, opening up a space in traditional representation in order to locate queer subjectivity within a particular historical and religious nexus; in other words, ‘queering’ religion, early Christianity, and the hagiography of Saint Sebastian. It is here that our third methodological strand of correlation comes into play, that between religion and queer theory. An examination of the relationship between religion and queer theory, or the queering of religion, begins with an ‘add queers and stir’ formula, which investigates how religion operates in the lives of non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered persons.24 Close attention is also paid to the dynamics of gender and sexuality that particular religions often hide in plain sight, and the roles of religiosity in both inscribing

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and challenging the heteronormativity and dualistic conceptions of gender.\textsuperscript{25} In the case of \textit{Sebastiane}, this article posits the inscription of a sexually sadomasochistic and narcissistic subjectivity onto the body of Saint Sebastian, seeing in these sexual positionalities a sense of religiosity, eroticism, and queerness, and reading the Christian saint as “a paradigmatic queer.”\textsuperscript{26} It is to an exploration of the film’s excessive aesthetics of queer religiosity by examining Saint Sebastian’s representation in earlier iconography, and Jarman’s personal predilection to the re-reading of religious history, creating a space for a queer receptive reading of \textit{Sebastiane}, that this article now turns.

\textbf{The Making of a Gay Icon: The Aesthetic Tradition of Saint Sebastian}

In order to examine \textit{Sebastiane}’s sacral aesthetics of queer excess through sadomasochism, narcissism, and their relationship to Sebastian, an investigation must first occur into the centuries-long aesthetic tradition, which Jarman drew on, that envisaged Saint Sebastian as homoerotically sadomasochistic.\textsuperscript{27} This tradition began, as historians of Christian iconography have observed, from the fifteenth century on, when the Italian Renaissance more commonly rejected the depiction of Saint Sebastian in terms of a muscular and mature masculinity in favour of the alignments of an exquisite youth.\textsuperscript{28} The Roman soldier becomes a beardless adolescent of Apollonian beauty and a naked \textit{ephebe}, his martyred body providing a ready site on which

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\item \textsuperscript{25} See the essays found in Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (eds), \textit{Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology} (New York: Continuum, 1997).
\item \textsuperscript{26} Donald L. Boisvert, \textit{Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints} (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), p. 43.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Kaye, ‘Saint Sebastian as Contemporary Gay Martyr,’ p. 88.
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to convey a classicising male eros. Indeed, many artists proceeded to strip Sebastian of his vestments, stretch his lithe physique taut on a wooden pole, and graphically illustrate the body beautiful with its numerous perforations by arrows. The multiple artworks produced by Pietro Perugino towards the end of the fifteenth century, and that of Guido Reni at the beginning of the seventeenth, are here exemplary, representing Sebastian as near-naked, fragile, alone, bound to his post, and delicately pierced by arrows. His face, uplifted to the heavens, bespeaks of an ecstasy, a loss of self, erotic abandon, and the desire to be penetrated. During the course of the twentieth century, moreover, Saint Sebastian came to represent the formation and self-formation of the modern male homosexual in quite explicit sadomasochistic terms, where the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima configured his own erotic awakening and his very body in terms of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. In his autobiographical Confessions of a Mask, published in Japan in 1949, Mishima comes to date his gay awakening to the discovery of Guido Reni’s aforementioned artwork. In gruesome anticipation of his own suicide by seppuku in 1970, Mishima posed four years earlier for a series of photographs taken by Kishin Shinoyama entitled Death of a Man, where one such scene was a recreation of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom. In this portrait, Mishima copies closely the attire and gestures of Reni’s depiction, down to the location of the three arrows that pierce the flesh. In reading the iconography of the martyr’s sagittation as that of intense erotic pleasure in excruciating death, Mishima thus drew on Saint Sebastian as an aesthetic embodiment of his extreme, sadomasochistic homoeroticism.

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29 For the ways in which Renaissance artists used classical erotica to locate and articulate their own homoerotic discourse see Alastair J. L. Blanshard, Sex: Vice and Love from Antiquity to Modernity (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
30 Wyke, ‘Shared Sexualities,’ p. 236.
33 Black helpfully juxtaposes a reproduction of Reni’s painting with Mishima’s enactment of it in his The Aesthetics of Murder.
This, then, is the aesthetic tradition to which Jarman laid claim in his interpretation of Saint Sebastian as homoerotically masochistic. This article’s reading of Sebastian as queerly sadomasochistic, however, bespeaks of Sebastiane’s aesthetics of excess. To be sure, it is noteworthy that Sebastiane’s narrative arc is quite unlike that of Saint Sebastian’s classical hagiography. For instance, there is no hagiographical record of Sebastian’s exile, no sadistically lovelorn captain Severus, and Sebastian supposedly survived the arrows with which, at Sebastiane’s ending, he is shot dead. Most pertinent, however, Jarman emphatically omits the influence of women as found within the saint’s hagiographical account, creating an androcentric film arguably queerer in its visions of sexuality rather than the gender of non-male subjectivities. According to the largely apocryphal account dating from the mid-fifth century, Sebastian was allegedly a captain in Diocletian’s Palace Guard during the imperial persecution of Christians. The emperor eventually came to know of Sebastian’s Christianity and ordered him to be shot dead with arrows. Sebastian, however, is said to have survived this ordeal and, having been nursed back to full health by Saint Irene, sought out and confronted Diocletian. In a rage, the emperor once again ordered Sebastian’s execution, and Sebastian was beaten to death with clubs on the Palatine.

This martyrology, in Jarman’s vision, becomes the backdrop to an imaging of homoerotic desire and identity, the torment and martyrdom of Saint Sebastian comprising an indictment of the long-standing oppression of homosexuals in Britain, and the fixity of notions of gender that accompanied it. Jarman, in his later autobiographical writings, establishes a specific historical context for, and urgent purpose to, the making of Sebastiane: the film was designed to open to young British men a door into a world distinct from their

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own, where to be a homosexual was frequently to be a social outcast and, until as recently as 1967, a criminal. In filming Sebastiane, Jarman thus sought to read between the lines of religious history, hunting for forebears who might validate his existence as a homosexual in contemporary Britain, and examining whether particular configurations of historical space opened up possibilities for other kinds of socio-political and sexual regimes.

It is worthwhile here comparing Sebastiane with Pier Paolo Pasolini’s The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1964), a film to which Sebastiane is explicitly indebted for the way in which Jarman re-mythologises the life of the Christian martyr and re-imagines the outlines of the Christian faith. Both films were made by homosexual directors who regularly sought to re-eroticise a past whose chief features in standard histories are explained in terms other than the psycho-sexual. In The Gospel According to St. Matthew, Pasolini idealises a prevenient peasant culture, aided by the filmic location of the ancient South Italian town of Matera, by examining the origins of the religion that grew out of it. This particular approach to re-mythicising history is accomplished by balancing the elements of vérité style with the citation of religious iconography and art from the intervening two thousand years, including using the American folksinger Odetta’s recording of ‘Motherless Child’ and a Delta Blues song on the soundtrack. Furthermore, both Sebastiane and The Gospel According to St. Matthew examine the context of early Christianity where Sebastian tied to a stake pierced with arrows resembles Jesus Christ’s crucified body. For centuries there has been a deep tradition within Christianity that fixed its attentive and passionate gaze on the adorable body of Christ and, within the wide range of its boundaries, the desirable bodies of his saints, rendering Jesus

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38 Jim Ellis, Derek Jarman’s Angelic Conversations (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 32-36.
39 Peter Fraser, Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film (Westport: Praeger, 1998), pp. 75-76.
and Sebastian in some interpretations as homoerotic and queer. Unlike Jarman’s interpretation of Sebastian, however, Pasolini does not suggest that Jesus may be gay. Dedicated to the reforming Pope John XXIII, and revealing Pasolini’s Marxist leanings, his film rather stressed Jesus as a champion of the poor and enemy of the rich and powerful. Some critics, though, did find homosexual elements in his Jesus.

By thus attempting to remake the past, both Pasolini and Jarman were remaking the present, and allowing for the invention of new possibilities for living. This other world that Jarman spoke of in Sebastiane, cinematically conceived as a stunning series of tableaux vivants infused with ethereal soundscapes and Latin dialogue, is here interpreted as sanctifying sadomasochism and narcissism in their queer form, and imparting these positionalities onto the body of Sebastian. Elucidating the manner in which this reveals Sebastiane as harbouring an excessive aesthetic of sexual sacrality, reverential self-abolition, and queer desire, is this article’s next task.

**Narcissism and Sadomasochism Sanctified: Aesthetics of Queer Excess in Jarman’s Sebastiane**

Gay male sadomasochism harbours a number of visual and psychological qualities, such as nakedness, submission, loss of subjectivity, and bodily signs of ecstasy and climax. Utilising these particular qualities of sadomasochism, Sebastian’s martyrdom in Sebastiane has been interpreted in this article through a queer lens. In an analysis of how film critics have come to interpret the sadomasochistic representation of homosexuality in, for example, Jean Genet’s Un Chant d’Amour (1950), Richard Dyer noted that, under the influence of the writings of Michel Foucault, sadomasochism is no longer understood as an allegory for, or evidence of, the distasteful state oppression of gay men. Instead, it comes to represent a discourse on the rituals of sexual pleasure. According to this account, through the dynamic interplay of

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40 Kiely, *Blessed and Beautiful*, p. 130.
domination and submission and the allocation of heavily marked gender roles to the penetrator and penetrated, sadomasochism can explore and interrogate the social relations of power that are at the essence of sexuality and hence dismantle utopian visions of caring, romantic intimacies. Gay male sadomasochism can thus both reclaim conventional masculinity and, perhaps more importantly, empower and render appealing the passivity and self-renunciation traditionally marked as both feminine and demeaning. This particular interpretation has in turn influenced the views of critics such as Michael O’Pray, who merely interpret the associations of sex and ritual violence in *Sebastiane* as a covert discourse on sadomasochism’s pleasures. In overlooking Sebastian’s martyrdom as a dramatisation, through pain, of the potential erotic ecstasy of self-renunciation, these views harbour the potential for greater sophistication and complexity through their queerly religious receptivity. Gay male masochists are queer specimens, distressing cultural paradigms of masculinity and passivity; as bodies to be gazed upon, they passively expose their subjectivity as coming from the Other. Moreover, the enhanced physical, visual, and aural sensations of gay sadomasochistic sex allow for a transportation of self, or the awareness of self, beyond everyday existence; a spiritual and ecstatic revelation. According to Leo Bersani, gay sadomasochism “advertises the risk of the sexual self as the risk of self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents jouissance as a mode of ascesis.” This confirms the close relationship of religion to sadomasochistic homoeroticism in its queer form, further evinced by all sorts of initiatory, ascetic, and mystical ritual practices, such as circumcision, sub-incision, flagellation, fasting, abstinence, and sacrifice. Furthermore, the belief that Christians should endure ‘pain’ in

45 O’Pray, *Derek Jarman*, pp. 89-93.
the earthly life of flesh in order to receive the ‘pleasure’ of eternal salvation is essentially the masochistic trope of pleasure in pain.\textsuperscript{50} Sebastian has often been depicted as emblematic of this pleasure and pain dichotomy within Christian martyrdom. His body may be wracked with arrows, blood streaming from the wounds, but his face is uplifted to heaven, transcending the pain in a moment of serene bliss.

These connections between gay male sadomasochism and queer sacrality come to be excessively yet skilfully displayed in Jarman’s remarkable work of art. Throughout \textit{Sebastiane}, Sebastian demands ever-increasing masochistic thrills by orchestrating events to ensure that he gets them, provoking his punishments by not reciprocating his captain Severus’ love for him. Over time, he is flogged, hung from his wrists, staked out in the sun, and burned with a candle before sand is rubbed into his wounds.\textsuperscript{51} The film sexualises these activities through the editing that juxtaposes Sebastian’s flagellation with the other soldiers drooling over a painting of a female nude. Sebastian does not seem to find these tortures disagreeable, but erotic. Indeed, the final scene shows Sebastian’s execution with an implication of religious ecstasy that has an obviously sexual redolence. There is considerable use of long, medium, and close-up shots of Sebastian’s penetrated body amid the bare and barren landscape, the soundtrack consisting of nothing more than the sighing of the wind. There is no whirr of arrows through the air, no thud of impact, no cries of pain, and no voices of the soldiers. The absence of synchronised sound means that it is sometimes difficult to correlate the shooting of an arrow with any immediate physical consequence, though closer attention reveals that all seven arrows do indeed find their target. The final, fatal shot through the neck comes from Sebastian’s friend Justin in Christ-like garb who, despite being near death himself, is forced by Max to help hold the bow. As he is impaled with arrows, the traditional slow motion of cinematic eroticism reveals a close-up of Sebastian’s face, showing erotic pleasure as he is penetrated each time with an arrow. A long shot of Sebastian’s body further depicts his semi-erect penis. Jarman’s original script (not the filmed version) makes this moment even more explicit. “The soldiers fire arrows one by one. One of the arrows goes through Sebastian’s neck. It is sexual and ecstatic for Sebastian. He has a hard-on.”\textsuperscript{52} Sebastian, his eyes raised to heaven in sublime ex-stasis, surrenders to something radically different and other, his limits of

\textsuperscript{50} Richardson, \textit{The Queer Cinema of Derek Jarman}, p. 103.
\textsuperscript{51} Pencak, \textit{The Films of Derek Jarman}, p. 50.
sensual profusion exploding in supreme masochistic pleasure.\(^{53}\) The gaze of the camera, moreover, which shifts from Sebastian’s face, his body, his proxemic relationship to the surrounding environment, and the movements of his fellow soldiers as they shoot their arrows into him, becomes metonymic for a divine process. As spectators, we come to be absorbed into the film through its cinematography and soundscape, submissively and subjectively positioned, approaching the artwork and the beautiful, broken body of Sebastian as a desiring worshipper. Drawing on Schrader’s treatment of transcendentalism in film, we are compelled towards a spiritual experience, undertaking an act of worship through directing a meditative and potentially erotic focus at the body of Sebastian. This visual simulation of a voyeuristic, albeit sadomasochistic space for the renegotiation of our sexual and religious subjectivities thus reveals *Sebastiane* as a queer religious work of art, its cinematic experience of queer excess analogous to reverential process.

The place of narcissism in *Sebastiane* also harbours a similar role in its attempt to present an aesthetic of queer sacrality, functioning as soon as the filmic narrative shifts from the imperial court to the imperial outpost. As day dawns over Sebastian, he begins to wash himself in the courtyard of the barracks whilst unknowingly watched at a distance by Severus. The commander’s lustful gaze is repeatedly counter-cut with slowed-down shots in extreme close-up of Sebastian’s naked body, so that its fragmented parts move in a languorous and sensual slow-motion in the eye of the film’s internal – and by extension, external – beholder.\(^{54}\) The English subtitles which, at this point, overlay Sebastian’s glistening body on the screen and translate his voiced-over Latin hymn to the god of the sun, detail nature’s amorous response to the god’s awakening and thus suggest an identification between the latter’s stimulating body and that of the awakened Sebastian: “Hail, messenger of dawn. The young God has arisen… The reeds sigh when the young God rises. The waters sing when the young God rises. Mankind awakens from sleep. The scarlet cock struts when the young God rises.” The repeated shots of the watching Captain seem to establish his viewpoint as dominant and Sebastian as the object of his (and our) desiring gaze. As viewers, we come to be implicated in Severus’ voyeuristic gazing at this beautiful young man, forcing us to sort through our own desiring identifications with the cinematic images before us, whatever our gender and sexuality. The voice-over in this scene, however, consists of

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\(^{53}\) Wymer, *Derek Jarman*, p. 43; Richardson, *The Queer Cinema of Derek Jarman*, p. 104.

Sebastian’s address to his God, making him the ecstatic subject of desire, the sensuality with which he runs his hands over his body narcissistically dissolving the subject-object distinction.55

Sebastian’s archetypal pose was as a Romantic icon, an image of radical isolationism, which hinted at an irretrievable homoerotic identity.56 Throughout the film, Sebastian is very much the outsider, marked off from the other soldiers by his religion, frequently seeking to be alone. His intense inner life is more important to him than the company of others, even when they offer friendship or love rather than just rough camaraderie. Julia Kristeva, in attempting to discern Sebastian’s unique erotic, existential quality, has suggestively conjured up the neologistic category of the “soulosexual” – a man, she writes, who will “undergo martyrdom in order to maintain the fantasy that there exists a power, as well as its masochistic obverse – passivisation, total ‘feminisation’.”57 In this sense, Jarman’s representation of Sebastian is indeed that of a ‘soulosexual’ which, in its disassembling of the body as a prescription of sexuality and gender, comes to be read here as markedly queer.

Sebastian’s queer ‘soulosexuality’ is further emphasised in a pastiche of the Narcissus pose in which Sebastian lounges on a rock while peering down at his reflection in the water. This scene is juxtaposed with the other soldiers exchanging bawdy jokes while tussling in the water, thus inflecting the image with queer sexuality. Sebastian, in stark contrast to his bawdy companions, rests meditatively on the rock and offers praise to the beauty of his god’s body. The camera, however, cuts from Sebastian to his pool reflection showing that there is no god’s body in evidence in this sequence, only Sebastian’s narcissistic, ‘soulosexual’ pleasure and the sun’s reflection.58 Sebastian comes to be identified with Jesus; by worshipping Christ, rendered in terms of his own exquisite body, he is worshipping himself. Sebastian’s continual lauding of Christ’s beautiful body is always juxtaposed with the visual image of Sebastian either enjoying his own flesh or narcissistically gazing upon his own or the sun’s reflection. Not only does his dark beard impart him with a Christ-like appearance; his friend Justin, himself in love with Sebastian and covered in Christological garb, shoots the arrow with which he is fatally injured.

55 Wymer, Derek Jarman, pp. 40-41.
Sebastiane ultimately reveals how Christianity, for Sebastian, is devoid of spiritual or intellectual content. He is lost in ecstatic contemplation of self and sun, both of which he narcissistically believes to be personified in his own body. In his single-minded worship of self, sun, and Christ, Sebastian symbolises traditional Christianity’s unnatural rejection of a diverse, pleasurable world in favour of absorption with personal salvation and the penchant to mock, pity, or relegate to Hell those who failed to share their asceticism. Transcendence is achieved only through self-absorption; in this, Christianity and Saint Sebastian are interpreted in their sacrality as excessively queer.

Conclusion
Overall, it has been argued that Sebastiane presents Saint Sebastian not only with a queer sexuality ranging from autoeroticism to extreme sadomasochism, but a visual world for the queer spirit. Jarman depicts Sebastian as the representation of a sadomasochistic and narcissistic connection between beauty, pain, and ecstasy, refracted through a lens of religiosity, and the sexual production of sanctity. Interpreted as harbouring an excessive aesthetic of sexual sacrality, reverential self-abolition, and queer desire, this article posits Jarman’s film as a queer and religious work of art. Sebastiane is neither simply a queer film nor a film with religious content; it is a reverentially sublime rendition of a Christian saint and martyr, its cinematic experience of queer nimietly analogous to an act of worship. Its filmic images, moreover, create a space from which to develop erotic and religious subjectivities destabilised from heteronormativity and the institutionally sacred. Ultimately, a mere description of Sebastiane performs a great disservice to the affect that the film has on the viewer: a feeling of watching something tremendously beautiful, brilliantly executed, indescribably erotic, and profoundly moving.