

Making Manifest: Viewing Wittgenstein's Philosophy through Derek Jarman's Lens

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In this paper I consider the use of Derek Jarman's film *Wittgenstein* as a resource for those writing, thinking about, and teaching Wittgenstein's philosophy. I explain how the deeply Wittgensteinian character of Jarman's film is powerful in making manifest central Wittgensteinian themes. I begin by considering the role of biography in philosophical scholarship, arguing that it has a particularly important role in the case of Wittgenstein. In the second section of the paper I describe the form and content of the film and something of the process of its production. The third section discusses the strategy I employ when using the film in class. In the fourth section I develop the claim that the film is a Wittgensteinian one, discussing the ways in which it makes Wittgensteinian themes visible, showing them rather than saying them. By manifesting Wittgenstein's crucial distinction between saying (telling) and showing (manifestation), the film guides its audience into a way of seeing and thinking that is essential to understanding Wittgenstein's later approach to questions about language and its relationship to reality. In so doing, the film functions as a valuable text for scholars and teachers of Wittgenstein's philosophy.

The Personal is Philosophical

Traditionally we tend not to think very much about a philosopher's biography. Arguments and ideas matter rather than their authors and proponents. Analytic philosophy in particular disdains the practice of situating ideas in their social, historical, and political contexts, remaining attached to the notion of the philosopher and his or her ideas as somehow transcending located embodiment. As an undergraduate I was given nuggets of detail from the narratives of philosophical lives—Kant liked to walk the streets of Königsberg, Descartes was

not an early morning person, Hume was partial to a game of backgammon—but, outside of the history of philosophy, the idea that it might be helpful to our understanding to grasp how “[the] work came from the man [or woman]”¹ was, and still tends to be, absent from philosophical methodology and from the philosophy teacher’s pedagogy. My experiences of using Jarman’s film as a philo-biographical text in the undergraduate classroom demonstrate that it can be beneficial both for students’ understanding of Wittgenstein’s work and their motivation to study it. Indeed, in responses to a questionnaire about their learning experiences, students commonly remark that the film has increased their motivation for and interest in studying Wittgenstein’s philosophy. This perception is borne out by their grades for essay assignments, the average for which has increased by five percentage points since I began using the film in the manner I describe below.

By bringing the philosopher to life, the film brings his work to life, not only by means of its explicit articulation by the voice of the filmic characterization of Wittgenstein but also by the way in which the very form of the film shows Wittgenstein’s views about the relation between language and the world and about the pursuit and aims of philosophical enquiry, among other things. For students in particular, Wittgenstein’s philosophy is articulated in a way that cannot be achieved from reading the relevant texts in the context of a relatively short module in a senior undergraduate course.²

It is particularly appropriate to draw together the personal and the philosophical when considering Wittgenstein’s work; for his work was in a certain sense, autobiographical. He considered philosophy to begin with confession, to be a struggle of the person.³ He writes, for instance,

Working in philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more a working on oneself. On one’s own interpretation. On one’s way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.) (*Culture and Value*, 16e)

From the outset, the film captures this way of thinking of and of doing philosophy; dramatising the Weinigerian quote which preface’s Monk’s biography, the film’s central character demanding of himself as he rows across a moonlit Norwegian fjord,

How can I be a logician before I’m a human being? The most important thing is to settle accounts with myself. (Jarman and Butler script for the film *Wittgenstein*, 182)

This angst, derived from the deep need to feel at one with oneself, pervades the film just as it does Wittgenstein’s philosophical work. Wittgenstein’s biographer, Ray Monk, claims that the *Philosophical Investigations* “more, perhaps than any other philosophical classic” makes demands on a reader’s involvement to the extent that in the

absence of such involvement, it will be almost impossible to grasp what Wittgenstein wants to say.⁴ The reader needs, Monk continues, to share Wittgenstein's confusions, those confusions must be (or become) the reader's confusions. Even if we don't care as deeply and obsessively as Wittgenstein did, we must at least see why these matters are worth caring so deeply about. Jarman's film, then, functions as an entrance and a guide to Wittgenstein's preoccupations and confusions. By setting them and him in a rich dramatic context, the film enables us to engage at a level at which we can achieve the necessary personal involvement.⁵

Wittgenstein the Movie

The film was originally commissioned as part of a series of TV productions about the life and work of philosophers, and a screenplay and script were written by Oxford literature scholar, Terry Eagleton. This was adapted by Jarman and Ken Butler, his associate director, when the British Film Institute made funds available for the production of a 75-minute feature film. Whereas the television film envisaged by Eagleton would have adopted a more conventional and naturalistic style with its interior and exterior scenes shot in Cambridge, Jarman's aesthetic approach coupled with the constraints of producing a feature film on a budget of just £300,000 (a familiar scenario for Jarman and his team), meant that the screenplay and script were changed to enable the entire film to be shot in the studio. These constraints contribute to a film that is characteristically Wittgensteinian in form and content.⁶

Although the film, like Monk's biography, aims to show how the philosophical work comes from the man, it does so as a drama, not as a documentary nor as a drama-documentary, and in fact resembles a stage play in form and appearance. Inevitably, then, Jarman's Wittgenstein is a dramatic character, not the documented figure that might be presented had someone come across old home movie footage of Wittgenstein. It is thus important that students of Wittgenstein's work do not become too much in thrall to the cinematic personage; that they do not, as one put it, fall prey to a "cult of the personality" and thereby lose their ability to critically analyse Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas. The personage is, however, very closely traced from the portrait of Wittgenstein that is finely detailed in Monk's widely acclaimed and frequently cited biography. While remaining a dramatic construction, it is, as far as one can tell, a truthful portrayal that neither caricatures nor understates its subject.⁷

Although basically chronological—its pretitile sequence displays a schoolboy Wittgenstein at a writing desk recounting his family background; its final scenes take place at Wittgenstein's deathbed—the

film does at times play with the details of his life and work. This is only to be expected, for one must bear in mind and emphasise to one's students that Jarman's task was to "turn philosophy into cinema."⁸ For example, the well-documented incident in which Italian economist Pietro Sraffa demonstrates the Neapolitan gesture of brushing one's chin with the fingertips that (apparently) motivated Wittgenstein to give more thought to the theory of meaning developed in his *Tractatus* is portrayed in the film by the dramatic device of three young women making contemptuous V-signs at Wittgenstein in the street. The incident serves Jarman's aim of showing Wittgenstein as an outsider within Cambridge academic society, but its philosophical import is not lost. What Wittgenstein viewed as the need for a theory of meaning to take an anthropological stance—looking at what language users say and do with language, closing the gap between theory and practices—is perspicuously demonstrated, as is Wittgenstein's likely despair at finding that "I have spent most of my life groping down a blind alley."⁹

The play-like feel and appearance of the film derives largely from Jarman's use of colour against a black drape. Where Wittgenstein is dressed always in more or less the same grey academic garb, the Cambridge characters shine out against the black, dressed in brightly coloured clothes—a scarlet cloak for Russell, purple waistcoat for Keynes, a green ostrich feather hat for Russell's lover, Lady Ottoline Morell. As Jarman puts it in his introduction to the film script, "Grey Ludwig and dotty Cambridge, friends in High Key."¹⁰ Whilst the entire film is suffused with Wittgensteinian ideas, it also includes many explicitly philosophical moments. These divide into roughly two types, reflecting some of the variety of devices Wittgenstein used in the practice of philosophy: seminar scenes in which Wittgenstein the teacher develops his ideas and students and colleagues endeavour to engage with them, and reminders which Jarman assembles for the audience, similar to the devices Wittgenstein's writing contains, that guide the reader's recollection of the pretheoretical use and therefore meaning of language.

The Class

When I enter the first class of the course pushing a video trolley there is always a show of surprise (and relief?) from the students. In their two or three years of philosophy classes this is often the first time they've been shown a film. When I first used the film it served merely as an introductory piece shown at the beginning of the Wittgenstein module to provide a 'background' to the philosophy we were about to study. (At this stage students have been advised to begin reading the *Philosophical Investigations*.) I would try to make a point

of referring back to scenes in the film during the course of our consideration of Wittgenstein's work, but the film was not integral to the course. With subsequent screenings of the film, however, I became more convinced of the film's Wittgensteinian form and content and of its effectiveness as a way into an understanding of some major themes in Wittgenstein's work, particularly his distinction between saying and showing and its effect on his later approach to language and his views about how philosophical enquiry should be approached.

The strategy I now use is to show the film in its entirety at the first class and follow it by a discussion of the film. I also hand out a questionnaire which gauges students' reactions to and opinions about the film as a learning tool. Some of this can be completed after the first viewing, but the remainder, which reflects on learning experiences, must be completed at the end of the course. I have found that it is important to warn students at this stage (1) that the film does not follow the cinematic conventions to which they are probably accustomed¹¹ and (2) that Jarman is working within and seeking to develop a gay aesthetic. I want them to be aware of this, but not to dwell on it, rather to think about the way in which Jarman shows how Wittgenstein's sexuality (and his difficult relationship with it) contribute to his position as an outsider within the Cambridge philosophical community. I also emphasise that watching the film is not a substitute for reading the printed philosophical texts, rather it is supposed to be complementary and motivational.

In subsequent classes I use a tape I have made of short takes from the film. These comprise the seminar scenes and the assemblage of reminders. As we discuss and analyse Wittgenstein's theories about linguistic meaning and practice, language's relationship with the world, privacy and the nature and purpose of philosophy, I show the clips at appropriate points as reminders and reinforcement but also as visual manifestations of the ideas, which bring alive the words in our texts. Each clip may be shown six or seven times during the course of our six seminars. They provide reinforcement of and familiarity with Wittgenstein's ideas and enable me to use Wittgenstein himself (or at least, Jarman's Wittgenstein) as the teacher in his own seminars, defending and developing his claims and themes.

A Wittgensteinian Film

The austere, pared-down form of Jarman's film mirrors that of Wittgenstein's published works (and unpublished remarks and notes), assembling fragments of a philosophical life in the same way that Wittgenstein himself assembled fragments of philosophical thought and constructing tableaux just as Wittgenstein constructed experiments—the builders, the apples, the beetle in the box—by means of

which he and his addressees could explore the bumps and imperfections of our linguistic practices, eventually reaching the point where we achieve an awareness of the ways in which we are prone to language's "bewitchment."¹² Jarman writes that he used the black background because it "annihilates the decorative"¹³ and this is in turn reminiscent of Wittgenstein's approach not only to writing philosophy but also to the designs (for every detail of which he took responsibility, from the structure itself to the window catches) for his sister Hermine's house in Vienna, a house that was a monument to austere modernistic disdain for decorative embellishment. Also significant is a commonality in Jarman's and Wittgenstein's aims. Jarman's goal as a filmmaker was similar to that of Wittgenstein as a philosopher, that of "reminding us, even teaching us, how better to see";¹⁴ of shifting the light so that we can see things differently.

The film's seminar scenes function as conversations in which Wittgenstein's ideas are drawn out through interaction with students, colleagues, and himself. This device, while not entirely true to Wittgenstein's actual teaching style,¹⁵ serves to manifest the frequently dialogical, and hence inclusive, nature of Wittgenstein's philosophical discourse. Throughout his remarks and investigations he makes explicit use of an interlocutory voice which articulates the theories and pictures that have tended to hold us captive and from which we should, according to Wittgenstein, seek therapeutic relief. Moreover, as well as believing that philosophy must begin from personal confession, Wittgenstein conceived of and pursued much of his work as a dialogue with himself. These scenes, then, demonstrate the style and nature of Wittgenstein's philosophising and this is important given that Wittgenstein placed so much emphasis upon how and why philosophy should be undertaken. This process of drawing out ideas has the effect of bringing them into view, of making them perspicuous; and bringing into focus the ordinary that already lies before us is, for Wittgenstein, the purpose and point of philosophy. Thus the film does for our understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas and of Wittgenstein himself what Wittgenstein believes philosophy should do for our understanding of truths about reality and our relation with it (among other themes).

The strongest example of this cinematic reflection on dialogue as philosophical process occurs in the final seminar scene in which the Maynard Keynes character engages Wittgenstein in a dialogical explanation of his work. This exchange, during the course of which Keynes extracts from Wittgenstein an account of his transition from the Tractarian position regarding the relation of linguistic practices to the world to the anthropological stance of the later work, provides a synopsis of central themes in Wittgenstein's work, and thus serves

as a miniature philosophical portrait for the audience: Wittgenstein's own *Gospel in Brief*.

The film's assemblage of reminders serves as a further visual manifestation of Wittgenstein's reflections about philosophy and of his many experimentations with philosophical practice. Jarman weaves in short scenes which include: the young Wittgenstein beside a red post box which "tells me I am in England"; signposts reminding us of the analogy Wittgenstein is fond of using to show his conception of the practice of following linguistic rules; a game of dominoes to remind us of Wittgenstein's language games metaphor. On one level, these visual reminders help us by giving life to Wittgenstein's own devices. On another they serve to manifest a conception of philosophical reflection (and education) as a process of recollection of submerged knowledge, a theme that is also present in Wittgenstein's work.¹⁶ He remarks for instance,

To study philosophy is really to recollect. We remind ourselves that we really use words in this way. ("Big Typescript" [unpublished *Nachlass*], 419)

One of the strongest aspects of Jarman's philosophical filmmaking and a source of his success in "turn[ing] philosophy into cinema" is his sensitivity to the tensions within both the life and the work that came from it, tensions which perhaps find some resolution towards the end of Wittgenstein's life and the end of his work.¹⁷ Jarman's film displays this theme most directly in scenes late in the film which make perspicuous the role of these tensions in Wittgenstein's life and philosophy. Keynes, sitting beside Wittgenstein on his deathbed, tells a story echoing *Philosophical Investigations* §107 of a very clever young man who managed to achieve his dream of reducing the world to pure logic¹⁸:

A world purged of imperfection and indeterminacy. Countless acres of gleaming ice stretching to the horizon.

Attempting to explore his creation but forgetting about friction, the clever young man falls flat on his back. He despaired that the perfect world he had created was uninhabitable. With the wisdom of age, however, he comes to realise that

roughness and ambiguity aren't imperfections. They're what make the world turn.

Despite the liberation in seeing that this is just the way things are, the wise old man remains homesick for the radiance, absoluteness, and relentlessness of the ice. And so he remains

marooned between earth and ice, at home in neither. And this was the cause of all his grief. (Jarman/Butler Script for *Wittgenstein*, 142)

Certainly Wittgenstein's inability to feel at home in the perfect Tractarian ice or the imperfect earth of his later work was a source

of grief in his life, but it had more positive effects in terms of his work. Indeed, Wittgenstein felt that despite the sense of alienation he felt there, he actually did his best work in Cambridge.¹⁹ The wise old man has seen that there are no *sui generis* philosophical problems that will be solved by the discovery of the essence of the objects of our enquiries. Yet he is still unable to bring himself to give up philosophy. His later work makes appeal to the ordinary, the rough ground of the everyday, yet philosophy and the philosophical life it brings with it is (and was even more so in Cambridge in the earlier half of the last century) extraordinary. Even if we consider that to engage philosophically is to continue the questioning that began in childhood, and thus that doing so is unexceptional in that sense, we must surely acknowledge that a life of such engagement is far from ordinary.

The idea that the goal of philosophy should be that of bringing words back home parallels Wittgenstein's own struggle to feel at home. Jarman's film, itself the reflection of his own sense of being other and of a search for a place in the world that would count as "home,"²⁰ makes these tensions visible through its tableaux of Wittgenstein's experiences and its largely melancholy mood. Wittgenstein remained on the margins of all the milieux in which he might have found solace. He leaves his bourgeois Viennese family unable to bear turn-of-the-century Vienna. Signing up for the Austrian infantry in the Great War, he's treated at best with suspicion by his comrades, an eccentric who insists on being sent to the front time after time. He returns to Cambridge where he's lauded as the next great philosopher, yet he's terrified that his work is misunderstood. He cannot bear the environment of college dinners and societies such as the Apostles where his otherness is satirised and the self-congratulatory behaviour irks him.²¹ The *Anschluss* forced Wittgenstein to exile himself from Austria; for the Nuremburg Laws made him a German Jew and therefore potentially subject to the terror of the death camps. Faced with the alternatives of being a German Jew or a British university lecturer, Wittgenstein has no choice but to take up a position in Cambridge. This decision makes it impossible for him to return to Austria and he thus considers himself to have abandoned both his family and his historical, if not his natural, home.

In all of these relationships, then, Wittgenstein occupies the position of the outsider within. He is accepted as a philosopher (if not well understood) and therefore able to participate in Cambridge philosophical discourses, but his otherness as foreign, gay, Jewish, and troubled means that he remains on the margins. But this places him in a position from which he can understand and participate in those language games, yet also in a unique position from which to critically reflect upon them without threatening anything in which he has staked his identity. It is only because he remained within the

language game that was Cambridge philosophy that he experiences alienation from it. Similarly, he is exiled from his native Austria, unable to fully acknowledge and make peace with his sexuality, and distanced from his Jewishness, and is thus included in yet excludes himself from these forms of life.

In his introduction to the film script, "This is Not a Film of Ludwig Wittgenstein," Jarman remarks,

Invisible worlds, brought into focus. Galileo's telescope, Newton's prism.
The glass. Negative. The lens of the Hubble telescope and the camera lens.
"This is not . . ." (66)

and his film shines and directs light into and onto Wittgenstein's life and work, making manifest the relationships between them. It is by bringing Wittgenstein, a man who liked to escape into the darkness of a cinema, into the light, that Jarman brings off the challenge of making man and ideas visible.

Notes

1. Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991), xviii. Monk is explaining the motivations for his biography of Wittgenstein. He says that the aim of his book is to explain what Wittgenstein's philosophical work "has to do with *him*," to make connections between Wittgenstein's spiritual and ethical preoccupations and his philosophical concerns.

2. A study of sections of *Philosophical Investigations* takes up approximately one quarter of a course in which students also study Frege, Russell, Kripke, Putnam, Quine, and Davidson.

3. Monk, *Wittgenstein*, 366. Wittgenstein's use of a citation from Augustine's *Confessions* as the opening passage of the *Philosophical Investigations* can be understood as an attempt to position the work within a confessional strand in our philosophical tradition.

4. *Ibid.*

5. In their responses to my questionnaire about their learning experiences, a majority of students (1998-99) found the film at least "helpful" in developing their understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas.

6. It should be noted that the results of this transition from Eagleton's script to Jarman's film were not wholeheartedly applauded by Eagleton, who was disappointed by many of Jarman's changes, particularly the attention paid to Wittgenstein's more whimsical remarks. As Ray Monk subsequently pointed out in a response to Eagleton's comments, much of the "silliness," including the device of the Martian, originates in Wittgenstein's own remarks. For the Eagleton/Monk exchange, see *The Guardian* (London), 18 and 19 March 1993.

7. Quoting Jarman's diary, his biographer, Tony Peake, tells of a Cambridge audience of "students and remaining Wittgensteinians" who "wholeheartedly applaud[ed]." It is not noted whether any of the "Wittgensteinians" were Wittgenstein's contemporaries or students. Peake, *Derek Jarman* (London: Little Brown, 1999), 515.

8. This quotation from Jarman's as-yet-unpublished diary appears in Peake, *Derek Jarman*, 508.

9. D. Jarman and K. Butler, *Script for Wittgenstein* (London: BFI, 1993), 112.

10. Jarman, "This is not a Film of Ludwig Wittgenstein," in *Script*, 65. It is interesting to note that here and elsewhere in his published writings Jarman, like Wittgenstein, writes in aphorisms.

11. I avoid making unfounded assumptions about the viewing tastes of each cohort by first asking them about the last film they saw. Examples of their viewing in the past year included *The Matrix*, *The Other Sister*, *Star Trek: Return of the Jedi*, and *Gone with the Wind*.

12. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §109

13. Jarman, "This is Not a Film of Ludwig Wittgenstein," 67.

14. Peake, *Derek Jarman*, 326.

15. One of Wittgenstein's former pupils, Alice Ambrose, gives an account of Wittgenstein as a teacher in her "Moore and Wittgenstein as Teachers," *Teaching Philosophy* 12 (June 1989).

16. Although I have drawn attention to both the dialogical nature of much of Wittgenstein's work and his conception of philosophy as recollection, I do not mean to suggest that these dialogical moments follow a Socratic pattern, nor that the notion of recollection in play here is the Socratic one. Indeed, Wittgenstein had a rather negative view of these Socratic devices. See, for example, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 14e.

17. Norman Malcolm recounts that Wittgenstein's last words were, "Tell them I've had a wonderful life!" Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 81.

18. At §107 Wittgenstein writes,

the more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable, the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!

19. Monk, *Wittgenstein*, 395.

20. Interestingly, Jarman felt that this film, more than some of his others, managed to manifest most clearly his own state of being. In his diary he writes: "[T]he balance I have achieved in *Wittgenstein* much more clearly reflects my situation," quoted in Peake, *Derek Jarman*, 515. *Wittgenstein* (the last of Jarman's films to involve visual images), then, represents a final homecoming for Jarman himself.

21. Julian Bell's satirical poem about Wittgenstein is reproduced in Monk, *Wittgenstein*, 256, and also appears in Jarman's film. See Jarman and Butler, *Script*, 110–2.

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