

**The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague  
FILM AND TELEVISION SCHOOL**

Audiovisual studies

**BACHELOR'S THESIS**

**Christianity and Occultism in Queer Experimental  
Cinematography**

**Adrián Kriška**

Thesis supervisor: doc. Mgr. David Kořínek

Awarded academic title: BcA.

Prague, August 2023

**Akademie múzických umění v Praze  
Filmová a televizní fakulta**

Centrum audiovizuálních studií

**BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE**

**Křesťanství a Okultismus v Queer experimentální  
kinematografii**

**Adrián Kriška**

Vedoucí práce: doc. Mgr. David Kořínek

Přidělovaný akademický titul: BcA.

Praha, august 2023

## **Declaration**

I declare that my bachelor's thesis entitled

Christianity and Occultism in Queer Experimental Film

was developed independently under the professional guidance of the supervisor and using only the literature and sources mentioned and that the work was not used in the framework of another university study or to obtain a different or the same degree. I agree that the work will be published in accordance with the law and internal regulations of AMU.

Prague, 10.8.2023

Adrián Kriška

## Thanks to

David Kořínek for his empathetic and personal approach to my work. Our shared interest in music such as *Coil* and *Throbbing Gristle* made this thesis more special and personal for both of us. He helped me to shape my work and aim it in the right direction. Then, I would like to thank Martin Blažíček for his lessons on experimental film, which introduced me to the authors and art that is significant in this thesis. The lessons were very inspiring for me and his underground approach to cinematography and his interpretations enriched me a lot. I would like to thank Marie Lukáčová, who is a supervisor of my practical thesis, for her mentoring and shaping my perception around intersectional feminism, queerness and visuality. Last, I would like to thank Veronika Klusáková for being the opponent of this thesis that she has accepted with joy because of her interest in this topic. And special thanks to Sanjin Nesimi, my partner who supported me mentally with finishing the thesis.

## **Abstract**

The aim of the work is to examine and re-evaluate the relationship between christianity and occultism in queer experimental cinematography and question coexistence of these two supposedly contradictory subjects. The work will try to define what *queer experimental cinematography* precisely is, and in order to achieve this result it will analyse three audiovisual works from authors connected with queer experimental film, starting with one the earliest homoerotic film *Fireworks* by *Kenneth Anger*, through *Derek Jarman's Sebastiane* and *In the Shadow of the Sun* and concluding with *A Fire in My Belly* by *David Wojnarowicz*. *The thesis will seek its parallels and answers via feminist, queer and leftist perspectives based also on personal observations.*

## **Abstrakt**

Cílem práce je prozkoumat a přehodnotit vztah mezi křesťanstvím a okultismem v queer experimentální kinematografii a zpochybnit koexistenci těchto dvou údajně protichůdných subjektů. Práce se pokusí definovat, co přesně je queer experimentální kinematografie, a za účelem dosažení tohoto výsledku bude analyzovat tři audiovizuální díla od autorů spjatých s queer experimentálním filmem, počínaje jedním z nejstarších homoerotických filmů "Fireworks" od Kennetha Angera skrze "Sebastiane" a "In the Shadow of the Sun" od Dereka Jarmana a na závěr "A Fire in My Belly" od Davida Wojnarowicze. Práce bude hledat její paralely a odpovědi prostřednictvím feministických, queer a levicových perspektiv založených také na osobním pozorování.

# Contents

Introduction	1
1 Queer cinematography from 1950s until 1990s	2
1.1 Queer experimental cinematography	4
1.2 History of queer experimental cinematography from 1950s until 1990s	5
2 Unveiling the Intersection of Queerness, Christianity and state	7
2.1 Homosexuality as a sin in pop-culture	7
2.2 Judith Butler and gender performativity	9
3 Explanation of occultism, its parallel with queerness and relevance in artistic contexts	10
3.1 Foucault: On the Monstrosity of the Hermaphroditic Body	11
3.2 Analysis of Fireworks by Kenneth Anger and its influence by Aleister Crowley	11
4 Modern Nature	14
4.1 Queering christianity	15
4.2 In the shadow of the Sun and occultism	16
5 The significance of symbolism and metaphor	17
5.1 The significance of symbolism and metaphor on an analysis of <i>A Fire in My Belly</i> by David Wojnarowicz	17
Conclusion	19
Bibliography	21

# Introduction

My interest in queer experimental cinematography predominantly arose in my first academic year of the Film Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU). Deviation from the dominant norms, constructs and a mass society in addition with queer or homoerotic lenses made me dive into these topics and authors more deeply. For me independent, or partially independent filmmakers and artists symbolise anarchism and punk, which are very dominant in their and my works. For me as a queer person, researching on directors and authors who worked with queerness in their work was very shaping in terms of my personal identity. As a highschool student I was visiting Christian schools which often humiliated or violated marginalised groups, mainly queers. The combination of Christianity and queerness fascinated me and triggered many questions in me but also inspired my artistic practice. I was raised in a relatively atheist upbringing, surrounded by conservative Christians in my elementary school and high school, who often bullied me for not being a Christian and not behaving according to male norms. That is why I delved into herbalism, beat poetry, connecting with nature and exploring my identity in my early teenage years, which constructed a safer environment for me. My spiritual practice was slowly evolving and finding occultism in my twenties helped me to understand particular ties with nature, define darkness and lightness or helped me with my visual language and identity. Music that brought me to these directors played a significant role in my personality growth and music taste shaping, particularly *Coil* and *Throbbing Gristle* brought me to Derek Jarman's work and *3 Teens Kill 4* brought me closer to David Wojnarowicz. The personal level of my thesis is for me very important, as I often reflect on the topics via my personal observations, analysis and ideas.

The thesis will explore and examine the intersection between queerness and Christianity and, on the contrary, queerness and occultism in queer experimental cinematography. The key speculations of the thesis are why queer directors use Christian depictions and iconography in their work while they are non Christians? Why are metaphors and symbols crucial for their work? How does church and state influence an individual's freedom? What artistic approaches are used in capturing the transcendence? It will offer you a brief historical insight and context of queer cinematography with subsequent explanation of what queer experimental cinematography is. In order to achieve the result, the thesis will focus on the key representatives of queer experimental cinematography and their background- Kenneth Anger, Derek Jarman and David Wojnarowicz. Furthermore, it will analyse their works via symbols, metaphors and speculations. The thesis is written from queer, feminist and anarchist perspective and some of the speculations might be subjective.

# 1 Queer cinematography from 1950s until 1990s

Queer cinematography, like the broader LGBTQ+ movement, experienced significant evolution from the 1950s to the 1990s. During this transformative period, film representations of homosexuality and other non-normative identities shifted from derogatory caricatures and stereotypes to more nuanced and empathetic portrayals. This chapter delves into the historical developments of queer cinema during the four decades, highlighting the key films and their impact on societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community.

In the 1950s, LGBTQ+ characters were largely marginalised in mainstream cinema. Homosexuality was often portrayed as deviant behaviour or the source of comic relief. These portrayals reinforced negative stereotypes and perpetuated harmful misconceptions about queer individuals. One notable example is the 1959 film "Some Like It Hot," where homosexuality was used as a comedic plot device, disregarding the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals.

The 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of a slight shift in queer representation. Independent filmmakers and underground cinema started exploring LGBTQ+ themes with more sensitivity and depth. For instance, the 1961 film "Victim" addressed homosexuality and blackmail in a serious manner, challenging prevailing taboos. Additionally, the 1970 documentary "Word Is Out" featured candid interviews with gay men and lesbians, offering an authentic perspective on their lives. The 1980s was a defining decade for queer cinema, largely shaped by the AIDS epidemic. The devastating impact of the disease on the LGBTQ+ community and mainly ignorance of the church and government prompted filmmakers to create films that portrayed the human cost of the epidemic. *Parting Glances* (1986) and "Longtime Companion" (1989) were among the films that sensitively portrayed the struggles and emotions of those affected by AIDS, humanising the community and fostering empathy. The 1990s witnessed a further evolution in queer cinema, as filmmakers offered more nuanced and empowering portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters. Films like *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) explored themes such as self-discovery, friendship, and identity, challenging societal norms. These films provided a positive representation of queer characters, fostering a sense of belonging and pride within the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Davis, Nick. *The Desiring- image, Gilles Deleuze and contemporary queer culture*. Oxford University Press. 2021. ISBN 978-0-19-999316-1 (p 27-30)



Throughout these decades, emerging queer filmmakers like Todd Haynes and Gregg Araki made notable contributions to the genre, bringing unique perspectives and experiences to their work. Haynes' film *Poison* (1991) and Araki's *The Living End* (1992) pushed boundaries and challenged conventional storytelling, encouraging a new wave of queer cinema.

Moreover, the new term has been coined in the early 1990s in the USA, referred to as *New Queer Cinema*. It includes a diverse range of films that explore LGBTQ+ themes, identities, and experiences in a more unapologetic and authentic manner. These films often challenge traditional norms and portray queer characters in complex and multidimensional ways. The movement has had a significant impact on both mainstream and independent cinema, contributing to a broader representation of LGBTQ+ stories in the film industry. It was revolutionary because this movement was one the first that started to involve intersectionality- combining different life experiences of marginalised groups i.e.- black people and people of colour, people with disabilities and often via feminist lenses. *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) by Cheryl Dunye holds a significant place within the context of the New Queer Cinema movement. The film is a prime example of the movement's emphasis on authentic representation of queer identities. By focusing on the journey of Cheryl, a young Black lesbian filmmaker, as she uncovers the life of a fictional African American actress from the 1930s known as "The Watermelon Woman," the film provides a multifaceted exploration of identity. It highlights the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, shedding light on the experiences of LGBTQ+ people of colour that had often been marginalised and stereotypically displayed in mainstream cinema.<sup>2</sup>

The history of queer cinematography from the 1950s to the 1990s demonstrates a journey of progress and challenges. From harmful stereotypes and marginalisation to nuanced representation and empowerment, LGBTQ+ characters evolved from one-dimensional caricatures to complex, relatable individuals. These films played a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, helping to break down stigmas and advocate for acceptance and equality. The legacy of these decades' queer cinema continues to influence and inspire filmmakers. It's important to note that the significance of queer cinematography extends beyond the 1990s, and later decades have continued to contribute to the evolution of LGBTQ+ representation in film. However, the era up until the 1990s remains a critical juncture in cinematic history, marked by groundbreaking efforts to

---

<sup>2</sup> Davis, Nick. *The Desiring- image, Gilles Deleuze and contemporary queer culture*. Oxford University Press. 2021. ISBN 978-0-19-999316-1 (p 21)

challenge norms, elevate marginalised voices, and initiate a broader cultural conversation about LGBTQ+ identities.

## **1.1 Queer experimental cinematography**

Queer experimental cinematography stands at the intersection of two powerful forces: artistry and activism and combination of queer cinematography with experimental cinematography. Through the lenses of unconventional filmmaking, it delves deeply into the realms of non-normative sexualities, gender identities, and experiences within the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>3</sup> This captivating genre of cinema not only challenges societal norms but also celebrates the diverse tapestry of human existence and embraces diversity and oddity. At its core, queer experimental cinematography strives to break free from the constraints of traditional storytelling and visual aesthetics. It seeks to explore the multifaceted realities of queer lives through innovative and imaginative techniques. Directors and filmmakers in this genre often blur the lines between fiction and reality, embracing ambiguity and surrealism to communicate their messages effectively. One of the defining aspects of queer experimental cinematography is its ability to capture the intricacies and nuances of queer identities that often elude mainstream narratives. By embracing a non-linear narrative, fragmented storytelling, and poetic visuals, filmmakers can convey the complex emotions and experiences that are central to the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, this genre serves as a vital platform for marginalised voices. By challenging the dominant cinematic norms, queer experimental cinematography empowers filmmakers from diverse backgrounds to tell their stories authentically. Through this empowerment, they can dismantle stereotypes, misconceptions, and prejudices, fostering a greater understanding and empathy among audiences. The queer experimental approach to filmmaking also encourages viewers to question the rigid boundaries imposed by society. It dismantles the binary concepts of gender and sexuality, inviting audiences to explore the vast spectrum of identities that exist beyond conventional norms. This exposure can lead to increased acceptance and appreciation for the rich tapestry of human diversity. Notably, queer experimental cinematography is not confined to a single style or technique. Filmmakers and artists may employ an array of elements, such as surreal imagery, abstract soundscapes, and avant-garde editing, to evoke emotions and provoke thought. This artistic freedom creates a powerful impact that lingers with the audience long after the credits roll.

---

<sup>3</sup> Davis, Nick. *The Desiring- image, Gilles Deleuze and contemporary queer culture*. Oxford University Press. 2021. ISBN 978-0-19-999316-1 (p 11)

In conclusion, queer experimental cinematography is an artistic force that challenges societal norms, embraces diversity, and empowers marginalised voices. It is a platform where authenticity and advocacy intertwine to create a profound cinematic experience. Through the artistry of unconventional storytelling, this genre invites us to see the world through different lenses, celebrating the vast spectrum of queer identities and feminist perspectives and practices that enrich our shared human experience. As we continue to witness the evolution of queer experimental cinematography, we can hope for a more inclusive and compassionate world where every voice finds its place in the storytelling.

## **1.2 History of queer experimental cinematography from 1950s until 1990s**

Queer experimental cinematography has been a powerful vehicle for exploring marginalised identities, challenging societal norms, and addressing crucial social issues. Throughout the history of cinema, pioneers like Kenneth Anger, Derek Jarman, and David Wojnarowicz have made significant contributions, revolutionising the landscape of filmmaking and shaping the representation of LGBTQ+ experiences.

Paving the Way for Queer Expression, Kenneth Anger, born in 1927, is often credited as one of the early pioneers of queer experimental cinema. His groundbreaking films, such as "*Fireworks*" (1947) and "*Scorpio Rising*" (1963), introduced audiences to surreal and symbolic imagery that explored themes of homosexuality and taboo subjects. Through his daring approach, Anger challenged the conventional narrative structures, offering an unapologetic portrayal of queer desire and identity. A British Visionary and LGBTQ+ Activist Derek Jarman, an influential British filmmaker, artist, and LGBTQ+ activist, used his art to champion queer rights and challenge mainstream perspectives. Films like "*Sebastiane*" (1976) and "*In the Shadow of the Sun*" (1981) showcased his sensitive approach, visual style and willingness to tackle societal norms head-on. *Sebastiane* portrayed a homoerotic narrative set in ancient Rome, defying conventions and asserting the queer experience in historical contexts. With "*The Shadow of the Sun*" is a mesmerising visual journey that combines experimental techniques with poetic imagery. Through a dreamlike sequence of surreal landscapes and symbolic vignettes, the film explores themes of identity, transformation, and the subconscious in a uniquely evocative and thought-provoking manner. With an addition of a hallucinatory and experimental soundtrack provided by pioneering music group *Throbbing Gristle* makes this film a true cult piece.

Jarman's fearlessness in addressing queer identity and his commitment to LGBTQ+ activism cemented his status as a visionary in queer experimental cinema, fine arts and gardening. Multifaceted Artistry and Activism David Wojnarowicz, a multi-disciplinary artist, left an indelible mark on queer experimental cinema through his provocative Super 8 films. Though primarily known for his visual art and writing, films like "A Fire in My Belly" (1986-87) demonstrated Wojnarowicz's exceptional storytelling ability and his willingness to confront urgent social issues connected to drug abuse, New York scene and his personal background. This short film tackled themes of AIDS, activism, and queer desire, becoming a potent reflection of the cultural climate during the height of the AIDS crisis. Wojnarowicz's artistry transcended boundaries, combining activism, personal experience, and a commitment to representing the struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ community. His works were connected to an infamous group of underground filmmakers known as *Cinema of Transgression*,<sup>4</sup> that was characteristic for its criticism of mass and mainstream society of the American population in the 1990s.

---

<sup>4</sup> Sargeant, Jack. *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression*. Creation Books, 2nd edition. 1999. ISBN- 10-1840680547

## 2 Unveiling the Intersection of Queerness, Christianity and state

Observing how in past decades Christianity and religion in general plays a significant role in oppression of LGBTQ+ rights leads to traumatising and polarising the society and especially queer people. Taking an example in Catholic Poland, where 91.9 % of the population identifies as Catholic resulted in so-called *LGBT-free zones* in 2019. The term LGBT-free zone refers to areas or regions in Poland where local governments often influenced by church have passed resolutions or declarations that claim to be "free from LGBT ideology" or "LGBT-free." These declarations have been criticised as discriminatory and a violation of human rights by various international organisations, including the European Union and human rights advocates.

Olivia Laing, British writer, art critic and cultural observer writes in her introduction for Derek Jarman's diaries called *Modern Nature* about *Section 28* and her personal notes on living in a Christian environment with a queer parent. *"We were happy enough together, but the world outside felt flimsy, inhospitable, permanently grey. I hated my girls' school, with its homophobic pupils and prying teachers, perpetually curious about the 'family situation'. This was the era of Section 28, which banned local authorities from promoting homosexuality and schools from teaching acceptability 'as a pretended family relationship'. Designated by the state as a pretend family, we lived under its malign rule, its imprecation of exposure and imminent disaster"*<sup>5</sup>. *Section 28* was in effect from 1988 until 2003 in the United Kingdom, and the work of Derek Jarman is highly influenced by this regime.

### 1.2 Homosexuality as a sin in pop culture

Sin as one of the motifs connected with engaging in non- heterosexual intercourses and relationships plays a central motif in a song *"It's a Sin"*. The song by the British synth-pop duo Pet Shop Boys, released in 1987 as the lead single from their second studio album, "Actually." The song's lyrics touch on themes of guilt, shame, morality, and personal experiences. The song's title, "It's a Sin," suggests wrongdoing or transgression. The lyrics evoke themes of religious guilt and the fear of divine judgement for one's actions. The song references various religious elements, such as "confession," "original sin," and the idea of being "number one. The lyrics appear to be a reflection on personal mistakes or choices that

---

<sup>5</sup> Jarman, Derek. *Modern Nature* with an Introduction by Olivia Laing. Penguin Random House. ISBN 978-1-784-87387-5 (p VII, Introduction by Olivia Laing)

have led to feelings of guilt and shame. The narrator expresses regret and acknowledges that their actions have consequences. The song's narrative seems to touch on the transition from youth to adulthood, a period when individuals might grapple with their identities, desires, and the consequences of their actions. The line "When I look back upon my life, it's always with a sense of shame" suggests retrospection and self-evaluation. The song's lyrics also hint at themes related to sexuality and sexual identity. The phrase "when I look back, I can see the signs" could be interpreted as a reference to recognizing one's own sexual orientation. The idea of hiding or suppressing one's true self ("I made my excuses and watched from the sidelines") aligns with narratives of self-discovery and self-acceptance. "It's a Sin" can also be seen as a commentary on societal attitudes and taboos surrounding topics such as sexuality, religion, and morality. The song's chorus, with its repeated assertion that "it's a sin," highlights the judgmental attitudes that can pervade certain cultural contexts. "It's a Sin" is a layered song that addresses personal introspection, societal judgement, and the intersection of morality, religion, and identity. Its emotionally charged lyrics and catchy melody have made it one of the iconic tracks of the 1980s and a signature song for Pet Shop Boys. This song was released just a year before Section 28 was in force.

The intersection of this song with the topic of this thesis is more relevant in combination with a video clip directed by Derek Jarman. Derek's significant sacral and religious depictions are present in the large scale in this video clip. The video prominently features religious symbolism, including a confessional booth, crucifixes, and religious statues. This symbolism ties into the song's themes of guilt, sin, and internal conflict. It serves to heighten the emotional weight of the song's lyrics. The video incorporates surreal and dreamlike sequences, which blur the lines between reality and imagination. These sequences reflect the turmoil and internal struggles faced by the main character. They also contribute to the video's unique visual style that reflects Jarman's previous works such as *Sebastiane*, *Caravaggio* and *Jubilee*. Furthermore, the video subtly addresses societal issues, including the stigma associated with sexuality and the tension between personal desires and religious beliefs. These themes are woven into the visuals, adding depth to the video's interpretation.

There are various parallels of a song "It's a sin" with Madonna's "Like a Prayer". Madonna plays a significant role in modern queer history, often regarded as a queer icon. Throughout her career, she has been a vocal advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and promoted visibility and acceptance among queer people. When analysing video clip *Like a Prayer* and putting it next to *It's a sin*, both of them use religious imagery and themes conveying deeper meanings with very similar use of *mise-en-scène*. Moreover *Like a Prayer* was shocking to some Christian audiences when the video was released in 1989. The video features scenes that include a burning cross, which were perceived as highly controversial and offensive. This is one of the

artistic and psychological tools used for attracting a religious audience, but leaving them in controversy in order to reevaluate their often conservative attitudes. Furthermore, Madonna was the one who brought wearing a cross as a fashion medium into the broader society.

## **2.2 Gender performativity and reevaluation of traditional beliefs**

The interplay between queerness and Christianity constitutes a complex and multifaceted terrain of identity, belief, and societal norms. Judith Butler, renowned for her theories on gender performativity, offers a theoretical lens through which to explore the intersection of these two realms. While Butler's writings may not directly address queerness and Christianity, her concepts shed light on the intricate ways in which religious norms, gender identities, and personal agency intersect within this discourse. Central to Butler's work is the concept of performativity, famously introduced in *"Gender Trouble"* (1990). Butler argues that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a repeated performance of societal norms. This perspective can be extended to the intersection of queerness and Christianity, where individuals navigate the fluidity of both their gender identity and their religious affiliation. The act of coming out as queer within religious spaces becomes a subversive performance, challenging rigid norms and asserting one's authentic self. Religious space is often a hostile environment for an individual to come out, usually under the threat of meeting with misunderstandings. Butler's critique of regulative norms in *Gender Trouble* holds relevance for examining the interaction between queerness and Christianity. Within religious contexts, norms around sexuality and gender may conflict with queer identities. By embracing their queerness openly, individuals perform subversive acts that contest established religious norms, thereby prompting reevaluation of traditional beliefs. Reevaluation of traditional beliefs is a key medium for authors I chose for examining my thesis- Kenneth Anger, Derek Jarman and David Wojnarowicz. In their work they engage with religious iconography and narratives, often subverting or reinterpreting them. This can be read as a critique of traditional religious beliefs and their usually repressive or exclusionary aspects. <sup>6</sup>

The concept of "bodily inscriptions" from Butler's work suggests that cultural norms and institutions inscribe meanings onto bodies. When applied to the realm of queerness and Christianity, this notion unveils how religious beliefs can shape perceptions of queerness and influence individuals' relationships with their bodies. The struggle for acceptance and self-recognition becomes entwined with the religious expectations placed upon bodies.

---

<sup>6</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble*. Routledge. 1990. ISBN10: 0-415-38955-0. ISBN13: 978-0-415-38955-6 (ch 1)

Christianity, like any religious or cultural system, can contribute to the shaping of identity through its teachings, practices, and norms. Butler argues that society's norms and expectations determine how we should look, behave and present ourselves. These norms are often linked to gender, race and social class. This is what Derek Jarman in *Sebastiane* is trying to disrupt. Portraying Roman masculine soldiers as gay and using only Latin language, which is a language of christianity, is making this film extremely controversial.



## 2 Explanation of occultism, its parallel with queerness and relevance in artistic contexts

Occultism can be perceived as conflicting with certain Christian beliefs and practices and for many religious people it can be very controversial. Occultism refers to a range of esoteric and mystical practices that involve seeking hidden knowledge, spiritual insights, and supernatural forces. These practices often include divination, magic, astrology, alchemy, and other metaphysical pursuits. Some occult beliefs and practices might involve non-Christian spiritual elements or unconventional views on reality that may not align with traditional Christian teachings. Christianity, on the other hand, is a monotheistic religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. It holds specific beliefs about God, salvation, sin, and morality. Some Christian denominations may view occult practices as incompatible with their theological framework, and they might consider them to be in opposition to Christian teachings.

Moreover, the majority can consider occultism as something "dark" whilst Christianity could be considered as something "light". This is a matter of my longlasting personal research, where I was critically analysing and philosophising these two poles. For me, occultism is connected more towards ideas of freedom, free love, symbiosis of nature and humans and self exploration. On certain principles, occultism is connected to the anarchist ideas which give an individual freedom to love anyone regardless gender and pursue a deeper understanding with the natural world and fights devastating impacts of capitalism and colonialism. On the other hand, Christianity as usually portrayed as something "light" caused in history a very polarising and blood shedding environment via its spread of colonialism and religion connected to it, genocide of aboriginal and native inhabitants, binarity of genders, hierarchies in society and division of labour. Per se, this is only my personal interpretation based on my perception and everyone interprets lightness and darkness their own way.

While queerness is connected to Christianity more through recession, occultism has deeper connections. Even though they are not inherently connected, there have been historical and cultural intersections between the two in various contexts. In some historical periods, occult or mystical practices were seen as outside of societal norms, much like LGBTQ+ identities. This common "outsider" status might have led to some individuals embracing both occult and queer identities as a way of rejecting societal conventions. Both occult and LGBTQ+ communities have sometimes existed on the fringes of mainstream society. As a result, there may have been instances of individuals belonging to both communities, seeking solace and acceptance in spaces that were considered unconventional. In the book *Gothic Queer*

*Culture*, author *Laura Westengard* describes and compares monsters, mythological creatures that are often non-binary, and other monsters to queer people. For example, creatures like Frankenstein and vampires like Count Dracula are essentially just marginalised individuals banished from the mainstream to the fringes of society destined to live alone in the mountains or in a castle. Due to their otherness and differences with the surrounding world, often associated with introversion, they are the target of fear and alienation from other people<sup>7</sup>. Both occultism and queerness have inspired artists and creators to explore themes of identity, spirituality, and self-expression. Some queer artists have incorporated occult symbolism and themes into their work as a means of exploring their own experiences. Occultism often involves concepts of transformation, self-discovery, and hidden knowledge. These themes can resonate metaphorically with aspects of the queer experience, where individuals go through personal journeys of self-acceptance and understanding. Just like in any community, there is diversity within both the occult and queer communities. Some individuals may identify with both, while others may not see any connection between the two.

## **2.1 Foucault: On the Monstrosity of the Hermaphroditic Body**

Devils, vampires, fauns, "chorts" (čerti), minotaurus, kentaurus, nymphs and other mythological creatures or monsters are key figures in my personal artistic work, that I am reflecting via mediums of textile, leather patchwork, moving image and ceramics. I consider my work as queer, even though I am not explicitly displaying queer elements. Michel Foucault theorised monstrosity in 1974 in which he outlined and described the human monster of the hermaphroditic body. In it, he explains that from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, the monster was taken as a "mix". "It is a mixture of two realms, animal and human: man with the head of a buffalo, man with bird's feet - monsters. It is a mixing of two species, a pig with a sheep's head is a monster. It is a mixture of two individuals, a person who has two heads and one body or two bodies and one head is a monster. It is a mixture of two sexes, a person who is both a man and a woman is a monster."<sup>8</sup> By this theory we can underlay and analyse other queer authors who in their work display similar creatures and metaphors.

---

<sup>7</sup> Westengard, Laura. *Gothic Queer Culture. Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma*. University of Nebraska Press / Nebraska. 2019. ISBN: 9781496202048, 149620204X

<sup>8</sup> Milkidis, Stefanos. *Foucault: On the Monstrosity of the Hermaphroditic Body*. Kennesaw State University. 2018. DOI 10.5070/Q521038306

### 3.2 Analysis of Fireworks by Kenneth Anger and its influence by Aleister Crowley

Kenneth Anger, an American avant-garde filmmaker and author, is known for incorporating occult and esoteric themes into his work. He is considered a pioneer of experimental filmmaking and has been associated with works that explore themes of mysticism, mythology, and the occult. Anger's most notable work with occult themes is his film *"Invocation of My Demon Brother"* (1969), which draws on Aleister Crowley's Thelemic concepts and features a soundtrack by Mick Jagger of The Rolling Stones. Additionally, Anger's book *"Hollywood Babylon"* (published in 1965) delves into scandalous stories from the entertainment industry and often includes elements of sensationalism and mythology. Throughout his career, Anger has been influenced by occultism, ceremonial magic, and mysticism, and these influences are evident in many of his films. His use of symbolic imagery, ritualistic elements, and fascination with the supernatural contribute to his reputation as a filmmaker who integrates esoteric themes into his work.

*"Fireworks"* is a highly influential and enigmatic short film that plays a significant role in experimental cinema and is considered as one of the first openly homoerotic films. The film was released in 1947 and is known for its experimental language and narrative style, as well as its exploration of homoerotic themes. *"Fireworks"* was shot on 16 mm film. The film's narrative is fragmented and dreamlike, featuring a series of surreal and symbolic images that blend reality with fantasy. The protagonist, played by Anger himself, encounters a group of sailors who subject him to various violent and sexual situations.<sup>9</sup> These scenes can be interpreted as a reflection of the protagonist's internal struggles with his own identity and desires. The homoerotic undertones in *"Fireworks"* are unmistakable. The interactions between the protagonist and the sailors contain both elements of aggression and intimacy, showcasing a complex interplay of power dynamics and attraction. This portrayal challenges societal norms of the time and explores the hidden desires and conflicts within individuals. The opening scene of *"Fireworks"* is a pieta of two sailor men, which already from the first point of view sketches a depiction on Christianity in a subversive way. Visually, *"Fireworks"* is characterised by its striking use of light, shadow, and symbolism, which is very dominant in works of queer experimental filmmakers and is used for transcendental purposes. Anger's innovative approach to editing and cinematography creates a hypnotic and unsettling atmosphere that invites multiple interpretations. The film's title, *"Fireworks"* can be seen as a

---

<sup>9</sup> Ara Osterweil on Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947). Close Up: America year zero. <https://www.artforum.com/print/201701/ara-osterweil-on-kenneth-anger-s-fireworks-1947-65390>

metaphor for the explosive emotions and desires that are depicted throughout and as a metaphor for ejaculation.

One of the significant influences on Anger's work is the British occultist Aleister Crowley, whose ideas and philosophies shaped not only Anger's artistic vision but also the thematic underpinnings of "*Fireworks*". Besides his pioneering works on occultism and Thelema, he was a queer (bisexual) mountaineer, poet, novelist and ceremonial magician. He is also widely known for his tarot cards- *Crowley tarot*. Aleister Crowley, known for his development of the philosophy of Thelema, advocated for self-discovery, individualism, and the pursuit of personal desires. The central tenet of Thelema, encapsulated in the phrase "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law," encourages individuals to seek their true will and purpose in life. This philosophy had a profound impact on Anger's exploration of identity and desire in "*Fireworks*." Crowley's rejection of conventional morality and societal norms is echoed in "*Fireworks*". The scenes featuring violent and homoerotic interactions between the protagonist and the sailors exemplify the breaking of societal taboos and boundaries, mirroring Crowley's belief in embracing one's true desires without societal constraints. Crowley's emphasis on symbolism and the power of the subconscious mind also finds resonance in Anger's film. "*Fireworks*" is replete with surreal and symbolic imagery that delves into the depths of the protagonist's psyche. The sailors in the film become embodiments of the protagonist's desires and fears, reminiscent of Crowley's teachings on exploring the hidden aspects of the self through symbolism and ritual.<sup>10</sup> Anger's use of avant-garde visual techniques, such as lighting, shadow play, and unconventional editing, can be seen as a visual manifestation of Crowley's belief in ritual magic. Just as Crowley utilised rituals to transform consciousness and manifest desires, Anger's experimental visual language serves to create an otherworldly and transformative experience for the viewer, aligning with Crowley's occult practices. The influence of Aleister Crowley on "*Fireworks*" extends beyond the film's content and into its lasting impact on LGBTQ+ cinema and experimental filmmaking. By embracing Crowley's philosophy of self-discovery and individualism, Anger contributed to the broader cultural dialogue around identity, desire, and societal norms.

---

<sup>10</sup> Crowley, Aleister. *Tales of Mystery & the Supernatural. The Drug & Other Stories.* Wordsworth Editions. ISBN 978-1-84022-734-5

## 4 Modern Nature- constructing personal utopias

Pilgrimage to Dungeness earlier this year (April 2023) gave me a closer and more personal insight of life and work of Derek Jarman. Inspiration for this pilgrimage came right after seeing a film *Found by the One She Seeks* (2022) by a Czech documentarist Petr Michal, who is portraying an ethereal translator Anna Karenina. In this portrait, she says that when she wants to translate some book from a particular author, first she needs to visit the place where the author was writing. Without this, she claims that she would be incapable of thoroughly translating the piece precisely. For me it was similar to Prospect Cottage, the place where Derek Jarman had lived his last years before he died of HIV- related illness. His diaries and a book *Modern Nature* introduced me to his thoughts, relationships, fights with HIV and a vivid overview of his garden he was creating in a very hostile environment of the only desert in the United Kingdom- Dungeness. But only after visiting Prospect Cottage and its surrounding, I truly felt the significance of the environment in Jarman's work.

Derek Jarman had a significant passion for gardening that extended beyond his renowned contributions to cinema and the arts. Jarman's love for gardening was deeply rooted in his personal life and creative expression. Prospect Cottage and its garden located in Dungeness, Kent, England, is particularly emblematic of his connection to nature and his artistic spirit. He transformed the surrounding landscape into a unique and idiosyncratic garden. The garden reflected Jarman's artistic sensibilities, incorporating diverse plants that could thrive in the harsh coastal environment.<sup>11</sup> It was a reflection of his love for the natural world and his desire to find beauty and inspiration in unexpected places. In keeping with his artistic inclinations, Jarman incorporated found objects, sculptures, and driftwood into his garden design. These elements added a touch of creativity and eclecticism to the landscape, blurring the boundaries between gardening and art. His neighbours and visitors thought, according to his diaries, that he was practising some occult or pagan rituals due to these found objects that assembled sacred objects. Jarman carefully selected plants that could withstand the challenging conditions of the area, including strong winds, salt spray, and poor soil. His garden featured a mix of hardy coastal plants, wildflowers, and drought-resistant species, creating a harmonious and sustainable ecosystem.<sup>12</sup> The garden's colour palette was intentionally limited, primarily consisting of shades of blue, grey, and silver. This choice was influenced by the coastal environment and the sea, reflecting both the natural

---

<sup>11</sup> Jarman, Derek. *Modern Nature with an Introduction by Olivia Laing*. Penguin Random House. ISBN 978-1-784-87387-5

<sup>12</sup> *Derek Jarman's garden with photographs by Hooward Sooley*. Thames & Hudson Ltd. 1995. ISBN 978-0-500-016-56-5

surroundings and Jarman's aesthetic preferences. Jarman's gardening endeavours were intertwined with his personal journey and health challenges. As he battled HIV/AIDS, the garden became a therapeutic retreat where he could connect with nature and find solace amidst the challenges he faced.

## 4.1 Queering christianity

Derek Jarman's connection to Christianity was complex and influenced by various factors throughout his life. The parallels and depiction on Christianity are present in the majority of his films. While he had a complicated relationship with organised religion, aspects of Christianity often surfaced in his work and personal beliefs. Jarman was raised in a Christian household and attended a Church of England school during his childhood. This early exposure to Christianity likely had a lasting impact on his understanding of religious themes and narratives. Throughout his life, Jarman explored spirituality through his personal experiences and creative work. While he didn't conform to traditional religious norms, he was drawn to themes of suffering, redemption, and the human condition—themes that are often present in Christian narratives. Jarman's films often engaged with Christian stories and symbolism in specific ways. His film "*Sebastiane*" (1976) explored the life of Saint Sebastian, a Christian martyr, in a homoerotic context. This interpretation of a Christian narrative through a queer lens demonstrated his artistic exploration of the intersection between religious themes and his own identity. The film reimagines the story of Saint Sebastian, a figure biblically depicted as a Christian martyr. Furthermore, *Sebastiane* is considered as one of the earliest queer icons due to his depiction in art that portrays him as a soft boy in agony hanging on the tree. *Sebastiane* shifts the narrative focus away from his religious devotion and suffering to emphasise his intimate relationships with other soldiers. The subversion critiques conventional narratives that often erase or overlook queer aspects of historical figures. The film's representation of same-sex desire and practises challenge heteronormative expectations. It presents queer relationships as valid and genuine, countering societal norms that often privilege heterosexual relationships. The film questions the dominance of heteronormativity in historical narratives. Moreover, the film's emphasis on nudity and physicality contribute to an aesthetic of liberation. The characters' unapologetic expression of desire challenges shame and stigma associated with queer relationships. The aesthetic aligns with queer optics by celebrating the human body and the authenticity of queer experiences.

Jarman was critical of aspects of organised religion, particularly its stance on LGBTQ+ issues and broader ignorance. He openly expressed his frustration with the Church's historical condemnation of queer individuals, a perspective that aligned with his advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights and representation. Jarman's battle with HIV/AIDS significantly impacted his spirituality. His 1993 film *"Blue"* dealt with his experiences living with the disease and facing mortality. This work can be seen as a reflection on suffering, transcendence, and the search for meaning—themes that often intersect with Christian and spiritual contemplations on life and death.

## **4.2 In the shadow of the Sun and occultism**

*"In the Shadow of the Sun,"* a visually intriguing experimental film that can be analysed through the lens of occultism. While the film's abstract and surreal nature allows for a range of interpretations, there are parallels between its themes, imagery, and the concepts found in occult practices. The film features a plethora of symbolic imagery that can be reminiscent of occult practices. Symbolism is integral to occultism, where objects and gestures hold deeper meanings. Similarly, *"In the Shadow of the Sun"* uses visually rich symbols that can be seen as invoking a sense of mysticism and otherworldly experiences. Occultism often delves into the subconscious mind as a means of personal transformation and spiritual insight. Similarly, the dreamlike quality of the film's visuals and narrative suggests an exploration of the subconscious realm. The film's abstract sequences mirror the mystical experiences often sought in occult practices. These occult practices include alchemy, focus on transformation and transmutation. *"In the Shadow of the Sun"* can be seen as a metaphorical journey of transformation, as it progresses through various visual and emotional states. This aligns with the alchemical concept of inner change and evolution. The film's soundtrack, composed by Throbbing Gristle, is an auditory experience that complements the visual elements. In occult rituals, sound is used to induce altered states of consciousness. The repetitive and trance-like nature of the soundtrack parallels the role of sound in certain occult practices. Throbbing Gristle representatives were close friends with Derek Jarman, which resulted in a flawless symbiosis of an image and sound. Occultism often seeks to uncover hidden truths and explore the mystical aspects of reality. *"In the Shadow of the Sun"* creates an atmosphere of mystery and the unknown, inviting viewers to contemplate hidden dimensions and question conventional perceptions of reality. This pursuit of the unseen resonates with occult ideals. Occultism values individual experience and interpretation as a means of understanding spiritual truths. Similarly, *"In the Shadow of the Sun"* encourages viewers to interpret its abstract imagery based on their personal perspectives. This aligns with the idea of individual spiritual journeys in occultism.

## **5. The significance of symbolism and metaphor**

As already mentioned above in several examples, using metaphors and symbolism in queer experimental cinematography is one of the main communication tools. Codes and symbols were significant tools for internal communication among queer people. There were various reasons for developing an idiosyncratic language, from oppressed rights, inequality, illegal ties between the same sex adherents, persecution, safety etc. The use of symbolism and metaphors has allowed queer individuals to communicate, share experiences, and find solidarity, especially when open expression of their identities was not safe or accepted. In times when being openly queer was dangerous or even illegal, symbolism and metaphors provided a way to communicate coded messages and identities discreetly. This allowed queer individuals to find each other and build communities while minimising the risk of exposure. The use of symbolism and metaphors has often been a way for queer artists to express their experiences and emotions that might be difficult to convey directly. This creative expression has produced meaningful art and literature that speaks to the unique struggles and triumphs of the queer community. The use of symbolism and metaphor in queer experimental film can intersect with Christianity in various ways. Filmmakers may appropriate and reinterpret Christian symbols, narratives, and rituals to reflect queer experiences. This subversion challenges heteronormative interpretations and introduces new layers of meaning. Metaphors and symbols become tools to communicate the complexities of queer identity and spirituality within the context of a religious framework. This intersection raises questions about reconciling queerness with faith, navigating religious spaces as a queer individual, and reclaiming religious symbols for LGBTQ+ empowerment.

### **5.1 The significance of symbolism and metaphor on an analysis of "A Fire in My Belly" by David Wojnarowicz**

David Wojnarowicz is the last representative on whom I will examine parallels of queer, christianity and occultism, particularly by analysing metaphors and symbols in the film "*Fire in my Belly*". David's childhood is highly present in his artistic work. His parents got divorced and fled when he was two, leaving him to temporary homes and often abusive relationships. The advantages were that he lived in a semi rural environment surrounded by animals, birds



and insects which fascinated him from childhood.<sup>13</sup> He came out homosexual when he was very young and at the same time he was visiting Roman Catholic grade school. Religious imagery and emotions were deeply enrooted with him from a young age, and are present throughout his artistic practice and work. David was astonished by Mexico for its combination of rawness and vital popular culture, where he shot both parts of "*Fire in My Belly*" on super 8 mm film, which is very characteristic for his work. 1987 was a turning year for David Wojnarowicz as his longtime lover, the photographer Peter Huraj, died of AIDS and Wojnarowicz himself found he's HIV positive. At the same period, "*A Fire in My Belly*" was created as a strong and rough manifest that is still found controversial even nowadays.

The title itself can be perceived as a metaphor, representing a passionate and intense emotion. The film contains various symbols and metaphors that reflect themes of AIDS, political activism, and the struggle for acceptance. The repeated imagery of fire can symbolise both destruction and transformation. It might represent the AIDS crisis, consuming lives while also igniting a sense of urgency for change. The juxtaposition of life and death is evident, with images of life cycles and decay highlighting the fragility of existence. The use of religious symbols, like the crucifix with crawling ants and the communion wafer, could represent the societal rejection and condemnation faced by individuals with AIDS, drawing parallels to martyrdom. Specifically, the crucifix with ants is the strongest and most controversial image from the film.<sup>14</sup> Placing ants on a religious symbol like the crucifix can be seen as a deliberate act of subversion and provocation. It challenges established norms, questions traditional interpretations of faith, and forces viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about the intersection of religion, sexuality, and disease. The clock, often shown ticking, can be interpreted as a symbol of mortality and the ticking time bomb of the AIDS epidemic. Water, on the other hand, can be seen as a symbol of purification, healing, and renewal. Its presence could indicate a desire for cleansing and transformation in the face of the devastation caused by AIDS. Wojnarowicz's inclusion of insects and animals might suggest the interconnectedness of all life forms and highlight the vulnerability shared by every living being. The portrayal of gay love and intimacy challenges societal norms and discrimination, emphasising the importance of human connection and love. The pornlike shots of male masturbation closes the film, which perfectly combines topics of christianity and homosexuality. Overall, "*Fire in My Belly*" is a complex work laden with spiritualist

---

<sup>13</sup> Wojnarowicz, David. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. 1991. ISBN 0679732276

<sup>14</sup> The New York Times, *As Ants Crawl Over Crucifix, Dead Artist Is Assailed Again* <https://www.artforum.com/print/201701/ara-osterweil-on-kenneth-anger-s-fireworks-1947-653> 90

metaphors and symbols that evoke strong emotions and confront viewers with the harsh realities of the AIDS crisis and the need for empathy, activism, and acceptance.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of the intersection between Christianity, occultism, and queer experimental cinematography reveals a profound tapestry of artistic expression that challenges societal norms and transcends conventional boundaries as authors themselves. Through the lens of filmmakers Derek Jarman, David Wojnarowicz, and Kenneth Anger, this thesis has unveiled a captivating landscape where symbols become the vehicles for deeper dialogues.

The juxtaposition of Christian iconography with occult symbolism serves as a transformative conduit, allowing these filmmakers to navigate their personal experiences as queer individuals within a broader socio-religious context. By intertwining themes of spirituality, sexuality, and the esoteric, their works forge a path toward reclamation and redefinition. In doing so, they boldly confront the marginalised realities faced by queer individuals, channelling the power of symbolism to provoke thought, evoke emotion, and demand societal introspection.

Furthermore, exploring the author's interests in herbalism, gardening and cultivating plants demonstrate and show how the connection with the natural world contributes to building personal utopias and inner worlds that are free from any forms of homophobia, transphobia and hate.

As the canvas of experimental cinematography becomes a site of convergence, the films of Jarman, Wojnarowicz, and Anger unravel a shared narrative that speaks to the complexity of identity and the resilience of the human spirit. The symbols they employ transcend mere aesthetic choices; they are the language of a subversive discourse, inviting viewers to engage with the ethereal and the profane, the sacred and the taboo. Furthermore, Jarman and Wojnarowicz are connected due to the precarious era of HIV/AIDS pandemic, which made their work very critical towards establishments predominantly Christian.

In the ever-evolving landscape of queer representation and artistic creation, these filmmakers illuminate the dynamic interplay between Christianity and occultism as conduits for personal and collective transformation. Their symbology-rich works inspire a reimagining of spirituality and queer identity, demonstrating the potency of cinema as a tool for fostering empathy, igniting dialogue, and ultimately, inciting change. In a world hungering for authenticity and inclusivity, the queer experimental cinematography stands as a testament to the enduring power of art to reshape perceptions, challenge dogmas, and illuminate the myriad facets of the human experience.

# Bibliography

## Literature

- Davis, Nick. *The Desiring- image, Gilles Deleuze and contemporary queer culture*. Oxford University Press. 2021. ISBN 978-0-19-999316-1
- Jarman, Derek. *Modern Nature with an Introduction by Olivia Laing*. Penguin Random House. ISBN 978-1-784-87387-5
- Crowley, Aleister. *Tales of Mystery & the Supernatural. The Drug & Other Stories*. Wordsworth Editions. ISBN 978-1-84022-734-5
- Derek Jarman's garden with photographs by Hooward Sooley. Thames & Hudson Ltd. 1995. ISBN 978-0-500-016-56-5
- Laing, Olivia. *Mesto osamelosti. O umení byt' sám*. INAQUE. 2019 ISBN-87978-80-897-37-98-7
- Wojnarowicz, David. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. 1991. ISBN 0679732276
- Sargeant, Jack. *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression*. Creation Books, 2nd edition. 1999. ISBN- 10-1840680547
- Milkidis, Stefanos. *Foucault: On the Monstrosity of the Hermaphroditic Body*. Kennesaw State University. 2018. DOI 10.5070/Q521038306
- Westengard, Laura. *Gothic Queer Culture. Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma*. University of Nebraska Press / Nebraska. 2019. ISBN: 9781496202048, 149620204X
- Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble*. Routledge. 1990. ISBN10: 0-415-38955-0. ISBN13: 978-0-415-38955-6
- Ara Osterweil on Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947). Close Up: America year zero. <https://www.artforum.com/print/201701/ara-osterweil-on-kenneth-anger-s-fireworks-1947-65390>
- The New York Times, As Ants Crawl Over Crucifix, Dead Artist Is Assailed Again <https://www.artforum.com/print/201701/ara-osterweil-on-kenneth-anger-s-fireworks-1947-65390>

## Sources

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/11/arts/design/11ants.html>
- <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/43319/1/beautifully-radical-david-wojnarowicz-films-that-rattled-america-kw-institute>
- <https://www.artforum.com/print/201701/ara-osterweil-on-kenneth-anger-s-fireworks-1947-65390>

