Epilogue
Derek Jarman’s War

. . . the pity of war, the pity war distilled.
—Wilfred Owen, “Strange Meeting” (1919)

amyl: Shit.
mad: What’s up, Amyl?
amyl: I’ve broken my Winston Churchill mug.
mad: Don’t worry, we’ll stick him together.
—Derek Jarman, Jubilee (1977)

I have argued that some films made in Britain during World War II offer an opportunity to think differently both about what it means to represent wars from within wars and about what it means for something to be about something else. World War II posed special representational challenges to filmmakers and others: because of its logistical enormity, the unprecedented scope of its destruction, its conceptual status as total, and the way it seemingly remade the very stuff of everyday life through aerial bombing, blackouts, rationing, and the logistical demands of total mobilization, World War II put terrific pressure on and created new critical opportunities for aesthetic and specifically cinematic representations. Light, dark, sound, silence, music, work, play, sleep, sex, food, belief, virtue, and truth all meant or could mean other, surprising things when seen from within the real and the conceptual ambit of total war. As a result, the films I have discussed rely both on moments of stylistic excess or eccentricity that call attention to the medium-specific resources of the cinema and on a range of ideologically loaded and historically specific ideas about eccentricity as a national value. At the same time that one can track an official, propaganda version of wartime eccentricity (the cherished and “little” eccentricity of the English), one also encounters darker, unofficial, or critical versions of eccentricity—
moments of aesthetic and ideological excess that call attention to logical contradictions immanent to the concept of total war.

Although we often remember World War II as a singular moment of national unity in Britain, it was in fact characterized by a shared experience of intellectual and emotional ambivalence about the value and significance of war, an ambivalence that demanded different approaches toward both war’s forms and its content. On the one hand, the war was widely recognized as a necessary and just war, a war that had to be fought if European civilization were to survive. On the other hand, the fresh memory of the Great War and its absurd waste made ridiculous the idea of any unambiguously good war. Kingsley Martin, editor of the left-leaning *New Statesman*, wrote in 1940 that Churchill misunderstood the British people’s “feelings when he talked of this as the finest moment of their history. Our feelings are more complex than that. To talk to common people in or out of uniform is to discover that determination to defend this island is coupled with a deep and almost universal bitterness that we have been reduced to such a pass.”

Although Martin’s feelings of complexity were of course particular to his situation, they are, I think, nonetheless representative of contradictions and compromises that were immanent to the war; Martin later wrote, “I combined in myself many of the inconsistencies and conflicts of the period which long tried to reconcile pacifism with collective security, and a defence of individual liberty with the necessity of working with Communists against Fascists.” As I have shown, a range of attitudes toward the war took a singularly doubled form: we would have to suspend our values—fair play, good sportsmanship, moderation—in order to save those values. The films I discuss all engage with the question of how productively to portray, as Cyril Connolly put it, “a war of which we are all ashamed and yet a war which has to be won.”

I have also argued that these films—*The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, *Henry V*, and *Brief Encounter*—use the specificity of cinema and cinematic style to come productively to grips with this necessary doubleness and to imagine cinema as a form of historical reckoning especially appropriate to the complexities of total war. Although cinema is not the only medium capable of critically relating the history of World War II, and although World War II was not necessarily absolutely different from other wars, its specificities and the medium of cinema came together in Britain in the 1940s to enable an especially canny kind of cinematic thinking. More to the point, these films work at the level of form and style to develop aesthetic strategies that could accommodate that real and necessary doubleness without falling into any number of available but inappropriate patterns: bad faith, mute resignation, sterile paradox. These films thus mobilize a productive
and eccentric tension between narrative content and film style in order to
develop a pragmatic aesthetic that could both recognize the specific ne-
cessity of this war and the larger shame and “original violence” of war as
such. As a result, they both refuse to reify war into an epic or simply me-
memorial experience and force an imaginative confrontation with war’s root
causes; they explore, in other words, a human tendency toward aggression
that would seem to exceed the historical terms of any war in particular. As
Powell and Pressburger, Olivier, and Lean try to understand, to repress that
aggression or to understate its effects seems in itself to turn history into
either tragedy or farce. This, for obvious reasons, is a difficult and dispiriting
argument to make during wartime; it is nonetheless a necessary argument,
and the achievement of these films is that they managed to make it in the
midst of war.

Despite their considerable critical and historical power, these films fell
largely out of favor after the war. This is partly the result of broader shifts
in British cinematic tastes in the 1950s and after:

A decade that began with the new government scheme to promote British
film-making, by rewarding producers with a share of the so-called Eady
Levy (named after a Treasury official) on cinema admissions, ended with
two seemingly interminable comedy formulae—the “Carry On” and “Doctor”
series—firmly entrenched as the routine diet of British audiences. . . . De-
clining attendance, cinema closures (and conversion to bowling alleys or
bingo halls), the rapid spread of television, spurred on by the introduction
of ITV—all of these can be pasted together into a highly selective, though
familiar, picture of British cinema sunk in torpor before the arrival of the
Angry Young Men (or Northern realists), who would transform it into a
world-class contender in the early sixties.⁴

With the end of the war, the particular value and aesthetic complexity of
the British war film became harder to see both as the war was inevitably re-
duced to an official memory of shared sacrifice and as critical energies were
turned increasingly toward what the Angry Young Men saw as the enervat-
ing, emasculating, and unheroic effects of relative postwar affluence and
the society that administered it. We can see this in films like Saturday Night
and Sunday Morning (1960), This Sporting Life (1963), and The Loneliness of
the Long Distance Runner (1962), in which Colin Smith, the lonely runner
of the film’s title, self-destructively and self-consciously falls between the
cracks of new American-style consumerism, working-class resentment at
the paternalism of the welfare state, and a crisis of masculinity marked
by the withering-away and eventual death of his father, a figure both for a more recognizably English working class and for a decaying generation that really fought and thus really remembered the war. Like the other films that I’ve looked at, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* relies on the comparative significance of particular faces: Colin’s pinched and largely inexpressive glare, the hollowed-out look of his father’s face moments after death, and the unused gas masks that Colin and the other Borstal boys are forced significantly to disassemble for scrap. However, whereas the faces of Roger Livesy, Celia Johnson, Robert Newton, and Laurence Olivier embody the richly doubled and critical character of these films, the blank countenances of Richardson’s film seem to deny the possibility of real significance in the postwar period.

The Angry Young Man’s break from the values and styles of the 1940s in Britain took different but related forms in the following decades: in light Godardian reflections on late capitalist surface and spectacle in swinging-sixties films such as *Darling* (1965), *Blow-Up* (1966), and *Alfie* (1966); in the apocalyptic images of exaggerated or threatened masculinity in glam, proto-punk, and punk films such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), and *Quadrophenia* (1979); in the class-conscious agitprop of Ken Loach or the late kitchen-sink realism of early Mike Leigh; as well as in the development of a stylized postimperial aesthetic in films such as *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), *Mona Lisa* (1985), *Playing Away* (1986), and, later, *The Crying Game* (1992). We could think, too, about Ealing comedies, Hammer horror, the Bond franchise, British gangster pictures, the heritage film, the British rom-com, feel-good films such as *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot*, the lock-stock-and-lad films of “Cool Britannia,” and so on. Although these films are all very different, they share an origin both in explicit reactions to the sexual, economic, and political displacements of the postwar period and in tacit reactions against the style and substance of the wartime cinema of the 1940s. Put differently, changes in British society after the war as well as cultural shifts in attitudes toward the war and its generation made it difficult to appreciate the aesthetic and critical achievement of the films discussed here, films that came to be seen as overly patriotic, hokey, merely eccentric, aesthetically aberrant, or oddly prudish. They are films that, with varying degrees of aesthetic success, try to reject, forget, or overcome the war; and insofar as they are efforts to forget war, they are, of course, about war, too.

Derek Jarman was one of the first British directors to look explicitly to the war cinema of the 1940s for aesthetic and technical inspiration. This is, in part, a result of where his personal history falls in relation to the larger
History of twentieth-century Britain. Jarman was born in 1942 and his father was a bomber pilot for the RAF, an experience that left a violent mark on his and his son’s life. Although Jarman came of age as an artist and as a gay man in the 1960s, the war and its character remained a strong presence in his thinking and his films:

Old RAF flying jackets, loaded pistols, medals and wartime souvenirs. They became my inheritance. I have never been anti-military in the way that some are, how could I be? My father fought a hard war. He fought Hitler, prosecuting the war with a violence that proved uncontainable. I don’t know how to solve that, but without men like my father the war would not have been won! After it was over, he carried on the war. It had destroyed his world. He had many friends who were killed, he laid his life on the line but survived. A terrible sadness invaded his life; at the end he became a kleptomaniac, and stole what he felt had been stolen from him.

For Jarman, the war was thus never entirely a thing of the past; it was rather an inheritance, a symptom, a problem, a violence uncontainable by history or by life. Unlike filmmakers who would try either to reject the war as a lie or to manage it as memorial, Jarman works to articulate a complicated relation to the war, its necessity, and its shame that recalls the complex position of the wartime films discussed here. As a result, Jarman was able to look back to and draw inspiration from filmmakers such as Powell and Pressburger (as well as from Kenneth Anger and Pier Paolo Pasolini) at a moment when that was not at all an obvious move. He wrote in 1984: “[T]here is only one English feature director whose work is in the first rank. Michael Powell is the only director to make a clear political analysis in his films, his work is unequalled. The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp is the finest English feature, and A Canterbury Tale and A Matter of Life and Death are not far behind.”

One can see Jarman’s debt to Powell, Olivier, and Lean in a number of ways: in a paradoxically radical traditionalism that mixes a melancholy appreciation for England’s past with a sharply experimental sense of social critique; in his characteristic mix of cool-headed political analysis and self-consciously overripe romanticism; in his sensitive ability to wed cinematic images and cuts with music and sound; in his pervasive sense that the violence of the present—in his case the social, homophobic violence of the Thatcher years—should not and cannot be seen as different in kind from the violence of the past. Indeed, this sense of a past war continuing to assert itself in the present runs throughout Jarman’s films. We might
think of his use of explicitly historical settings in films such as Edward II, Caravaggio, and Wittgenstein; in each case Jarman takes, understands, and expands on techniques that Olivier and Powell and Pressburger used in their historical—or, rather, historiographical—films not only to imagine the long and darker cultural history of England but also to radicalize that history by forcing the past into critical contact with the present.

This takes a couple of different forms for Jarman. On the one hand, we can think of these films as a species of antiheritage history film. Unlike the Merchant-and-Ivory model, Jarman’s presentations of the English past don’t offer it as a comfortably other place. Instead, he enlivens luminously queer moments of political conflict, aesthetic achievement, and philosophical investigation in order to show how our culture—at its best—has been and remains more than a little queer all along. One aspect of Jarman’s crucial influence on the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s is his use of the historical film to imagine and to trace a queer counterhistory of European culture. On the other hand, each of these films also works to show how the history of violence that would seem to be about its states of emergency—periods of civil unrest in early modern England and renaissance Italy, World War I, World War II, the collapse of the British welfare state under Thatcher, a long history of homophobia, the AIDS crisis—are in fact part of a continuous history that needs to be understood in terms of a critical and comparative historiography. In a way that once again recalls the films I’ve considered over the course of this book, Jarman’s films are an instance of a historical project that Walter Benjamin understood in similarly cinematic terms fifty years before: “Historical materialism must renounce the epic element in history. It blasts the epoch out of the reified ‘continuity of history.’ But it also explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins—that is, with the present.” And, indeed, more than any other filmmaker in Britain, Jarman’s cinema and, in particular, his early cinema is a political cinema of ruins.

Jubilee (1978) opens with a scene in which Queen Elizabeth I asks the court alchemist, John Dee, to entertain her with a vision of England’s future. He then conjures an angel, Ariel, who in turn reveals a future England run by punks, shock troops, and insane television execs. The shift from the present to the past is, at first glance, striking. Elizabeth’s drawing room is lit in a stark chiaroscuro style that recalls the paintings of Caravaggio while anticipating Jarman’s later experiments with black-box settings (in, for instance, his Caravaggio); however, as the film cuts suddenly to the dystopian future promised by the angel, a bombed-out, smoking London bathed in an even and harsh light, the shift seems to mark out a difference in kind
between the past and the future. As the film continues, that difference becomes more and more obscure. Jenny Runacre, the actor who played the renaissance queen returns as Bod, the cruelest and most cunning member of the girl gang that wreaks havoc throughout the film. In an early scene the gang’s resident intellectual (Jarman’s script refers to her as a “historian of the void”), Amyl Nitrate, offers a brief history lesson—asking, among other things, “Was Winston Churchill a hero?”—just before inadvertently shattering her commemorative Winston Churchill mug; when Elizabeth and John Dee look forward, Amyl looks back, throwing the film’s status as prophecy and history into question.8 Also, insofar as the film is a comment on the 1977 Silver Jubilee that stands proudly alongside The Sex Pistol’s “God Save the Queen” and The Clash’s “1977,” Jubilee is not only a comment on a particular queen; it is also a comment on a mode of political sovereignty that directly links the violence of the past, present, and future. It “gazes,” writes Michael O’Pray, “back into the past from the standpoint of contemporary England and then proceeds to create an image of the future.”9

Jarman shot some of Jubilee in parts of London that still bore the scars of the Blitz. At first glance, his future London thus resembles other period future-shock films that imagine a tomorrow in which cities have degenerated into different versions of a Hobbesian wilderness, including Planet of the Apes (1968), The Omega Man (1971), and Logan’s Run (1976). However, whereas those films imagined a canned future on storyboards and Hollywood backlots, Jarman pointedly looked for his future in the tenacious ruins
of World War II. If the critical force of Jarman’s film comes from its efforts to put an apparently sacred past into contact with a profane present, its London physically embodied a present unable to manage, memorialize, or undo, or, indeed, effectively to sacralize the past. Indeed, this London of significant and significantly forgotten rubble, of a present that can’t escape its past is Jarman’s London. Jarman’s ruined London returns even more poignantly in *The Last of England* (1989), a film which blends Super 8 scenes of another future England run by shock troops in balaclavas, riot cops, and barking German shepherds with found documentary footage of people walking to work, of fascist rallies, and of teeming cityscapes as well as with home movies of him, his sister, mother, and father during and after the war. As I said, Jarman’s father was an RAF bomber pilot, and the film is, among other things, an attempt to come to grips—as Powell and Pressburger, Olivier, and Lean did years before—with the difficult idea that a war could be both necessary and evil, and that violence tends to run past its ostensible historical and psychological bounds. Thinking of an apparently bucolic scene of him playing ball with his mother and sister, Jarman remarks: “[T]he film triggers memories. I see the camouflage, the barbed wire, and the H-blocks of my childhood; my sister Gaye, and myself playing ball on the lawns of RAF Abingdon, where my father was Station Commander—I’m six years old, it’s the summer of 1948.”

Jarman transferred all of these different types of film—different types that evoke the play between his memories of war and its aftermath—to
video, edited his film in that format, only to transfer it all back to 35mm stock. This was an incredibly laborious process in 1989. As a result, the film mixes its media, its histories, and its often violent imagery into a beautifully and erotically blurred continuity, a method that nicely embodies the film’s larger, complex sense of history as a set of confrontations between only apparently distinct types of desire, violence, loss, and, perhaps, recompense. As a result, *The Last of England* is Jarman’s most explicitly archeological project, one that sees the past, present, and future as sites to uncover and confront; instead of a trowel and brush, however, Jarman uses the aesthetic resources of cinema and, in particular, video to upset the memorial quiet of history. In addition to the distressed and fragile homogeneity of the film’s multiply transferred look, Jarman used the specific resources of video editing to cut time in a way that would have been impossible with film; this is especially visible in the film’s extended scene of an apocalyptic disco that seems to announce the apparent end of things with its volatile mix of sex, violence, and death: “The images in the disco are not arbitrary, although there is an element of chance in the way they rattle along. The cutting is staccato, and aggressive. It would not be possible to cut film this way, although theoretically you might attempt it. 1600 cuts in six minutes. The sequence crashes into the film unexpectedly, the pace is relentless. It should wind the audience. Why do I want to do this?”

Much of the film centers on the apparently aimless activity of a few tattooed boys as they wander through the persistent past-future rubble of London docks, masturbating, doing drugs, breaking rocks, setting off flares, and so on. In one striking scene, a shirtless boy beats, kicks, and finally grinds himself against a large reproduction of Caravaggio’s *Amor Vincit Omnia*. Insofar as the moment forces together a high point of the late renaissance, the lingering ruins of World War II, and the conceptual last of England, it is characteristic of Jarman’s political and aesthetic blend of the radical and the conservative: “Jarman’s hatred of Thatcherism was partly because her particular brand of Conservatism wasn’t actually conserving anything. Nevertheless, he remained deeply suspicious of the heritage industry, declaring an equal hatred for the way the Elizabethan past might be used to ‘castrate our vibrant present.’ His historical films were always meticulously researched but always included startling anachronisms such as the Frisbee in *Sebastiane* or the typewriter in *Caravaggio* which opened up the possibility of a living relationship between past, present, and future.” As with the wartime films I’ve looked at over the course of this book, Jarman’s films rely on anachronism as an especially powerful cinematic tool. Indeed, the London that Jarman films, a London that is a palpable mix of its wartime
past, its broken present, and the future that seems the likely and tragic result of that present, stands as a powerful argument about the historical and social tenacity of violence: “In The Last of England the devastation wrought by Margaret Thatcher’s social and economic policies is represented as a continuation of the Blitz as London burns before being reduced to rubble.”

Jarman’s most explicit reference to the cinema of the 1940s comes with War Requiem (1989), which is set as a kind of music video to a 1963 recording of Benjamin Britten’s piece of the same name. The film opens with a visibly frail Laurence Olivier in his final film appearance as the quasi-allegorical Old Soldier (he died only a few months later); a Nurse cares for Olivier’s character, adjusting his lap blanket and rolling him down the path of what appears to be a veterans’ rest home. As they move down the path, he fiddles with some medals, trying shakily to pin them to his cardigan zip-up sweater; we hear Olivier in voiceover, weakly reciting lines from Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting”:

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,  
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.  
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared  
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,  
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.  
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall;  
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.
The poem and the medals appear to evoke disparate, violent memories and thoughts in the Old Soldier as Jarman cuts to found footage of explosions, fires, stretchers, men carrying the wounded and the dead through trenches. Having, at last and with the help of the Nurse, pinned the medals to his chest, the Old Soldier looks directly into the camera, staring out toward the audience as memories, fantasies, and nightmares of the war begin to unfurl in a mix of 35mm, Super 8, and found documentary footage; his memories are somehow mixed in with what appear to be the experiences of the dead Owen and are juxtaposed with religious visions, quasi-allegorical passages, the wars of several decades as they were or would be seen on TV. The apparent disorder of the Old Soldier’s thoughts, as expressed in Jarman’s quick, disconcerting cuts, rhymes cannily with the “diabolic” harmonic interval (the tritone, flattened fifth, or “diabolus in musica”) upon which Britten’s score largely depends.

In Britten’s *War Requiem*, that tritonic interval both suggests the essential, timeless discord of war and, because it falls between more familiar tonalities, stands as yet another example the rabbit-duck effects that I’ve been tracing throughout this book. The tritone is, indeed, an importantly ambiguous effect within Western music, an amphibious harmonic relation that both resists and, in resisting, calls attention to the structure of conventional tonality. In Britten, it works to balance without resolving different aspects of war: its beauty and its squalor, its imagined order and its practical futility, its opportunity and its waste, its necessity and its great shame. Indeed, Britten’s own experience of the war offers another example of the doubleness I’ve described. Although Britten and his lover, Peter Pears, were pacifists and conscientious objectors, he understood his resistance to violence in the characteristically fraught structural terms of total war; he wrote in a 1942 statement with which he refused both combatant and noncombatant service: “I realize however that in total war, it is impossible to avoid all participation of an indirect kind but I believe I must draw the line as far away from direct participation as possible.”¹⁴ Like the wartime filmmakers discussed in this book, Britten understood World War II’s totality as a conceptual as well as a practical problem, one that he later sought to encode in the pull between a large and frankly lovely sense of order and a necessary, particular, bedeviling dissonance in his *War Requiem*.

Commissioned for the late reopening of Coventry Cathedral after its destruction in the war, Britten’s piece uneasily mixes the traditional Latin Mass of the Dead with Wilfred Owen’s World War I poetry in order to commemorate and criticize the violence of World War II; like the tritone, Britten’s broad and almost cinematic assemblage of nearly but finally not
incommensurate parts into a single act of remembrance invokes the official or memorial generality of war alongside the irreducible particularity of its violence and its loss. As Heather Wiebe writes, “The worldly experience of war arrives as if conjured from the space of the bell’s tritone, like a film close-up revealing the nature of this disruption.”¹⁵ Like the reconstructed cathedral—a new structure built around the paradoxically preserved ruins of what had been destroyed in 1940—Britten’s requiem uses a variety of quasi-cinematic tools—sudden shifts in volume that create the feel of close-ups, stylistic juxtapositions in the score and the libretto that create the critical effect of montage, and a tritone that invokes the more broadly anamorphic possibilities of cinema—to upset the official war memorial’s tendency not to help us remember but rather to let us forget.

It is clear that this is part of what Jarman heard in Britten’s piece, and his initial close-up of an aged and frail Olivier works to connect his film to the formal logic of Britten’s score as well as to the wartime films discussed in the previous chapters. Olivier’s presence as the quasi-allegorical Old Soldier recalls Powell and Pressburger’s effort to embody the similarly archetypal figure of Colonel Blimp, an aging warrior invoked to help understand a larger history of violence. Olivier was Powell and Pressburger’s first choice for the role of Clive Candy; they turned to Roger Livesy only when Churchill’s government refused to give Olivier leave from the Fleet Air Arm to make the film. As a result, Jarman seems in War Requiem to make good on the counterfactual promise of The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp,

The world at war.
imagining what might have happened if the government and the world had seen Powell and Pressburger and their films more clearly. Olivier’s look into the camera accompanied by a voiceover also recalls Olivier’s own shot of Henry’s vigil on the night before the battle of Agincourt in *Henry V*, a scene that attempts to synthesize exteriority and interiority, the theater and the cinema, the actor and the character, the body of the man and the idea of a king. Here, too, we listen as a voice quietly registers what’s happening behind a more or less static image of a face, a relation that promises some kind of compromise between inside and outside, past and present, memory and experience. That said, Olivier’s appearance in *War Requiem* also offers another, more critical account as it focuses our attention on the bodily particularity of the actor, in this case on the heartbreaking spectacle of Olivier’s really dying body, which brings to mind not the ideal presence of the hero-king-star but rather the excessively present, already ravaged body of Robert Newton as Pistol. As I argued, Newton’s unruly particularity provides a kind of counterpoint to Olivier’s ostensible effort to imagine and embody national unity in the body of the king. And, finally, like Lean’s *Brief Encounter*, *War Requiem* relies on the face for its narrative structure. As with Celia Johnson’s melancholy stare, Olivier’s face both authorizes and undermines the film’s coherence as an account of war and its effects. And, just as her face stood as a point where the past and the present of war were forced critically together, Olivier’s resists the tendency to memorialize war and thus to reduce it to a past understood as officially different from the present. Because it brings together the history of war and the history of cinema in Britain, Jarman’s casting of the aged Olivier is an argument about cinema, war, and the relation between the two.

Jarman identifies, shares, and adapts an argument about war and history that runs through my discussion of the films of Powell and Pressburger, Olivier, and Lean, an argument about the temporality of war and the character of its violence. Although the first half of *War Requiem* is filled with images associated with the memory and the memorialization of World War I—trenches, poppies, and Tommys—it turns in its second half to a more general and difficult argument about war. After following the winding path of the Old Soldier’s thoughts for over an hour, Jarman cuts abruptly back to Olivier’s face. Once again staring directly into the camera, he ushers in a late series of almost timeless violent images: cities burning, fantasies of ritual sacrifice, and, most strikingly, documentary footage taken from other wars, including World War II, the Vietnam War, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, and civil wars in Africa. These images are brutal, and, while they bear the traces of their particular moments in space and time, they are cut together
in such a way as to identify what remains tragically the same from war to war: the degradation, the loss, the reduction of persons to things, and an overall sense of the tremendous, tragic waste of war.

Like the films discussed in this book, Jarman’s *War Requiem* is both an effort to reckon with and to represent a particular experience of a particular war and a meditation on general modes of human violence that must exceed the terms of any one war. The film thus brings together several different registers: a sense of commemoration, an enigmatic personal and aesthetic “reparation” for personal loss, a feeling of outrage at the horror of war, and a pointed if tacit response to the AIDS crisis in Britain as well as to Jarman’s own recent diagnosis. Jarman discovered he had the disease while making *The Last of England*, and he dedicated *War Requiem* “In my heart . . . to all those cast out, like myself from Christendom. To my friends who are dying in a moral climate created by a church with no compassion.”

Later, he both complicated and clarified his sense of the film’s contemporary significance: “So, yes, it is my AIDS film . . . but it’s not. I leave that to others. The film’s as ungrounded as possible so it remains an open situation, so people can put their own interpretation on parts of it.”

Jarman thought of *War Requiem* as a film with its own particular and particularly difficult relation to aboutness, a relation that emerges from the uncertain space between Britain’s long military past and the social violence of its present. It is a film about World War I, World War II, the Vietnam War, and the war in Afghanistan, just as it is a film about war poetry, beauty, and love; memory, religion, and
Thatcher’s rise; the collapse of the welfare state, homophobia, the AIDS crisis, and more. The film works, in other words, to reveal ideological, psychic, and historical tensions that emerge when wars are memorialized and the human tendency toward violence is imagined as merely atavistic, as backward, as someone else’s or some other time’s problem. As Jarman saw in the midst of his own political emergency, violence against bodies, against ideals, against futures isn’t limited to this or that war; and, insofar as he pursues that argument cinematically, he draws on techniques, styles, and ideas that Powell and Pressburger, Olivier, and Lean developed in their own deeply self-conscious wartime films. This ability to think both about a particular political situation and about the nature of violence and history writ large is, I maintain, the real and specifically cinematic achievement of some films made in Britain between 1939 and 1945; and although this sense of cinema’s critical capacity was made possible by the particular experience of World War II, it has not been and must not be limited to this or that war.