

# So Mayer's *A Nazi Word For A Nazi Thing* (2020)

## Review

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I think I saw Derek Jarman's *Blue* in a gallery in Stockholm, but don't quote me on that. I remember sitting down on a very comfortable institutional sofa, and I remember falling asleep. What I didn't know then about Jarman I know now, not through seeing but reading, with Jarman's work catalogued in the library of all the things which aren't books but which are discovered in them. In *A Nazi Word for a Nazi Thing*, So Mayer reads the skywriting of queer cinema, reassuring us: "When it comes to queer film, iron-ically, you have to read to see it" (157). Mayer "screens" many of these "difficult-to-impossible to QUILTBAG films" (113) in the book. "QUILTBAG" (queer, intersex, lesbian, trans, bisexual, asexual and gay) takes the place of LGBTQIA following lesbian authors Nicola Griffith and Kelley Eskridge's re-stitching. I welcome any reminder that queerness must resist assimilation: that each LGTBQIA-ing must continually rearrange itself into a QUILTBAG to avoid resembling a flag. While reading/watching, I came up with a drag show I'll never *perform* but will write about (here I am!) called The Earl Drag Kings, where I get a band together and we do a cover of Earl King's 'Trick Bag' called 'QUILT BAG'. We shake and boogie – *I said, saw you kissin' Willie across the fence – I heard you tellin' Willie I don't have no sense – The way you been actin' is such a drag – You done put me in a QUILT-BAG!* – and everyone roars when we really ham up the word '*drrrraaggg*'. It would really be a laugh-riot. I won't say you had to be

there because you won't. You most likely won't get the chance, it being a small venue and us only having the impetus to do it once. And even if someone filmed it and intended to make a documentary of us called *Earl Drag King Dreams* it'd never be shown. You'd have to read about it. Mayer quotes Dorian Corey, "Mother of the House of Corey", in *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990) on "reading" in Ball culture, "the art of the insult" (77–78), which brings flaws to the fore and necessitates an interrogative looking. "Folded time is not soft; it cannot soften the erasures and their terror," Mayer states, "it can only resist them by insisting we face them" (118). Folded time, Mayer explains, sets "itself against the imperative, folded time explores and values the subjunctive, a grammar of the speculative that cannot erase erasure, but can refuse its totality" (59).

The potential of thinking with the subjunctive is one of the larger elucidations woven into Mayer's necessarily complex back-pocket tome among many smaller, but for me, just as expansive, revelations. Often these smaller moments arrive at the end of sentences, a tribute to the uncompromised intent in Mayer's writing: "Like Pasolini, he openly depicted queer communities and desires, the suppression of which persisted long after the end of the war" (124). *Long after the end of the war!* On the day war stopped the degenerates did not regenerate, the unclassifiable were not suddenly classified and that classification was not in that instant embraced and celebrated: oh what a lovely quiltbag! caught on the air and drifting and look! Oh! Ricky Fitts – *It was one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing and there's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it. Right? And this bag was just dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid, ever. Video's a poor excuse, I know. But it helps me remember... I need to remember... Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can't take it, and my heart is just going to cave in* – and the quiltbag blooms and sucks, travels like a jellyfish through the air and the filmmaker captures it on video, lest we forget. (If you haven't seen *American Beauty* please don't watch it.) That's the second part of the drag show you'll never see, when we take off our Earl Drag King looks and red petals fall from under our wigs like a *Drag Race* finale and someone butchly holds a leaf blower under a quiltbag and it drifts over the heads of the audience and someone pretends to Super 8 it and someone yells – *Jane, he's a freak* – and someone replies – *But so am I* – and the audience joins in and we shout out together – *And we'll always be freaks and we'll never be like other people, and you'll never be a freak 'cause you're just ... too perfect!!!* And we dance to 'Last Chance Blue Print' by Rise Against and go

home thinking about *chances* and *lasting* and the colour *blue* which I think I saw in a gallery somewhere but which I most definitely fell asleep in front of.

*Blue* is a daring swoon of a film, a challenge and an assertion as fabulous as drag. But it has been positioned as a monument that is at once a memorial to an individual, and (against its intention) a celebration of the ‘progressive’ state and institutions which never supported the filmmaker while he was alive. When it is pinned in the gallery, no one has to listen to the formidable soundtrack, only drift past the lightbox-like screen. In being only seen within that frame – without its context, including knowledge of the liveness of its original performance – the film’s power is diminished and contained (114).

On reading this, I think that the most radical response I could have had to Jarman’s film contextualised in a self-congratulatory arts institution was to fall asleep on the broad self-congratulatory arts institution couch. *Not like this*, my sleep exclaimed, as well as rendering the whole thing much more intimate than the arts institution (which one was it!?) ever could. In sleeping, I closed my eyes to the *imperative* of it, in so doing opening up a subjunctive space of imagining. That is, I didn’t refuse to look, but fell into a state of un-looking which also accesses a world of possibility – a folded, subjunctive grammar of the speculative (59). In sleep I (accidentally) refused the repositioning of the film and entered the imaginary world of documentary. This excites me! Mayer’s biggest offering in the book is the opening up of documentary to the imaginary, and highlighting specifically the role of the writer to “show”. The telling of the visual is a valuable and creatively rich subjunctive theatre for an expansive future of queer literature. When my first reaction is to stop capturing as a response to the way in which capturing on film can render more invisible than is shown, grabbing certain moments by the ear and dragging them with us to make examples of them in history, Mayer’s subjunctive possibility offers a much more generative response, delving into the “anarchive, perhaps of untaken photographs and destroyed films” (144).

I see it everywhere now, how all the books I’ve so enjoyed these last few years have held me somewhere between the imperative and the subjunctive. And that this holding has been on texts, a kind of buoyancy upon the writing which allows us to fully explore what we haven’t seen. Mayer continues the queer scholarly work of critiquing origins and razing binaries, but gives new legs to these queer foundries (generative foundations, solidifying processes) in this return to the textual as film, as performance, as artwork.

One such novel is by Jordy Rosenberg. *Confessions of the Fox* (2018) expands on a congress of queer and postmodern literary form in which the researcher's life encroaches upon the research. Rooting around in the queer archives, Rosenberg's protagonist reaches a new plain of historicity called "the stretches" (2018: 266), which speaks exactly to Mayer's blue ache. On another couch, Mayer recalls watching *Blue* at home on Channel 4: "my fifteen-year-old self, watching *Blue* in gratitude and grief and bewilderment. Aching." (119). Derrida's feverishness over the archive is better expressed for Mayer as an "ache":

The archive captures the act of erasure and – and herein lies the aching possibility – a flaming trace of that which it tried to erase. Attending to the trace, the possibility, is the repeated work felt as an ache for what has been lost. A persistent ache can push you to stretch, and stretching can release deep feelings of grief and rage. These motivate an urgency to learn more and to continue the work in the present; and, in order to do so, to fold time so that there is – even if only imaginatively – more past work, more that was made and that survived in order to sustain us (58–59).

Rosenberg's archival stretch and Mayer's persistent ache which leads to the stretch are engagements with embodied research, the embodied-ness enabling grander stretches of history for future infoldings.

Mayer's book breaks down epistemic solids in a *gutsy* way, subjunctively returning to the burnt history of Magnus Hirschfeld's Institut für Sexualwissenschaft to redigest sexology that is, to re-view the relationship between (a word which implies too much distance) sexology and the body.

Unlike sexology, *Sexualwissenschaft* – looked at again – could mean something like sexuality as a way of doing research; even, prefiguring the work of Michel Foucault, sexuality as an epistemology, a way of knowing. *Sexualwissenschaft* may have combined sociology, psychology, philology, archaeology and literary criticism to do cultural history, but it did so primarily through the repertoire: the lived experience of sexual and gender dissidence (78–79).

In so doing, the certainty of "science", of "documentary", are processed through the body, the queer body specifically, and Mayer joins in queer scholarly conversation with Elizabeth Freeman's erotohistography and, most excitingly for me, Zohar Wieman-Kelman's eroto-philology, whose exploration into the

textuality of Yiddish through time brings me to my next seemingly simply realisation from the book: *or both!*

“A silent black-and-white Biblical epic, *Lot in Sodom* was made in 1933 by Watson and Melville Webber, alongside a number of crew members who had fled Eastern Europe because they were queer and Jewish or both” (61–62). *Or both*. Why did I never think of that? As a “both” myself I have only ever imagined the Holocaust as a Jew. Me and the other Jewish boy (also queer) in my sixth form were the only two to go on a free trip to Auschwitz. Was no one else interested? Did they think it wasn’t about them? That somehow the two gay Jews and the Holocaust they’d “doubly” escaped (7) weren’t the little spoon to their big, that we didn’t hold and shape each other, the same way queerness and Jewishness interact in Mayer’s book? Until reading *A Nazi Word for a Nazi Thing* my Holocaust remembering/memorialising had made me feel like a Jew, but Mayer’s book made me feel like both. The bothness speaks of course to an embodied coalition, the intersectional as contained first within the body and separated out into discourses second, but Mayer pays attention to the gaps which seeing coalition as a unified body (eg my body) can smooth over. Much of my academic life has been floundering in the gaps between a queer and a Jew and trying to cobble together a path which connects the two. I don’t know why. Maybe because queerness’s “potential for interconnection in solidarity has been repeatedly fractured by attempted erasures”. Or maybe it’s because Jewishness’s “potential for interconnection in solidarity has been repeatedly fractured by attempted erasures” or maybe because the sameness doesn’t dispel the difference between the two.

Mayer recognises – like I recognise my own position in Mayer’s – “the anarchic aspects of thinking with a body” and, to quote them fully, recognises “the anarchic aspects of thinking with a body of work that feels disparate because its potential for interconnection in solidarity has been repeatedly fractured by attempted erasures.” (147). The refrain to Mayer’s *A Nazi Word for a Nazi Thing* tells us there was something we should have seen but didn’t: “It is a video you are not allowed to see. No one is allowed to see it.” (130). Each section starts with a version of it: you can’t see *this* or *this* or *this* or *this*, Mayer tells us, defiantly showing through telling.

## WORKS CITED

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