

Wittgenstein
UK 1993
75 mins

Directed by **Derek Jarman**
Written by **Ken Butler, Terry Eagleton and Derek Jarman**
Edited by **Budge Tremlett**
Original music by **Jan Latham-Koenig**
Art Direction by **Annie la Paz**
Costume Design by **Sandy Powell**
Produced by **Tariq Ali, Takashi Asai, Ben Gibson and Eliza Mellor**

Cast

Clancy Chassay Young Wittgenstein;
Jill Balcon Leopoldine Wittgenstein;
Sally Dexter Hermine Wittgenstein;
Gina Marsh Gretyl Wittgenstein;
Vanya Del Borgo Helene Wittgenstein;
Ben Scantlebury Hans Wittgenstein;
Howard Sooley Kurt Wittgenstein;
David Radzinowicz Rudolf Wittgenstein; **Jan Latham-Koenig** Paul Wittgenstein; **Tony Peake** Tutor; **Michelle Wade** Tutor; **Tanya Wade** Tutor; **Roger Cook** Tutor; **Anna Campeau** Tutor; **Mike O'Pray** Tutor; **Nabil Shaban** Martian; **Karl Johnson** Ludwig Wittgenstein; **Michael Gough** Bertrand Russell; **Tilda Swinton** Lady Ottoline Morrell; **Donald McInnes** Hairdresser; **Hussein McGraw**; **Chris Hughes**; **Budge Tremlett**; **Aisling Magill** Schoolgirl; **Perry Kadir**; **John Quentin** Maynard Keynes; **Kevin Collins** Johnny; **Lynn Seymour** Lydia Lopokova; **Ashley Russell** Student; **Stuart Bennett**; **David Mansell** Student; **Steven Downes** Student; **Peter Fillingham** Student; **Fayez Samara** Student; **Samantha Cones**; **Kate Temple**; **Sarah Graham**; **Layla Alexander Garrett** Sophie Janovskaya

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Wittgenstein



For he talks nonsense, numerous statements makes
Forever his own vow of silence breaks
Ethics, aesthetics, talks of day and night, and calls things good or bad, and wrong or right
Who on any issue ever saw Ludwig refrain from laying down the law?
In every company he shouts us down and stops our sentence stuttering his own
Unceasing argues, harsh, irate and loud, some that he's right and of his rightness proud
Such faults are common, shared by all in part, but Wittgenstein pontificates on art.

Julian Bell

An Epistle on the Subject of the Ethical and Aesthetic Beliefs of Herr Ludwig Wittgenstein

If the genre of the philosophical biopic existed, then Derek Jarman's 1993 *Wittgenstein* would surely be one of its odder examples; as it is, the film practically defines the territory. Even emerging from among Jarman's characteristic English camp and butch nudes, the film must still mark the Austrian philosopher's most determined entry into popular culture.

Wittgenstein was scripted by Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton and directed by Jarman shortly before his death in 1994. Eagleton's quotation-rich script is matched by Jarman's lush settings: against a black sound stage, all the detail is in the costumes. As Bertrand Russell's lover Ottoline Morrell, Tilda Swinton splendidly appears in several different coloured versions of the same outlandish feathered costume. A welter of Merchant Ivory costumes and grand pianos symbolising Wittgenstein's wealthy and suffocating youth in Vienna gives way to an interwar Cambridge in which young men dressed for cricket sit before Wittgenstein's blackboard in deckchairs, scenes that somehow always carry a touch of the 1980s with them.

The film's most intriguing pairing, however, is that of Wittgenstein the child and Wittgenstein the adult. The young Wittgenstein nonchalantly introduces himself as a prodigy before cheerfully conversing with a Martian about whether, if humans and philosophers both have ten toes, a Martian can be a philosopher. While young Wittgenstein is at ease arguing from first principles, the older Wittgenstein is more tortured, an unlikely gay icon at Cambridge, adored more for his own personal intensity than his radically reductive philosophy.

Ultimately, though, Jarman's *Wittgenstein* is tortured less by his homosexuality than by the tension between simultaneously exercising his philosophical and moral mind, and trying to live (and love) as a human being.

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In itself this is an irony, as it was exactly Wittgenstein's point (at least as expressed in the film) that our consciousness, and thereby any philosophy we may possess, is ineluctably forged by our material and cultural existence. "If you'd just allow yourself to be a little more sinful you'd stand a chance of salvation," Maynard Keynes tells Wittgenstein. And so too, Jarman implies, if we were a little less philosophical, our chances of comprehending the world might improve.

Wittgenstein's logic

At the end of the nineteenth century, philosophy in the English-speaking world took a turn towards logic. Formal logic had already resolved some troubling questions in mathematics, so its application to other problems seemed natural. Many philosophers at this time, including Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein, initially trained as mathematicians.

Logic governs the rules of rational thought. Its most basic form, the syllogism, takes a familiar shape: All cheeses are dairy products; cheddar is a cheese, therefore cheddar is a dairy product. This can be further reduced to: All A are B; C is an A, therefore C is B. Logic studies these formal shapes of analysis, rather than the cheesy content, and any argument of this form is, in some sense, a 'good argument'

Since Descartes in the early 17th century, mathematics was the only field of human endeavour in which certainty seemed possible. Gottlob Frege attempted to set all mathematics on a firm and logical basis with his *Foundations of Arithmetic* in 1893 (he failed: Bertrand Russell found a fatal flaw in Frege's system, now known as Russell's Paradox). The quest for a set of universal laws of thought was potentially revolutionary, opening up new vistas for mathematics, clarifying methods of thinking about philosophical problems and ultimately paving the way for the invention of the modern computer.

Wittgenstein published only one book in his lifetime, the brief and enigmatic *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Its title suggests a work in the tradition of Frege and Russell, as does its layout and numbered sections. The *Tractatus*, however, contains a systematic account of how language relates to the world. Though the 'picture theory' that Wittgenstein proposes is now largely discredited, the sharpness of his insight lasts: the realisation, for example, that the relationship between a picture and what it represents can't itself be the subject of a picture.

Wittgenstein's posthumously published works, a small number of books including the famous *Philosophical Investigations*, are less systematic than the *Tractatus*, but they contain many astonishing ideas, things that seem obvious once you read them but had never been mentioned before. Crucially, these works expand Wittgenstein's interests from the *Tractatus*, in which language is used solely to describe facts, to cover all kinds of social interactions in which words appear: what he called 'language games'.

English-speaking philosophy in the decades following the Second World War was dominated by Wittgenstein's legacy. His influence might be divided into two areas. Firstly, a shift in emphasis from logical notation and formal analysis to the underlying structures of the things we say and do with ordinary language and behaviour. Secondly, an interest in the boundaries of what it is possible to think or say coherently, something already present in the preface to the *Tractatus*.

Today, unlike in the 1950s when no self-respecting Oxford don read Husserl, but all knew Wittgenstein, his place in the history of ideas has more context, especially in its connections with phenomenology. Like Shakespeare, Wittgenstein remains a figure whose work is reinterpreted, reclaimed and reframed by each new generation.

Programme notes by Danny Birchall & Rich Cochrane