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Author(s)	Steve Warren
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## 'Caravaggio' Reviewed

Summer is really over. After a static September, new films are suddenly as plentiful as new TV series and the Regency marquees seem to change as often as the Strand's.

Unfortunately, my editor would only give me space to review *Caravaggio*.

### PAINT QUEEN

With *Caravaggio* gay writer-director Derek Jarman advances from outrageous cult filmmaker (*Sebastiane*, *Jubilee*) to misunderstood genius. Whether your expertise is in Renaissance painting, 20th century cinema, or unrecorded church history, if you tell me you understand what's going on in this movie I'll call you a liar.

Certain things are more or less clear. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Nigel Terry) is on his deathbed, nursed by his apprentice Jerusaleme (Spencer Leigh), whom he bought as a child. Flashbacks show us scenes from the painter's life. As a teenager (Dexter Fletcher, who looks like the young Mick Jagger) he arrived in Rome as a street artist and hustler. "I'm an art object and very expensive," he tells a client in both Italian and English.

Patronized by Cardinal Del Monte (Michael Gough), Caravaggio achieves a certain amount of security and recognition, yet lives a lusty, violent life. His models are the street people of the day and he thinks nothing of posing whores as saints.



**Fight! Fight! — Boys will be boys in *Caravaggio***

Attracted by the gambler Ranuccio (Sean Bean, a Dolph Lundgren-type) in a tavern, Caravaggio hires the man to pose for him. They become lovers. Ranuccio's mistress, the prostitute Lena (Tilda Swinton), also poses for and beds with Caravaggio until she is murdered and he paints her one last time. Caravaggio kills Ranuccio in a fight, and four years later he dies.

Those are the events in a film in which style is more important than content, yet they are inseparable. The lighting approximates that of the paintings of Caravaggio, the father of chiaroscuro. Sound effects suggest much that is going on outside camera range. Anachronisms abound, from clothing and vehicles to publications, a pocket calculator and the Royal typewriter on which a bitter rival painter decries a "conspiracy between church and gutter," his own words giving him an

orgasm (not unusual in this business).

The Catholic church is painted as gay and greedy, "prepared to turn a blind eye to Sodom providing you make it worth it." The pope greets Caravaggio lisping, "I hear you're a rascal. One of the family."

In other areas Jarman is remarkably coy. Models for nude subjects are shown posing covered, and sex is only talked about, never shown. The closest thing to pornography is a passage from the literary narration that runs through Caravaggio's head to our ears as he lies dying.

Even with a more detailed synopsis you'll have trouble following *Caravaggio*, but it's too beautiful a piece of cinema to dismiss. I recommend it to those who liked *Mishima*, who don't mind meeting a work of art more than halfway to get what they can out of it. (Castro)