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He's Not There: *Velvet Goldmine* and the (in) Authentic Specter(s) of Bowie

Named after a relatively obscure David Bowie outtake, *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) is an audacious film, which divided critics and audiences alike. Inspired by David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust persona, the film provides a complex account of glam rock as a cultural phenomenon, identifying its major motifs and aporias with specific reference to questions of history and identity. This paper will argue that the film functions as a locus for understanding Glam Rock’s genealogy and its relationship to celebrity fandom with specific reference to the discourse of (in)authenticity, and the phantasmagoric representation of Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust.

The film begins with an epigraph: ‘Although what you are about to see is a work of fiction, it should nevertheless be played at maximum volume.’ As any self-respecting Bowie fan knows, this is a playful reference to the quotation inscribed on Bowie’s *Ziggy Stardust* album. The epigraph signals the film’s fictional status while making an explicit connection with Bowie and his Ziggy Stardust persona. The epigraph is followed by an image of the night sky with a plethora of stars. We see what looks like a shooting star move across the screen while a female narrator speaks the following words: ‘Histories, like ancient ruins, are the fictions of empires. While everything forgotten hangs in dark dreams of the past, ever threatening to return.’ These auspicious lines signal Todd Haynes’ skepticism towards the authority of history and, paradoxically, his intent to produce a forgotten history of sorts, one that recalls the spirits of Glam Rock’s non-musical forebears. The shooting star explodes in a series of sparks (presumably descending to earth as stardust). The next shot shows a spaceship leaving earth having just deposited an infant at the doorstep of a Georgian townhouse in Dublin in the year 1854 — the year of Oscar Wilde’s birth. The camera shows the surprised servants of the grand house who gather around the child. The next shot is a close-up on the child who is wrapped in a blanket. A luminous emerald green pin is attached to the infant’s pinafore, and this image dissolves into a sequence that shows a series of schoolchildren in an Irish classroom in 1862. The camera tracks past a series of young faces, and lingers long enough for us to see and hear them talk about their future ambitions. Most of the children proclaim their desire for conventional occupations with phrases like ‘I want to be a farmer’ or ‘I want to be a barrister.’ The last child is the young Oscar Wilde who states that when he grows up he ‘wants to be a pop idol.’ Of course the real Oscar Wilde never uttered any such thing, but one David Jones of Bromley, London, England apparently did make such a statement — David Jones subsequently changed his name to avoid being confused with Davy Jones of the Monkees, a manufactured band pilloried for their inauthenticity (Clover). The film immediately cuts to an English schoolyard in 1955 and we see a group of young boys beating up one of their peers, the effete Jack Fairy. After taking his beating, Jack lies face down in the dirt. He notices a small object partially covered by the soil. It turns out to be the baby Oscar’s emerald pin. While inspecting his wounded mouth, the young boy notices he has a cut lip. He smears the blood like
lipstick, and smiles at his reflection in the mirror — it as though the emerald pin gives Jack Fairy the confidence and inspiration to embrace difference.

The pin is a recurring motif in the film, and it symbolically connects Wilde with the Velvet Goldmine’s other ‘pop idol’ characters, even though they are separated in time by more than 70 years. This is the film’s first genealogical move. Todd Haynes researched his film meticulously, and found that until 1998 there ‘were no books about the glam rock as a coherent movement’ (Haynes xii). While there was a formidable body of press commentary and fan magazine stories about Glam and its major exponents, Haynes is correct in noting that the movement has attracted a paucity of serious cultural criticism. This lacunae in knowledge was soon filled by Haynes himself through the release of his film, the publication of its screenplay, and the appearance of Barney Hoskyn’s book, Glam!, which was commissioned to tie in with the release of Velvet Goldmine. Glam! provides a skeletal, but compelling, account of its titular subject, and clearly supports and complements the film. In many ways, Velvet Goldmine inaugurates a renewed popular and scholarly interest in the glam rock phenomenon by drawing attention to what was then a relatively neglected genre. Hoskyns claims that Glam, up to the last few years of the 20th century at least, was in danger of being forgotten: ‘with a few exceptions, glam would ultimately fall through the cracks of pop-cultural memory, dispersed and absorbed by gay disco and straight heavy metal, and punctuated by Bowie and Lou Reed’s apparent disavowal of their homosexual pasts’ (ix). So, why do Haynes and Hoskyns think Glam (and Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust persona) worthy of attention? First and foremost Glam, in their view, provided a cultural space that openly celebrated queer identities. As Hoskyn’s notes,

For a brief time pop culture would proclaim that identities and sexualities were not stable things but quivery and costumed, and rock and roll would paint its face and turn the mirror around, inverting in the process everything in sight (xi).

Of course, popular music since the advent of early rock and roll in the 1950s had always unsettled hetero-normative identities. Both Elvis Presley and Little Richard wore make-up and adopted flamboyant, theatrical stage personas. In the 1960s, the ‘flower power’ wing of the counterculture also superficially unsettled stable gender identities through unisex hairstyles and fashions, but there is only so much that kaftans, beads and long hair could do to dislodge the dominant machismo attitudes that characterized the rock culture of the 50s and 60s. Glam is distinctive, if one accepts the narrative proffered by Haynes and Hoskyns, in its overt promotion of queer sexuality, but this is not the only reason why the movement is of interest to artists and scholars. The film is also, as I have already indicated, about history and memory. One of the most admirable things about Velvet Goldmine lies in its treatment of Glam’s historical antecedents, which extend well beyond the realms of popular music culture. This is why the figure of Oscar Wilde, whose spirit animates the film, is so crucial. In the interview that preface’s the film’s published screenplay, Haynes observes that many of the artist’s associated with the Glam movement,
were both looking backward into history — into Hollywood references, nostalgia, Valentino, etc — and looking forward into Kubrickesque futurism. That’s what David Bowie did at the time — he was becoming a human Xerox machine, pulling constant references and recompiling them, condensing them, distilling them down into his own narrative diagram which became Ziggy Stardust […] Obviously in this process of recombining and reconstructing the notion of truth [and] authenticity gets lost (xiii).

In equating Oscar Wilde with the Alien, Haynes gives form to Glam’s dual vision, its embrace of past and future, which takes us back to the film’s first lines. The film’s opening sequence is not merely acknowledging its debt to Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust, but underscoring a much older current, or spirit that flows through history, apparently disappearing, only to return with vengeance. The emerald broach, which pulsates with an otherworldly glow is mounted in an ornate 19th century frame, also literally represents this historical vision. This is why Oscar Wilde as an alien functions as such an apt and powerful patron of Glam since he is, in some ways, the first of a new (alien) species. Michel Foucault famously declared that the homosexual as a distinct personality type did not appear until the 19th century. In a much-quoted passage from The History of Sexuality, volume one, Foucault argues, ‘Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species’ (43). Obviously, this is not to say that people did not engage in homosexual acts before the nineteenth century. Rather, before the 19th century ‘the homosexual’ as a category of identity did not exist. It was not possible to identify oneself or others as homosexual, bi-sexual or polymorphously perverse. Oscar Wilde as Glam’s alien progenitor is a brilliant artistic conceit — and one that is consistent with Foucault’s argument about the emergence of homosexual identity.

Of course, Wilde was not the only 19th century gentleman who embodied this new personality type. Wilde is merely the poster boy for a more widespread social phenomenon connected to the literary movements of aestheticism and decadence, which are commonly associated with the figure of the Dandy. In his book, The British Pop Dandy, Stan Hawkins sees this figure as ‘a creature of alluring elegance, vanity and irony, who plays with conventions to his own end. At the same time he is someone whose transient tastes never shirk from excess, protest or rebellion’(15). Hawkins sees the Dandy as an outside obsessed with a revolt through personal style. Here Hawkins echoes Albert Camus’ characterization of the Dandy as Rebel — ‘The dandy is, by occupation, always in opposition. He can only exist by defiance’ (51). The Dandy, in his account, self-consciously adopts poses and embraces artificiality and theatricality as key markers of identity — Charles Baudelaire, one of the major French proponents of dandyism remarked that ‘the dandy must aspire to be sublime without interruption; he must live and sleep before a mirror’ (Seigel 98-99). Aestheticism also celebrated artificiality and questioned ‘authenticity’ as a cultural value. This interest in the artificial is manifest in the writings of Walter Pater, the most prominent exponent of British aestheticism in the 19th Century and a former
Velvet Goldmine is a dense, multi-layered film that probes Glam as a cultural and political phenomenon without trying to provide a definitive account of its meaning. As is well known, Haynes intended to use David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust era music, but Bowie withheld his permission because he reputedly did not like the film’s script, and had plans to make his own movie about the Ziggy Stardust era (the film is yet to emerge some 15 years later). In any case, Haynes never intended to make a conventional biopic about David Bowie —Bowie’s literal absence from film was always going to function as a ‘structuring absence.’ That is, a point of reference around which Haynes weaves his take on the Glam phenomenon, and represents a symbiotic relationship between celebrity pop stars and their fans. The film is saturated with intertextual references to cinema history —Haynes includes references to Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange (1971) and includes a self-referential ‘doll’ sequence that refers to his first foray into the celebrity biopic, Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story (1987). However, Haynes uses Citizen Kane (1941) as a structural template — Velvet Goldmine sets up an investigation into a Bowie-like rock star by a journalist, a former fan, Arthur Stuart, played by Christian Bale. Haynes wanted the film to have ‘a really strong fan point of view,’ so the Arthur character is included ‘as a reminder of our place in the cycle of pop and consumer culture, that we’re really central to it’ (xvii).

Arthur interviews the key players in the life of Brian Slade, a former rock star who embodies many of Bowie’s key characteristics as a performer and Glam icon. Like Bowie, Slade begins his career as a somewhat fey, hippie folk rocker strumming acoustic songs to a hostile and disinterested audience. He later finds success by creating a space alien persona, Maxwell Demon, an obvious pastiche of Ziggy Stardust. Haynes recreates several of the iconic Bowie images from this era, including a version of the famous ‘fellatio’ shot of Bowie ‘going down’ on Mick Ronson’s guitar. Despite these references to Bowie, Slade, like most of the characters in the film is a composite figure — there are elements of glam’s dandy forebears in Demon (Haynes puts a number of well-known quotations in the mouths of his characters. For example, at one point Slade turns to his wife, Mandy Slade, clearly modeled on Angela Bowie, and says, ‘I wish I’d thought of that,’ and Mandy completes the quotation with the response, ‘You will, Brian, you will’ — this echoes the famous exchange between the painter James Whistler and Oscar Wilde).
The character of Curt Wilde is an even more complex mélange of pop icons — Wilde, played by Ewan McGregor, mimics Iggy Pop’s stage act, and also functions as a stand-in for Lou Reed, whose 60s band, The Velvet Underground, Bowie paid homage to in the song ‘Queen Bitch’ (Bowie famously used his celebrity cache to produce and promote Reed’s best selling album, Transformer). Just to complicate matters further, Wilde physically resembles the 90s grunge icon, Kurt Cobain. Arthur strongly identifies with Slade, and the film regularly flashes back to the Arthur’s adolescence in the 1970s, and shows him developing a Glam persona inspired by Brian Slade. This persona allows him to express his homosexuality, but alienates him from his family — Arthur is traumatized by his family’s overt homophobia, and finds himself in the image and music of Slade and his Glam cohorts, for the movement was about sound and vision. This past time contrasts with the film’s present — a 1980s world of Orwellian menace and austerity. This temporal contrast is an important element of the film’s narrative, and its larger intellectual ambitions. As Hoskyns observes, ‘for a brief time pop culture would proclaim that identities and sexualities were not stable things but quivery and costumed, and rock and roll would paint its face and turn the mirror around, inverting in the process everything in sight’ (66); however, this period did not last, and the film is at pains to point out how conventional gender hierarchies and hetero-normative hegemony were reinstated in the 1980s. It is also through Arthur that Haynes juxtaposes the overly public display of the sexuality of his celebrity characters with the private sexuality of the fan (Haynes, xvii).

These artistic choices make it easy to categorize Haynes as a postmodern filmmaker, and his engagement with queer identity politics invites critics to typecast Haynes as the doyen of the new queer cinema. Both these characterizations of Haynes are valid and can be legitimated with reference to his oeuvre — his films certainly raise questions about the nature of sexual identity. As Helen Darby notes, ‘Haynes’s depiction of the emergence of gay male sexuality, as inextricable from previous mediations and fantasies, gives us a parable of all identity as constructed and performative’ (336). I have argued elsewhere, with Carolyn D’Cruz, that it is also possible to examine Haynes’ films with reference to the logic of ‘hauntology’ — a neologism coined by Derrida, which furthers his sustained critique of the metaphysics of presence — that is, the idea that nothing can be fully present in and of itself because of the play of signification (320). The logic of hauntology involves a reckoning with ghosts — figures that are simultaneously present and absent, dead and alive, here and not here, material and immaterial.

The neologism bears a close sounding resemblance to the word ontology, whose philosophical domain is concerned with the question of ‘what is’ and being. While the ontological status of the ghost is usually excluded from reality and discarded to the realm of the incredulously supernatural, the hauntological challenges the very idea that the status of ‘what is’ can be given over to situating the presence of reality in its actuality; this is to say, any attempt at situating what is actual in the here and now is inescapably entangled in directions of there, then, and ‘to-come’ (D’Cruz and D’Cruz, 326).

Hauntology, then, speaks to a dis-adjusted temporality — the film makes no clear distinction between past, present and future, and the specters associated with the heritage of Glam — Wilde, Pater, Rimbaud, Reed, Pop, and Bowie himself appear as
unearthly (alien) figures that the film’s characters ventriloquize literally and figuratively. Of course, Bowie is not literally represented in Velvet Goldmine, but his specter, like those of his spiritual forebears haunt the film, and demand that we engage with Glam’s (in)authentic heritage for the sake of those yet to come and the sake of the ghosts whose fate and place in history remain in our hands. Velvet Goldmine, finally, is a locus for acknowledging and remembering Glam’s complex legacy —a legacy that embraces difference, and (in)authenticity, and while the film fails to provide any definitive ‘truth’ about Bowie and the Glam scene, it remains curiously faithful to what we might call, after Derrida, the spirit of Bowie’s work, which is one of the many reasons this exemplary account of Glam should be played at maximum volume.

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