Queer Times, Queer Becomings

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Nostalgia for an Age Yet to Come

_Velvet Goldmine’s Queer Archive_

_Dana Luciano_

The curves of your lips rewrite history.
—_The Picture of Dorian Gray_ (1891) and _Velvet Goldmine_ (1998)

_Lipstick Traces_

They keep on kissing Oscar Wilde.

He’s been dead for over a century, buried in Paris beneath a strangely demonic stone angel (inspired by Wilde’s poem “The Sphinx”)—best known, perhaps, for what it lacks: the exposed male genitals that were condemned as obscene, supposedly broken off and hidden by cemetery officials.¹ The stone also contains the ashes of Wilde’s longtime lover, Robert Ross, who commissioned it when he had Wilde’s remains moved to Père Lachaise from the suburban Cimetière de Bagneux. Here, on this monument that speaks, at once, of the affirmation and the repression of queer energies, is where the kisses gather, brought by admirers who press their painted lips against the stone to mark their presence and their complicity. This makes Wilde’s family—his biological descendants, that is—furious. The impressions can’t be removed; because they contain animal fats, they permanently stain the stone. They’ve been repeatedly scrubbed off and the tomb set behind a barrier to prevent their return; a plaque has been added, imploring visitors to show
respect for Wilde's memory; yet people keep bringing them back. Wilde's grandson Merlin Holland deplores this persistence, lamenting: "unthinking vulgar people may have defaced Wilde's tomb for ever" (quoted in Jeffries). But those who leave the kisses see things otherwise; their marks are meant not to deface a memorial but to activate a memory. Their relation to the deceased is not, of course, usually granted the presumption of durability that "blood" family bonds enjoy; the kind of attachment they have to, and in common with, Wilde is still often dismissed as unreal, transient, ephemeral, certainly nothing to set in stone. Yet the lipstick traces keep their vigil on the monument; the scandalous kisses persist.

The pink and purple marks made by pilgrims to Wilde's gravesite manifest the "touch across time" that Carolyn Dinshaw locates at the heart of a queer historiographic practice: a critical gesture that insists not simply on making queerness "visible" within the past but, more provocatively, on queering historical method. Queer historiographers ask what it means to think history as something other than a linear chronology, a public record of steady "progress" enabled and stabilized by the domestic-familial reproduction of successive generations. The pressure of lips on stone suggests a different form of contact with the past. The lipstick kisses don't trace a timeline, a narrative of descent, between Wilde and those who made them; rather, they bend time through the location of partial affinities, pressing up against a presence from the past, the present-ness of this being-otherwise. They kiss into being an expansively queer now, one that is affectively distinct from the melancholy perpetuity predicted in the verse from Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol" which is etched on the back of the stone:

And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long broken urn
For his mourners will be outcast men
And outcasts always mourn.

The disconsolate note struck by the verse fragment is well-suited to the circumstances of Wilde's death, exiled and in disgrace, yet, as the grave's audacious front implies, that is not the only story to be told in Wilde's name. Queer "outcasts" may well mourn, but as the flaming bursts of color on the stone affirm, they also rejoice in their difference, and the two moods mark time differently. Mournfulness conveys the insufficiency of a present marked by loss and emptiness, maintaining the conviction that the present should have been otherwise, while the exultation of the outcast brings that otherwise-present into being, charging it with a mingled sense of consummation and expectation—just as a kiss can do.

Queer artists have found other ways of leaving kisses at Wilde's grave. Consider Neil Bartlett's Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde, an experimental, transhistorical, collective memoir of gay male life in London. Bartlett's practice, much like the lipstick marks, animates another form of time, as the dual resonance of the titular "present" indicates. Writing in the mid-1980s, when the precariousness of the gay future provoked many writers to turn to the past, Bartlett confesses himself frustrated by the available forms to tell a gay story: he seeks "another way of putting the story together... not a story, exactly," but "the draft of a book like this one," stowed away somewhere in the homes of his friends and lovers,

Figure 1. Wilde's tomb, wikimedia commons.
a draft composed of "a record collection, a drawer of photographs, a wall of pictures, a mantelpiece of postcards, a bookshelf, a wardrobe of clothes": the ephemera of gay life, difficult to classify, harder still to read, a collection of objects, always shifting and incomplete, that mean queerness to this man only because of what he has invested in them, and whose significance is consequently always at risk of disappearing (24). Bartlett's arrangement of some of these treasured objects around the figure of Wilde (the chapter titles are, in succession, "History," "Flowers," "Faces," "Words," "Evidence," "Forgery," "Possessions," "Pretexts," "Messages," and again "History") possesses a kind of votive quality, the passionate preservation of a cherished memory in expectation of something else, something yet to be, toward which its flame may help to light the way. 4

In this essay, I want to bring into focus another textual kiss blown at Oscar Wilde, one with similarly votive aspirations: Todd Haynes's 1998 film Velvet Goldmine. Velvet Goldmine takes part in what appears to be the gay American director's overall project: using film as a means of thinking through the difficult time of the queer, both as history and as possibility. 5 Haynes's delirious, melancholy film stakes itself on the same terrain of affective ambivalence, of suffering and exultation, pleasure and pain, that we have seen thus far, not as a record but as a tactic of queer emotion. A recognition of loss becomes the film's avenue into the "seemingly obsolete politics of pleasure" it locates in an early-1970s London captivated by glam rock, and its cinematic embodiment of those pleasures figures as a means of intervening in history. 6 I will address Velvet Goldmine as a formal meditation on the temporality of queer attachment, whose force, like lipstick marks on stone, lingers long after the first impression has faded. The film's obvious preoccupation with the politics of memory has been linked by several critics to a traumatic period in the recent historical past: the early years of the AIDS epidemic (see Davis). I propose, however, that we read this film not only as a reaction to losses located in the gay past; it is also a response to loss in the future—or, more precisely, a certain loss of the future, the loss of its radical possibility to the happily-ever-after dream of bland normativity projected by a gay rights movement whose agenda, by 1998, had already dwindled from the revolutionary dreams of gay liberationists to inclusion in the institutions of straight society, a transformation that has become ever more entrenched since the turn of the century. In this light, we may comprehend Velvet Goldmine's engagement with a not-especially-straight, not-officially-gay, moment in our cultural past as challenging both hetero- and homonormativity. Haynes's film rifles through glam's attic not in order to generate nostalgia for this period but to provoke remembrance of what it meant to desire something different, in order to reanimate the movement of difference itself.

Structured much like Barlett's experimental memoir—as a shifting and incomplete collection of objects whose meaning is anything but set in stone—Velvet Goldmine recalls Ann Cvetkovich's description of the queer archival project as a quest for forms of historical preservation responsive to the challenges posed by poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and, more recently, Jacques Derrida, who have interrogated the nature of the archive itself and questioned the kinds of historical narratives it authorizes. 7 For Cvetkovich, queer archives appear as "the material instantiation of Derrida's deconstructed archive . . . composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science" (268). The diffuseness of queer archives, which take odd, unpredictable forms and often reside in unexpected places, results, for Cvetkovich, from the subject matter: "Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge" (8). Cvetkovich desires not to "clean up" the irregular queer archive but in a sense to foment its messiness; observing that "affects . . . are what make a document significant," she insists on the necessity of an archive that can maintain and generate feeling as well as knowledge (241). Following Cvetkovich's observation that queer archives are located both within and outside institutional space, informing and inhabiting queer cultural genres, I wish to develop a reading of Haynes's Velvet Goldmine as allegorizing the cultural work done by the queer archive. Fine-tuning her argument, however, I emphasize that it is attachments, more precisely than affects, that mark a document's significance in the queer archive, insofar as attachment marks the relational matrix that queer history seeks to preserve and recreate. In Bartlett's vision of the archives tucked away around the homes of the gay men he knows, for instance, the men's attachment to certain photographs offers a history of the uneasy coexistence of queerness and traditional family forms: "that wedding photo is precious because it includes a gay uncle, the one he never met, the one his mother says was . . . the only other one in the family" (24–26). The language of attachment can
illuminates, perhaps more usefully than “affect” or “feeling,” relationality in its spatiotemporal dimensions. Attachment marks a site between the psychic and the social, invested in both but proper to neither. It locates itself both within and beyond the individual: we might describe it as an intimate affinity (taking a number of affective forms, not all of them “positive”) between two subjects, or a subject and a beloved object (for when your affinity for an object, a place, a thing is passionate enough to be described as attachment, you imagine that the thing loves, or ought to love, you back). As a form, attachment suspends the false choice between identification and desire that marks the heteronormative sorting of the Oedipal subject, maintaining aspects of both. And as Lauren Berlant points out, attachments are always, in a certain sense, optimistic, though they may not all feel that way, insofar as “proximity to the object [of desire/attachment] means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises,” the indefinite futurity of which serves as an “explanation for our sense of our endurance in the object” (20).

I am interested in Velvet Goldmine for the way it queers the “promise” of attachment, the way it simultaneously confirms and challenges any sense of “endurance in the object” by juxtaposing the certitude of “endurance” to the radical uncertainty of the future into which the promise may launch us. Promises, after all, are unstable things, much as they might wish to declare otherwise; their terms may change, they may end by fulfilling something other than what was initially envisioned. The time of queer attachment, as it appears in Velvet Goldmine, follows the latter course, permitting the film to develop a vision of time itself as flux, as inventiveness. The historiographic challenge posed by Velvet Goldmine’s queer attachment-archive, in this light, opens history to an imaginative, subjective displacement via an unsanctioned, homoerotically-inflected look at the glam-rock era that is nevertheless conditioned by factors at once materialist and material. That is to say, even as the film combines an appeal to art’s much-vaunted inventiveness with an exposure of the limits posed by its circulation under the aegis of capital, the feel of the film—the intoxication of mise-en-scène and soundtrack—directly engages the forces of the body, drawing its sensory capacities toward a posthumanist dissolution of the subject itself, toward an engagement with matter, corporeal or not, as potentially vital and vitalizing. Velvet Goldmine’s meditation on the “alien” allies the figure of the queer outsider to the dazzling expectancy associated with the space age, infusing its imagined past with a fantasmatric future in order to interrupt and revise the terms of our own time. In this way, it transforms (queer) sexuality as we usually understand it, rendering it no longer the property of a (human) subject but the vehicle for that subject’s rescripting in other contexts, whose political urgency may be felt even if their contents can scarcely be imagined.

Now, the fact that attachments are optimistic is not necessarily a reason to feel optimistic about them; indeed, Berlant’s concern, in the essay cited above, is with the cruelty of attachments that produce a sense of self-continuity through proximity to things that actively undermine one’s capacity to thrive. And though I am deeply invested in the important scholarly labor of queer historiographers and autoethnographers, I remain concerned, as well, that we might fall into a similar predicament of injurious enthrallment, one that might be illuminated through a consideration of the limits of the figure of collector-historiographer outlined by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s collector, as Max Pensky has shown, manifests a “form of practical remembering” (Benjamin, quoted in Pensky 242) that affectively revises the earlier figure of the melancholy allegorist; the collector’s affection for objects generates a new and subjective system of meanings, an intimate, affiliative kinship that removes those objects from their original contexts and uses. The enchantment that results (for the collector, unlike the allegorist, “embraces” the objects with “love, not spleen”) may actualize the past in the present, giving the latter the force of a Now (Pensky 243). This is, for Benjamin, a resistant historiographic process, and one he employed in his own work. But, again like allegory, collection was not, finally, a sufficient mode for Benjamin as a historical materialist; insofar as it lacked a sufficiently objective perspective, it risked simply appropriating the objects it engaged (Pensky 245). The collector, that is, fails to historicize collection as historiographic method. This omission is what prompts my concern with the practice of queer historiography at the present time—a concern that an entire absorption into the enchantment of collecting (as visible in the transformation of “the archive” into “our archives” or even “my archive”) may risk the loss of a larger critique of our historical conditions (a point to which I will return at the end of this essay). Thus our attention to attachments and affects must be balanced with the “cautious detachment” with which, Benjamin insists, a materialist historiography must view the “cultural treasures” of the past, as the spoils of history’s victors. Benjamin’s warning still obtains even when the past under consideration seems to be more the abjected past of those exiled from history as such than that of its ostensible victors—for its real object is ourselves, and the mistaken belief that our purposes might be, or become, temporally transcendent rather than contingent. Even as we work to expand the temporal registers through which we may engage the
past, that is, we have not moved beyond the necessity of historicizing the methods as well as the objects of queer history.

Loving the Alien

*Velvet Goldmine* overtly adapts the narrative structure of, and borrows numerous formal gestures from, Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1941), a film whose authority in the archive seems unassailable even as, ironically, the film itself questions the capacity of archives to produce the kinds of answers about the past that we believe we require. Haynes’s film sets Arthur Stuart, who in 1984 is working as a reporter for the *New York Herald* on a quest to reconstruct the missing years in the life of former glam-rock star Brian Slade, who disappeared from public view shortly after faking his own assassination on stage ten years earlier. Lou, the editor who assigns the story, is only interested in a four-thousand-word “Weekender” fluff piece, an assignment meant to occupy Arthur’s time in between coverage of President Reynolds’s upcoming visit and the latest extravagant show by bland stadium-rocker Tommy Stone, whose tour is underwritten by the President’s Big-Brothersque Committee for Cultural Renewal. Like Jerry Thompson, the reporter assigned to uncover the meaning of media mogul Charles Foster Kane’s last word, Arthur begins by interviewing figures who were close to Slade in his prime: Cecil Drake, the aging British queen who was Slade’s first manager, and Mandy, the bisexual American party girl who becomes Slade’s wife and, later, his embittered ex. Yet in a departure from the Wellesian template, it turns out that Arthur, as a young queer growing up in Manchester in the early 1970s, was himself passionately attached to Slade and the glam scene. Indeed, he initially resists the story assignment, apparently suspecting that he is being queer-baited by his employer (though he will only venture an acerbic hypothesis that they must have chosen him because of his role as the “resident Brit”); Lou, however, insists that it is not identity but attachment that qualifies Arthur for the job, affirming, “We want you because you remember.” In place of Thompson’s journalistic detachment, then, the history of attachment that surfaces through Arthur’s reportage serves both to document and to manifest the energy of queer audience investments in glam.

*Velvet Goldmine’s* engagement with glam rock foregrounds the question of what kind of work a queer attachment does in relation to a given object. In comparison to other films by Haynes (such as *Dottie Gets Spanked, Far From Heaven*, and even, in some ways, *I’m Not There*), which have sought to trace the affect-history of queer attachments to ostensibly straight cultural objects like the early television sitcom, classic Hollywood melodrama, or Bob Dylan’s career, *Velvet Goldmine*’s take on glam might appear as a “straight” (that is, direct and noncircuitous) attachment to a queer cultural object. I would argue, however, that this notion of a straight queer attachment is misleading, since even when a queer’s attachment to a queer object need not do any revisionist imaginative work in order to locate itself, it usually operates in a cultural context where it is understood as going against other, more proper attachments, and that awareness, consciously or not, conditions and charges the attachment. Moreover, despite the obvious homoerotic overtones of glam rock, its status as queer cultural object is by no means uncontested. Indeed, the film’s release provoked howls of outrage from some glam veterans, who protested that Haynes had gotten the era all wrong by focusing on the gay thing. For instance, Tony Visconti, who worked as a producer for both David Bowie and Marc Bolan, complained that the film was “grossly inaccurate about those times” and dismissed it as a “gay porn film disguised as a musical,” while Peter York worried that the film’s excessive attention to “the Boystown Romance” would give music historians one more reason not to take glam seriously. Yet *Velvet Goldmine* makes no claim to the fetish of historical “accuracy” that Visconti wields to defend his own memories from the queer taint; it operates not as a collection of facts but a circulation of (invented) reollections, seeking not to “restore” queer presence in the past but to emphasize how queer attachment and fantasy operate temporally in relation to that past.

The time-bending potential of queer attachment may be seen in a comment about the impact of glam rock made by Boy George: “If you’re a kid living in an environment where you feel alien most of the time, and you suddenly see this guy on telly in a catsuit with no eyebrows putting his arm around another man, it’s incredible” (quoted in Auslander 232). Interestingly, though this accession of a new sense of possibility took place in the past (the alienated kid Boy George is talking about is himself in the early seventies), its lingering force apparently provokes the sentence into the present tense: the scene itself is history, but the time of queer attachment remains. A similar attachment-event occurs in *Velvet Goldmine*, in a scene where the teenaged Arthur Stuart sees Brian Slade on television. Sitting on the floor close to the television, while his parents watch from their chairs behind him, Arthur, as he hears Slade readily agree to a reporter’s suggestion that he’s a “blinking fruit,” suddenly leaps to his feet, pointing at Slade onscreen and shouting, “That is me! That is me! That that is
me!" Onscreen, Slade goes on calmly to assert that “everyone knows most people are bisexual,” and when we next see Arthur silently sitting on the floor again, looking nervously back at his blank-faced parents, we realize the outburst has taken place only in his imagination. The retrospective tension registered in the passage from Arthur’s interior explosion and his external response—the way, that is, that merely sitting on the floor can be transformed, in the aftermath of the imagined outburst, into an expression of forcible repression—demands a reconsideration of what, in this moment, counts as “truth.” It’s a question of whether we can register “truth” in the recognition of a sexual secret about the self, the kind of truth that is, as Foucault suggests, at the center of the modern deployment of sexuality, or conversely, whether we stick doggedly to an understanding of (historical) “truth” as what actually and verifiably took place in the past. The sequencing of this scene seems rather to suggest that we admit a third possibility: that something like queer truth emerges instead from the frisson between the two takes, the play between fact and fantasy, affirmation and concealment, between what was and what might-have-been-otherwise.

A related dimension of queer truth emerges in the indefinable otherness bespoken by the sheer excess of Arthur’s stuttered exclamation, which marks this scene of recognition as surpassing a straightforward “identification.” In place of the movement toward self-consolidation that identification is usually understood to enable, we get a number of “me’s” in Arthur’s imagined outburst, which seems appropriate, since the figure to whom he attaches his “me,” Brian Slade, succeeds in proliferating endless versions of himself, so much so that Arthur eventually becomes convinced that Slade has actually transformed himself into Tommy Stone. It isn’t ever made clear what in Slade is the “that(s)” that Arthur refers to—the willingness to claim the status of “blinking fruit,” the defiance, the arch, campy attitude, his subsequent assertion that he “likes boys as much as girls,” and that his wife feels the same way about things (the secret of his marriage’s success). The signifier “gay” (or even “bisexual”) can’t be made to capture everything that this “that” might suggest. Slade, rather, appears as one of those sites of attachment that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as necessary to the survival of the queer child: “objects whose meanings seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, ... sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other” (“Queer” 3). Such fascinated attachments enable the queer’s survival as queer precisely by supplementing the sense of “endurance” in the object with the continual deferral and revision kept in play by the very messiness of their meanings.

On this view, the relation between the two—the that(s) that may be Slade in this moment and the me(s) that Arthur imagines—opens out into an expansive time that confounds the tidy ordering that language requires, as suggested through the repetition and stutter.

Whether we consider this scene in terms of narrative structure or of the content of Arthur’s outburst, then, it seems that queer “truth” emerges from a temporal fold, resisting the straightforward movement of causality in favor of an exploration of the multiple possibilities that may emerge when time works otherwise. And just as this scene of adolescent attachment doesn’t quite match the sort of “coming-out” story that has, as its telos, a stable adult gay identity, the film’s richly queer archive likewise resists offering history as a self-confirming ground for gay identity or an origin story for modern homosexuality. Its engagement with the past, like the recurring nods toward the archive in contemporary queer studies, testifies to what Christopher Nealon identifies as the “overwhelming desire to feel historical,” to transform the extreme individuation of a pathologized subjectivity into “some more encompassing narrative of collective life” (Foundlings 8). We might connect this desire to what Derrida has identified in his exploration of the mal d’archive, inelegantly translated as “archive fever,” that runs throughout modern Western culture. To be en mal d’archive (in need of archives) is, as Derrida points out by way of an engagement with psychoanalysis, not just to desire a past, but to burn with a passion for origins, which he identifies as a nostalgia, a homesickness (91). The passion for the archive is indeed set aflame in Velvet Goldmine, but it burns otherwise, insistently eliciting and just as insistently displacing the question of origin by activating the twisted temporalities that queer attachments set into play.

We can track this displacement to the beginning of the film, the point at which it first presses its gorgeously-painted lips against Oscar Wilde, in what seems to be an origin story but turns out to be a form of kissing-into-Now-time. In its opening sequence, the camera pans downward over a starry sky, which eventually transforms into a cloudy mist suddenly disrupted by an illuminated spaceship flying away over the rooftops of Dublin in 1854, after leaving its infant passenger on the doorstep of the Wilde household. When Lady Wilde examines the baby, she finds a glowing green stickpin affixed to the blankets in which it is swaddled. The same pin is seen attached to the lapel of the eight-year-old Oscar in the next scene, as he rises in class and anachronistically announces, in response to a teacher’s query, that when he grows up he wants to be a pop idol. From there, it skips a century to land in front of young Jack Fairy, a seven-year-old nancy-boy whom we first see
lying on the ground in the schoolyard as his thuggish classmates beat and kick him. After they run off, Jack finds the pin lying in the gutter before him, and it prompts him to begin looking at the stars. The patently false, childhood-storybook-illustration valley of sunshine down which he trudges gloomily home gives way, after he puts on the pin, to a sexy blue nightclub-style light, which illuminates his face as he touches a wound on his mouth and then uses his own blood as lipstick. With the emerald pin glowing brightly in his lapel, he smiles at his brightly-painted lips in the mirror as a voiceover narrator observes, “Jack would discover that somewhere there were others quite like him, singled out for a great gift. And one day... the whole stinking world would be theirs.”

At once antiqued and futuristic, the pin that falls to earth with Wilde types queerness as a form of untimeliness; its attachment to a character heralds a detachment from the present that promises to translate the wearer into a moment in which he might finally make sense, rewriting the putatively regressive temporality of the queer narcissist as opening toward a particularly compelling mode of life yet to come. Wilde’s pop-idol plans, for instance, are a century ahead of his time, while the voiceover narrator’s promise that “one day” the world will belong to Jack Fairy and his queer kin, much like Brian Slade’s later, confident prediction that he and Curt Wild, the pop idols who become the pin’s next two owners, will “quite soon take over the world,” is an event never realized within the film. Split like the mirror image that reflects Jack’s pin-promted self-adornment, the film’s account of this incompletion marks it at once as a loss, the effect of a failed transformation—at the end of the film, Curt Wild laments to Arthur Stuart, “We set out to change the world, and we ended up just changing ourselves”—and as the potentiality of a future yet to be actualized, the expectation of a transformation yet to take place.11

This second future, the future yet-to-come, is indexed in the film’s displacement of an account of the queer past that would situate Wilde at the origin of both glam rock and modern gay identity via a futuristic fiction of Wilde’s extraterrestrial origins. Velvet Goldmine’s account of Wilde puns on two senses of the word alien: as Jon Davies points out, it at once crafts “an alternative, otherworldly point of origin for the dandyism personified by Wilde and... the glam rockers” and indicates the extent to which queer camp blossoms “in the childhood experience of feeling singularly alien to one’s straight surroundings” (as we also saw in Boy George’s comment) (Davies 63). This dual account of the alien recalls the affective alternations, between suffering and exhilaration, mapped out between the verse from “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” etched onto Wilde’s tomb and the kisses left by latter-day admirers. But it also uses the two affects (and their differing temporal implications) to pun on time, playing anachronistically on the word “alien,” drawing Wilde’s turn-of-the-century usage forward in time toward a meaning (extraterrestrial) that would not become common until the middle of the twentieth century.12 This unexpected contact between the two senses of the word—the contact between the perpetually mournful outcast and the expectancy of the otherworldly—constitutes a compelling example of the way literary texts can open themselves forward, generating what we might understand, in Linda Charnes’s terms, as “worm-holes to the future,” sites where future ideas “crash onto a textual scene,” offering ways to think beyond our own conventional and period-bound assessment of the cultural past(s). Such anomalies, for Charnes, underscore how the future manifests “in bursts, fits and starts, ahead of our ability to recognize it as ‘the future.’”

In the vision of Wilde as an alien, however, the word carved on his gravestone meets a worm hole to another future, located not within the “history” we have come to know as such but within a glam fantasy. Without the spaceship and its infant extraterrestrial passenger, one could read Velvet
Goldmine simply as mapping onto accounts of modern homosexual identity beginning with Wilde a lavish but more or less conventionally structured genealogy of glam, a forward-moving timeline of stylized self-invention beginning with the Decadents and ending with a dissolution into 1980s mass-market pop, the downfall of glam in big hair and bad politics. Yet glam’s archive was more capacious than this account would suggest, gathering together multiple moments and mediums—it looked multiply backward at pasts which didn’t necessarily line up with one another (the Decadents, but also the era of classic cinema) as well as forward, in a preoccupation with the futuristic “space age,” manifested most extensively in the career of David Bowie, whose song lyrics often speculated on the possibility of evolution jumpstarted by contact between humans and aliens. The frisson between Bowie and Wilde rubs this imagined other-time, glam’s expectant and melancholy futures, against the rubric of an inverted cultural history in which the late-twentieth-century pop singer pre-bespeaks the nineteenth-century writer. For while the infant Wilde is the first glam character to appear physically in the film, this sequence is preceded by a title card that reads, “Although the following is a work of fiction, it should nevertheless be played at maximum volume.” This phrase simultaneously detaches the film from “real” history (it is a work of fiction) and invokes the very history it distances in its citation of the liner notes to the epoch-defining 1972 Bowie album The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, which appealed lyrically and conceptually to the extraterrestrial glam fantasy. (It also has the fortuitous effect, as Edward O’Neill has noted, of instructing the viewer how to take pleasure in the film.) Velvet Goldmine’s space-alien opening thus transforms what might otherwise have been a “straight” genealogy of glam into a particularly bent one, insofar as it moves Velvet Goldmine into an alternate-timeline invented within the glam moment, turning time inside out so that it curves backward and forward from a historical 1972 which never appears in the film itself. (Likewise, the Orwellian overtones of the film’s 1984, in which a right-wing government controls both the music industry and the media, evoke the late-glam apocalypticism that surfaced, among other places, in Bowie’s last glam album, 1974’s Diamond Dogs, which contained fragments of an abandoned stage-musical version of Orwell’s infamous novel.) Velvet Goldmine’s futuristic take on queer pasts effectively transposes Sedgwick’s account of the mysterious messiness of the queer child’s attachment into a historiographic vein, rendering time itself excessive, oblique, untidy, by investing it with “fascination and love” (“Queer” 3).

The inventive distancing of “real” history in the uncted allusion to Ziggy Stardust has, however, a mundane enough cause; unlike Wilde, Bowie could not be represented directly in the film nor his music included in the soundtrack because it remains under copyright, and the singer refused to cede permission. The film winks cheekily at this denial by means of its title (taken from a song cut from the Ziggy Stardust album, reputedly because its lyrics were too sexually explicit) and a number of other references to the glam idol’s career, as well as a scene staged between two Ken dolls, a glance backward to Haynes’ 1987 film Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story, which was to be pulled from circulation in 1989 after a copyright infringement lawsuit over the Carpenters’ music on the soundtrack. Haynes’s career has consisted—to some extent, has been made by—an imaginative ability to work around the limits posed by copyright; even as Carpenter’s legal harassment, for all its negativity, also had the effect, as Lucas Hildebrand observes, of making Superstar “legendary” (170), the need to write all actionable citations of David Bowie out of the Velvet Goldmine script ultimately rendered the film narratively (and musically) richer. And yet—as implied in a scene in which the teenaged Arthur Stuart is homophonically mocked and abused after trying to borrow money from some older boys in order to buy a Brian Slade album—the film’s production history also reminds us of how the passionate investment of the queer or minoritarian attachment is always conditioned, if not thwarted, by the blunt, endurably unequal fact of ownership.

Do You Wanna Touch Me?

At a crucial moment in the film, just before pressing his lips against those of Brian Slade, Curt Wild repeats, without attribution, the passage from the final chapter of Wilde’s 1891 novella, The Picture of Dorian Gray, cited in the epigraph to this paper: “The curves of your lips rewrite history.” This prelude to a kiss might be taken to allegorize the work of the film itself—its inventive, revisionary, and deeply bent historiography, or in Foucault’s phrase, the “transformation of history into a totally different form of time” (160). Yet we might also think about the connection between the intricately convoluted form of this revisionary historiography and the pressure exerted by the film itself. Velvet Goldmine’s insistence on (the pleasure of) contact with the viewer expresses a drive toward an embodied cinematic imagination, an
affectivity that is, as Steven Shaviro asserts, "dangerous to ... a fixed self," pushing the body to "[desire] ... its own transmutation" (60).

A warning against fixity appears early in the film, in the form of a title card bearing a quote from Norman O. Brown's Love's Body: "Meaning is not in things, but in between them." Recalling the opening title card's suggestion of how the viewer might best take pleasure in the film, this quotation, which ostensibly comments on Curt Wild's flippant assertion that glam's newly-trendy avowals of universal bisexuality are "meaningless," expands to take on an instructive status of its own, pointing the viewer to the most effective way to situate herself in relation to the film. In Love's Body, this passage continues: "[Meaning is] in the iridescence, the interplay; in the interconnections; at the intersections, at the crossroads. Meaning is transitional as it is transitory; in the pens or bridges, the correspondence" (247). Velvet Goldmine manifests Brown's argument both narratively and aesthetically; even as characters' accounts overlap and interrupt one another and the story flits back and forth in time, the film proliferates sites of aural, fading, dissolving, zooming, crosscutting, overlapping dialogue and shot. Haynes has commented that in filming the movie, he attempted to reproduce early 1970s-style filmmaking, eschewing tracking and instead using the camera to move in and out of the surface of the image—a style he saw as providing "a sense of surface, this beautiful, almost caressing of the surface of the screen" (quoted in Pizzello 32). This sense of surface complicates ordinary habits of viewer identification in the sense of appropriating characters' perspectives, offering, instead, an intensified relation to the film itself. For Haynes, working in this mode "literally led to an appreciation of the grain of cinema—what isn't completely clear and completely available to an objective assessment" (quoted in Moverman xxii). Grain, here, signifies in more than one sense. It serves as a reminder of the materiality of film, and consequently of its own vulnerability to time. (Interestingly, Haynes worked in the lab to restore grain to the film he used, since contemporary film stocks are less grainy than those that were available in the early 1970s [James 8].)

But it is also a filmic transposition of what Roland Barthes describes as the grain of the voice, that site of contact between language and the physical dimension of the voice—the "body in the voice"—that can pull language away from already-given codes of meaning. In this sense, grain reveals that the materiality of the medium is not simply mute—it too has a story to tell. Haynes's attention to the visual and historical depths of the surface in his attempt to reproduce this earlier style of filmmaking points toward the primary site for Brown's conception of meaning: the iridescence, or refractive

quality of the medium. For Velvet Goldmine, as for Brown, the possibility of interplay, interconnection, intersection as cognitive practice appears to be based on a foundation of flux, a bedrock of shimmer.

This embrace of foundational flux helps to explain the touching effect of Haynes's films. By touching, I mean not simply their emotional appeal, but also the way that appeal is extended and complicated by their explicit comprehensiveness of the eye and the ear as tactile surfaces. Velvet Goldmine's investment in the tactility of sound and vision, and in the transformative potential thereof, is highlighted in Curt Wild's outrageous live performance of "TV Eye." Opening with a wild, ear-splitting howl that causes Brian Slade, who is storming off after flopping miserably during his own performance, to stop in his tracks and stare, the concert sequence offers up the shirtless, sweating American rock singer as a mélange of textures. In voiceover, Cecil Drake explains that Wild was subjected to shock treatment as a child to correct his emergent gay tendencies, "but all it did was to make him bonkers every time he heard an electric guitar." Onstage, Wild's behavior exemplifies this explosion of unsuccessfully repressed sexuality; he sings with one hand shoved inside his leather pants, pulling them down, at one point, to display himself to the audience, freaking out the straight hippies and making Mandy, Brian's wife, giggle. Less directly sexual, but no less palpably erotic, than Curt's playing with himself are the movements of rapt and oozing, glisten and flicker, burn and caress that play across his show. Alternately cooing and shrieking, Wild rubs oil onto his bare chest and face, then shakes a tube of gold glitter over himself so that it catches in the stickiness. Near the end of the performance, a roadie tosses a Molotov cocktail at the stage so that its floor catches fire, and Wild and his band continue to perform amidst the flames. A reverse shot catches Slade, still staring, transfixed, at the spectacle onstage, the reflection of the fire onstage lighting his eyes and setting his face aglow. The flames playing over Slade's face symbolize both desire (Slade will carry a torch for Wild for a couple of years, until he finally arranges to meet him on a trip to New York City) and identification (burning with jealousy the following day, Slade confesses to Mandy, "I wish I'd thought of it"); she responds, "You will, love," and the next sequence depicts the fulfillment of this promise: a new turn in Slade's career, as his invention of the space-alien Maxwell Demon character is announced by a striking video depicting, among other things, a glitter-covered, oversexed lizard playing guitar surrounded by fire). Yet on a more basic, presymbolic level, the orange-y warmth suffusing Slade's face in this shot registers the physical impact of the (highly physical) spectacle upon him—an impact not
exhausted by either of the subsequent transformations that this corporeal encounter with extravagance impels.

Such scenes allegorize what phenomenologically-oriented film theorists view as the necessity of thinking through film’s physiological effect on the viewer—film’s role, that is, in the transmission of affect (see, e.g., Sobchack; Marks, Skin, Touch). This sort of hypersensory appeal is not limited to Velvet Goldmine’s presentation of rock performances, though it is especially marked there; it is diffused across the film, which abounds in moments of extravagant excess, moments in which narrative gives way to—or perhaps becomes recomposed in—the spectator’s pleasure in experiencing the film as it plays with itself. In one such sequence, during Mandy’s narration, as she explains how and when she met Slade, the film suddenly cuts to a shot of a long, gauzy white scarf billowing out in slow motion behind her wearer as he approaches a doorway—an image that seems solely designed to call attention to its own sensual allure. A moment later, we realize that the shot is from Brian’s point of view, as he himself appears in the doorway, frizzy-haired and wearing a shaggy coat; the heavy, slightly bedraggled feel of his late-1960s shag, in contrast to the breezy glamour of the gauze, implies that he has not yet caught up with the glam scene he will soon lead. The visual texture of both shots, embodied in the contrasting movements of clothing across the screen, marks time in more than one way— with respect to history, via the weight of Brian’s outfit, highly timely at this chronological moment (it is New Year’s Eve, 1969) yet sadly belated in this gloriously retro crowd, and to temporality, through the engaging quality of texture itself, which, as Renee Bora notes, is always implicitly eventful, calling one’s attention to the temporal nature of perception (98–99). Indeed, texture often seems to be the main event in Velvet Goldmine. The deeply corporeal appeal of both sound and vision throughout the film—the wail and shriek of guitars, the pulsation of drums, the rich densities of saturated color, the play of light on skin, the pull and shimmer of fabric, and the flickering intensities of falling feathers, leaves, snow, flames, and glitter, which tie together scenes with no evident narrative connection; or, conversely, the grainy flicker-and-pause that marks certain shots and sequences as film or video enfolded within the film, and hence as coming from elsewhere, taking place in some other, often achronological moment—have the effect of disorienting the body, of dislocating it in time as well as space. It is as if the film is asking the viewer to think herself (or to unthink herself) through the pleasurable tension generated in the touch of these moments, just as bodies in the film gather and disperse knowledge by pressing against other bodies and objects. In an alternate movement to Arthur’s Citizen Kane-esque journalistic quest, which pursues information in order to fill in the outlines of a missing individual, the carnal and corporeal knowledges diffused in and through tactile cognition suggest an erosion of individual boundaries, a drive toward de-individuation, as bodies rub against surfaces and flow out of themselves into other objects, both human and inhuman. In this sense, Haynes’s lavishly iridescent film, insisting on the feel of its images, presses beyond the conventionally excessive relation of mise-en-scène to narrative; Velvet Goldmine’s mise-en-scène is so emphatically, excessively stylized as to become a counter-narrative, to tell another story by means of its intervention into the body of the viewer—a story not about the relationships among the film’s characters but about the romance of its own relationship to the viewer. Regardless of whether people are having sex onscreen, the film’s appeal to the viewer is a kind of erotic contact, deeply felt and perverse in that it seemingly seeks nothing beyond the perpetuation of pleasure.

The film’s drive to engage the body as vehicle of spatiotemporal dislocation provokes a turn to Gilles Deleuze’s reflections on the cinematic while underscoring the ways that schema must be amended, if not abandoned, in

Figure 3. “Feathers” from Velvet Goldmine, dir. Todd Haynes, 1998.
order to comprehend the centrality of embodied cognition. As some feminist and queer critics have noted, Deleuze pays little attention to questions of difference in his studies of cinema; indeed, as Teresa Geller points out, most of the films he praises as provoking a radical rethinking of time do very little rethinking in terms of their representations of gender and sexuality. His omission of an extended discussion of reception and context, moreover, diminishes the conceptual terrain on which this account of the cinematic assemblage can operate. And most importantly, while Deleuze, at a few points in Cinema 2, launches an exploration of the body as a political site, his argument seems on the whole to move toward a disembodied conception of thought, and hence to "frisk" privileging the mind over the body (Geller). For feminist and queer thought, this move is a damaging one, insofar as Cinema 2's fetish of a pure, disembodied "time itself" rising to the screen works against the possibility of queer and/or critically gendered thought, which is necessarily not disembodied or dematerialized, even when it looks beyond the subject or situates itself as posthuman. The disembodiment of the time-image is not only a problematic move for queer theory, but an unnecessary one; as recent work on queer time demonstrates, the movement of queer bodies against the tide of heteronormative history itself has the effect of fragmenting assumptions about the "natural" movement of time, of making time visible as a construct. In this sense, time does not need to separate itself from (embodied) movement, as Deleuze argues, in order to be denaturalized; the queer image does its critical work not by divorcing time from movement but by transforming time in movement.

Nick Davis astutely locates Velvet Goldmine itself as a queer dialogue with Deleuze, pointing out that Velvet Goldmine's queering of Citizen Kane—the very film Deleuze singles out, in Cinema 2, to signal the historical turn toward the time-image, as it fragments narrative time into "sheets of past" and "peaks of present" (Deleuze 99, 100)—effectively queers Cinema 2 as well. Davis proposes that Haynes's film demands a move beyond the time-image, a recognition of "how the time-image has been conjoined with other elements to constitute a new regime of the image," which he names the "desiring-image" (98, 99). Here, Davis follows Ian Buchanan's assertion that desire is the "bottom line" of Deleuzian thought, underlying and shifting such conceptions as becoming (Buchanan 15, quoted in Davis 99n3). For Davis, the "new regime of the image" that becomes visible in Velvet Goldmine (and other queer films of "our epoch") emerges from a dialectical conversation in the film between two ways of marking time—historical and nonchronological—that produces a "formal leap" into a fantasy-history of desire" (89, 94). Davis's extension of the Deleuzian schema past the point at which the Cinema books concluded offers (queer) film scholarship, which has hitherto limited itself to (re)locating the time-image in queer film, greater historical precision—a precision that, as I will suggest in the final section of this essay, queer historiography in general continues to need. I remain concerned, however, that the emphasis on the "new" in this schema (as in Deleuzian thought overall) might rely rather than trouble the TOO-linear historical structure that marks the Cinema books in general, to the detriment of recognizing how the foundational flux of desire, the irruptive time of attraction, oscillates across the historical periods Deleuze associates, in his history of cinema, with movement and desire, respectively. We might, instead, frame the (queer/Deleuzian) conversation between movement and time, historicity and temporality, past and present, not as a dialectical progression but as an incessant racking focus, a shifting back and forth that would recall the rock critic Greil Marcus's insistence, in his experimental archive Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century (which Velvet Goldmine blows a kiss at by adapting its evocative title for one of Brian Slade's albums), on writing a history that emphasizes not the past's determinate construction of the present but the entanglement of now and then (23). That this entanglement works in and through the body, as I earlier asserted, emphasizes its own entanglement with the forces unleashed in cinema as interventions in time, interventions that transform presence into potentiality. Meditating on film's embodied appeal, Jennifer Barker asserts: "our tactile engagement with the cinema allows us to recognize through embodied, perceptive and expressive acts our situation in something larger" (157). This engagement brings the figure of the alien back down to earth, as it were, grounding its fantastic futurity in the materiality of the body—posing, that is, a futurism that seeks not to escape our time but to illuminate it. That illumination, in turn, reveals the body as transmutable material, as a site of potential change.

In this sense, the film's attention to the time of queer attachment at once foregrounds how attachment supports what Berlant calls a "sense of our endurance in the object," which she links to the drive to self-continuity, and proposes that it may also proliferate a potentially useful dis/continuity, a dissipation or dissemination of the self in and through encounters with beloved objects. This dual movement is suggested in the sequence of visibly mixed feelings (of love and loss, ecstasy and elegy) with which the film climaxes. The sequence begins in 1975, on a rooftop near the "Death of Glitter" concert staged by Curt Wild and Jack Fairy, where, after the show,
Curt seduces Arthur Stuart, whom he has met at the show. Curt tells Arthur to "make a wish" as the same spaceship that had deposited Oscar Wilde on the Dublin doorstep flies overhead, lights flickering, and releases stardust over the two men. As they start to fuck in the deluge of glitter, the camera pulls back through the window of a ruined ballroom to reveal Brian Slade, as his glam persona Maxwell Demon, in bright blue body paint, glitter and feathers, turning away from the window, where he has been watching the scene. Slade/Demon sings the elegiac "Tumbling Down," and the performance sequence unfolds as a veritable orgy of visual textures: his shimmering body, lit from below, dances, lizard-like, up and down stairs, moving against walls covered in tattered frescoes, mounting a sparkling chandelier, unleashing a rain of falling feathers, and finally rubbing against his own image and those of the frescoes in a sensuously anamorphic closing cross-fade (in which, fleetingly, one of the frescoes seemingly takes the form of a skull). The alien stardust from the preceding scene remains visible, glittering fiercely, whenever the singer passes in front of the open window, marking the two scenes as spatially contiguous, but their temporal and causal relationship is indeterminate: is the gorgeous scene in the ballroom the wish that Curt told Arthur to make? Has their fucking brought the phantasmatic spectacle of Maxwell Demon into being once more? Yet since the relation of the Curt and Arthur scene to the film's reality is also radically indeterminate (although the seduction is framed as a flashback/memory sequence, with Arthur awakening, at its end, into the grim, noisy tedium of a Tommy Stone show in 1984, its facticity is called into question by a number of factors—Arthur is tripping during the "Death of Glitter" show, the narrative time of the seduction is oddly out of joint, and when, shortly after the memory-impelling 1984 concert concludes, Arthur runs into Curt in a New York City bar, the two men behave warily, as though they have never met) the causal relationship may well be reversed: Demon, belatedly revealed to have been watching all along, might somehow have masterminded this coming-together, fantasy constructing "reality," rather than the other way around. Recalling the diffusion of selves in the teenaged Arthur's fantasized living-room outburst, the film's indeterminacy here underscores a drive to orient intimate affective engagements (with both viewer and character) in ways that keep a sense of possibility in play; the rooftop coupling may, in fact, be a consummation of a long-cherished desire, or the expectation of something yet-to-come, a promise extended when, a few minutes of screen-time later, Curt passes on the green stickpin to Arthur in the bar after the Stone show.

Yet we might also comprehend this sequence as a further extension of the posthumanist paradigm brought into the film by the space alien—an extension proposed in the return of the spaceship and prolonged by the shimmer that visually links the two scenes, the rain of stardust falling from above. On this view, the stardust would not merely be an accompaniment to but, in effect, the cause of the action, as it carries and transmits the energy of the film, the "alien," otherworldly origins of glam as a worldmaking force.1 Yet the alien, here, does more than appeal to the vastness of outer space (and the depth of time it evokes) to expand the future course of the human; its manifestation as a kind of iridescence, as materialized energy, rather than (solely) as character, also expands the terrain of the posthuman into the present tense—that is to say, it opens the question of the nonhuman as a social force. Doubled by the rain of falling feathers during the "Tumbling Down" sequence, the glitter of the stardust suggests a reading of the film's attention to texture as an animating event, as not just an aesthetic movement but a conceptual glancing toward what Jane Bennett calls "vital materiality," that "creative not-quite-human-force capable of producing the new"

Figure 4. "Ballroom" from Velvet Goldmine, dir. Todd Haynes, 1998.
In this sense, I want to propose, the “romance” of the film’s relation to the viewer, its captivating attentiveness to the shimmering of objects and energies as counterplot to the more familiarly queer entanglements of the characters, may prompt us to think more about the vitality, the social force, of the things that move around and flow through bodies, as a means of interrupting our human-centered perspective on social and political life. For even as vital materiality, for Bennett, consistently “congeals into bodies which seek to persevere or prolong their run,” a recognition of this process, of the uneveness of the nonhuman and the noncompleteness of the human without it, may help to “chasten . . . fantasies of human mastery . . . and reshape the self and its interests” (118, 122). Recontextualizing the film’s tactile intervention into bodies, the seductive play of nonhuman as well as human objects across the frame articulates a vision of the “something larger” to which Barker refers as queerness’s posthumanist horizon. The mutual entanglement of bodies and objects, that is, offers another way to conceive the function of (queer) attachment archives—not as spaces for the production of a stable gay identity, but as animate and animating resources for the provisional negotiation of problems in (queer) time—narratagements whose potentially uncontrollable force may well take us beyond gayness, or even queerness, as we currently conceive of them.

Reflecting on the connection between Curt Wild’s traumatized past and his compelling performance style, Mandy muses, “When you’ve been abused like that, you know you’ve touched the stars.” The fantasy of touching stars sustains and enlivens many young (and older) queers—as both Boy George and Arthur Stuart affirm, and as the rooftop sequence, whether read as fact or fiction, illustrates. Yet we might also keep in mind—as that sequence reminds us—that the first moving image we see in the film is not one of stars as pop idols, but of stars as celestial bodies—the distant, glimmering, almost unattainable objects that congeal into the spaceship carrying Oscar Wilde to earth, and which persist, fragmented and diffused, alongside these other, more recognizably queer bodies throughout the film. Velvet Goldmine asks the viewer to take seriously the enchanting, dislocating possibility that these stars somehow touch us as well.

Coda: Here’s Looking at You, Kid

To close this essay, I would like to briefly consider what we might understand as the extensibility of Velvet Goldmine’s attachments: the extent of the relevance of a film whose archive, richly and clearly queer as it is, largely tends toward artifacts historically identified with Euro-American gay men. This tendency brings to mind Judith Halberstam’s pointed critiques of the overly narrow “camp” archive favored by “gay [white] male” critics, which she sees as both formalistic and formulaic, privileging a “neat, clever, chiasmatic, punning emphasis on style and stylistic order” and a by-now predictable embrace of a controlled “ironic distancing.” Halberstam instead calls for critical attention to a messier collection of affects: an undisciplined archive that includes, along with rage, rudeness, anger, and mania, the possibility of intensity, sincerity, earnestness, and overinvestment (2824). Yet what interests me about Haynes’s recent films in this respect is the way that (as I have observed in “Coming Around Again”) they dethrone ironic distancing from its privileged postmodern position without entirely abandoning it. Instead, in developing formal languages for the inscription of histories of queer spectatorship and attachment, they conjure irony and responses like sincerity, anger, longing and—especially visible in Velvet Goldmine—overinvestment, modeling a set of dramatically mixed feelings that recall the combined suffering and exultation marking the queer’s relation to outcast or alien status. Their archive thus works to erode the high/low culture split instead of reifying it, as Halberstam’s assessment of alternative archives unfortunately tends to do.

The postironic structure of feelings that marks Velvet Goldmine does not, however, fully respond to the concerns underlying this critique of the insular canonicity marking some strands of queer studies, in which Oscar Wilde might serve as a sort of patron saint. Haynes’s film, though, draws from this canon without insisting that its archive suffices to represent some universal value of queerness. At the close of the film, a scene of trans-temporal and crosscultural contact underscores these points. Arthur visits a New York bar where a multiracial group of kids (in pointed contrast to the white Anglo glam fans from the 1970s segments of the film) has gathered after the Tommy Stone concert; they are briefly interested in him because of his press pass, which makes them think he’s got some connection to Stone, but after he denies it and gives the pass to one of them, they ignore him and cluster around the pass instead. Arthur wanders to the back room of the bar, where he discovers a depressed Curt Wild drinking by himself and asks him about Brian Slade. Reflecting on glam’s legacy, Curt observes, “We set out to change the world and ended up just changing ourselves”; he looks bitterly out toward the front room, adding that nothing is wrong with that, “if you don’t look at the world.” This comment is followed by a shot of the kids in the bar, standing still and staring, with vague hostility, directly
at the camera, as all action temporarily comes to a halt. It is as if the bar itself has been divided into two time zones, with the kids representing what looks like a bleak and immobilized present as the consequence of the past's narcissistic failure of vision. The mood here is melancholic; the film itself seems to lament the past's loss in the rueful recognition of present paralysis.24

It's important to keep in mind, however, that this shot comes from Curt's point of view, reflecting and supporting the narrative he has constructed about the relation between past and present. A different story emerges from the Roxy Music song "2HB," which begins to play shortly afterward, diegetically produced by the jukebox in the front room of the bar.25 The viewer will recall that is the second time this song (a testimonial to the mesmerizing power of the American film star Humphrey Bogart) has been heard in the film; the first time, it was played live by Brian Slade at a London nightclub, and his performance drew a fascinated Cecil Drake from the table of old-school, Polari-speaking queens in the back of the club toward the strange new pansexual creature onstage. But this semi-successful scene of crossgenerational contact, both musical and erotic (Cecil becomes Brian's manager, and possibly his lover) is not replicated in the film's 1984. Instead,
as the song begins to play, Arthur turns around in surprised recognition, and one of the Tommy Stone fans, a Latino teen coded as gay, also recognizes it, walking toward the jukebox and exclaiming, "Oh, god, I love this song." The visual and sonic tone of the front room changes markedly: the kids are now milling around, talking animately to one another, illuminated in a less harsh light, and paying no attention whatsoever to Curt and Arthur in the other room. The youths' set of possibilities in the present, that is, no longer depends on whatever narratives the two older white men, glam's survivors, may develop about the relationship between then and now. Instead, the film brings past and present together, not in a singular causal chain, but in the audiotaopia constructed as the same song, "2HB," is carried across space and time, from the jukebox in the 1984 New York City bar, through shots of Jack Fairy's glitter-dusted performance of it at the 1975 "Death of Glitter" concert, and finally, in the film's closing shot, as it issues from a small radio in the corner of a working-class London pub in 1974, during the coal miners' strikes. The pub is lit entirely by candles because of electricity restrictions, and their flickering light around the radio recalls the votive dimension of the film. The contact between these three disparate spaces where the song is played brings them into sync with one another as an affective cluster rather than a causal narrative, a different kind of perpetuation of history. Most of the people gathered within these two bars, which lie on either side of the "Death of Glitter" concert historically, have had nothing to do with the glam scene, nor do they have any particular interest in or need for the content of that history, the attachment-archive of the film. What seems to matter in this sequence, rather, is the affective and affinitive gesture implied by the collection of scenes through sound: the construction of what Josh Kun, following Foucault's notion of the heterotopia as an effectively enacted utopia produced by the juxtaposition of several ordinarily incompatible spaces in a single place, identifies as audiotaopia, a musical contact zone wherein a remapping of the present toward a "more just world" might be imagined (23).

In sympathy with the movement toward justice, we might also use this image cluster to return to the question I invoked earlier, about the effectiveness of attachment-historiography at the present time. For if one of the things this final image does is to locate Arthur and Curt, as Davis puts it, within the "larger scale of struggling, oppressed classes for whom revolution may not seem imminent, but who share a common stake in the recovery of outlawed pleasure," it therefore calls our attention to the material dimension of (queer) history (98). This materiality indicates, I think, another structuring absence in the film: an engagement with questions of

Figure 5. "Kids in bar" from Velvet Goldmine, dir. Todd Haynes, 1998.
class formation and, more generally, capital. Though the film’s gestures toward something like class consciousness are intermittent and imperfect, it maintains an awareness of the necessarily difficult question of capital in relation to the arts, the way the romance of attachments to cinema and popular culture is everywhere crossed by questions of money and institutional power. It points to the way the trappings of glam self-making, the material of the intense self-unmaking and self-remaking attachments that it details and foment s, are circulated in a capitalist economy whose sole purpose is to remake itself, not to make queers, and which will even solicit and circulate queerness if the capacity for profit is seen therein, as Slade’s manager Jerry Devine does when he promotes Brian Slade and Curt Wild “like a pair of forties starlets on the swoon—a Tracy and Hepburn for the seventies.” Indeed, even the passionate kiss the two singers share after Curt recites Wilde to Brian is effectively for sale, as it takes place during a press conference that Devine has organized to promote Slade’s Maxwell Demon persona as a novelty product. Though such nonreproductive couplings are anathema to the heterodomestic family (when Arthur’s father catches him masturbating to a picture of Slade felling Wilde’s guitar, he shames him so fiercely that Arthur leaves home shortly afterward), that intolerability has no necessary consequences for what the market will bear, or what kinds of desires it will solicit, as amply evidenced in shows like Queer Eye For The Straight Guy, where homosexuality seems to exist entirely in order to direct heterosexuality’s attention outward in order to maximize its contact with the newest commodities. This circulation of queerness as capital, moreover, actually ends up damming queers in the film while making more money for straight people: Slade’s first manager, the aging queen Cecil Drake, is humiliated and tossed aside in favor of the more aggressive, swaggering Devine, just as Curt Wild will be after Devine decides he is too unpredictable, too much of a fiscal risk. In this way, Velvet Goldmine works to remember the relation of capitalism to modern gay identity even as it explores the possibility of its deterritorialization—always transient, always temporary—in the attachments fomented by the queer.

For all the film’s play with time, then, the final scene may also read as a warning against making a fetish of queer temporality, of celebrating it as a mode of resistance to the obligatory embrace of reproductive/generational time without also thinking through its relation to the times of capital at this particular point in history—where (to name just two of many concerns) the drive to reclaim “our” history, construct “our” archives, may unintentionally collude with the neoliberal drive toward privatization, where the possibility of aesthetic self-making runs up against a drastic decline in public support for the arts and ever-increasing corporate control. If queer historiography in general, and an attention to histories of queer attachment in particular, offer the promise of encountering our time differently, we are left with the challenge of approaching these histories passionately and yet dispossessively, in line with Benjamin’s cautious detachment: of keeping in mind, as a verse from “2HB” has it, that “finding, not keeping’s the lesson,” lest in the exhilarating movement toward inventing another kind of future, one that “history has not yet envisioned,” we forget (how) to remember our own historical present.

Notes

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1. In another version of this story, the genitals were covered by a fig leaf before cemetery officials would allow the stone to be displayed, and subsequently broken off by student pranksters who tried to remove the fig leaf (see Keister 243–44). Performance artist Leon Johnson ceremonially (and temporarily) restored the missing part of the sculpture with a sterling silver phallus in order to craft the performance piece MEMBERING WILDE (2000).

2. Here I am glossing a number of important recent examples of queer historiography and its distance from the heteronormative arrangements of generational reproduction. In addition to Dinshaw, see especially Freeman, “Packing.”

3. The notion of partial affinity is adapted from Dinshaw’s insistence on partial connections between past and present, which she embraces as a way of getting past an unproductive opposition between historical alterity and presentism.

4. I adopt this concept of “votiveness” from Nealon, “Camp.”

5. I make this argument in greater detail in “Coming.”

6. The phrase is taken from Freeman, “Time‘ 39; ‘pleasure,” here, is posited in opposition to what Freeman sees as an overvaluation of negative affect in recent queer theory.

7. Excerpts from all three thinkers (Foucault, Agamben, and Derrida) are situated alongside contemporary artistic meditations on archives in Merewether.

8. It has been proposed to me that all attachments are queer; here, however, I am concerned with a particular historical deployment around forms of gender dissonance and sexual nonnormativity, and am reluctant to make the kind of large-scale assertion of queerness that would obscure these.

9. Transcription of live chat on BowieNet, December 17, 1998. During the same chat, Mick Rock, the rock photographer who directed several of Bowie’s gla-
era music videos, insists on glam's basic heterosexuality, commenting about Velvet Goldmine: "It's going to be hard for me not to be very critical. Having read the script, I realized it was something I need to keep distance from because it had nothing to do with the period. A fact that gets lost is that a boy in those days wearing a lot of makeup would probably attract a lot of girlfriends, speaking for myself. Makeup was nothing to do with being gay, it had a lot to do with getting laid, for a very heterosexual person. You couldn't fuck a lot of girls unless you were wearing some mascara" (Visconti et al., n. pag.). York's more qualified critique blasts Haynes for not understanding that "the gay in Glam was always sensibility as much as sex," apparently missing the gay sensibility that permeates the film.

10. Boy George has also criticized Velvet Goldmine while on BowieNet live chat, though on nationalist rather than homophobic grounds: "I saw Velvet Goldmine and I thought it was an insult to my youth. I sit in the cinema tutting throughout and thought they got it completely wrong. American's [sic] shouldn't make movies about British culture" (Bowie, n. pag.).

11. On the "not-yet" as the temporality of a utopic queerness, see Muñoz, Cruising.
12. The Oxford English Dictionary's first references for alien as extraterrestrial date to 1944 for the adjective and 1953 for the noun.

13. See Auslander 126-34 for an overview of the space alien thematic in Bowie's pre-glum glam career. Particularly relevant in this context is the hit single "Starman" (1972), which is affectively indebted to the queer canon via the aural echo of that classic of queer longing, "Somewhere over the Rainbow" that begins its chorus.

14. Wilde's declaration of himself as would-be pop idol likewise originates with Bowie, who famously spoke those words a century later, at his high-school graduation.

15. It is rumored that Bowie declined to give Haynes the rights to use any of his music because he thought the Slade character was too gay. The official reason cited by Haynes and others was that Bowie had his own plans for a Ziggy Stardust project and thought the two would go in competition; see Moverman xv.

16. The film remains banned from circulation but can be viewed online at http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6221305107139405456.

17. Haynes's films, as James Morrison observes, abound in images of touch: shots of people touching one another, or touching themselves, as when Jack Fairy strokes the blood-lipstick onto his own lips (140-42). Yet as Laura Marks, in a brief critique of Deleuze's focus on the touch of the hand as the cue for the haptic, argues, the spectacle of touching hands is not inherently haptic; rather, she asserts, this sort of identification with touch may serve to distance the viewer from contact with the image itself (Touch 8).

18. Insofar as perception is a social process, the temporal aspect of texture also indirectly suggests a historical dimension, as Sedgwick, following Bora, proposes, since one is reminded that other people and/or forces have been involved in touching as well (Touching 14).

19. D. N. Rodowick offers a qualified defense of Deleuze's elision of categories of critical difference, insofar as Deleuze's work launches itself against the subject; such elisions might be read as constituting a resistance to identity. Yet as Rodowick notes, resistance is never "outside" identity, but comes from a context marked by identity (ix-xviii).

20. For another critique of Deleuze's move away from the body, see Hansen.
21. On the worldmaking aspect of Haynes's work overall, see especially Davies.
22. Halberstam's specific target here is Lee Edelman's work, which I discuss in greater detail below.

23. Other work by Haynes deliberately emphasizes the limits of a white male perspective even as he uses the marginalization of (white male) queerness to open other perspectives on the scene. As Muñoz has pointed out in "Dead White," Haynes's Safe is an exception among early examples of New Queer Cinema in that it takes whiteness seriously as a perspective, which is to say it makes it apparent in all its historical toxicity, all its perspectival limitations. While Haynes's films situate a queer sensibility in relation to other forms of alterity, there is no sense, in his film, that these forms of marginalization are equivalent or exchangeable.

24. See Wiegman 807 for a discussion of the distinction between melancholic and apocalyptic relations between past and present.

25. "2HB" was first released by Roxy Music in 1972, though the version played in the film is a cover by The Venus in Furs.

26. This is an important distinction too often overlooked in contemporary queer theory: while reproductive futurism polices the present by allowing it only an officially recognized past and insisting that it regulate its desire for the good of a future reckoned as a direct continuation of the present, the logic of the market in late-late capitalism instead erases the past and with it the grounding of temporal direction as it commodifies time as a series of consecutive and consumable presents. For a discussion of this loss of direction, see Harry Harootunian, whose observations help illuminate why Edelman's recent polemics No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive is both so startlingly accurate in many of its claims and so frustratingly insufficient, not only because its binary model of sexuality sidesteps the necessity of thinking about how racial and gender difference operate in the construction of sexuality (though he acknowledges, in a footnote on women-as-simulhomosexual, that these might be reinscribed) but, more importantly, because its impoverished model of the social, insofar as it lacks any place for thinking about class and labor, replicates rather than interrupts the neoliberal social imaginary.

27. On contemporary capitalism's capacity to accommodate "diversity" while neutralizing critique in the arts, see Joseph; for a critique of contemporary gay political imaginary's complicity with neoliberalism, see Duggan.
Works Cited


