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Flaming the Fans: Shame and the Aesthetics of Queer Fandom in Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine*

by CHAD BENNETT

Abstract: *Velvet Goldmine* offers a trenchant queer theorization of shame in relation to fandom's affective reading practices. Through the film's representation and formal enactment of such reading practices, we can see the formative role fandom's shame-fueled pleasures play in the queer film aesthetic Haynes's oeuvre exemplifies.

I was at the Hammersmith Odeon when [David] Bowie killed off Ziggy [Stardust] in '73. . . . A lot of men were throwing off their underwear and showing their cocks all over the place. A lot of fluid was flying about. One girl was actually sucking someone off at the same time as trying to listen to what was going on. I thought it was so extraordinary because nobody had any inhibitions. I remember that around me nobody gave a shit really about doing these things because it was rumoured that maybe this was the last time Bowie would perform. Maybe this was the last time Ziggy would be here. And everyone's got to get in on this because otherwise you're just a square. So everyone just took their clothes off. And wanking was nothing. There was a guy next to me wanking in time to one track and I thought: My God! What does he do when he's alone? Then I suddenly realized that all the things I'd been doing were perfectly OK. Because here were people doing it with each other and sharing it. Julie, David Bowie fan¹

I'd . . . like [Bowie] to see himself from a fan's point of view and understand just how *intense* a fan's devotions can be. It may be embarrassing, but it's very real. Sheila, David Bowie fan²

Fandom is embarrassing. Embarrassing for us, for the objects of fan devotion, and, perhaps above all, for fans—like Julie, the fan whose account of David Bowie's final appearance as Ziggy Stardust renders an already infamous concert decidedly more infamous. (No other eyes at the show, not

1 Fan identified as "Julie," as quoted in Fred Vermorel and Judy Vermorel's *Starlust: The Secret Life of Fans* (London: Comet Books, 1985), 182–183.

2 Ibid., 71.

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even the unblinking eyes of D. A. Pennebaker's four movie cameras, seem to have glimpsed the presumably hard to miss display of "cocks all over the place."³ Julie's fantasy, a decade on, turns inside out all of the things a fan might do with her desires when alone in her bedroom, a Bowie LP on the turntable and surrounded by carefully arranged album sleeves, news clippings, and pinups.⁴ Fan activities, often private and marked by isolation, secrecy, and shame, here morph into something public, communal, and "perfectly OK." But even as she labors to produce an unashamed fan narrative and identity, Julie stages her fandom in complicated relation to—engendered by and further engendering—the range of emotions grouped under the heading of shame: her words are flush with shame for a fellow fan's impressively rhythmic, public masturbation ("My God! What does he do when he's alone?"); for her own, more private autoeroticism ("all the things I'd been doing"); and for her inability, at the time and in retrospect, to shed the embarrassment and shame saturating the erotics of fandom, like those around her *seemed* to have done ("nobody had any inhibitions," but "everyone's got to get in on this because otherwise you're just a square.")

In Michael Warner's polemic on the ethics of sexual shame, *The Trouble with Normal*, he recounts the ancient Athenian philosopher Diogenes' dramatic response to what he saw as the hypocrisy of sexual shame: masturbating in the marketplace.⁵ But, like the fantasy of Bowie fans wanking in the pop marketplace in order to affirm fandom's shame-inducing eroticism as "OK," this response and its pretense of shamelessness seems almost absurdly willful. "An ethical response to the problem of shame should not require us to pretend that shame doesn't exist," writes Warner, sensing "a certain hollowness to these anodyne views of sexuality as simply benign and pleasant."⁶ Indeed, there is very little that strikes the reader as *simply* benign or pleasant or perfectly OK in the oral and written accounts of pop fandom collected, like Julie's, in Fred and Judy Vermorel's absorbing 1985 study *Starlust: The Secret Lives of Fans*. Rather, these "embarrassing, but . . . very real" productions of fans' sexualities feature scenes of fluid identifications and transgressive desires whose staging ranges from the disarmingly banal to the stunningly elaborate. The numerous erotic tales of Bowie fandom, especially, are deeply interwoven with many of the narrative threads that so often run through stories of queer lives and desires—including the thread Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her work on affect, has recognized as tracing shame's constitutive part in queer identity. If the term "queer," as Sedgwick proposes, can be taken to refer primarily to "those whose sense of identity is for some reason tuned most durably to the note of shame . . . developing from this originary affect their particular structures of expression, creativity, pleasure, and struggle," then perhaps there is something queer about fandom in general, given its shamed status as—as Henry Jenkins argues—"a

3 See *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (D. A. Pennebaker, 1973).

4 Julie: "I had this thing where I'd stick myself in my room and switch off the lights and burn incense and play Bowie records on this old record player my brother gave me. And I'd start to masturbate." Vermorel, *Starlust*, 100.

5 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.

6 Ibid.

scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire.”⁷

The Bowie fans represented in *Starlust*, at least, structure their fandom in relation to shame and the shame-related affects that hover around their erotically charged, overlapping fan activities—including viewing, reading, listening, writing, fantasizing, role playing, and archiving. As these fans construct their queer narratives both in terms of and against the array of official marketing materials surrounding the pop star Bowie, they are able to redeploy, if not shed, the shame concomitant with their “scandalous,” culturally marginal position—for as Sedgwick notes, “the forms taken by shame” are “available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *transfiguration* . . . but perhaps all too potent for the work of purgation and deontological closure.”⁸ As Warner more bluntly puts it, “it is futile to deny the ordinary power of sexual shame.”⁹ We have seen how just such an attempted denial—or, more accurately, the failure of this denial—propels Julie’s fan narrative, which hinges on the question of how to rid oneself of shame. But if this affect cannot easily be gotten rid of, then perhaps the fan identified in *Starlust* as Sheila poses a more productive question: not how to do without shame, but rather how to do things with it. “I’d . . . like [Bowie] to see himself from a fan’s point of view and understand just how *intense* a fan’s devotions can be,” she says. “It may be embarrassing, but it’s very real.” Sheila’s wish that Bowie “see himself from a fan’s point of view”—her desire that the object of her fandom simultaneously occupy that position *and* the spectatorial position of the fan, a site of “*intense*” affect—mirrors her own “embarrassing” vision of herself from Bowie’s point of view. Her wish further suggests the ways fans often identify and communicate with stars, the ways they come to better “understand” and shape stars and themselves through queer affects like shame, making use of what Sedgwick sees as its “transformational energy,” its “experimental, creative, performative force.”¹⁰ Embarrassment, here, both interrupts identification and suggests its potential intensity; it at once emphasizes and shores up the tenuous identity of the fan, making a self that merely may “be” also appear as something “very real.”

I take as my point of departure Judy’s and Sheila’s accounts of pop fandom, marked by extreme embarrassment and shame and generated in response to the gender-bending styles and ambiguous sexuality of Bowie’s personae, because these accounts link together a set of issues—fandom, shame, performance, and queer identity—that motivate the discussion that follows. The identity-making force of fan activities has become a commonplace in studies of gay and lesbian spectatorship and fandom as well as in more current work on queer spectatorship and fandom.¹¹ Set next to queer theory’s

7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 63; Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

8 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 63.

9 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 3.

10 Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*,” *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (1993): 4.

11 See, for instance, Richard Dyer’s “Judy Garland and Gay Men,” in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 137–191; and Judith Mayne’s assertion, in *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), that fan activities ranging from viewing films, to “shared pleasures in camp,” to “speculations about the real lives of performers” play significant parts in “the various narratives that constitute the very notion of a gay/lesbian identity” (166).

mid-1990s turn to affirmative explorations of shame and queer performativity, claims for fandom's role in shaping queer identity appear to overlap significantly with similar claims about shame. Sedgwick ventures that, at this cultural and historical moment, "many of the performative identity vernaculars that seem most recognizably 'flushed' . . . with shame consciousness and shame creativity do cluster intimately around lesbian and gay worldly spaces," and I propose that fandom, from this vantage point, emerges as one particular queer, shame-saturated, "performative identity vernacular."¹² As such, fandom provides a rich site for thinking about queer affect and the imbrications of its thorny, stigmatized history and "experimental, creative, performative force."

An extraordinary example of such thinking—and the focus of my critical attention—is Todd Haynes's film *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), an ambitious queer fantasia on fandom, performance, identity, history, and politics. Among other things, Haynes's complex film is a thinly veiled Bowie biopic, using the arc of his career to document the fleeting promise of the "glam rock era" and the less transitory effects of its demise. It is also a pastiche of film history, borrowing its narrative structure from *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and its bold tone and style largely from counterculture event films like *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) and *Performance* (Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell, 1970). And it is a rumination on identity as performance, situating the film's Bowie-esque character Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) as heir to a Wildean tradition of aesthetic self-fashioning.¹³ Most significantly for this discussion, *Velvet Goldmine* reclaims certain queer facets of the glam rock scene as part of a critique of what Douglas Crimp, in another context, calls "the current homogenizing, normalizing, and desexualizing of gay life."¹⁴ Haynes's film shares with a number of roughly concurrent, queer theoretical projects a desire to acknowledge and reconsider the potential productivity of those aspects—often affects—of queer history which contemporary gay culture distances itself from or frankly disavows. Rather than just reading *Velvet Goldmine* through the lens of recent queer theory, then, in what follows I consider the film as itself a trenchant queer theorization of shame, of fandom's affective reading practices, and of the formative role these reception practices and their shame-fueled pleasures play in the queer film aesthetic Haynes's oeuvre exemplifies.¹⁵ *Velvet Goldmine* begins with a coy epigraph: "Although what you are about to see is a work of fiction, it should nevertheless be played at maximum volume."¹⁶ We are instructed to approach the movie's fiction with a certain intensity, such that our reception, like the fan's, becomes audible, even authorial: listen loudly, the film says. Although it "may

12 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 63.

13 On this tradition, see Shelton Waldrep's *The Aesthetics of Self-Invention: Oscar Wilde to David Bowie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Waldrep's study echoes *Velvet Goldmine's* critical point of view: in moving from Wilde to Bowie to *Velvet Goldmine*, its trajectory borrows and fleshes out Haynes's own.

14 Douglas Crimp, "Mario Montez, for Shame," in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, ed. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 58.

15 Fandom's central role in Haynes's queer formalism continues in his films following *Velvet Goldmine*; *Far From Heaven* (2002) presents a fan's queer reworking of the cinema of Douglas Sirk, while the fan perspective of *I'm Not There* (2007) swaps out Bowie for Bob Dylan, offering a further queer deconstruction of the musical biopic and the rock idol's star discourse.

16 Haynes, here, references instructions on the back cover of the original pressing of David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (RCA, 1972): "TO BE PLAYED AT MAXIMUM VOLUME."

be embarrassing,” this cinematic work of fiction has “very real” things to tell us—or rather, through its fiction, we as fans have “very real” things to say—about shame and performativity, shame and fandom, and shame’s difficult part in the pleasures of queer reception.

Shame Is Performance

Shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, *is performance*.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick¹⁷

[I]n these and other scenes of queer culture it may seem that life has been freed from any attempt at respectability or dignity. . . . [I]f it’s possible to be more exposed and abject then it’s sure to be only a matter of time before someone gets there, probably on stage and with style. Michael Warner¹⁸

Exposed, abject, *on stage and with style*—Michael Warner’s description of marginal queer culture could serve as the tag line for Todd Haynes’s *Velvet Goldmine*. In one of the film’s most memorable performance sequences, we are introduced to garage rocker-cum-glam star Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor), whose name links him both to Kurt Cobain, one of rock music’s most celebrated and shame-ridden casualties, and Oscar Wilde, one of shame’s most tortured and eloquent theoreticians, and whose look and stage moves reverberate with the queer menace of Iggy Pop circa 1970. Pop’s ravaged, skinny frame held a cartoonishly masculine musculature, inexplicably motored about by a lithe, feminine slither—an erotic presence that dared you to look *and* to look away. So too with Wild, who takes the stage with a piercing howl, launching into Iggy and the Stooges’ “TV Eye” with one hand clutching the mike and the other down his pants. Wild oils up his shirtless chest and coats it in glitter, using the jar to mime masturbation with a shimmering climax; and he drops his leather pants to moon the audience before turning to expose himself and give the repulsed but fascinated crowd the finger. All the while, the rapt gaze of Wild’s audience is both scrutinizing and shaming: it exposes him (the festival’s crowd of hippies taunts him with shouts of “Wanker!” and throws flaming debris on stage) and induces him further to expose himself (he campily wanks for the crowd and deliriously leaps into it through the fire). “They despised him,” Brian Slade sullenly concludes after Wild’s performance, but he means it as an odd honorific. “When you’re abused like that,” agrees Brian’s wife Mandy (Toni Collette), “you know you’ve touched the stars.” The crowd’s overdetermined ambivalence is echoed by the lyrics Wild growls—“She got TV eye on me”—which leave unresolved who is watching whom, who inhabits the positions of spectator and performer, who is exposing and who is being exposed, who is star and who is fan, who is abusing and who, precisely, is “abused like that.” In this context, the scene’s searching camerawork, marked by frequent, extreme zooms and frantic pans, seems simultaneously voyeuristic and ashamed, both at pains to keep the skulking Wild firmly in frame and, just the opposite, to avert the film’s gaze from his seductively shameful figure.

17 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 38 (italics in original).

18 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 34.

As Wild's stylishly exposed and abject performance unfolds on-screen, Slade's first manager, Cecil (Michael Feast), provides in voice-over its queer backstory, establishing that, "according to legend," during Wild's adolescence in "the aluminum trailer parks of Michigan" he was "discovered by his mother in the family loo, at the 'service' of his older brother, and promptly shipped off for eighteen months of electric shock treatment" (Figure 1). But the stigma of this shock treatment, meant to "fry the fairy clean out of him," instead generates the fabulously abject show we witness: "all it did was make him bonkers every time he heard electric guitar" (Figure 2). The sequence cuts between Wild's performance and illustrative glimpses of his teenage trailer park years, though, as Cecil notes, "rock folklore claims far more primitive origins" for Wild. The "primitive origins" of this alternate "legend" are suggested visually—a prowling wolf dissolves into the subsequent shot of a wolflike Wild lurking on stage—so that even as Cecil quietly sets aside this register of "rock folklore," the film boldly engages it, thus positioning Wild's more realistic history, which draws on the reported experience of

Figures 1–2. Flaming creature: Curt Wild transforms the stigma of "electric shock treatment" into the thrall of "electric guitar" (*Velvet Goldmine*, Miramax, 1998).

Lou Reed, as also an account of “origins.” As a teenager in the 1950s, Reed’s intense rock-and-roll fandom and sexually ambiguous behavior led to his being institutionalized by his parents and forced to undergo shock therapy. Haynes, here, links and blurs Reed’s oft-recounted biography and the fantasies of “rock folklore,” and deploys his resulting mythos of glam rock in order to situate the shame and stigma of queer childhood at the origin of glam’s aesthetic of self-making performance.

In a staggering moment in Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*, Wilde recalls “sitting in the dock on the occasion of my last trial listening to [the prosecutor’s] appalling denunciation of me . . . and being sickened with horror at what I heard. Suddenly it occurred to me, *How splendid it would be, if I was saying all this about myself!*”¹⁹ *Velvet Goldmine* takes a cue from Wilde—one of many—in depicting glam rock and its stars as emerging from the sudden, queer realization: how splendid it would be if I was *staging* all this about myself! Through his shame, Wilde realizes (and valorizes) its performative potential, the way it can transform “appalling denunciation” into erotic confession, or, as in *Velvet Goldmine*, the violent throes of “electric shock treatment” into the thrall of “electric guitar.” Wilde anticipates Sedgwick’s argument that “transformational shame . . . is *performance*.” Or as Crimp, drawing on Sedgwick, explains, shame is “the switching point between stage fright and stage presence, between being a wall flower and being a diva.”²⁰

For Sedgwick, the political vitality of the term *queer* claims shame as its wellspring: “far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy.”²¹ *Velvet Goldmine* persistently “cleaves,” or passionately adheres to *and* tears itself away from “the childhood scene of shame” and its beautifully, troublingly abundant resources for queer performativity.²² Even before we learn of Curt Wild’s queer adolescence, the film’s prologue depicts an Oscar Wilde orphaned not by wolves but by a spacecraft that deposits him as an infant on the doorstep of Victorian Dublin. The young Wilde—alien, outcast, queer—wields his immense resources of shame like a glamorous weapon. A tracking shot past a row of schoolboys who stand one by one to state what they would like to be when they grow up—a tailor, a farmer, a barrister, a truck driver—is punctuated and punctured by Wilde (Luke Morgan Oliver), a would-be “pop idol,” whose self-assured, anachronistic, gender-dissonant ambitions, not to mention his emerald cravat and sparkling pin, arrest the camera and draw the dubious stare of his teacher.

Cut to (a title informs) “One hundred years later . . .”: a child is being beaten. From above we watch as a pack of uniformed schoolboys, not unlike those in young Wilde’s classroom, circle a boy not unlike Wilde on the playground. They shove, tease, tear at, topple, and abandon him. The camera draws nearer and we see that the boy,

19 Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1905), in *De Profundis and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 197, italics in original.

20 Crimp, “Mario Montez, for Shame,” 65.

21 Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity,” 4.

22 For further discussion of the representation of queer childhood in Haynes’s work, see Jon Davies, “‘Nurtured in Darkness’: Queer Childhood in the Films of Todd Haynes,” and Lucas Hilderbrand, “Mediating Queer Boyhood: *Dottie Gets Spanked*,” both in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All That Heaven Allows*, ed. James Morrison (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 57–67, 42–56.

face down and rooting in the muck of the playground as if caught or absorbed in his disgrace, is, of course, not Wilde, but another boy whose continuities with Wilde are made clear when he unburies a familiar green pin, now caked with age and dirt. The prologue's narrator (Janet McTeer) intones, "Childhood, adults always say, is the happiest time in life. But as long as he could remember, Jack Fairy knew better." At home, seven-year-old Jack (Osheen Jones) stands before a vanity in the dark of his parents' bedroom and presses his finger to his still-bleeding lip. He examines the finger, and we see it in close-up as he brings it, tremulously, as if charged with tenuous insight, back to his mouth where it smoothes the blood that marks his beating across his lips like lipstick (Figure 3).

stick (Figure 3). "One mysterious day," the narrator continues, "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." With this last line, the camera swish-pans from Jack's engrossed eyes to the mirror image they peer into. Jack's reflection, boasting the discovered pin and glossy blood-red lipstick, smiles knowingly and puckers his lips, as if this were an alternate version of Jack, a self constructed out of legible shame, shame articulated on the body itself but now read back, recited, reflected with different emphasis: how splendid it would be if I were saying all this about myself! (Figure 4). Jack the fairy, beaten on the playground, here transforms into ur-glam-rocker Jack Fairy, emblazoning the sign of his shame not only as a means of self-making, but also as a way of establishing queer affective relationships ("somewhere there were others quite like him"), forging transhistorical bonds between those most prone to shame (signified by the shifting possession of the pin), and delineating the potential political efficacy of these queer ties ("the whole stinking world would be theirs").

Figures 3–4. Lipstick traces: Jack the fairy becomes glam star Jack Fairy by emblazoning his shame—a bloody lip from a playground beating—as a means of self-making (*Velvet Goldmine*, Miramax, 1998).

Velvet Goldmine also depicts its enigmatic subject, Brian Slade (whose identity, as Mary Ann Doane notes, “is never stabilized as anything other than performance”) in relation to the childhood scene of shame.²³ But Slade’s queer performativity—his strategic manufacturing of “meaning and being”—is complicated by the fact that the shame to which it is intensely linked is seldom originally Slade’s own. “One of the strangest features of shame,” writes Sedgwick, is the way “someone else’s embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me—assuming I’m a shame-prone person—with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable.”²⁴ We see this strange feature of shame, this “double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality,” in the three vignettes that compose Cecil’s narrative of Slade’s childhood, adolescence, and early career.²⁵ In each, Slade encounters and takes on someone else’s shame.

The first encounter takes place while young Brian spends “a summer in London with his aunt—a figure of some ill repute in the Slade family, after she married a cockney in the ‘entertainment field.’” After eagerly soaking up a creaky music hall drag performance, Brian wanders backstage and, like a good Freudian child, follows the sound of distressing moans to a slightly ajar dressing room door, through which he just as eagerly devours a peculiar primal scene: the performer he has just seen onstage (Lindsay Kemp) now performing oral sex on his heavy-set, sweaty uncle. The uncle crassly smirks, and blows little Brian a kiss, while the haggard singer, still in drag, head between the uncle’s legs, turns, dazed, eyes heavy with numbness and shame. “Brian’s tender introduction to the theatrical underworld,” we are told, “would leave a dramatic impression.” Sure enough, a theatrical drumroll bridges the dramatic impression the scene makes on wide-eyed Brian and the quite literal dramatic impression he makes out of it, precociously imitating Little Richard as he leaps into frame, performing “Tutti Frutti” for his distinctly uneasy parents and distinctly uninterested grandmother. Brian’s own drag act—he wears a flamboyant mod suit, a pompadour wig, and a penciled-on moustache—makes clear whose shame he has taken on, and further signals a queer identity taking shape through the affective connection to another’s shame.²⁶

In Cecil’s second vignette a teenaged Brian, now a “swank London mod,” fully under the stylistic sway of Little Richard, fucks a young schoolboy in exchange for a gold watch. The scene centers intensely on the exchange of this watch: the boy conspicuously swings it as he passes Brian on the street, and we soon see it in close-up

23 Mary Ann Doane, “Pathos and Pathology: The Cinema of Todd Haynes,” *Camera Obscura* 19, no. 3 (2004): 15.

24 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 37.

25 Ibid.

26 Brian is also, of course, taking on the shame of Little Richard—a shame linked to the charged intersection of race and ambiguous gender performance. Haynes explores this fleeting suggestion of performative shame’s relationship to racial difference more fully—though in terms less overtly connected to sexuality—in *I’m Not There* (2007), where the curious embodiment of Bob Dylan as a black child folksinger (Marcus Carl Franklin) named Woody Guthrie suggests, among other things, Dylan’s (and American popular music’s) complicated, troubling appropriation of the creative resources derived from the shame surrounding a certain strain of black American experience and performance.

as Brian snaps it into his palm and slips it into his jacket's breast pocket, payment for services about to be rendered. But more than simply indicating the price of this particular sexual exchange, these shots of the watch identify it as a locus of concentrated sexual shame: that of sex already culturally marked as shameful (paid, same sex, and intergenerational), but also carried out in what appears to be deep personal relation to shame. In a strikingly composed full shot, we see that the sexual encounter awkwardly takes place in a sparsely appointed child's room, in which the schoolboy lies face down atop the covers of a neatly made twin bed, fully dressed except for the short distance his pants have traveled to expose his bare buttocks (Figure 5). The boy's face is averted both from Brian, standing over him at the foot of the bed, and from us, as if he has been reduced to just the ineradicable indignity communicated by this waiting white flesh, almost shamefully voluptuous in its ascetic surroundings, and signaling his illicit desire to be penetrated.

Brian, too, is exposed as he takes on this shame—a transfer indicated by the movement of the watch from the queer boy who uses it to buy precious, shamefully coded pleasures, to Brian, who exposes himself in accepting it as his price for giving these pleasures. The exchange of the watch from one body to another stands in for the sexual act we do not witness. The schoolboy and Brian never so much as touch on-screen; their starkly dissimilar attires, placements, postures, and attitudes seem to pit them in different worlds altogether. Though the camera frames them together, and though they share in sexual shame quite directly, they nevertheless remain compositionally isolated, highlighting the way in which one can be suffused with the shame of another even while this affect's "very suffusiveness seems to delineate [one's] precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable." The sound-bridge into the next scene—in which we shortly see Brian's first full-blown glam performance, at the Sombrero club—gestures toward this sense that Brian shares in the rich performative resources of the schoolboy's shame (as signified by the exchange of overdetermined

Figure 5. The erotics of shame: Brian Slade fucks a schoolboy in exchange for a gold watch (*Velvet Goldmine*, Miramax, 1998).

gold) but does not share in his identity. As Brian loosens his tie and begins to undress, exposing himself by stripping away his meticulous veneer of style, Freda Payne's version of "Band of Gold" begins, with its eventual chorus: "Now that you're gone/All that's left is a band of gold."

Perhaps most significantly, Brian takes on Curt Wild's unwieldy shame at a key moment in the formation of his own unstable identity (and career). Brian's festival set precedes Wild's, but with the exception of a few distracted cries—"bugger off, you woofster!" being the most energetic—the audience can hardly be bothered to get riled up by his appearance. Mandy disingenuously characterizes the crowd's tepid distaste: "They adored you!" But we recognize how disappointing even this lie is to Brian when, after Wild's fiery performance, he jealously concludes of the same audience: "they despised him." Brian's queer desire to take on another's degradation and shame is explicit—"I just wish it had been me," he says, "wish I'd thought of it"—and his ability to once again do so is equally apparent. In the subsequent scene a promotional film introduces Brian's soon-to-be-famous Maxwell Demon persona, and in the film Brian inhabits nearly all of the characteristics for which Wild's performance has been despised: he appears as a menacing, slithering, half-dressed alien, glamorous and abject and wailing away on guitar behind a wall of fire.

Slade's liability—or ability?—to be flooded with the other's shame certainly appears to coincide neatly with Sedgwick's caveat that such affective fluidity depends on one's first being "a shame-prone person." If, as Crimp, elaborating on Sedgwick, explains, a "shame-prone person is a person who has been shamed" (a definition he acknowledges is "necessarily . . . a bit tautological"), Brian seems to fit the bill.²⁷ "Brian never cared much for the suburbs," Cecil tells us, and we can only presume—based on his being shipped off for the summer with an aunt "of ill repute," his parents' disapproving response to his gender-troubling performance, and his emerging queer sexuality—that the suburbs never cared much for Brian, either. From this vantage, we might conclude that Brian's deep experience of others' shame points toward his own unique sources of it. According to Crimp, "In taking on the shame, I do not share in the other's identity. I simply adopt the other's vulnerability to being shamed. In this operation, most importantly, the other's difference is preserved; it is not claimed as my own. In taking on or taking up his or her shame, I am not attempting to vanquish his or her otherness. I put myself in the place of the other only insofar as I recognize that I too am prone to shame."²⁸ It is tempting, in this context, to assert that Brian is depicted as particularly susceptible to shame and particularly good at exploiting its transformational, performative capacity. Or, to borrow Warner's language: if it's possible in *Velvet Goldmine* to be more exposed and abject than it's sure to be only a matter of time before Brian Slade gets there, probably on stage and with style. But tempting and accurate as such an assertion might be, it seems only part of what Haynes's film is after in its explorations of the scene of shame. *Velvet Goldmine* does not share in the relative ease with which Crimp acknowledges but sets aside the possibility of effacing "the other's difference" in the "operation" of "taking on or taking up his or her shame." Instead,

27 Crimp, "Mario Montez, for Shame," 65.

28 Ibid.

the extent to which Slade at times seems to do just this—to claim the other’s particular affective experience or identity as his own—becomes the ethical fault line the narrative straddles as it investigates Brian Slade and glam’s queer moment from the perspective of a dystopian 1980s in which Slade has morphed into Tommy Stone (Alastair Cumming), a garish portrait of the economic greed and heteronormative threat of neoconservative politics and culture. How, the film seems to ask, do we distinguish between affective communication and communities queerly enabled by shame, and the appropriation and concomitant normalization of these queer affective lives and communities? Next to Jack Fairy’s and Curt Wild’s performative uses of the childhood scene of shame, Brian Slade’s queer performativity emerges as a site of both promise and trouble—indeed, as a site of promising trouble and troubling promise. Slade’s seeming dependence on co-opting the resources of the other’s shame in constructing his own series of shifting star identities presents an ethical dilemma that turns us back again and again, along with the film, to fandom.

Fandom and the Pleasures of Shame

I needn’t mention how essential dreaming is to the character of the rock star.

Mandy Slade, *Velvet Goldmine*

Need we mention that what Mandy coyly “needn’t mention” warrants attention? For if the fictions of rock stardom depend on dreaming, whose dreams, we might ask, are “essential”? The rock star’s? The fan’s? Both? When we recall that *Velvet Goldmine* envisions these dreams and fantasies taking shape as theatrical performance and more introverted performative gestures, both rooted in experiences of shame, the question becomes more loaded. Through whose shame is “the character of the rock star” constructed?

The character of the film’s central rock star, Brian Slade, collapses easy distinctions between stars, fans, and their respective dreams: Brian’s stardom is in large part facilitated by his fandom, first for Jack Fairy, and subsequently for Curt Wild. That Brian is as much a fan as a star is underscored by the film’s doubling of him and Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale), the journalist and former Slade fanatic assigned to delve into the mystery behind Brian’s faking of his own onstage assassination and subsequent disappearance ten years prior. Brian and Arthur are linked by more than just their former fan/star or current reporter/subject relationship; as Arthur investigates Slade, it quickly becomes clear he is uncovering disavowed aspects of his own life. “Suddenly,” he says, “I was being paid to remember all the things that money, the future, and a serious life made so certain I’d forget.” *Velvet Goldmine* mourns the loss of the rich excess of affect surrounding Arthur’s adolescence and the glam era: the teenage Arthur scampers through the adult Arthur’s memory and the movie wearing a perpetual, heartbreaking blush, and the film parallels Slade’s ascent to stardom with Arthur’s memories of “all the things” of his lost youth at odds with normative culture, especially his now repressed fandom and queer sexuality. Whether working up the nerve to first trawl the Manchester suburbs in his tight glam wardrobe, or shyly asking his brother to loan him “two quid” to help buy *The Ballad of Maxwell Demon* LP with an alluringly androgynous Slade adorning the cover, or masturbating over this same album cover in his room at

home, Arthur's embarrassing, youthful fan enthusiasms are hardly separable from his shame-saturated, burgeoning sexual enthusiasms. In depicting shame as performance, the film homes in on fandom as a formative, performative practice closely tied to experiences of shame—both one's own shame and that of the stars around whose bodies swirls the star discourse absorbed and often reworked by fans. Need one mention how essential *Velvet Goldmine's* queer cocktail of shame, eroticism, and performance can be for the character of the fan as well as for the character of the rock star?

Critical discussion of queer fandom has most often imagined it as a practice invested in anti-normative interpretation—or “queering”—of mainstream texts, and though *Velvet Goldmine* engages to some extent in this type of reading (most notably in its queer resculpting of cinematic monument *Citizen Kane*), the film's plot principally focuses on fans of a star discourse and product that is already (more or less) explicitly queer. Haynes's interest, then, and mine, is less on fanning the flames of queer subtext, and more on flaming the text's fans. In *Velvet Goldmine*, fandom comes to entail a performative identity and mode of reading invested in pleasures marked as queer—at the levels of both representation and cinematic style. While suggesting that fandom in general—as an identity category laden with cultural shame—might productively be thought of as queer, I am nonetheless wary of emptying queer of its lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans specificity. I do not mean for the “queer” in “queer fandom” to appear entirely redundant. As Matthew Tinkcom usefully points out, not all fandoms are alike: “Gay fandom has historically differed from other fan practices as they are described by critics such as John Fiske and Janice A. Radway, in that gays have often had to be comparatively discreet in how they appear as fans, and thus have deployed camp rhetorical strategies in order to circulate their writings.”²⁹ The comparative discretion Tinkcom sees in gay fan practices suggests an even deeper relation to shame than in nongay fandoms; and in a suspicious critical climate where *any* textual absorption or emotional investment in a text—let alone unbridled fan enthusiasm—tends to be seen as shamefully uncritical, queer fandom doubly exposes itself to shame. *Velvet Goldmine's* representation of queer fandom, then, takes on one of the most apparent examples of shamed reading practices; and the film's examination of the significant role shame plays in the queer performances and pleasures of fandom has much to tell us about the productive uses, and the risks, of other queer reading practices less visibly or excessively but no less indelibly marked by shame.

In considering *Velvet Goldmine's* representation and formal enactment of shame in relation to fandom's reading practices, it is useful to invoke the reader as figured in Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*. Here, Barthes extends his distinction between readerly and writerly texts, casting it now in terms of the reader's general bodily “pleasure,” as distinguished from his or her more specific “bliss.”³⁰ For Barthes, the classic, readerly text of pleasure “contents, fills, grants euphoria”; it “comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading.”³¹ The avant-garde,

29 Matthew Tinkcom, “Scandalous! Kenneth Anger and the Prohibitions of Hollywood History,” in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 272.

30 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 19.

31 *Ibid.*, 14.

writerly text of bliss, meanwhile, “imposes a state of loss,” “discomforts,” and “unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.”³² Barthes attends especially to the “doubly perverse” reader who seeks writerly bliss in the midst of the pleasures of readerly texts—a reader much like Barthes himself in his deft reading of Balzac’s *Sarrasine*, or, closer to this discussion, like the fan who seeks out the blissful snags, gaps, and excesses in an official star discourse that nonetheless provide not just pleasure, but pleasures that constitute the very identity of the fan as their effect. Such a reader, writes Barthes, “simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture . . . and in the destruction of that culture: he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse.”³³

Barthes’s description of this “perverse” reader—“never anything but a ‘living contradiction’: a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall”³⁴—aligns provocatively with Sedgwick’s discussion of the queer subject whose shame engages him or her in an odd double bind: “in interrupting identification,” she writes, “shame, too, makes identity,” and thus emerges as “at once deconstituting and foundational.”³⁵ Just as Sedgwick’s queer subject, at once formed and deformed by shame, is imagined as an absorbed reader—she notes that “the attitude of shame” (“the lowering of the eyelids, the lowering of the eyes, the hanging of the head”) is also the attitude “of reading”³⁶—so too is Barthes’s subject, simultaneously formed and deformed by reading, imagined in profound relation to shame. “[W]ho endures contradiction without shame?” Barthes asks. His response: “the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure.”³⁷ Far from being free of shame, this reader’s shameless assertion of pleasure, Barthes clarifies, brands him as exceptionally shamed: “doubly perverse,” an “anti-hero,” he appears so beyond the pale that perhaps we can only “[i]magine” him. “Such a man would be the mockery of our society,” writes Barthes: “court, school, asylum, polite conversation would cast him out.”³⁸ Setting Barthes’s perverse reader next to Sedgwick’s shame-prone subject underscores how Barthes’s reading practice is made possible through shame, and, further, how at this cultural moment there is perhaps something queer about the reader at the instant of pleasure. The erotics of reading hinge, for Barthes, on a “moment” of textual pleasure in which the shamefully shameless reader experiences “the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse,” and in Sedgwick we can likewise locate the erotics of shame as it “floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 21.

35 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 36–37.

36 Ibid, 114.

37 Barthes, 3. The term “pleasure,” here, does not refer to Barthes’s distinction between the text of pleasure and the text of bliss. The specificity of this distinction is only sometimes invoked; often Barthes uses the term “pleasure” to refer more generally to the range of pleasures—sometimes blissful—of the text.

38 Ibid.

identity-constituting identificatory communication.”³⁹ These fleeting, erotic, shame-saturated moments are spatially located *between*⁴⁰—in the case of Barthes, between two distinct readings of and pleasures in a text; in Sedgwick, between the legible spectacle of the performer’s body and the no less legible spectacle of his or her audience—and Barthes articulates this “between” space of the pleasure of reading, its transience, and its erotics in terms relevant to Sedgwick’s moment and site of shame. For Barthes, “Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so.”⁴¹ The site of pleasure, then, “is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss.”⁴² Such sites seductively promise the constitution of identity and the transgressive deconstitution of that same identity: “Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes?*” asks Barthes. “[I]t is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.”⁴³

Seams, cuts, dissolves, flashes—if we return, now, to *Velvet Goldmine*, it is with a distinctly cinematic vocabulary for the erotically charged moment and site of shame, textual pleasure, and queer identity formation and dissolution at our disposal. For more than simply helping to elucidate the thematic connections *Velvet Goldmine* makes among fandom as an identity and reading practice, its pleasures, and the shame with which it is carried out, the practice of reading advanced by Barthes—one that searches out and exploits the erotic excesses, complications, and gaps in readerly texts—pinpoints some of the ways in which the film registers the shame of fandom aesthetically. If, per Sedgwick, queer might most productively refer to “the shame-delineated place of identity,” to those who develop “from this originary affect their particular structures of expression, creativity, pleasure, and struggle,” then those formal aspects of the text both sought and produced by the “shame-delineated” reader offer us one concrete example of shame’s productive, queer textual structures and their attendant pleasures.⁴⁴

Velvet Goldmine’s seams, cuts, dissolves, and flashes enact fandom’s queer mode of reception. Consider—as if it were possible not to—the conspicuous scene in which two young girls act out the flourishing love affair between Brian Slade and Curt Wild using Barbie-esque Brian and Curt dolls.⁴⁵ From a high angle the camera tracks across

39 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 36.

40 “Meaning is not in things but in between them,” a title card in *Velvet Goldmine* (quoting Norman O. Brown) informs us.

41 Barthes, 7.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 9.

44 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 63.

45 The scene’s brash self-homage to Haynes’s *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), a biopic featuring an all-Barbie cast, underscores the film’s more subtle revisiting of Haynes’s body of work: the sustained meditation on shame and self-making in *Poison* (1990), especially the film’s Jean Genet-inspired sequences; and the fertile nexus of queer childhood, shame, and pop fandom that Haynes explores in his short film *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1994). We might ascribe the ripple of vulnerability running beneath *Velvet Goldmine*’s shimmering surface, then, to the film’s staging of a charged encounter between Haynes’s cinema past and present; as Sedgwick writes of Henry James’s similar staging in the prefaces to the New York edition of his novels and stories, “What undertaking could be more narcissistically exciting or more narcissistically dangerous than that of rereading, revising, and consolidating one’s own ‘collected works?’” (*Touching Feeling*, 39).

a Slade LP spinning on a child's plastic portable record player, and, strewn across the floor, the album cover, stuffed animals, plush carpet, one half of a small pair of white Mary Janes, a ponytail holder, a canister of glitter, crayons, baby dolls and Barbies, and, at last, two sets of little girl legs, protruding from underneath a table (Figure 6). As the camera glides over the tabletop, the film significantly dissolves to a shot of the Curt and Brian dolls, poised in a diffusely lit romantic scene that plays out through the girls' hands and voices (Figure 7). After the Brian doll shyly declares his love ("I love your music, my son, and I love—") and the Curt doll gently acknowledges it ("You don't have to say it, mate"), the two swoon out of frame in a soft, plastic, sexual embrace. The scene is absurd but tender, self-reflexively distant *and* emotionally absorbed. Its queer child's play (two little girls identifying with and voicing the desires of two queer men), further positioned as fandom (the girls act out their Slade fantasies surrounded by fan paraphernalia), is exposed as embarrassingly naïve and accepted with a disarming seriousness. The film allows this crucial scene in its narrative's central

Figures 6–7. The Barbie doll scene: *Velvet Goldmine* dissolves between embarrassing fandom and unembarrassed stardom, shameful imagining and shameless doing (Miramax, 1998).

relationship—Brian and Curt’s first kiss—to be imagined and acted out by fans whose awkward fantasies are nonetheless authorized as real, or at least as real as anything else that occurs within the film’s diegesis, emphasizing the way in which fandom is given authority in the film as a mode of cocreative dreaming, essential to the character of the rock star.

This performativity of fandom is on stark display in the subsequent scene, in which Brian and Curt restage the girls’ doll-enacted fantasy kiss as a fully realized, live-action publicity spectacle. As “Carolyn,” another Bowie fan who speaks in the pages of *Starlust*, says, “It got to the point where I thought I’d invented him. I created this creature out of *my* desire and he was working on *my* power. . . . After all, I imagined it first, then he did it.”⁴⁶ *Velvet Goldmine*’s Barbie doll scene depicts both embarrassing fandom and unembarrassed stardom, shameful imagining and shameless doing, and bridges these two positions with a dissolve, a vertiginous temporal and spatial gap in which we move from two girls at play to two stars in love. In this dissolve, childish, queer erotic play, visually marked by isolation and shame (it hides itself from the camera, taking place underneath a table) gives way to the performance of a glamorous screen kiss, fixed in close-up; and one set of subjectivities gives way to another. Through this moment the film depicts and formally enacts the fan’s reading practice, making literal Barthes’s figure of the textual dissolve, which establishes and collapses the self, and is conducive of both shame and pleasure.

Velvet Goldmine’s oddly affecting Barbie doll scene can be read as more generally emblemizing the film’s ethos of fandom and the pleasures of its shame-saturated reading practices, a setup most clearly delineated in the bravura masturbation sequence which weaves together Slade’s queer performance, its media dissemination, Arthur’s shameful fandom, and the fluid erotics that seep through these moments and spaces. The roughly four-minute sequence begins in silence, with the passionate kiss between Curt and Brian that closes Brian’s Wildean press conference. The sonic rips and pops of shutters and flashbulbs and the insistent pulse of Brian Eno’s “Baby’s on Fire” (which scores the ensuing sequence and is covered and presented here as a Slade song) violently interrupt the kiss and lead to the first of four threads the sequence inextricably tangles. In this first thread, we see shame as performance. As Slade performs “Baby’s on Fire” he is joined onstage by Wild, who plugs in his staticky electric guitar and ornaments the song with a raucous solo. Slade responds by dropping to his knees and mimicking fellatio on Wild’s guitar, playing stray notes with his tongue in an echo of Bowie’s aural sex with guitarist Mick Ronson at a June 1972 performance at Oxford Town Hall, famously captured by glam photographer Mick Rock. In the film, the performance recalls Wild’s childhood scene of shame: the electric shock treatment generated by his being caught “at the ‘service’ of his older brother” becomes an electric guitar solo which generates the mock services of Slade. The performance also stages the queer affective bond between Wild and Slade, extending their initial fan/performer connection, enabled by a shared susceptibility to (if not experience of) shame, and highlighting the erotics of this connection: Slade goes down on Wild’s electric guitar, the phallic sign of his transfigured shame.

46 Vermorel, *Starlust*, 229.

In the sequence's second and third threads we see queer fandom and its shamed pleasures: the photographic capture of Brian and Curt's kiss, its reproduction in an issue of *New Musical Express* (*NME*) featuring a "Brian Slade Exclusive," and its dissemination—in a rapid series of shots the issue rolls off the press and is bundled and stacked for shipment—to fans like the teenage Arthur, who consume it as part of the star discourse *NME* reports and sells, but who also reenvision it in terms of their own distinct desires. Such queer fandom seems to anticipate shame as a prerequisite for and result of its pleasures, and is not disappointed. Arthur locks himself alone in his bedroom before masturbating over the *NME* photos of Brian and Curt's kiss and performance, and while his fandom, communicated by his blaring music, earns the sharp dismay of his father (Jim Whelan), who hollers at him to lower the volume, his *queer* fandom earns his father's shame: having forced his way into the obviously enraptured Arthur's room and discovered him propped over a photo of a same-sex kiss, pants around knees, he furiously shames him. "You bring *shame* to this house," he snarls. "You bring *shame* to your mother and me. It's a *shameful*, filthy thing you're doing." The sequence's fourth and final thread suggests such fierce shame's potential refiguration as intense pleasure: the camera moves sumptuously through a decadent orgy at which Brian and his entourage of beautiful young things lounge and cavort and pleasure each other before Brian and Curt, locking eyes across the room, hypnotically exit together in pursuit of a more private encounter in which they consummate their erotically charged artistic collaboration.

I have set out the masturbation sequence's four narrative and thematic threads as if distinct, though in the film they are anything but that. Rather, the evident mutability of each thread emerges as the film fluidly shifts from one to another and back again, binding together the concentrated shame of Arthur's fandom and the extravagant pleasures of Slade's stardom. This binding begins in an even earlier flashback, in which Arthur sits in his high school lit class, sketching Brian Slade in his notebook while his teacher reads aloud from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "He felt that he had known them all, those strange, terrible figures that had passed along the stage of life, and made sin so marvelous and evil so full of subtlety. It seemed that in some mysterious way, their lives had been his own."⁴⁷ Here, as elsewhere in the film, Wilde's words seem to sum up *Velvet Goldmine* with epigrammatic precision: in some mysterious way, the film posits, Brian Slade's life is Arthur's own. The "mysterious" link between Slade and Arthur, star and fan, appears an affective one—a continuity based on the shared shame of those who partake of "sin" and "evil," and on shame's performative transformation (on "the stage of life") into something "marvelous" and nuanced. This link is made explicit when young Arthur watches Slade's fabulous announcement, during a televised press conference, that the impression that he is "a blinking fruit," as one reporter has put it, "would not be a wrong impression in the slightest." In a rush of identification the shame-prone Arthur envisions an action equal to the inexplicably joyous affect swelling inside him: he imagines himself bursting to his feet and gesturing wildly at the TV as he shouts at his unmoved parents, "That is me! That's me, that! That's me!"

47 For the original passage, which contains very slight differences in wording, see Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 118.

Rather than disavow such exuberant queer affect or the intense fandom that generates it, *Velvet Goldmine* calls for its reclamation as an erotic, aesthetic, and political resource. D. A. Miller elegantly describes queer fandom (in this case of the Broadway musical) as connoting “those early pre-sexual realities of gay experience”: “not just the solitude, shame, secretiveness by which the impossibility of social integration was first internalized; or the excessive sentimentality that was the necessary condition of sentiments allowed no real object; but also the intense, senseless *joy* that, while not identical to these destitutions, is neither extricable from them.”⁴⁸ Against such realities, the normative attitudes of contemporary gay culture—for which, Miller writes, “gay identity” is strictly “a declarable, dignified thing”—render fandom, if not queer affect more generally, “at best a pleasure permitted only on condition of melancholy or ironic discretion, and otherwise a taste so bizarre as to deserve, or so seductive as to demand, nothing short of stigma.”⁴⁹ In *Velvet Goldmine* the stony-faced adult Arthur, now “a declarable, dignified thing,” but seemingly void of affect, follows the “seductive,” queer siren song of such stigma until he is willing to ask, like Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “Emotion: why should it be antipathetic to bliss . . . ?”⁵⁰

Throughout the film’s masturbation sequence, Arthur’s extreme emotion, far from being “antipathetic to bliss,” proves nimbly productive of it. Like Barthes’s “doubly perverse” reader who “enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss),” Arthur engages with the text of Slade’s star discourse—here, the *NME* exclusive—in a shameful act of reading that pulls his sense of identity both together and apart. The sequence’s accent on the continuities and discontinuities of identity and identification—the “mysterious way” in which the story of Slade’s life is (and is not) Arthur’s own—plays out, appropriately, in its editing. On the one hand, the sequence’s editing disrupts continuity. As the film shuttles between a number of seemingly distinct moments—Slade’s performance; the media coverage of the performance; Arthur’s reception of this media coverage; the orgy; and the present, in which Arthur interviews Mandy—temporality and film space blur, unsettling any clear sense of chronology and calling into question what is to be taken as real and what as fantasy. For instance, Arthur turns to the photograph of Slade going down on Wild’s guitar *before* we view the same event take place on stage, suggesting that the performance we see is perhaps teenage Arthur’s imagined version of it, teased out of the photos he pores over and the music he absorbs alone in his room. Likewise, though the narrative of the performance and orgy is ostensibly Mandy’s, as the adult Arthur listens to her account of Slade he seems to assimilate it to his own past experience, isolating the seams, cuts, and dissolves in her story and using these textual gaps to rework the account as, in part, his own. In disrupting a continuity which would firmly position Arthur and Slade in different spaces and temporalities, the sequence’s edits—which align themselves with Arthur’s fan point of view—simultaneously establish new connections between Arthur and Slade, fandom and stardom, shame and performance, shame and dignity, suspect emotion and subversive textual bliss. The seams and cuts in

48 D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 26.

49 Ibid., 26–27.

50 Barthes, 25.

Mandy's and *NME*'s accounts of Slade coincide with the film's actual seams and cuts, which emerge as simultaneously disruptive and connective formal moments charged with Arthur's past and present performative shame and textual bliss.

The cut most explicitly mimetic of Arthur's queer reading practices edits together a shot of the humiliated Arthur, whose parents have discovered him masturbating over pictures of Slade, and a shot of Slade, gracefully rising into frame and following Wild out of the room at his enticingly tacit invitation. The seam joining these shots neatly conveys the way in which Arthur's queer pleasures are both frustrated by and move toward fulfillment through his shameful identification with Slade; and though this significant seam is a seductive flash that disappears as soon as it appears, we can at least glimpse its contours by reading what surrounds it. Prior to the cut, Arthur's shaming is composed in relation to the mirror atop his dresser, a prop whose reflective presence in the scene of shame's *mise-en-scène* has been well prepared. In a series of shots that recalls Jack Fairy's self-fashioning through childhood shame, the adolescent Arthur, literally caught with his pants down, crouches and lowers his head so as not to face his parents, their reflection in the mirror, or even, initially, his own painful reflection. We first see this scene of shame entirely as reproduced in the mirror, though it takes a moment, as the camera pulls back to take in each of the scene's players, to realize that the frame is quivering not (only) with Arthur's terrified shame but because reflected. When the camera cuts to a more distant angle that encompasses both the original scene and its mirror copy, we see how the reflection makes a spectacle of Arthur's shame, both multiplying it and presenting it from a different vantage.

The shot composition emphasizes the reflection as a space of performance: a trio of stickers bearing Slade's image is affixed to the mirror, so that when Arthur first confronts himself in it we see Slade's face in lieu of his own. Further, the figure placement which leads us, in sharp diagonal, from Arthur's bewildered mother, to his disgusted father, to shame-stooped Arthur himself, and, finally, to the image of the queer pop star with whom he desperately identifies, echoes that of the earlier scene in which Arthur sits on the floor watching Slade's press conference on TV, while his parents, seated behind him, watch him attentively watching Slade's well-oiled, queer performance.⁵¹ Accordingly, the mirror's spectacle of the scene of shame mediates all of the communication—verbal and nonverbal—between Arthur and his parents, just as Slade's previous televised declaration of his status as a “blinking fruit” mediates Arthur's own desire to declare his queerness (by pointing at Slade and declaiming “That's me!”) and his parents' suspicions of this same queerness (they level their interrogative gazes both at Slade on the telly and the potentially “blinking fruit” attentively propped in front of it). Shame's mirror image—shame refigured as spectacle, as performance—facilitates a complex exchange of words, gestures, and glances, real or fantasized, that threatens but also produces queer identity.

When at last we see Arthur's sobbing face in the mirror, in excruciating close-up, it is split into two by the mirror's beveled edge (Figure 8). As he drops his head in shame

51 The figure placement also more closely echoes that of a pertinent shot in *Dottie Gets Spanked*, in which the effeminate Steven intently watches *The Dottie Show* while his mother and father—alternately encouraging of and troubled by his queerly keen interest in television star Dottie Frank—just as intently watch him.

the dual reflection solidifies into one, and when he raises his head again it dissolves back into two, as if, on the cusp of textual bliss, Arthur flirts with the “consistency of his selfhood” and “its loss.” The cut that tears us away from this image is marked as the “site of a loss” of self and the moment of textual bliss. On the other side of this seam, Slade carries out the erotic fantasy Arthur’s masturbatory fandom has set in motion, and seems almost to respond to Arthur’s father’s shaming commands. “Do you hear me? Stand up!” Mr. Stuart demands, but where Arthur, terrified of further exposure, has been unable to move, Slade confidently stands in pursuit of his desires, which indeed stand in for Arthur’s and seek to fulfill their blissful potential. In Arthur’s fantasy, the shame of fandom offers the pleasures of stardom, humiliating isolation holds out the promise of passionate connection, and frustrated desires move toward fulfillment.

The film stresses that this fan’s fantasy—this act of reading—is not easily reducible to naïve textual absorption. In hindsight, Arthur recognizes the ideal he desired and identified with (“That’s me!”) as reflective of his own persistent shame and its terrible beauty. Mandy comments, “It’s funny how beautiful people look when they’re walking out the door,” and though she refers to Brian walking through the door that leads to Wild’s room and out of her life, for Arthur her words trigger the memory—which ends the sequence and plays out in silence—of leaving home in exile on a bus headed for the city. More than simply another instance of Arthur’s and Brian’s blurred narratives, Arthur’s acknowledgment of how beautiful he himself looked when walking out the door of the house to which he brought shame suggests the way his investigation stages a reconciliation with a past self and an affective life marked by difficult, negative, but foundational affect. His acknowledgment is not a shameless self’s reconciliation with shame left in the past, but rather a reconciliation through shame; Arthur does not board the bus for London and leave his shame behind, but rather leaves his parents’ home *in* shame, taking the shame he brought to that home with him as a passport to the queer pleasures of glam London, an ephemeral metropolis the film’s narrator describes, quoting Wilde, as “a land where all things are perfect and poisonous.” The masturbation sequence begins with the silence of a queer kiss and ends with the silence of queer exile, as if the pleasure Arthur takes in one results in the other, but also as if that fraught pleasure is worth it. As Barthes notes, though “the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure” faces the shame and “mockery of our society,” which “would cast him out,” he is also an “anti-hero,” an almost unimaginable critical presence able to endure the potent contradictions that can make poisonous exile a form of perfect pleasure.

Figure 8. The shame of queer fandom: Arthur appears “a subject split twice over, doubly perverse” in *Velvet Goldmine* (Miramax, 1998).

Arthur's shame-drenched moment of queer self-collapse and self-assertion contrasts sharply with Brian Slade's pivotal scene of shame, also composed in relation to a mirror. While Arthur reads in his reflection shame dressed to advantage and enters fully into that possible self, Slade stares into his backstage mirror before the final show of the Maxwell Demon tour as a prelude to killing off the spectacle of shame he sees there, and walking away as if it never existed (Figure 9). Late in the film, Slade—now stadium-rocker Tommy Stone—again sees a reflection of this shameful self, this time in a TV broadcasting his monolithic stadium show, and again he recoils (Figure 10). His image on TV significantly appears to be played by an actor other than Jonathan Rhys Meyers, who plays Slade, or Alastair Cumming, who plays Stone, as if it is an alien version of himself, looming over him like Dorian Gray's portrait: a ghost of repressed shame, haunting what he has become.

Figures 9–10. *The Picture of Brian Slade*: Slade's disavowed reflections emphasize shame's capacity to disfigure as much as transfigure (Miramax, 1998).

The glam movement, for which Slade was—a newsreel tells us—the “patron saint,” forged its strong affective bonds through shame that cut across hierarchies; the diverse orphans of glam that appear near the film’s beginning and at its end include Arthur, a clean-cut young boy, punk rock kids, teenage schoolgirls, drag queens, and miners on strike. How does Brian Slade, queer pop star, become Tommy Stone, bland corporate idol and celebrity shill for right-wing President Reynolds? Slade’s extreme trajectory makes clear the film’s view that the erotics of queer fandom are inseparable from the marketplace economy, and that the same shame that enables affective ties and dismantles moral hierarchies can—if disavowed—become the instrument of those very same or new moral hierarchies.

Conclusion: It May Be Embarrassing. If Slade’s rise to stardom exemplifies the “experimental, creative, performative force” available via one’s openness or propensity to the other’s shame, his later disowning of that shame suggests the way its seemingly inexhaustible resources are always risky resources, as prone to disfigure as transfigure, but perhaps necessarily so. Critics writing on shame often so emphasize its potential productivity that it no longer seems shameful (or particularly productive). Shame without difficulty or peril, without fear or negativity, shame somehow wholly reframed or transformed would no longer be shame but pride, the very affect that troubles recent anti-normative critique. In *Velvet Goldmine*, the embrace of shame at the heart of Arthur’s—and the film’s own—fan practices is all the more potent for its real risks, for its suspect susceptibility to empty formalism, uncritical consumption, emotional negativity, and moralistic appropriation. Fandom’s kind of textual absorption can indeed be painfully naïve or unrealistic, can be the dupe of power, but, *Velvet Goldmine* insists, it can also be a vital, queer means of sustenance and pleasure.

“He called it a freedom,” Arthur says of Curt Wild in his final voice-over, failing to specify what this ambiguous “it” is. Is it an act? A voice? A desire? An affect? An identity? And who, in this day and age, could ever think that “it,” whatever it is, would set one free? Arthur’s equivocal final words, which concede that this “freedom” is suspect but also admit it as a real possibility, might well be describing the stigmatized reading practice of fandom and its queer affective investments in its culture’s texts: “He called it a freedom. A freedom you can allow yourself . . . or not.” *

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