**Abstract**

Neither David Bowie nor Romanticism are explicitly named in Todd Haynes’s 1998 film, *Velvet Goldmine*; but this essay takes on Haynes’s fictional account of the origins of “glam rock” to reflect on Bowie’s Romanticism and Romanticism’s Bowie. The essay approaches the topic using what Brian Eno called “oblique strategies” and what Walter Benjamin called “constellations”: Percy Shelley and Oscar Wilde, Benjamin and Bowie, Todd Haynes. At the center of this “constellation” is the “Bowie-Image,” an image *of* and *about* the Romantic image and what Shelley would call its “electric energies” or what might be called its “currencies” for Romanticism and for the “sounds and visions” of contemporary popular culture.

**Biographical Note**

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**Waiting for the Gift:**

***Velvet Goldmine* and the Bowie-Image**

– *for Jack*

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**“the stars look very different today”**

On the surface, David Bowie is one of the least likely matches that I can imagine for a pairing of pop culture with Romanticism, at least in the most agreed upon items in our catalogue of Romantic images, themes, and motivations. To list just a few of these entries: the relationship between an individual subject and the natural world, reflections on or depictions of the beautiful and the sublime, a visionary poetics, the gothic monstrous, the thematics of revolution, and an apostrophizing lyricism that revisits and reanimates the genres of the ode and the ballad. And if many of Bowie’s most compelling songs address or express the experience of solitude or alienation we associate with Romanticism, his is the solitude and even “derangement” of a “space oddity,” the cosmic alien “floating in a most peculiar way.” With Bowie we are very far removed from the project of a Wordsworthian Romanticism as it is presented, for example, in Stanley Cavell’s admirably concise formulation: “the task of bringing the world back, as to life . . . a new creation of our habitat” (Cavell 53).[[1]](#endnote-1) In his most compelling images, Bowie was the “starman waiting in the sky,” at home nowhere, without earthly habitat, concerned more with life on Mars or with how the stars looked today.

There are certainly many other artists in contemporary Anglo-American pop music from Bowie’s era and after whose relationship to Romanticism, both earthbound and visionary, is far more explicit. Patti Smith comes to mind, of course, not only for her devotion to William Blake but for the experimental play of innocence and experience, naivete and transgression, that animates her cultural projects. Morrissey’s mock anthems, both with the Smiths and in his solo work afterwards, generate an affective irony that turns so many of his songs into magnificent pop melodramas, brilliant camp performances that are unthinkable without the Byron of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Thom Yorke’s songs with Radiohead, by turns twitchy, torqued, and exquisite, conjure Percy Shelley’s political sensibility, aesthetic experimentation, and a poetic impulse to learn “how to disappear completely.” Elsewhere, I’ve argued that singer-songwriters as diverse as Kurt Cobain, Nick Drake, Cat Power, Elliott Smith, and Leonard Cohen are affectively and formally marked by what I call “the Keats effects,” more specifically the aura of a “shrine of no prospects” (Pyle 2020). Mary Shelley’s Romanticism established its constitutive relationship with popular culture early enough for her to witness first-hand its beginnings, though that effect is registered in theatre and cinema rather than popular music.[[2]](#endnote-2) The prospect of establishing a vital current that runs from British Romanticism to David Bowie is made even more challenging by the fact that his songs, at least to the best of my knowledge, make no references to Romantic poets, no allusions to Romanticism in form or figure.

One might address the challenge of developing a relationship between Bowie and Romanticism by asking how his songs or his personae might change the way we receive or interpret certain Romantic texts. We might, for example, consider how Percy Shelley’s “The Witch of Atlas,” arguably the “glammiest” of Romantic poems, anticipates Bowie, Ziggy Stardust, and their aftermath. From this perspective Shelley’s “witch” is the “glam queen” who commands all images, bestowing beauty upon the world in jeweled forms, the “many-star beams” woven into “a subtle veil,” “a shadow for the splendor of her love” (ll. 149, 151–2).[[3]](#endnote-3) From her cosmic perspective, Shelley’s playful “witch” beholds “the constellations reel and dance / Like fire-flies” (ll. 269–70) on a dancefloor. Shelley’s “glam-witch” belongs to “the spirit of the wind,” and “her light feet / Past through the peopled haunts of mankind, / Scattering sweet visions,” bestowing “strange panaceas in a chrystal bowl” “to those she saw most beautiful” and “playing pranks among the cities” (ll. 521, 523–4, 594, 593, 665). From the hands of this playful glam-witch “a living Image” “did flow,” -- the genderqueer “Hermaphroditus,” a “fair Shape,” blessed with “all the grace of both” sexes and adorned with “heaven-coloured pinions,” -- Shelley’s own figural anticipation of the man who fell to earth (ll. 325–6, 331, 393, 404).

But as pleasurable as that mode of interpretive exercise might be, I’m not convinced that British Romanticism offers sufficiently glam examples to make it work in a sustained form. It is more immediately plausible to speak of Bowie and his various cultural and musical “personae” as “performing” the catalogue of postmodernism, specifically in the canonical version elaborated by Fredric Jameson: an emphasis on surfaces and the refusal of notions of depth or interiority, the “flattening” out of temporality, a celebration of style for its own sake, the aesthetics of pastiche, and even a song dedicated to “Andy Warhol,” icon of postmodern art. In fact, Jameson’s principal example of the new mode of multiplied sense experience demanded by the logic of postmodernism is David Bowie in the role of Thomas Jerome Newton, the alien “who watches fifty-seven television screens simultaneously” in Nicolas Roeg’s *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976).[[4]](#endnote-4) Moreover, Jameson identifies *David Bowie*, the *cinematic image* and not the *character* he plays in the film, as the one what has undergone the “evolutionary mutation” that makes possible this new postmodern mode of multiply simultaneous perception. In this version of the “Bowie effect,” he’s as much a symptom as a paradigm.

If postmodern Bowie is the most obvious for his exemplification of what Jameson calls the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” in terms of “elective affinities,” the critical and theatrical modernisms of Brecht, Weill, Genet, and Brel are far more crucial to Bowie’s own aesthetic project. In 1982, Bowie reprised the title role of *Baal*,Bertolt Brecht’s first play; Bowie’s version of “Alabama Song” became a staple of his live performances; and the influence of Kurt Weill is audible in many of his songs, perhaps most distinctly in the chorus of “Velvet Goldmine” (1971). “Jean Genie” is a fierce homage to Jean Genet; and Bowie’s versions of Jacques Brel’s “Port of Amsterdam” and “My Death” became signature covers during a long stretch of his live performances. Bowie’s own performative affect and stagings—at least until the disappointing bluesy authenticity of *Let’s Dance* (1983)—are perhaps the most paradigmatic example in pop music of Modernism’s “alienation effect,” a reiterated thematization of the *Verfremdungseffekt.* There is certainly nothing comparable for Bowie in British Romanticism to this vital curatorial reclamation of European modernism. From my perspective, discerning Romanticism’s relationship with David Bowie demands something other than a logic of exemplification or aesthetic allusions. It demands an oblique strategy, one that reorients Romanticism according to Oscar Wilde.

It is fair to say that for many of the stops on Wilde’s 1882 North American lecture tour he was regarded by his audiences as something of a “space oddity,” his aestheticism serving as a punchline for the accompanying Gilbert and Sullivan musical *Patience* whose protagonist, Bunthorne, was taken to be a parody of the tall, young Irish dandy, preacher of art and beauty. At the age of twenty-eight, Wilde undertook this lecture tour long before he had written the plays, dialogues, and novel that established his extraordinary position in British culture. On his American Tour, Wilde not only lectured in the cosmopolitan centers of New York, Boston, and San Francisco, but America’s aesthetic hinterlands: Topeka, Dubuque, Leadville, Galveston, Ogden. Newspaper accounts of his visits convey the sense of an alien aesthete preaching his unknown pleasures to these provincial audiences.[[5]](#endnote-5) And somewhere along the way, Oscar Wilde became a pop star.

The tour’s inaugural lecture was delivered in New York and its title—“The English Renaissance of Art”—refers not to the flowering of literature and culture in early modern England but to what Wilde claimed as “our romantic movement,” :an open-ended aestheticist current of Romanticism that dispenses with Wordsworth and Coleridge and runs instead from Keats and Shelley through Walter Pater, Dante Rossetti, and himself. Most importantly, Wilde’s conception of “our romantic movement” does not have a terminus: it is available to any future artists who feel themselves hailed as one of “ours.” Wilde’s Romanticism is not confined to a historical period, nor is it bound to the most prominent themes of the period. For Wilde Romanticism is defined by its “most vital tendencies”: “the two most vital tendencies of the nineteenth century—the democratic and pantheistic tendency and the tendency to value life for the sake of art—found their most complete and perfect utterance in the poetry of Shelley and Keats, who to the blind eyes of their own time, seemed to be as wanderers in the wilderness, preachers of vague or unreal things” (259).[[6]](#endnote-6) With this assessment, Wilde is espousing a Paterian principle: literature and culture are valued precisely for their “most vital tendencies,” a vitality that exists in spite of “the blind eyes of their own time.”[[7]](#endnote-7) For Wilde, “our romantic movement” is never what Raymond Williams calls the “the cultural *dominant*,” but always a subterranean “current” that is counter-hegemonic and, in ways that remain in need of elaboration, *queer*.[[8]](#endnote-8) This is where we can find Bowie’s Romanticism and Romanticism’s Bowie, in these queer and oblique strategies which come about by way of a set of relays: Shelley and Keats, Pater and Wilde, Benjamin and Bowie.

For Walter Benjamin, the truth of history was not its chronology or causality but precisely such a set of relays. His most compelling historical model was the stellar constellation, images beheld with connections that are less causal than affective: shared radiances, activated currencies, tokens bestowed. What registers as an *event* for Benjamin is not the historical occurrence, not the *what* that happened but the *image* [*bild*] projected from the past that may—or may not—be “caught” as it passes through the “sky of history,” most notably when we are presented with shifting constellations in the firmament at night. “The true image of the past flits by,” writes Benjamin in the fifth thesis: “the past can be seized as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again” (390).[[9]](#endnote-9) For Benjamin of, the *truth* of history is its status as an image: fragile, transient, fugitive. The Benjaminian historian is one who “ceases to tell the sequence of events like beads of a rosary” and resists the poverty of historicism’s directive to “establish a causal nexus” among consecutive events and its prescription to tell the past “as it really was” (397). For Benjamin, the truth of history is not its sequential narrative but its composition as images that coalesce in a constellation, connecting cultural phenomena that might be separated by epochs. The task of the cultural historian, according to Benjamin, is to seize those “flitting” images as they “flash” first by recognizing oneself *as seized by them* and then learning to behold the constellations these images form, often under disparate historical conditions. This is how I hope to position myself in order to seize and release—in other words, to *redeem*—the Bowie-image for the constellation we call Romanticism.[[10]](#endnote-10)

**“singled out for a great gift”: the Bowie-image**

What fans of Bowie often call his various “personae”—Major Tom, Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, The Thin White Duke, etc.—I prefer to call his images: those that he fashioned in songs and performance as well as those that fashioned him to his audiences. The Bowie-Image flickers in a Benjaminian “constellation” that relays us from the glittering Romanticism of Shelley and Keats to Pater and Wilde, all by way of Todd Haynes. Therefore, the text I regard as the “alpha star” of this constellation is not a song or performance by Bowie. It is Haynes’s 1998 film which takes its title from a Bowie B-side. *Velvet Goldmine* is an ambitious and delirious film about a fictitious episode in 1970s British glam rock, a film in which Bowie is and is “not there”: never named as such, the singer in his Ziggy days is conjured and “imaged” in the figure of Brian Slade, whose career we follow from the end of the 60s through the glam and glitter period until the “staged” assassination, which results in “the death of glitter,” a hoax which alludes to Bowie’s own faked assassination of his Ziggy Stardust image at the Hammersmith Odeon in 1973.[[11]](#endnote-11) Though there are no Bowie songs in the film, it features music from or inspired by some of the most prominent British glam bands of the period—Marc Bolan and T. Rex, Roxy Music, and Brian Eno’s early solo records—as well as the New York Dolls, the “glammiest” band on the west side of the Atlantic. For the Brian Slade songs of his “Maxwell Demon” period, Haynes employed Grant Lee Buffalo and Shudder to Think, a 90s indie version of a rock “glam” band, to write several Ziggy-themed songs, which are performed as highly stylized music videos.

Of course, glam was always as much about the visual as it was the music; and the camera lavishes as much attention to the fashion in *Velvet Goldmine* as it does to any character: the feathers, the boas, the make-up, the hats, the costumes, the jewelry that made it a *scene* as visual as it was musical, as flamboyant and ironic as it was affectively rich and jubilant. As Mary Ann Doane puts it, “in *Velvet Goldmine*, the complexity of feeling and intelligence is located in glam rock, music that is emotionally powerful, moving, and knowingly cynical or ironic, undercutting its own seriousness” (14–5).[[12]](#endnote-12) This “complexity of feeling and intelligence” extends to the many cinematic genres and styles the film invokes “knowingly” and lovingly without ever quite adopting one predominant mode: moments of fable, examples of music videos, B-movie sci-fi, Busby Berkeley musicals, the *Citizen Kane* investigation, biopic, documentary, Fassbinder’s melodrama, jittery super-8s, even his own experimental animated bio-film about the life and death of Karen Carpenter. This cinematic kaleidoscope of visual and generic prisms makes it clear that *Velvet Goldmine* is not a film *about* Bowie or even glam rock as much as it is a cinematic fable of a queer cultural history and the political, sexual, and artistic possibilities opened by the “glittering” eruption of a “glam” spirit and “the electric life”—the “vital tendencies”—of these astonishing songs and performances, this momentary “spirit of the age” in London’s 1970s underground. It is, as I argue elsewhere, “an allegory of cultural history in the vein of Benjamin, Wilde, and Shelley,” which is to say a Romantic cultural history.[[13]](#endnote-13) What we encounter in this remarkable film is what Joel Faflak, in an essay about Shelley’s relationship to some other film musicals, describes as “images that body forth life, then compromise any return to life itself” (168).[[14]](#endnote-14) But, as Shelley himself asks in the famous prose fragment he composed on the back of notebook in 1819, “What is life?”: this is a question that Shelley, characteristically, doesn’t answer, but “leaves” as “a vacancy” (*SPP* 506, 507). We are better equipped by the poet to say what Shelleyan “life” is *not*: it’s not a personal possession or subjective quality; and its truth is not revealed by religion or empiricism or historicism. It’s certainly more Shelleyan to ask what the figure of life *does*; and one of the best examples of that is one I quoted above in passing: “electric life.” In the final aspirational paragraph of *A Defense of Poetry*, when Shelley is assessing the “compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day,” he asserts that “it is impossible to read” them “without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words” (*SPP* 535). Shelleyan life is *poetic*, measured by the force of its “electricity,” just as Wilde’s “vital tendency” is the electric current that activates aesthetic expressions, and Benjamin’s “images” flash through a darkness that receives them. Thus, for Shelley and for Wilde, as for Benjamin and Haynes, “life” is delivered in images and measured by its “maximization” *and* its “compromise.” This describes *Velvet Goldmine*’s affective oscillation, its “alternating currents”: “*Although what you are about to see is a work of fiction*,” reads a line drawn across the bottom of the dark screen before the images appear, “*it should be played at maximum volume*.”

This work of cinematic fiction orbits around two principal performers of the period, Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) and Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor), “images that body forth” Bowie and Iggy Pop during their unlikely collaborations in the mid 1970s. In Haynes’s depiction of this relationship, Slade, a long-haired “shirt-lifter from Birmingh’m,” is struggling to make his queer torch-song cabaret act work in an afternoon slot at an outdoor “hippie” rock festival in Southwest England. Dressed in a long purple frock, Slade performs an acoustic version of Steve Harley’s folky “Sebastian” for “rock audiences bred on Creedence Clearwater and the Beatles” who “were not entirely sure what to make of this particular brand of revolt”: “Get the fuck off! Cut the shite! Bugger off, you wooftah!” Following this dismissive reception by a meager but abusive and homophobic audience, Slade angrily storms out of his tent at the moment the festival announcer introduces the following act: Curt Wild, “all the way from New York City, lead singer and founder of the greatest garage band known to mankind.” In the next shot, we behold Brian Slade, his back to the camera, suddenly seized by a primal scream onstage, the opening of Wild’s electrifying version of the Stooges’s “T.V. Eye.” Abruptly turning his face to the stage, Slade is arrested by Wild’s eruptive snarling proto-punk vocalization which comes out of the dark and from nowhere, a throaty guttural wail that could only be apprehended as “music” in the context of the fringes of rock and roll.

In Haynes’s cinematic fable, this moment of ecstatic seizure is the unlikely origin of glam rock. I call it unlikely, because “Maxwell Demon”—the “glam” persona Slade fashions in the aftermath of this concert—bears no resemblance to Ewan McGregor’s Curt Wild or his stage representation of that iconic Iggy Pop garage song, just as there was certainly nothing ever “glammy” about Iggy or the Stooges. Wild’s version of “T.V. Eye” has no evident visual or musical connection to anything glam or glitter, other than the can of gold dust he sprinkles over his naked chest and then lewdly gestures with in the mode of a golden shower before he strips entirely in the course of the song and concludes with a punk-rock stage-dive over flames.[[15]](#endnote-15) Nor does the theatrical flamboyance of Slade’s subsequent campy “Maxwell Demon” videos resemble Curt Wild’s manic proto-punk performance, just as the crucial personal and musical collaborations between Bowie and Pop never involved a resemblance or melding of musical styles or genres or themes. Their connection was what Benjamin would call a sort of pop music “elective affinity,” one which Haynes makes into an “electric” affinity in his fantasy of the affective and aesthetic connection between Slade and Wild. No rock music historicist would describe the origins of glam rock as Haynes conceives these “resonant images;” but this is how Benjamin teaches us to understand the *current* that connects these distinctive “images, making them resonate.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

Curt Wild’s back story is presented in voice-over by Cecil (Michael Feast), Slade’s first manager during the ongoing live performance of “T.V. Eye” which is intercut with tracking shots over the rowdy audience and tight reaction shots of Slade: “*when Curt was fourteen, he was discovered by his mother in the family loo, at the ‘service’ of his older brother and promptly shipped off for eighteenth months of electric shock treatment*.” In a POV shot, the young Curt, strapped to a gurney and hooked up to electrodes, sees his older brother give him a wink as a nurse bends over to initiate the treatment. “*The doctors guaranteed the treatment would fry the fairy clean out of him*,” continues the narration, “*but all it did was make him bonkers every time he heard electric guitar*.” At this point, the film cuts back to flames erupting over the foot of the stage as Wild, in the words of the screenplay, “shrieking defiantly,” dives over them into the audience (*Velvet* 43). In the final shot of the scene, the camera again cuts to Slade in “rapt attention” as he responds to the leap with a sudden involuntary smile that slowly dissolves into a look of calculating envy.

In Haynes’s cinematic version of a queer cultural history, beginnings are always fables, legends, folklore; and when his film asks where images come from, it is never in the service of a straight historicism. If “legend has it” that Wild’s queer excursions with his older brother and the subsequent “electroshock” therapy are merely “legendary,” the “electric current” that forms this piece of folklore seizes Brian Slade at the moment it ignites the stage: the scene establishes the current that runs between the two performers and inaugurates the unlikely beginnings of glam rock. The charge of this beginning is all the more unusual given that the primitive three-chord electric guitar featured in Iggy Pop’s band, the Stooges, and in Curt Wild’s simulacrum band called the “Rats,” is not a feature of any of the musical instrumentations of glam rock.[[17]](#endnote-17) For Brian Slade, the thrilling event of the opening “shriek” of Wild’s performance is entirely affective, the charge of a sensation as “sudden” as that which Shelley describes in the fifth stanza of “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” when the poet feels the “shadow” of beauty fall upon him: “I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy!” (ll. 55–60). In Haynes’s version of this “conversion,” it is the “shriek”—certainly one of the great inaugurating shrieks in rock history—that falls on Slade and seems, as Francis Bacon might describe the affect, to “come off directly onto the nervous system.”[[18]](#endnote-18) As Haynes describes it in the screenplay, Slade stops, “stricken by what he sees.” The event of the shriek produces what, in “Hot One,” Slade’s first genuine “glam” song, he calls a “momentary seizure”: it’s a conversion experience in which a performer is yoked into spectatorship and suddenly transformed, like a sea-change, into something rich and strange, the feathered angels of David Bowie and Roxy Music.[[19]](#endnote-19) Throughout the film, staged performances are often experienced or remembered as forms of a “momentary seizure”: not only Slade’s beholding of Wilde, but Cecil’s “seizure” by Slade’s early performance of Roxy Music’s “2HB” at the Sombrero Club in Kensington or Arthur Stuart’s (Christian Bale) reaction when he hears Cecil utter the name “Curt Wild.” Whether in the moment of beholding, or its recollection, the film addresses the many forms of aesthetic address and “seizure” that reference the nature of aesthetic identification and the more rarified version of it known as “fandom.”

In *Velvet Goldmine*, “glam rock” is not so much a clearly defined musical genre as it is, in the Shelleyan sense, the momentary appearance of a queering spirit that, as Faflak puts it, “bodies forth life” and erupts in its “maximized” form from London’s underground in the 1970’s as a utopian possibility, a fleeting but thrilling moment of affective redemption. When the film flashes forward in time, we find ourselves in “New York in 1984,” a world in which this spirit has been dispatched or “compromised.” This New York is a lifeless Reagan-era urbanscape in which the musical, cultural, and sexual excitement and potentiality of the London’s glam moment has been drained of its color: a grey, washed-out world of cultural regression and political repression. Arthur Stuart is a journalist—“the resident Brit”—for a New York newspaper assigned to write a story on the mysterious disappearance of Brian Slade ten years after. Stuart’s investigation—has Slade re-surfaced as the surgically reconstructed right-wing arena-rock star “Tommy Stone” who proclaims the most reactionary American values?—is really only a lure. Whatever the “real story” of the assassination hoax—one derived from Bowie’s own onstage “killing off” of Ziggy—Brian Slade and the spirit of the Bowie-image have “passed away,” leaving “our state, / This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate” (“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” ll. 15–7). And though the film’s structural allusion to *Citizen Kane* is its central narrative conceit, Haynes shifts his principal focus to the “reporter”: unlike *Kane’s* Jerry Thompson, Bale’s Arthur Stuart, the figure who beheld the glittering eruption of glam rock and lives in the aftermath of its demise, is a prominent object of the film’s narrative attentions. In the guise of journalistic research, Haynes zeroes in on how Stuart’s relationship to a personal past that orbits around a painful adolescent “coming out” that was bound up with the liberating and erotically charged images and music of glam. Stuart revisits this era, one that he seems to have withheld from himself, with a wistful but unspoken nostalgia for what might have been: the memories of his own fandom, his own tortured relationship to his sexual orientation, and his own brush with the stars.

The nested stories and virtuoso story-telling of *Velvet Goldmine* have received many treatments and discussions, to my knowledge none more detailed and urgent than Nick Davis’s “Theses on a Philosophy of Queer History,” which opens with this illuminating characterization of the film’s narrative structure: “*Velvet Goldmine* comprises a bivalve narrative structure, . . . suffusing one story with heavy affective fallout from the events of a chronologically earlier one, and finding the carryover character . . . suspended in a woebegone urban existence.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Managing to write an entire book chapter on the film without a Bowie reference, Davis takes his point of departure from Marcia Landy’s claim that *Velvet Goldmine* is “predicated on the question ‘what happened?’ . . . and the film’s technique is investigative” (126). This is the decisive question for Landy, whose crisp characterization of the film’s generic instability concludes with a reassertion of this question: “The film is neither an exposé of stardom, a homage to *Citizen Kane*, a conventional biopic, a diatribe against drugs, nor an ‘explanation’ of what went wrong [with glam rock]; it is an exploration of ‘what happened’ in and to the politics of the 1960s and early 1970s” (126). Amplifying Landy’s account of the Benjaminian allusions to the “Theses on the Concept of History” in the film’s opening scene, Davis argues that *Velvet Goldmine* does not simply resonate with “Benjamin’s sense of historical crisis, it serially reprises the essay’s signature attitude of looking despondently backward, in tandem with its famous epitome of the Angel of History” (214).[[21]](#endnote-21)

**“looking backward”: attitudes of nostalgia**

*Velvet Goldmine* also “reprises” “attitudes” of“looking backward” that are not despondent but wistful, occasions for an arresting lyricism: an “attitude” of nostalgia which is not only invoked by and expressed in the film but thematized as a crucial affective aspect of glam rock, an “attitude” that is something other than the hazy regressive sentimentality with which it is most often identified, what Jameson, for instance, labels “mere nostalgia” (*Postmodernism* 170).[[22]](#endnote-22) For Haynes, the images of the Hollywood “silver screen” punctuate the film like icons of a conjured age. Slade and Wild are treated by their manager as if they belonged to “those vintage years”: “Tracy and Hepburn for the seventies.” Brando, Rooney, Garbo are among the Hollywood stars name-dropped as if it were a Frank O’Hara poem. Early in the film, Haynes has a BBC commentator describe the movement as “glamour, nostalgia, and outrageousness.” And though as Slade’s wife Mandy says, “Brian believed in the future,” we first see him performing Roxy Music’s “2HB” in Kensington’s Sombrero Club in the early 70s. The song and its dedicatory title—“to Humphrey Bogart”—invoke and enact the glamour of cinematic nostalgia, twice-over, by creating a song to a cinematic scene which has long been a scene of nostalgia, one which reprises Hollywood’s most iconic and clichéd utterance: “here’s looking at you, kid.” By deploying and by naming nostalgia as something to be reclaimed, Haynes offers images of the cultural past that are something other than our received ideas of “mere nostalgia”: his is a memory of a past which never existed except in the present tense of the cinematic image, its own sound and vision. When “2HB” appears again later in the film—at the concert called “Death to Glitter”—it comes as a nostalgic good-bye to the genre and its stars, including the departed Brian Slade, who appears as a projected image above the stage and as a shadowy presence off stage. This version of the song is performed by Jack Fairy, Haynes’s fictional “patron saint of the movement,” himself more an image than a character. His performance at the tribute concert positions him as origin and as end of this fleeting episode of cultural history, one which pivots around the figures of nostalgia for this dead star: “Your memory stays / It lingers ever / Fade away never.” Like every invocation of nostalgia in the film, its effects conjure Shelley’s account in his “Hymn” of beauty’s departures from our world, “like hues and harmonies of evening / Like clouds in starlight widely spread, — / Like memory of music fled” (ll. 8–10). The Roxy Music song and Haynes’s cinematic version belongs to this series of “likenesses” and its swirling preface an indication of its removal from our world: “Oh I was moved by a screen dream!” “Your cigarette traces a ladder.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

How are we to assess this Romantic nostalgia that attends to Haynes’s representation of glam rock, not only in this emblematic song by Roxy Music but in the presentations of the Bowie-Image? To call it a “critical nostalgia” seems oxymoronic enough to drain both terms of their meaning. To call it “ironic nostalgia” cancels its affective force. How, then, do we characterize the form of Romantic nostalgia which “knows” that what it remembers is only an image? What do we call a nostalgia that knows what it evokes in memory was always only an image but that *feels* that *image* to be true? The *OED* defines nostalgia as “severe home-sickness”: a “form of melancholia caused by prolonged absence from one’s home or country;” and it records the earliest uses of the word nostalgia, not surprisingly, in the era we associate with Romanticism. However, when it first appears in English in 1780, it is found not in poetry but in medical discourse: nostalgia is a term coined by Dr. William Cullen for the malady that afflicted soldiers during long military campaigns in foreign lands. In *A* *Complete Dictionary of Music,* Rousseau devoted an entry to the particular “*mal de Suisse*” or “homesickness” produced by the simple but often irregular melodies played and sung by Alpine mountaineers. Rousseau claims one such melody “was forbidden to be played . . . upon pain of death, because it made them burst into tears, desert, or, die, whoever heard it; so great a desire did it excite in them of returning to their country” (266–7).

The status of nostalgia in Rousseau is the principal point of contention in what is perhaps the most important—or at least the most celebrated—theoretical dispute between the two figures most directly associated with deconstruction, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. One of the principal objects of Derrida’s painstaking deconstruction in *Of Grammatology* is Rousseau’s nostalgic “longing for presence” that manifests itself in the phonocentrism of his theory of language. Rousseau’s accounts of the seductions of native songs might appear to reinforce Derrida’s argument that the Swiss philosopher reinscribes the metaphysical privileging of the voice over writing. Derrida’s “interpretation of Rousseau,” famously prompted de Man to respond with “The Rhetoric of Blindness” which claims that Rousseau is not in fact guilty of the nostalgia for presence that Derrida ascribes to the Swiss philosopher. According to de Man, Rousseau’s theory of language doesn’t *call for* Derrida’s deconstruction, because Rousseau has already performed the dismantling of nostalgia for which Derrida takes credit. “The elegiac tone that is occasionally sounded [in Rousseau] does not express a nostalgia for an original presence,” says de Man, “but is a purely dramatic device, an effect made possible and dictated by a fiction that deprives the nostalgia of all foundation” (133). If we believe that this exchange set in motion two “tracks” of deconstruction—at least in the North American context—then perhaps the exchange pivots on what Gayatri Spivak describes of other such charges of “metaphysics” by sparring philosophers: “perhaps this entire argument hangs on who *knew* how much of what he was doing” (*Grammatology* xxxvvviii). I’m less interested here in taking sides in this sparring match as I am in suggesting how significant nostalgia is not only for the sounds and visions of popular culture but for the most adventurous theoretical undertakings. In fact, what de Man says of Rousseau’s nostalgia could be said verbatim about the images of nostalgia in *Velvet Goldmine*: “The elegiac tone that is occasionally sounded [in Haynes] does not express a nostalgia for an original presence, but is a purely dramatic device, an affect made possible and dictated by a fiction that deprives the nostalgia of all foundation.” To this we might add that for both Rousseau and Haynes, the “purely dramatic device” that “knows” that it is a “fiction” does not “deprive the nostalgia” of all *affect*.

Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* undertakes the deconstruction of any and all sources of nostalgia—speech, presence, the origin, etc. Perhaps the underlying target of Derrida’s deconstructive project is the metalepsis of nostalgia as an affect that *posits* origins and presences that it comes to believe in, after the fact. Early in her translator’s preface, Spivak stresses precisely this affective dimension of Derrida’s turn from the “Rousseauist” orientation of Levi-Strauss to Nietzsche: “Derrida contrasts Rousseau’s melancholy with Nietzsche’s affirmative joy”; and she goes on to quote the passage from “Structure, Sign, and Play” which declares and performs this turn and in the process declares its break from structuralism: “Turned toward the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin, [the] structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is thus the sad, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty Rousseauistic aspect of the thought of play of which the Nietzschean *affirmation* – the joyous affirmation of the play of the world, . . . The affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation – would be the other side” (*Grammatology* xiii). This “Nietzschean affirmation” is made possible by “the gigantic ebullience” of “an *active* forgetfulness” that Derrida pursues in lieu of what he considers the nostalgia of Rousseau’s melancholy metaphysics of a lost presence. It was Nietzsche, writes Spivak emphatically, who “cracked apart” the metaphysics of presence “and then advocated forgetting that fact! . . . It is difficult to imagine a solution to the problem [of the metaphysical inheritance] that would go beyond Nietzsche’s, to know and then actively to forget, convincingly to offer in his text his own misreading” (*Grammatology* xxviii). If it is “difficult to imagine a solution to the problem that would go beyond Nietzsche’s,” what might it mean to have both: the “joyous affirmation of the play of the world,” a “gigantic ebullience” *oscillating* with the melancholy nostalgia of perpetual loss, of the path of beauty’s departure from the world? What happens if we are presented with a movie *about* this oscillation and its effects and affects, two opposing dispositions in the same text, with their own full range of images and depletions? If *Velvet Goldmine* is a many-splendored thing, among its many splendors is an ambitious thought experiment in which the Bowie-Image and its cultural current become the site of both nostalgia and ebullience, alternating currents in Romanticism’s transmissions to our future.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the *OED*’s etymological record is how recently the meaning of nostalgia as a melancholic affliction for one’s home expanded to a longing for a period or a person or an object. Once the era of technological reproducibility commences, nostalgia’s domain extends further still, to the affective experience evoked by an old photo or recorded song, indeed, by any form of *visual* or *audio* image that conjures an emotional relationship to a remembered person or place or period. Giorgio Agamben, who belongs to the constellation of philosophers reflecting on the temporal, epistemological, and affective aspects of nostalgia, invokes a brief note by Roland Barthes as his point of departure to the question that is posed by Agamben’s essay and, I argue, by Haynes’s film: “What Is the Contemporary?” Barthes’s declaration is, as Agamben notes, Nietzschean: “the contemporary is the untimely” (Agamben 40). For Nietzsche, as Barthes and Agamben characterize his *Untimely Meditations*, “those who are truly contemporary” are not those who *reflect* or *express* their time: “those who are truly contemporary,” writes Agamben “are those who neither perfectly coincide with [their time] nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time” (40). This “non-coincidence” is precisely our film’s “condition.” *Velvet Goldmine* is, on the one hand, acutely aware of time and dates and it marks them carefully: 1854, “100 years later,” New Year’s night 1969, 1972, 1984, and beyond. And yet the film never feels as if it *belongs* to any of those moments; and the strongest historical affect the film generates is its disconnection with a past which also appears as the “new,” as in the way that Bowie in those early days looked and dressed more like Lauren Bacall than a rock and roll star.

“Naturally,” writes Agamben, “this noncoincidence, this ‘dys-chrony,’does not mean that the contemporary is a person who lives in another time, a nostalgic who feels more at home in the Athens of Pericles or in the Paris of Robespierre and the marquis de Sade than in the city and time in which he lives” (41). “Naturally” is an odd qualifier to describe this temporal “noncoincidence,” since nostalgia is often claimed to be a “natural” and pre-critical impulse. But this is an index of the difficulty of prying nostalgia loose from its “homesickness”; and ultimately Agamben is working to develop an understanding of the contemporaneous as “*that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*” (41). This is Haynes’s “relationship with time” in *Velvet Goldmine*, a cinematic relationship that releases the images of history from their obligations to reflect or express their moment and then relays those images to possibilities produced by temporal disjunctions. These are Haynes’s own “untimely meditations,” achieved through a new filmic practice of anachronism. *Velvet Goldmine* accomplishes this not only through the countless flashbacks and flashforwards in this shuffled “flipbook” of narrative time loops, but also because its cinematic depictions of the narrative present tense—extended scenes not prefaced or accompanied by recollecting voice-over—often emit images of pasts and futures: there are visual and auditory references to eras which have receded that are “shot through,” as Benjamin would say, with “now time” [*Jetzeit*] and there are haunted images of a time to come, one the film will never “know.” If “2HB,” which circulates like the movie’s refrain, is the paradigm for this nostalgic allure of a past captured in the image of the departed film star, there’s another image that addresses this temporal disjunction which lodges itself as a nostalgia for that which has *yet to appear*. In the film’s late scenes, Haynes lingers over Curt Wild’s uncanny resemblance to Kurt Cobain and deposits a future that the film “images” but does not narrate, a future which resides in the spectator’s past and elicits what Robert Christgau called “an aura of painful regret,” projecting a once future and now lost redemption, its “present” doubly displaced. In the expanding universe of *Velvet Goldmine*, the emerald broach is passed beyond the narrative frame, generating relays the film “images” without showing, images that bleed into the extra-fictional world of the film, into our own collective image-world of memories and laments. I offer one such memory that registers as a lament on so many levels: in one of the final performances of Cobain’s life, for MTV’s “Nirvana Unplugged,” he covers “a David Bowie song”: “The Man Who Sold the World.”

**“for your image”: found and lost in the stars**

“In the firmament that we observe at night,” writes Agamben, “the stars shine brightly, surrounded by a thick darkness.” Agamben is more interested here in the nature of this “thick darkness” that makes the stars shine so brightly in the firmament than he is in those celestial objects themselves. He takes his guide from astrophysics: “In an expanding universe, the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us. What we perceive as the darkness of the heavens is this light that, though traveling toward us, cannot reach us, since the galaxies from which the light originates move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light” (46). The celestial darkness teaches how the stars disappear completely, in a vanishing that makes constellations possible to behold.

Likewise, *Velvet Goldmine* opens not with our star, Brian Slade—the “Bowie-Image”—but with a disorienting POV shot among the stars in the midst of a nighttime constellation with audio samples of old muffled British radio recordings, overlapping transmissions beaming through space from different epochs. Haynes’s published screenplay imagines the temporality of this scene in more granular detail: “the sound of distant waves rises up. Sounds emerge in succession: gunfire, explosions, rinky-tink piano, children at play, bar-room singing, opera . . . each enveloping the other like the sound of time itself passing” (*Velvet* 3). In the film’s final version, “the sound of time itself passing” is a muffled din which gives way to the magisterial voice of Janet McTeer, our temporary narrator, delivering what sounds like a lost fragment of a thesis from Benjamin’s final meditations on history: “*Histories, like ancient ruins, are the fictions of empires. While everything forgotten hangs in dark dreams of the past, ever threatening to return.*”[[24]](#endnote-24) But the film’s initiating voice-over also channels Benjamin’s efforts in an earlier essay on Kafka to attend to the “forgotten”: “Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the pre-historic world, forms countless, uncertain, changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new strange products.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Haynes’s extraction of this Benjaminian recollection feels like the blueprint to his cinematic perception of the production/projection of “glam rock”: something from a forgotten world that “mingles” with a darker, more distant past, threatening or promising to return, a “present” where with “forms countless, uncertain,” and “changing compounds,” it yields “a constant flow of new strange products.”

From Haynes’s constellation of a nighttime of shooting stars and scattered sound transmissions appears a flying saucer, like an image from B-movie stock, that suddenly swoops towards Earth amid tufts of space clouds, depositing on a storybook Dublin doorstep in 1854 a baby swaddled in a blanket pinned with an emerald green broach. Whether bestowed or abandoned, the baby who fell to earth is Oscar Wilde, our first “space oddity,” cosmic nomad. We watch along with the Wildes and their housekeeper as the spaceship suddenly returns to the stars; and the film then cuts to a scene—“100 years later”—featuring a classroom of Irish schoolboys, nine to ten years old, who stand one by one in a tight tracking shot declaring their aspirations before their prim schoolmaster. “I want to be a barrister,” says one; “I want to be a farmer,” and so on, until the final boy, labeled “O. Wilde” and wearing the green broach, rises and declares, “I want to be a pop idol.” And as if to demonstrate how “Benjaminian” constellations are formed, the subsequent scene is separated from Wilde’s arrival by “one hundred years.” The film cuts to a scene of a young boy, Jack Fairy, who—after being beaten by a score of bullying schoolmates—lays face down in the street, his lip bloodied, and discovers in the dirt and grime the emerald broach that had earlier adorned Oscar Wilde. The following scene looks as if it is a hand-drawn page in a children’s picture-book: it features a little boy in school shorts walking into the sunlight as the female narrator’s voice-over continues: “*Childhood, adults always say, is the best time in life. But as long as he could remember, Jack Fairy knew better*.” The narration continues as the film cuts to a series of dark interior shots featuring the head of young Jack Fairy bathed in blue light and poised in three different angles before a mirror we never quite see. “*Until one mysterious day when Jack would discover that somewhere there were others quite like him, singled out for a great gift*.” Jack Fairy meticulously draws the blood from his wound as if it were lipstick until his eyes flash on his reflection, suddenly smiling directly at the mirror/camera/spectator as the narrator concludes her overture: “*and one day the whole stinking world would be theirs*.”[[26]](#endnote-26) It’s a fleeting image of redemption—the world itself reclaimed or delivered by a queer art—but one that sustains the film as fantasy’s redemption. The title sequence erupts from this image as if it were *caused* by it: scores of giddy glitter kids pour across the Waterloo Bridge in 1972 and fill the streets to the jubilant guitars in the opening strains of Brian Eno’s “Needle in a Camel’s Eye” on their way to a Brian Slade concert. These twentieth-century boys and girls appear like Shelley’s “glorious phantoms” who “burst” from the “graves” of “England in 1819” to “illumine our tempestuous day” (13–4).

Perhaps there is no better way to describe Jack Fairy’s virtual presence in the film than as a “glorious phantom”: “singled out for a great gift,” Fairy remains a ghostly if glamorous figure in the story. Haynes calls him the “patron saint” of the scene, the “real thing which is not real,” the “origin” which is not the origin, “erupting spontaneously” (*Velvet* xvii). Jack Fairy is less a *character* in the film than ephemeral image, passing though London’s streets and clubs, the glam *flâneur*. Fairy performs one song—a highly stylized version of Roxy Music’s “2HB”—in the “Death to Glitter” concert, lip-synching vocals recorded by Thom Yorke. Jack Fairy is just an image, one who conveys a transitory image of transit, the transfer of the emerald broach from the stars to Oscar Wilde and Fairy and on to Curt Wild before it is deposited with Arthur Stuart near the movie’s end. “The pin will keep moving through time,” says Haynes, “and be passed on in many different ways” (*Velvet* xxviii). The broach is the “true image” in Haynes’s cinematic theses on history, one that bestows “the gift of sound and vision” upon those who wait.

In the Haynes universe of *Velvet Goldmine,* we encounter a distinctive cinematic account of the image, one that is not only concerned with cinematic image-making but with the perpetual play of vanishing and appearance that is the condition of the image as such. On the one hand, Haynes’s highly self-reflexive filmmaking foregrounds its artifice and its image-making with an awareness shared by the most adventurous or extravagant glam artists, David Bowie and Roxy Music. But Todd Haynes’s *Velvet Goldmine* universe is also a historical one; and this self-consciousness of image-making relays his film and his world to the images of Oscar Wilde and beyond. In so doing, the film eliminates any sense of “mereness” from the image. Near the film’s end, Arthur approaches Curt sitting alone in a bar. Arthur reveals himself as a journalist to Curt and ask about his “old friend,” Brian Slade. Curt avoids the question by initiating a cryptic dialogue in which the image itself—its movements, its effects, its affects—is at stake. After reflecting, via Wilde, on glam rock’s cultural-political ambitions—*change the world! no, change ourselves! okay, but look at the world!—*Arthur notices the antique emerald pin on Curt’s leather jacket:

Arthur: That’s quite a pin you got there. Is it old?

Curt: Possibly. It was Oscar Wilde’s. Or so I was told by the person who gave it to me. This friend of mine who kinda . . . disappeared . . . some years back. I forget where we were. On a trip. But he says to me, ‘Curt, a man’s life is his image.’

At this point Curt passes the pin on to Arthur: “here why don’t you hang to it? I’ve had it too long anyway. Go ahead. For your image. . .” That last phrase—“for your image”—could serve as the film’s dedication or, better, its *destination*. *Velvet Goldmine* is a film which, via Wilde’s Romanticism, asks us to seek the image in its transit and in its autonomy: “your image” is not the representation of “your” personal identity nor is it the expression of “your” character: “your image” is the assertion of “your” non-identity, something extractable, fungible, potentially redeemable. *Velvet Goldmine* understands the agency and circulation of images as an ideal but historical space in which an antique emerald pin and the Bowie-image circulate in a constellation that posits a new model of cultural history: the “true image.”

The Bowie-Image is but one of many in *Velvet Goldmine*, a filmwhich presents and beholds those images from the past as Benjamin suggests and then bestows them to an open futurity. This cinematic constellation is composed of images of relays, from the starlit heavens and the relaying of the gift of Oscar Wilde and his bejeweled aestheticism on to what Haynes calls its “designated ancestors,” Jack Fairy, Brian Slade, Curt Wild, Kurt Cobain. In Haynes’s film, something happens through and between them on a plane that does not really belong to the film’s story but exists elsewhere, like a refrain in its images among the stars.[[27]](#endnote-27) Or a time-capsule: I can think of no better way than this to describe the film’s redemptive closing scene, a giddy super-8 memory-fantasy of a night of 70s rooftop sex between Curt and Arthur. Recalling that night, Arthur says, “he called it a freedom. A freedom you can allow yourself. Or not.”[[28]](#endnote-28) In his *Dialogues* with Claire Parnet, Gilles Deleuze offers a beautiful account of the constellation of philosophers that “singled him out”; and his construction of this “sky-map” of philosophers conveys the sense of the relationships I am suggesting, one that exists in the “ideal space” of *Velvet Goldmine*:

Lucretius, Spinoza, Hume, Nietzsche, Bergson: These thinkers have few relationships with each other . . . and yet they do have them. One might say that something happens between them, at different speeds with different intensities, which is not in one or other, but truly in an ideal space, which is no longer a part of history, still less a dialogue among the dead, but an interstellar conversation, between very irregular stars, whose different becomings form a mobile bloc which it would be a case of capturing, an inter-flight, light-years (Deleuze and Parnet 15–6).

Shelley, Wilde, Fairy, Wild-Pop, Slade-Bowie, Cobain: these figures in literary and popular culture have “few relationships with each other,” at least those we would describe according to the available models of intellectual or cultural history. And yet in the “ideal space” of *Velvet Goldmine* “something happens between them, at different speeds with different intensities.” “No longer a *part* of history,” the currency between these “irregular stars” constitutes its own sort of pop “interstellar conversation.” As Frank O’Hara once said in a poem, “the heavens operate on the star system.”

**“It was Oscar Wilde’s”**

In Haynes’s version of the “star system” in which his “heavens operate,” the “interstellar conversation” is initiated by Wilde. Haynes’s original dedication for his screenplay—“For Oscar Wilde, posing as a sodomite”—quotes and corrects the spelling of the infamous visiting card left for Wilde by the Marquess of Queensberry, “posing as a somdomite,” thereby redeeming the affront by the father of Wilde’s lover, turning it into a celebration. If for Haynes, Jack Fairy is the film’s version of the “lost originator of the whole glam thing,” Wilde is its “perfect manifestation”:

It quickly became clear to me that glam came out of the English tradition of camp and applied counter-philosophies about art and culture, which I saw originating from Oscar Wilde. To me Wilde became the perfect manifestation of the glam era. . . . I think glam rock was the first overt alignment of the notion of the alien with the notion of the homosexual—both of which became this fantastical, galvanizing potential for musical expression, a potential freedom for kids trapped in their dreary lives. The space ship definitely brings in the outsider elements of the period, which I attribute to Wilde and dandyism, but it also refers to feelings of ‘otherness’ confronted at the time of adolescence. (*Velvet* xii–xiii)

*Velvet Goldmine* is an “alignment” of the Wildean “tradition of camp and applied-counter-philosophies about art and culture” with Benjamin’s impulse to “brush” cultural history “against the grain” in order to tap into what Haynes calls the “galvanizing potential” of “‘otherness’ and its “potential freedom.” “It is about pop culture transforming us momentarily,” as Haynes describes it, and becoming in the process an agent of redemption. In so doing, Haynes not only participates in the ongoing redemption of Wilde, he reads Wilde’s work *and* his image as *agent* of this redemptive potentiality. If Wilde’s epigrammatic poetics is made to be deployed and its effectivity measured in the delivery of its utterances, I know of no artwork which activates the critical potential and the historical implications of a Wildean poetics more effectively than *Velvet Goldmine*. Wilde’s extracted words, epigrams, and dialogues, punctuate the film to such an extent that we can say of the movie what Curt says of the emerald broach: “It was Oscar Wilde’s.”

One of the most remarkable features of Wilde’s epigrams is their ability to resist context and avail themselves for extraction. This “extractability” extends to every feature of his work: the epigram is his *poesi*s, one that Haynes mines from Wilde’s texts and deposits in the mouths of his own characters. Mandy Slade (Toni Collette in the Angie Bowie role): “Beauty reveals everything because it expresses nothing” (“The Critic as Artist”); Brian Slade: “Man is less himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he’ll tell you the truth” (“The Happy Prince”); Freddi in the press soiree: “The first duty in life is to assume a pose. What the second duty is no one yet has found out” (“The Critic as Artist”),” etcetera. Though they are spoken as if they were personal declarations of the characters, their delivery marks them as epigrammatic, bookish, and gnomic extractions which address the film’s ethos of artifice and mirrors, in turn the ethos of artifice in the glam and glitter movement. In his final exchange with Arthur, Curt delivers famous lines from *Dorian Gray* (1890)—“a real artist creates beautiful things and puts nothing of his life into them”—as if they were spontaneously uttered as his deepest convictions, but they register to the viewer as something quoted. Often, as in the lavish mock “press conference,” staged with what Haynes calls “a touch of Louis XIV,” Haynes presents Wilde’s epigrams as “quoted texts,” including one extraordinary passage, presented by a reporter “reading from a large placard” with a “theatrical” delivery, from an article written about Wilde in 1895 for the *Daily Star*: “The Aesthete Gives Characteristically / cynical Evidence, Replete with Pointed / Epigram and Startling Paradox, while / Explaining his Views on Morality in Art.”

One of the most exquisite moments in the film is a scene which concludes the “press conference,” a long kiss between Slade and Wild (which reproduces the notorious publicity kiss between Bowie and Lou Reed). In a tight closeup, Curt says to Brian: “The world is changed because you are made of ivory and gold. The curve of your lips rewrite history.” Haynes lifts these two sentences from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where they are reported as lines written in a letter late in the novel to Dorian by one of his former lovers, “idolatrous words,” he calls them, that overtake his memory. At this point in the novel, Dorian can no longer hear what the words say: they simply reiterate the madness of his situation and his impulses. But Haynes hears something else, something Wilde must have heard when he wrote these words: the intersection of history with a sculpted and gilded beauty, the possibility and even necessity that aesthetics intervenes historically, and a queer desire might “rewrite history.” What Haynes extracts from Wilde’s aestheticism is not solely the camp theatricality and arch performativity that runs from the queer pose of the dandy aesthete to Bowie’s glam pop supernova, but the historical stakes of this constellation and its “vital tendencies,” which are themselves both extractable and redeemable, in part, as Mandy tells Brian, by “strange people” “chosen through their art.” Or as Bowie would sing after his glam days were gone, as “the man who fell to earth,” “waiting for the gift of sound and vision.”

By way of Benjamin, Haynes also understands that it is the image that connects Wilde to Bowie and that it is the “image” that makes this constellation of philosopher, playwright, singer-performer, and filmmaker an *historical* one. It’s also what makes this constellation Romantic, at least in the Shelleyan sense of poetry, not “in the more restricted sense” as verse but more expansively as the authors of “music, of the dance and architecture and statuary and painting” (*SPP* 512). Like Wilde and Benjamin, I believe that we can assert that Haynes’s cinematic vision shares with Shelley the aesthetic investment that poetry has the capacity:

to defeat the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain or withdraws life’s dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. . . . [I]t purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe after it has been blunted by reiteration. (*SPP* 533)

This is arguably the most epistemologically ambitious and philosophically acute catalogue of poetic promises that Romanticism has to offer; and each item would be at home in quotable fashion in most any text by Wilde. Each of these promises is plugged into the Bowie-Image, especially when it resists the prosaic “curse which binds us to the accident of surrounding impressions” and looks instead to the stars to “create anew the universe.” Near the end of *Velvet Goldmine*, long after Brian Slade has vanished, Arthur and Curt make love on the rooftop of the Rainbow Theatre. Arthur’s voice-over is from ten years later: “looking back,” he says, Curt “patched through my walls and entered my life . . . in waves.” A few scenes later, we return to this little episode, shot in super-8 with voice-over. Arthur says, “He called it a freedom.” “A freedom you can allow yourself. Or not.” The “vital tendency” that I’ve been tracing from Shelley through Wilde and Benjamin to Bowie and Haynes is both redemptive and liberatory: in one form or another each calls it “a freedom.” It’s not a *promise* of the image’s redemption but a shared and urgent investment in the precious and fragile possibility of that redemption, one that is simultaneously aesthetic and historical. “It compels us to feel what we know”: It compels us to feel that the image, that most transitory and fugitive non-being, will not only be what Bowie calls “the gift of sound and vision” but what Benjamin calls the “secret index of history.”

“*Or not*.” The catalogue of redemptive promises—for Shelley, for Wilde, for Benjamin—remains only possibilities, for which the missed or failed redemption might well be the rule and not the exception. Nothing in Shelley, Wilde, Benjamin, Haynes, Bowie guarantees the fulfilment of the promised redemption—the liberation of the image and the image as liberation—and perhaps “the vital tendency” offered from Romanticism to our “now-time” or to another futurity will never find its recipient, its “great gift” squandered and lost, merely “floating in a tin can.” Perhaps we invest—with a critical urgency that slides into uncritical desperation—in “constellations of contemporary romanticism,” “Keats and popular culture,” or “Bowie and Romanticism” in order to convince ourselves that Romanticism’s redemptive value has not passed us by—eager as we may have been to receive it and make good on it—when in fact we may only be what Jacques Khalip calls the “misfit,” the “blip,” the “has-been” (*Last Things* xi). Perhaps when we make our investments in Romanticism’s potentiality, we are more likely to be left with what Shelley calls the “path of its departure.” I want to recall the inaugural declaration of *Velvet Goldmine*, the one that accompanies the image of Jack Fairy’s triumphant smile, the one that sets the film’s story in motion: “one day the whole stinking world would be theirs!” In the instant that the young queer Jack Fairy flashes his glammy smile and Brian Eno’s song erupts, we *feel* a jubilation that we can certainly take for redemption, even when we *know* that the “whole stinking world” remains just that and the beautiful “curve of the lips” doesn’t determine history but remains merely its “blips” or “might-have-beens;” and Shelley’s promised reconciliation between feeling and knowing is never realized. We know that Wilde’s Shelleyan promises of aesthetic redemption in his early lectures on the “English Renaissance in Art”—“Love art for its own sake, and then all things that you need shall be added to you”—turn into the painful realizations of the prison poetry of *De Profundis*. At the end of his letter to Bosie in “carcere et vinculis,” Wilde acknowledges that “society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer.”

But what does *redemption* mean for Benjamin or Haynes, or for Wilde or Shelley, given that none of them believes that it is a “deliverance from sin and its consequences through Christ’s atonement” (*OED*)? Though Benjamin uses the theologically charged *Erlösung* for his notion of historical redemption, Werner Hamacher makes a compelling case that Benjaminian redemption is derived not from “a straight-forwardly Judeo-Christian theology” but is closer to *Einlösung*, the more prosaic redemption of deposits or vouchers; and if it “points towards a theology,” it’s the “theology of the missed or distorted – hunchbacked – possibilities” (40). “Lower-case redemption” we might call it. The *OED* offers us the English-language gift of such a definition: if redemption means “deliverance from sin,” it can also mean the “action of freeing a prisoner, captive, or slave by payment or ransom.” This is the mode of redemption on which Wilde reflects “in Her Majesty’s Prison, Reading”: “Religion does not help me,” he writes to Bosie, “when I think about Religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who cannot believe: the Confraternity of Fatherless one might call it, where on an altar, on which no taper burned, a priest in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblessed bread and a chalice empty of wine” (*De Profundis* 1019). Wilde’s “order,” the “Confraternity of the Fatherless,” seeks redemption not in atonement but in the release from captivity, what Curt Wild also “called a freedom. A freedom you can allow yourself. Or not.” This redemption is not the deliverance of the sinner, but the *release* of the captive—the misfit, the queer, the alien—from the Judeo-Christian narrative. The model for this mode of redemption—a redemption from Redemption—is located in the notion of the image we’ve traced through this constellation of artists and poets and philosophers, an image which like *Velvet Goldmine*’s emerald broach, *seizes and relea*s*es*. If it offers an image of freedom, it’s because the freedom belongs to the image itself, its agency and its currency. Benjamin called it “the true image,” the one that escapes the chronologies of history and “flashes up,” but only at the moment of *its* “recognizability.” I can think of no better name for this image than “the gift of sound and vision,” though the most that those of us in the “Confraternity of the Fatherless” can count on is the “waiting.” But that itself is gift enough, since we all know what we feel: this refrain is the best part of that song.

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1. In *Last Things*, Jacques Khalip explores this passage and the “alternating” route of Romanticism in Cavell’s thinking (51–2). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Mary Shelley was an enthusiastic member of the London audience for the first—and quite popular—stage adaptation of *Frankenstein* in 1823, a version of the story retitled as *Presumption, or The Fate of Frankenstein*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. References to Shelley use *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edition, Norton, 2002. References to poetry are given with line numbers; references to prose are given with page numbers. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jameson’s account of this moment—and Bowie’s role in it—deserves to be quoted in full: “The postmodernist viewer . . . is called upon to do the impossible, namely to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference: such a viewer is asked to follow the evolutionary mutation of David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (who watches fifty-seven television screens simultaneously) and to rise somehow to a level at which the vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship: something for which the word *collage* is still only a very feeble name” (*Postmodernism*, 31). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For an excellent account of this extraordinary tour and its implications for our notion of celebrity, see David M. Friedman, *Wilde in America: Oscar Wilde and the Invention of Modern Celebrity*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In *Art’s Undoing: In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism*, I have explored the implications of Wilde’s account of “our romantic movement” for the cultivation and radicalization of his aestheticism (11–3, 209–43). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In his preface to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Pater characterizes this “vital tendency” as “the *virtue*, the active principle” of poetry and art which it is the “function of the aesthetic critic” to “distinguish, and analyse, and separate from its adjuncts” this “active principle,” “disengag[ing] that virtue, and not[ing] it, as a chemist notes some natural element” (xx–xxi). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Raymond Williams develops his notion of the “cultural dominant” and its historical relation to the “residual” and the “emergent” in *Marxism and Literature*, esp. 121–7. If the image of an “subterranean current” sounds like a mixing of metaphors—electromagnetic currents that become subterranean forces—one might call to mind Nikola Tesla’s “grand capacitor” that he was building at the Wardenclyffe Tower near Shoreham, New York in 1901, designed to gather electrical currents from the heavens which it would transmit to underground channels for distribution across a spidery network of “pop-up” receptors. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Benjamin’s account of the “flitting” and “flashing” of the image appears as something like a refrain in his work, and not only as the “true” form of the past’s historicity. See for instance the 1933 fragment “On the Mimetic Faculty”: “The mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer [*Trager*]. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus, the nexus of meaning of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man—like its perception by him—is in many cases, and particularly the most important, tied to its flashing up. It flits by [*Sie huscht vorbei*]” (722). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. My “seize and release” metaphor is inspired by Jacques Khalip and Rob Mitchell’s introduction to *Releasing the Image*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Bowie did not permit any of his own music to be used in the film, though “Velvet Goldmine,” recorded in 1971, is the title of a B-side to a 1975 rerelease of “Space Oddity.” In Oren Moverman’s interview that introduces the published screenplay, Haynes acknowledges that he “wanted the song, along with other Bowie tracks, in the film, but Bowie didn’t feel he wanted to let his music be used in *Velvet Goldmine*. I think he had some other plan for the songs from the Ziggy era. It was very disappointing to me, . . . [but] I think it ultimately serves the film not to have Bowie’s music . . . because, while they are fantastic songs that can never be matched, I think their absence makes it easier to make Brian Slade his own character” (“Superstardust,” xv–xvi). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Doane’s essay is the single most insightful essay I’ve encountered on the ambition and accomplishment of Haynes’s films; and I will have occasion to return to it below. Here I would qualify what is otherwise her laser-like account of the “complexity of feeling and intelligence” in the music: while glam rock is saturated with irony, the best of it is never *musically* “cynical.” In a contemporaneous *City Pages* interview, Haynes delivers the most precise account of the emotional tone of the best of the glam records, especially the early adventurous work of Roxy Music: “the early Roxy Music records that Eno was a part of, and the few that followed, sum up the most interesting dualities between this highly referenced, tongue-in-cheek kind of musical presentation and, *somehow*, this incredibly emotional quality at the same time. That combination still baffles me, and it’s something that I tried with all my gumption to bring to the film itself.” (Nelson). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. In “On the Currency of Images: Percy Shelley’s Minor Event,” I focus primarily on the role of the image in Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*; and I also examine a couple of brief scenes from Haynes’s film. I regard the essay as a companion to the present one. And I regard Shelley’s *Defense* and Wilde’s “The English Renaissance of Art” as kindred examples of the mode of cultural history Benjamin develops in his “Theses.” See *Art’s Undoing*, 37–47 and 210–5. To this constellation I would add Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces*, a book to which Haynes also pays homage as he tracks across a series of glam rock album covers in a record store, and we see one of Slade’s fictional singles bearing the title *Lipstick Traces*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Faflak’s formulation deserves to be quoted more fully: “*The Triumph of Life* reflects a society of the spectacle still in visual flux. But it predicts a history fascinated by the production of image that body forth life, then compromise any return to life itself.”

    The topic of Romanticism and “life” (or Romantic “vitality”) has been a rich and compelling site of research over the past ten to fifteen years. While my own interest here is in aesthetic life and life’s aestheticization, I want to acknowledge some of the signal studies on the topic that have most influenced my thinking. See Denise Gigante; Sara Guyer; Jacques Khalip, *Anonymous Life*; Sharon Ruston; Ross Wilson; and Amanda Jo Goldstein. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. “T.V. Eye” is a fascinating example of this affinity, given Bowie’s participation in the live album versions released in 1977. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. As Haynes describes Bowie’s role in glam rock, “he was the most articulate spokesperson of that period; he brought the most resonant images to the glam era. Even though Marc Bolan started the movement, Bowie brought it to an amazing level of sophistication, both musically and visually” (“Superstardust,” xvi). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. I am not suggesting that the electric guitar is not an important feature of glam rock, but that it has a very different role in the mix of instruments, one that rarely features solos and often, as with the early Roxy Music records in particular, can sound as if it has been routed through the fuzziest of synthesizers and is much less prominent than Andy McKay’s alto saxophone, arguably Roxy Music’s “lead” instrument. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. In his extraordinary series of interviews with David Sylvester, Bacon repeats this phrase often enough that it becomes a refrain for his project, one which he describes as “a kind of tightrope walk between what is called figurative painting and abstraction. It will go right out from abstraction but will really have nothing to do with it. It’s an attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly” (12). Later in this same interview he will describe the relationship between narrative and the image with the same refrain: “it’s a very, very close and difficult thing to know why some paint comes across directly onto the nervous system and other paint tells you the story in a long diatribe through the brain” (18). The “Bacon-Universe,” his images as well as his words, form a crucial “node” in Deleuze’s constellation; and he adopts Bacon’s refrain in his own project to characterize the relationship between art and affect. See especially his chapters on “Painting and Sensation” and “Painting Forces” in *Francis Bacon*, 31–8 and 48–54. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. “Hot One” is one of two numbers in the film that are not covers of Glam or Glam-era songs. In the temporal looping of the film’s narrative structure, “Hot One,” written and performed by the band Shudder to Think, tells the story of Maxwell Demon, Slade’s Ziggy-like glam persona. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. This is the final chapter to Davis’s exciting and provocative queering of the Deleuzian cinema-image, *The Desiring-Image*, 206–46. I won’t be able to do justice to Davis’s ambitious “Deleuzian-Benjaminian” reading of *Velvet Goldmine*, a reading which is both dazzling and deeply felt. Ultimately, the chapter seems like an extended and urgent closing meditation on his principal thesis: a Deleuzian “crystal image” and its activation in the “new queer cinema.” Though I’ll again refer to Davis’s chapter and my own “accentual” departure from his reading, I want to acknowledge with what insight Davis’s chapter and book has engaged my understanding of Haynes in particular and the Deleuzian cinematic image in general. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For Davis, *Velvet Goldmine* is not merely a film to be seen but a *reading* with which to reckon: “*Velvet Goldmine* offers as much a sustained reading of ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ through the prism of queer experience as a glam-and-guitars, sequins-and-sodomy pastiche of *Citizen Kane*” (214). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Though Jameson does refer on occasion to “mere nostalgia” as a “reflex,” *Postmodernism* explores in compelling forms the workings of what we might call a second order nostalgia, especially with regard to the “nostalgia” or “retro” film. See especially pp. 19–22. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. It’s worth noting that the second version of “2HB”—the “Jack Fairy” version—was recorded by “The Venus in Furs,” a band formed for the film that refers to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s novella and to the Velvet Underground song of that name. The singer is Radiohead’s Thom Yorke. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The remainder of this paragraph and the following two paragraphs are revised and augmented versions of paragraphs I originally wrote for “On the Currency of Images.” [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Quoted by Rèda Bensmaïa in “The Kafka Effect,” xii. Bensmaïa’s account of the “Kafka effect” offers an illuminating model for the kind of “constellation” I am proposing here. Without conflating Deleuze and Guattari with Benjamin or even suggesting a resemblance between them, Bensmaïa posits Kafka as what we might describe as their “nodal” connection. The Kafka that Benjamin shares with Deleuze and Guattari is one resistant to the exegetical modes imposed upon him, the Kafka who rejects symbolic, allegorical, mythical, and theological interpretations in order to allow the “Kafka-universe” to emerge, in Deleuze and Guattari’s case the Kafka who introduces a “minor literature.” [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. It’s impossible to resist recognizing in this sequence of shots the initiating “mirror stage” of the Lacanian imaginary, even if it’s a *misrecognition*. Perhaps it’s better to call it a *redemption* of the Lacanian scenario, or at least a redemption fantasy. Spoken but not yet speaking, battered and bullied, Jack Fairy not only delights in the image of his bodily integrity suddenly reflected in the mirror (which the screenplay specifies as his “mother’s vanity”), he—and we—recognize his image as both subject and object of desire. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. For Christian Metz, Godard exhibits the cinematic “intelligence” we are considering with Haynes, a capacity “to suggest with a great deal of truth, but without determining the outcome, several possibilities at the same time. So he gives us a sort of *potential sequence* – an undetermined sequence – that represents a new type of syntagma, . . . *but that remains entirely a figure of narrativity*” (219). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. I am grateful to Jacques Khalip for the gift of this image of the “time-capsule.” [↑](#endnote-ref-28)