

Program note for **Pinewood Dialogue with Todd Haynes** and screening of ***Velvet Goldmine***
Sunday, November 15, 1998

VELVET GOLDMINE

Miramax, 1998, 123 mins, 35mm print courtesy of Miramax Films.

Written and directed by Todd Haynes. Produced by Christine Vachon. Photographed by Maryse Alberti. Edited by James Lyons. Original music by Carter Burwell. Production design by Christopher Hobbs.

With Ewan McGregor (as Curt Wild), Jonathan Rhys-Meyers (Brian Slade), Toni Collette (Mandy Slade), Christian Bale (Arthur Stuart), Eddie Izzard (Jerry Divine), Emily Woof (Shannon), Michael Feast (Cecil), Janet McTeer (Female Narrator), Maraid McKinley (Wilde Housemaid), Luke Morgan Oliver (Oscar Wilde, age eight), Osheen Jones (Jack Fairy, age seven), and Micko Westmoreland (Jack Fairy).

Inventing new narrative forms with each film, Todd Haynes has established himself—with just three features and several short films—as one of the most intelligent and talented voices in American cinema. As provocative as they are liberating, his films avoid the easy answers and resolved endings of conventional movies. Whether depicting the mysterious psychodrama of a Los Angeles housewife in *Safe* or creating a vast tapestry of the glam-rock era in *Velvet Goldmine*, Haynes's exquisitely crafted movies all find different, fascinating ways to probe the nature of identity.

From "Fanning the Flames" by Amy Taubin in *The Village Voice*, October 28, 1998:

"The men don't know, but the little girls understand."

—"Backdoor Man," by Willie Dixon and Chester Burnett

Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine* is a big, bursting piñata of a movie—a glam-rock opera à clef that, mixing fact with fantasy, swings backward and forward in time as fluidly and disconcertingly as a dream. Though kaleidoscopic in structure, it's anchored in a fan's point of view.

The fan within the film is Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale), a British journalist living in New York in a grim 1984. Arthur is working on a story about Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), a glam-rock idol who disappeared 10 years earlier after faking his own murder. The story takes Arthur back to his own adolescence, awakening the memory of his infatuation with Brian Slade, and the intoxicating, ephemeral, sexually subversive glam-rock moment. If glam didn't transform the world into the polysexual paradise it fantasized but never promised, it did give fans like Arthur a taste of freedom ("a freedom you can allow yourself, or not" is how the film puts it) that changed them, more than they might later want to admit.

Arthur is something of an alter-ego for the filmmaker, who views the '70s as the last truly progressive decade, and glam, in "its inversion of sexuality, performance, and identity," as part of "a long history of underground gay culture, dandyism, and camp that stretches from Beau Brummel to Oscar Wilde to Jack Smith."

Haynes remembers his first encounter with glam as an 11-year-old. "In California, where I grew up, there were these tough, cigarette-smoking glam girls. They were my age and they were really into Iggy and Elton. On the school bus, I heard one of them say, 'Bowie's bi.' That was scary to me, it thrilled and repelled me at the same time. And I remember going over to a friend's house and listening to *Diamond Dogs*. But I didn't really get into it until I was in high school."

Haynes started working on *Velvet Goldmine* in 1990, just after he finished his first feature, *Poison*. "There were many years of accumulating material and then distilling it into a

script. There's a messiness to *Velvet Goldmine* but it's also a tightly constructed puzzle. It's all taut and interconnected. I know it doesn't feel that way when you watch it, but it is."

Haynes's description of his work process brings to mind the scene in *Velvet Goldmine* in which the teenage Arthur is in his room poring over music mags, surrounded by album covers and posters depicting Brian Slade near naked or in some outrageous drag costume. You can find similar scenes in thousands of coming-of-age movies, but few in which the attention that the teenager lavishes on his sacred artifacts is quite so fetishistic and fewer still where the fetish object is so subversive. (The reason that Arthur's parents are flipped out is not merely that he plays his stereo too loud, but that his idol is a flaming faggot, pansy, queer.)

To a susceptible viewer, the scene is like a hall of mirrors where one's own fantasy, and Arthur's fantasy, and the fantasy behind the film (Haynes's fantasy) reflect one another. Crudely put, that fantasy goes: what if David Bowie and Iggy Pop had fallen madly in love and then had broken up; and what if, in the cataclysm of their breakup (signaling nothing less than the destruction of glam itself), a space was opened where I could enter, where one of them would notice me, would say to me, "Come with me, don't be afraid..."

That fantasy already has certain rock critics protesting about the film's "lack of authenticity" (as if that wasn't an absurd standard to apply to glam) and about Haynes's totalizingly queer vision, in which drag isn't merely an act. "They're particularly upset about Iggy, the sacred Iggy," says an amused Haynes.

But *Velvet Goldmine* isn't a biopic, though there's a lot of Bowie in Brian Slade, a lot of Iggy in Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor) and a bit of Bryan Ferry, Lou Reed, Brian Eno, and the New York Dolls floating around. It's couched as a fan's memory of glam and of the fantasy that glam produced in him. ("Your memory stays, it lingers ever, fade away never," Bryan Ferry sings in "2HB".) For all its density and pyrotechnics, it's as personal a film as Haynes's *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* or *Dottie Gets Spanked*, which also deal with pop culture, memory, and youthful formative experiences.

"*Velvet Goldmine* is ultimately about the active role the fan takes in this kind of pop moment, and it speaks by association to films and music that give you a role to play, that encourage your fantasies and your embellishment," says Haynes. "The whole act of looking was foregrounded in the glam era in ways it hadn't been before in pop music. The lyrics, the melodrama of the music, the staging are all about the act of looking. So that the roles we all play in life are highlighted by the roles they play on the stage. It offers you the invitation to become the thing you're looking at, to dress up, to experiment."

Haynes is extremely skeptical about the possibility of a glam revival. "Glam established a preoccupation with image and the look of the artist that is now very commonplace--in the Boy Georges, Princes, and Madonnas--but has lost much of its arresting power. It made you think about who you were in ways I don't think it does anymore. Glam isn't an option now, mostly because the culture we live in is so much less progressive than the culture that produced it. And the meaning, energy, and potential glam gave to the act of looking isn't possible in a culture where every image is available to us immediately and outside its cultural context. In a way, glam saved itself from that horrible recycling process that most other significant chapters in the history of rock undergo by predicting its own end in various ways and killing itself off--Bowie killing Ziggy, Eno leaving Roxy. I wanted the whole film to be a reflection of the Roxy Music experience I had, rather than the Bowie experience. Roxy Music has this elegaic, mournful melodramatic quality, this spilling out of emotion, but it's brought to you with such an excess of references, winks and nods, and posturing. The duality of being so emotional and so tongue-in-cheek is always what moves me. It's Sirk and Fassbinder and Oscar Wilde, too. They let you feel the feelings and think about the structures at the same time."

In inviting the fan to become what he or she looked at, glam blurred the distinction between identification and desire, just as it blurred those between masculinity and femininity,

heterosexuality and homosexuality, fact and fiction, form and feeling. In *Velvet Goldmine*, the thrill of blurring is specifically tied to the adolescent experience.

"Maybe it suggests," says Haynes, "that the period when we're most vulnerable and impressionable is limited, and that to become part of society, to submit to a single identity, a career, responsible choices inevitably cuts us off from everything glam rock stands for. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which is the only other film I can think of that deals with the themes specific to the glam era, is the film that successive generations of teens cannot let go of. Jim [Lyons, *Velvet Goldmine* editor] and I saw it again a few years ago and we were shocked that the audience's reactions were still the same--the perversions were hailed and the conformity ridiculed. It can only be that there's this brief time before you have to settle on a life for yourself when you're invited to dress up, interact, and engage, to wear the lipstick and the garters, to be faggoty."

And it's not just a boy thing. In *Velvet Goldmine*, the most explicit sex scene between Brian and Curt is enacted with Barbie dolls that belong to girl fans.

"I wanted to show that it wasn't a problem for girl fans to enter that world and play out their desires with two boys instead of a boy and a girl. But ultimately, the little girls holding up their Barbies and speaking through them is exactly what I'm doing in the entire film. It's not the story of Bowie and Iggy. It's what we do with what they put out there. That's the work of the fans."

So, perhaps, it's not surprising that when Miramax, *Velvet Goldmine*'s North American distributor, test-screened the film, it found that it scored highest with female audiences under 25. "I always knew," says Haynes, "that the perfect boy is a girl."