

Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine*, or, Some of the limits artists still accept

Velvet Goldmine, directed by Todd Haynes, written by Haynes and James Lyons

David Walsh**13 November 1998**

US filmmaker Todd Haynes has made four quite distinct works. In *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), he recounted the life of the popular American singer who died of anorexia, with Barbie dolls playing all the roles. Because of the unauthorized use of the Carpenters' music, the film ran into legal problems and has not been shown since 1990. Haynes' *Poison* (1991) told three stories, one of them adapted from Jean Genet, about social exclusion, passion and death. Julianne Moore, in the remarkable *Safe* (1995), played a middle class housewife allergic to virtually every twentieth century substance. The work, a sharp critique of 'New Age' thought and practice, is one of the most disturbing American films of this decade.

In *Velvet Goldmine* Haynes has turned his attention to the 'glitter' or 'glam' rock era of the early 1970s in London. The film approaches its subject indirectly. It begins with a brief tribute to Oscar Wilde, portrayed as a small boy cheerfully telling his teacher, 'I want to be a pop idol.' The film jumps forward a hundred years or so. In gloomy 1984 (a consciously *Orwellian* 1984) a journalist, Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale), is assigned to investigate the whereabouts of one of the glitter scene's stars, Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), who disappeared from view after staging his own fake assassination seven years earlier. Arthur interviews the star's first manager, his American ex-wife Mandy (Toni Collette) and another leading performer, American Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor). In flashbacks, we follow Slade's rise to prominence in the music world and, ultimately, his decline and supposed fall.

Artifice, dandyism and the deliberate blurring of sexual identities characterized glam rock. Projecting a gay or bisexual image was *de rigueur*. Some went farther. Brian marries Mandy, but falls for the extravagant Wild and the latter pair go off together, briefly. Recounting this to the journalist years later, Mandy says sadly, 'It's funny how beautiful people look when they're walking out the door.' In the process of investigating Slade and the others, Arthur revisits his own past; as a teenager he was a fan of the music and gained some of his identity through following the public exploits of those he admired.

He discovers in the end that Slade has been transformed, physically and morally, in the 1980s into a monstrous, Reagan-loving superstar. In one of the final sequences Arthur encounters Wild, now down on his luck, in a bar. In the film's most interesting exchange the latter says, 'We set out to change the world and just changed ourselves.' Arthur: 'What's wrong with that?' Wild: 'Nothing, if you don't look at the world.'

Haynes is a genuine film stylist. His images have purpose and urgency. One senses that he knows what he is doing and why he is doing it. And he seems honest and driven by unselfish motives, not simply making films for effect or to enhance his reputation. There is an intellectual and artistic integrity at work. He is one of the most interesting American filmmakers currently working.

The director, as he is quick to point out, is anything but a *realist*. Although people and events are identifiable and follow some sort of logic, everything takes place in a cloud, a haze. His primary concern in this film is not so much to reproduce a particular moment in popular cultural history, but to evoke an alternative emotional and mental state.

In his notes for *Velvet Goldmine*, Haynes writes: 'Glam rock was the product of the last truly progressive decade we've seen in the West--a climate of great possibility and openness--that resulted in important social movements, amazing cinema, and some fantastic music....

'I wanted to re-examine the period because I think the '70s was a unique era, not because it was kitsch, but for an extremely radical spirit we've not seen since. The dressing up and performing draws a direct relationship to sexuality and identity which was about the individual and non-conformity. It was a truly progressive period, but in a playful way, without the political dogma of the '60s.'

Much of Haynes' concern revolves around the notions of the *natural* and the *artificial*. The references to Oscar Wilde are not accidental. He told interviewer Rob Nelson in *City Pages* that a concern for 'realness' in art, which he rejects, is bound up with 'our way of understanding ourselves as a society--in terms of very fixed notions, in terms of models based on *nature*. And ultimately that boils down to notions of identity that are about a sort of organic, authentic sense of self that we are supposed to find and stick to.'

Haynes, in the same interview, noted that film 'realism' has changed from decade to decade, that it is 'quite coded, invented,' and went on: 'It's very unique voices like Oscar Wilde, and this weird little departure in rock music known as glitter rock, that begin to reveal the language that we like to think of as invisible and natural, and make *that* the point of what they're talking about. It's not accidental that there's an element of homosexual history that fuels some of these works that look at the world in a different way--because gay people, and other minorities, are not given access to these codes of realism and authenticity that the society likes to give out. So we are *forced* to read the world against the grain and to look at those structures and

those codes that don't exclude us.'

It is relatively rare for a contemporary American filmmaker to discuss such matters, or virtually any matters, in a serious manner. Haynes has obviously given some of this considerable thought. And yet there is something troubling about these comments and others he makes, which seems to me to be bound up with the relative weakness of the film. Because after one has said that *Velvet Goldmine* is an insightful and attractive work, one has to admit that it fails to engage the emotions and the intellect at the level Haynes undoubtedly would like it to.

A number of factors come into play, some of them matters of personal taste. I don't find enough of the music that Haynes so admires (David Bowie, Brian Ferry, Brian Eno, Iggy Pop) truly electrifying. And I question, in general, the practice of making so much of relatively ephemeral developments in popular music. Pop music, in my opinion, is most interesting as a rule when it's taken *least seriously*. Furthermore, to compare the entire collectivity of undeniably talented performers of the time to Oscar Wilde strikes me as off the mark and indicative at the very least of a serious underestimation of Wilde's significance as a critic and artist. (I won't go into here what I take that significance to be. That would be the fourth or fifth such effort in 18 months. The relevant pieces are listed below.)

The devotion of different individuals to stylistically- and thematically-opposed types of popular music has a great deal to do, it seems to me, with the moods of particular generations and social layers at given moments in time. It contains an accidental element, in other words. Why does Haynes suppose that his chosen genre (he came to it as a college student) has to have meaning for a wide audience? I find it a little repressive, frankly, this notion that a spectator *must* respond to what he passionately cares for in a field where the choices are relatively arbitrary and subjective. It strikes me as a minor miscalculation, which perhaps speaks to a more serious miscalculation.

Haynes' determination to make the opposition between artificiality and naturalness a kind of permanent aesthetic program also seems questionable to me. After one has recognized that the claims of naturalism to reproduce 'life as it is' are bogus and that all art involves getting at the truth about reality through artificial means, one can perhaps go on to other matters. I'm no more convinced by people who fetishize 'theatricality' and 'dressing up' than I am by those who insist that only 'realistic portrayals of the modern class struggle' count for anything.

It's perfectly reasonable to find 'authenticity, naturalness and a direct emotional experience between audience and performer'--which Haynes refers to a little condescendingly as 'things Americans love'-- *inadequate* as artistic approaches, but to set them up as *a positive barrier* as the filmmaker does seems to me as limiting as any dogma he derides. Truth comes in all sorts of forms, under the influence of various impulses. The realism of Courbet or Kiarostami is as radical as the dandyism of Wilde or Haynes. This is not an argument for eclecticism--different forms may have aesthetically progressive or regressive implications under specific conditions--but for a concrete study of the problem.

The basic difficulty with *Velvet Goldmine*, in my mind, boils down to this. One feels an active and serious intelligence and a strong film sense at work--but on what? He seems to have spent a disproportionate amount of energy exploring a relatively slight subject. My own suspicion is that Haynes is more interesting than the

performers on whom he lavishes a good deal of attention. Why does he limit himself in this manner?

He told the *New York Times*: I'm a political filmmaker and the politics of identity is where I see the core of my focus. We live in a society that insists on prescribing our identities. I think the glam rock era posed some of the strongest dangers to that by encouraging a refusal of any fixed category for sexual orientation or identity in general.'

I'm less interested in polemicizing against Haynes' conceptions (to his credit, he makes it clear elsewhere that he is hostile to contemporary identity politics) than in noting their circumscribed character. That is to say, he is legitimately concerned by the way in which society limits who we are and who we may be *sexually* and he is prepared to invest a considerable amount of thought to that problem, but how much of this same flexibility and genuine breadth of vision extends to social and historical problems? Would he be so critical of the arguments that seek to limit us *politically and socially* ('socialism is dead,' 'a revolution replaces one tyranny with another,' and all the other prevailing banalities)? I don't know, but I suspect not. Haynes' is a dialectical imagination that is exercised, in my view, over too limited a patch of ground. I'm convinced this has something to do with the limitations of *Velvet Goldmine*, its somewhat undernourished feel. At this point the director applies his boldness in some areas and not in others.

Haynes speaks, for example, of 'codes' that are available to the vast majority. Sexual codes perhaps. But to imply that the majority of the population is let in on or benefits from crucial social codes 'of realism and authenticity' simply reveals a kind of ideological myopia. Those invisible codes, which accept the existing social order as natural and inevitable, exclude and work against all but a handful. They are powerful, difficult to see and challenging them poses 'the strongest dangers' of all.

If someone as perceptive as Haynes seems cut off from that understanding it is not a personal weakness, but a more general intellectual problem. Artists are working in so many cases with one hand tied behind their backs. Somehow the extraordinary formal advances and sporadic insights need to become worked up into a frontal assault on the aesthetic and social status quo. I strongly suspect that Haynes is someone who could make a contribution to such an assault.

See Also:

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