In early 1970s Britain, Ziggy Stardust landed on Earth. David Bowie’s alien alter-ego may not have been glam-rock’s first notable figure, but he stands as a potent symbol for glam’s defining traits: sensuality, androgyny, a Wildean spirit, and sexual and gender fluidity. Through his influential concept album The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, released in 1973, Bowie became an icon for Britain’s youth in the midst of sexual revolution. But Bowie is also one of music’s greatest re-inventors, who famously discarded his bisexuality in a 1983 issue of Rolling Stone by referring to his identification as gay, and later bisexual, as ‘the biggest mistake I ever made […] I was experimenting.’ (Loader 1983). This calls into question whether the representation of sexual and gender identity in the glam-rock scene can be considered authentic, or merely a method of generating publicity and profit. This article considers this debate in relation to two films: Velvet Goldmine (Haynes, 1998), which loosely depicts the exploits of Bowie, Iggy Pop, and other key glam-rock figures, and Hedwig and the Angry Inch (Mitchell, 2001), whose transsexual rock star protagonist draws influence from the glam era.

In Judith Butler’s Critically Queer, she discusses the crucial difference between the concepts of performance and performativity. For Butler, performativity ‘consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s “will” or “choice”’. (Butler 1993: 24). In other words, gender and sexuality are constructed through the performing of certain social norms that have been read as belonging to a particular category of people. By contrast, for Butler, performance is a bounded act, which exaggerates and mimics existing codes and signifiers of gender. Much as Butler discussed drag performance as highlighting the unnatural theatricality of gender or identity, so too can this be said of glam-rock’s performers, whose elaborate stage costuming bears strong resemblance to drag, and who equally call into question gender and sexuality codes.

Also essential in the reading of these films is the fact that they are products of the New Queer Cinema movement. B. Ruby Rich, who coined the phrase, describes New Queer Cinema as containing ‘traces of appropriation, pastiche, and irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind.’ (Rich 2013: 18). These defining traits can also be found in both glam-rock and in the drag performance that Butler describes,
linking New Queer Cinema directly with the notions of playing with sexuality and gender for the enjoyment of an audience.

_Velvet Goldmine_, directed by Todd Haynes, loosely recreates the glam-rock scene of 1970s Britain, in particular emulating the figures of Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and most especially, David Bowie. Through the character of Brian Slade, Bowie’s trademarks of aesthetic innovation and reinvention are explored. Through Brian, Haynes also demonstrates how the reinvention of a public figure’s sexual identity can be advantageous in furthering their appeal in a changing cultural landscape. In an era of sexual freedom, where scandalous sexual acts can sell records and newspapers, Brian Slade is the icon of the queer revolution in music. However, it is up for debate how authentic Brian’s sexual identity is. The film’s perspective character, Arthur Stuart, comes to the unconfirmed conclusion that after Slade’s faked assassination, disappearance, and the death of the glam-rock movement, Slade reinvents himself again as the ultra-conservative, heteronormative rock star Tommy Stone (a nod to Bowie’s follow-up to the androgynous Ziggy Stardust - the neo-Nazi character The Thin White Duke.) The fact that Slade is able to cast off his bisexual identity so easily calls into question whether it is all a performance, taking a cue from Oscar Wilde by asking ‘how splendid it would be if I was staging all this about myself! (original emphasis)’ (Bennett 2010: 23)

Brian Slade, it can be argued, is a figure of pure performance, or as Chad Bennett describes him, an ‘heir to a Wildean tradition of aesthetic self-fashioning.’ (Bennett 2010: 20) Within the narrative of _Velvet Goldmine_, Brian appears in many guises, including the film’s very own Ziggy Stardust: the green-skinned, lizard-like alien Maxwell Demon. As the enigmatic star of the glam-rock era, Brian’s public persona is theatrical, disguised, and hyper-stylised. However, Brian’s performance goes beyond that which is seen on stage or in his music videos. Unlike fellow rock star-turned-lover Curt Wild, ex-wife Mandy Slade, or the reporter Arthur Stuart whose investigation into Brian’s disappearance forms the film’s frame story, the audience are not privy to any aspect of Brian’s emotional growth, and despite Brian being the central focus of Arthur’s investigation, he remains the only figure that Arthur does not meet. It is also key to note that Brian Slade is rarely seen out of costume, whether it be his introduction into the narrative covered in elaborate blue and silver feathers, his emulation of Little Richard as a child, or his final song as the green-skinned Maxwell Demon, or dressed in various eccentric outfits in between these moments. Throughout _Velvet Goldmine_, the figure of Brian Slade is constructed as an aesthetic creation, crafted purely as a means for
fame and success and discarded just as easily when the glam-rock moment has passed. He is ‘a supreme stylist with no style of his own.’ (Davis 2007: 90). Brian steals his stage persona from other key artists, first taking inspiration from glam-rock godfather Jack Fairy, and later from Curt. Witnessing an aggressive, highly sexual, and confrontational performance of Curt’s at a festival, Brian is overcome with jealousy at the vitriol the previously-indifferent crowd hurls Curt’s way, as Curt feeds manically on that hate, flinging himself across a stage engulfed in flames. ‘I wish it had been me,’ he says to Mandy and his first manager Cecil. ‘Wish I’d thought of it.’ In the following scene, we are introduced to Brian’s latest persona, Maxwell Demon, in a music clip that borrows heavily from the characteristics of Curt’s performance. Brian-as-Maxwell-Demon slithers sensually, provocatively through the scene, a figure of sexual energy. He even plays guitar surrounded by flames in a recreation of the moment when he first saw Curt. Maxwell Demon’s introduction ‘inhabits nearly all of the characteristics for which Wild’s performance has been despised.’ (Bennett 2010: 27). The connection is made explicit as the clip opens with Curt Wild, dressed as the lustful satyr of Greek mythology, winks directly at the audience.

In his chapter The Invention of a People, Nick Davis argues that ‘Brian conjures “fantasy” in the sense of performativity and impossible fabrication.’ (Davis 2007: 90). In discussing both fantasy and performativity, it is possible to read Brian’s queerness as pure performance also. Brian’s marriage to Mandy and sexual affairs with Curt and first manager Cecil would ostensibly place him in the category of bisexual, but his later reinvention as Tommy Stone, a conservative, heterosexual rocker, suggests that this is inauthentic. In this sense, it is possible to conclude that Brian merely exploited the queer identity that was popular within the glam-rock scene to achieve fame, and easily cast it aside when that scene came to an end. However, this reading does not take into account the fact that Brian does engage in sexual acts with both men and women even before he becomes famous, and at times shows genuine love and affection towards both Mandy and Curt. Brian may publicise his sexuality to sell records, but that does not negate his sexuality’s authenticity. In fact, it is possible to conclude that Tommy Stone’s heterosexuality is the fabrication. Brian’s sexual fluidity also defines him as something more than bisexual. As Davis argues, ‘[He is] the very definition of Deleuze and Guattari’s schizo, described as “not simply bisexual, or between the two, or intersexual. He is transsexual. He is trans-alivedead […] He does not confine himself inside contractions; on the contrary, he opens out.”’ (Davis 2007: 91). This places Brian as perhaps the queerest figure of all; one that defies the categorisation based on social norms that forms the basis of performativity.
While we have shown that to label Brian Slade as simply a performance of bisexuality would be reductive, he does stand in direct contrast to the queer figure of Curt Wild, and this provides the major conflict in the characters’ relationship. Brian is cold, emotionally distant, and exploits his relationship with Curt for publicity. Unlike Brian, ‘[Curt] stands up for realizing one’s principles, whether these have to do with personal loyalty, global awareness, or claiming sexual identifications for other than faddish reasons.’ (Davis 2013: 226). As it becomes clear to Brian that the record he is producing for Curt will never sell, he quickly pulls the plug on both the project and the relationship, with only a fleeting moment of anguish before the assassination stunt that allows him to reinvent himself as Tommy Stone.

The ease with which Brian abandons glam-rock, his stage persona, and his sexual identity sets him apart from Curt, who is both unwilling and unable to abandon that fundamental part of his identity to achieve fame in the conservative 1984 of the film’s framing story. The contrast between Brian’s pragmatic nature and Curt’s emotional one is most clearly seen with Curt’s performance at the Death of Glitter concert.

In what is both the final concert of the glam-rock era and Curt’s final performance, he sings Iggy and the Stooges’s ‘Gimme Danger’, watched in the wings by Mandy and a young Arthur, who both look visibly distressed by the spectacle. Also watching at the back of the room, and in disguise, is Brian. The performance begins as a typical, sensual Curt Wild number not unlike his introduction at the festival, but there is an underlying sense of melancholy. His on-stage writhing becomes more violent as the song progresses, with Curt screaming and throwing his body around the floor as if having convulsions. Eventually, Brian, with no emotion in his face, chooses to turn away, just as Curt screams into the microphone ‘I wanna fucking feel it!’ while clawing at his chest, then collapsing face down on the stage. Brian’s ease at turning away from both their relationship and his Brian Slade persona contrasts with Curt’s painful inability to let go, showing that Curt, unlike Brian, values his sexual identity more than his fame. After the performance, Curt meets the younger Arthur, and the two have sex on a rooftop beneath the night sky. Significantly, Arthur in this scene has chosen to style himself identically like his idol Brian Slade, and with Curt positioned behind Arthur, he can pretend that Brian is still his lover. This is yet another performance, but one for which there is no audience but Curt himself.
In *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, we see another example of performed queerness that can be read as artificial, and that is within the character of Hedwig herself. Directed by and starring John Cameron Mitchell, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* focuses on transsexual rock singer Hedwig Robinson, who travels the United States performing in small restaurants next door to the stadiums where her ex-lover, the rock superstar Tommy Gnosis, is performing the songs he stole from her. During these performances, Hedwig narrates her life story to her small audience. It is in these narrations that we discover her origins, and the potential artificiality of her transsexual identity. Living in East Berlin as the effeminate, homosexual, but nevertheless cisgender Hansel, Hedwig’s origins lie in a forced and fake identity as a method of escape. Hansel longs for the freedom of the West, listening to ‘the American masters’ and the ‘crypto-homo rockers’, and, gaining the attraction of African-American soldier Luther Robinson, finds a path to the West. That method is to see a backstreet surgeon in order to become physically female and legally marry Luther. While Hedwig/Hansel remain undoubtedly queer, the artificiality of their presentation comes from the fact that Hansel never expresses an emotional desire to become female. In his article *Gender Without Genitals*, Jordy Jones argues:

> The transsexual considers him or herself a member of the sex “opposite” to his or her original physical embodiment and/or wishes to be or to become a member of the sex into which he or she was not assigned at birth. The beautiful boy Hansel, who eventually becomes Hedwig, never articulates a desire to become a woman. His transformation is certainly not his idea, nor is it freely chosen. (Jones 2006: 450).

Taking this into consideration, Jones’ argument is that *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* can be more accurately considered a drag film than the tale of a transsexual. Jones summarises the conflict thus: ‘Hedwig is […] an overt citation of a transsexual woman, and Mitchell, as Hedwig, is a non-transsexual gay man *in drag as his fantasy of a transsexual woman* (original emphasis).’ (Jones 2006: 450).

However, both the readings of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* as a transsexual film, and Jones’ reading of the film as gay male drag, are reductive. Hedwig/Hansel is a figure without gender. She is at once both male and female, and at the same time neither. Her sex reassignment surgery assigns her biologically female, though she never expresses any desire to become female. Nevertheless, this surgery denies her the status of male. Hedwig/Hansel remains unable to be categorised as anything other than queer. The difficulty in ascribing a gender category to Hedwig is highlighted in the sequence in which she performs the song.
‘The Origin of Love’. The song reworks Plato’s *Symposium*, a text which theorises the existence of three sexes, where all of humanity exists as two people joined together back to back. The Children of the Sun comprise of two men, the Children of the Earth are two women, and the Children of the Moon are a man and a woman. When the gods become angry at humanity, Zeus splits them down the middle, and the two halves only become united during sexual intercourse. As Hedwig sings, an animation interrupts the film’s usual performance footage to visually accompany Plato’s story. In the closing moments of the animation, we see two halves of a face, resembling the Ying and Yang symbol, joining together. We later discover that Hedwig has a tattoo of half of a face. According to the ideas expressed in ‘The Origin of Love’ the two faces will only reunite when a person finds their other half, or their soul mate. Throughout the film, Hedwig tries and fails to find this other half in her romantic partners: Tommy Gnosis, Luther Robinson, and her bandmate and second husband Yishtak (in a reversal of Mitchell’s portrayal of Hedwig, Yishtak is played by a woman, Miriam Shor). Yet, it is only in the close of the final sequence - when Hedwig has removed her clothing and emerged naked as the male Hansel - that the two faces of her tattoo join together. Here, Hedwig/Hansel is ‘reborn with the knowledge that Hedwig is the feminine within himself,’ (Jones 2006: 454) and is confirmed as a Child of the Moon, with both male and female united in one entity. Hedwig’s identity as a woman may be performance, but her queer identity is both authentic and all-encompassing.

The fact that both *Velvet Goldmine* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* feature public performers as their protagonists means it is impossible to discuss the performance of sexuality without analysing the impact that has on the characters’ respective on-screen audiences. In theorising *Velvet Goldmine*’s relation to fandom and the marketing of queer sexualities for profit, it is essential to begin first with the title. Taken from one of David Bowie’s Ziggy-era b-sides, the film’s title emphasises both the excessive, flamboyant styling and provocative queerness as connoted by the word “velvet”, and the “goldmine” that Brian Slade, Curt Wild, and Jerry Devine seek to acquire by exploiting this. Jerry Devine, Brian’s second manager, is the film’s most overt figure in regards to this profiteering, a maestro conducting every beat of Brian and Curt’s love affair for maximum exposure. As Mandy Slade tells Arthur Stuart in their interview, ‘It was pretty clear what was happening. Happens every day. But for the world to think it was happening, well, that was Jerry’s particular genius.’
Curt first meets with Jerry and Brian in an elaborate, expensive restaurant, where his shaggy, greasy hair and blotchy skin stand out against both the scenery and Brian’s impeccable styling. As Brian and Jerry court Curt on cutting a record together, Curt appears spaced out, willing to agree to anything. Yet, while Brian is at this point focused on the opportunity to spend time with the man who captivated him in the festival performance, Jerry recognises an even greater opportunity. When Brian looks at Curt, we see cartoon hearts appear in his eyes, but when Jerry looks at them both, we see bright green dollar signs. The fact that Brian succeeds under Jerry’s guidance but not with his first manager Cecil, who is also queer, is articulated by Stephen doCarmo, who argues that ‘only straight, white, male music executives had the power and wherewithal to sell Brian Slade’s revolutionary queerness to every teenager in England.’ (doCarmo 2002: 397).

Jerry proves to be a master manipulator when it comes to turning Brian and Curt’s romance into a profitable publicity machine. He hires documentary crews to film the house where they are both staying, and encourages Brian to play up his sexuality in interviews. But perhaps Jerry’s greatest success in this regard is seen in a four-minute-long sequence that bridges musical performance, tabloid press, and fandom. The sequence begins as Brian, dressed all in gold, is circled by the press as if the ringmaster in a circus. He answers their questions with provocative Oscar Wilde quotes, and when asked about Curt Wild, Curt appears. The two engage in a lengthy, passionate kiss, which is only interrupted by the flash of paparazzi cameras. The kiss then cuts to Brian on stage, singing the sultry ‘Baby’s on Fire’, with Curt acting as his guitarist. This performance is then intercut with a teenage Arthur listening to the record of the song in his bedroom, reading an article in the NME about Curt and Brian’s kiss. Arthur turns the page, and sees an image of Brian and Curt re-creating Bowie and Mick Ronson’s famous guitar fellatio photograph taken by Mick Rock. We watch the highly sexual stage act be performed, and also see Arthur masturbating to the image in his bedroom. But this sequence has an even stronger connection to fandom than merely awakening Arthur’s own sexual identity. Bennett demonstrates that what we are seeing may not be fact, but rather the product of fan fantasy. ‘Arthur turns to the photograph of Slade going down on Wild’s guitar before we view the same even taking place on stage, suggesting that the performance we see is perhaps teenage Arthur’s imagined version of it, teased out of the photos he pours over and the music he absorbs alone in his room.’ (Bennett 2010: 35). The epic Brian and Curt romance has evolved beyond the two men due to Jerry’s publicity, with their relationship becoming a commodity turning casual fans into rabid, dedicated, and money-spending fanatics.
The interaction between Hedwig’s gender identity and the mass market stands in direct contrast to that seen in *Velvet Goldmine*. While Brian Slade became a superstar because of his androgynous stage presence and exploited bisexuality, it is Hedwig’s transsexual identity that prevents her becoming famous for her music. As established in the film’s opening, Hedwig’s songs do appeal to a mass market audience, but only when performed by heteronormative stadium rocker Tommy Gnosis. Equally, the songs that Tommy steals from Hedwig are the ones that do not directly reference her sexuality or her botched operation. Songs like ‘Angry Inch’, the name given to the inch of penis remaining from her operation, elicit disgust and revulsion from audience members, aside from the few Hedwig devotees in the crowd.

Yet Hedwig’s transsexuality does prove to be profitable, for outside sources. Tabloid newspapers and TV broadcasts are frequently shown with headlines such as ‘TOMMY GNOSIS’ TRANSSEXUAL LOVER!’ promoting Hedwig purely as a scandal and used to generate profit not for Hedwig or Tommy, but for the news media themselves. Why Brian Slade and Curt Wilde could profit from their sexual identity but Hedwig cannot profit from her gender identity may be in some part due to their settings. While *Velvet Goldmine* takes place in a liberal, rebellious 1970s counter-culture, the setting of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* traverses both communist East Berlin at a point when the collapse of the Berlin Wall is imminent, and a conservative, early-90s America in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic. Hedwig, as Hansel, reveals that he grew up listening to the ‘sexually ambiguous rockers: David Bowie, Iggy Pop, [and] Lou Reed,’ (Jones 2006: 455) but their time has been and gone, and there is no place for Hedwig in this new, conservative era of rock.

Scandal does lead Hedwig to a modicum of success in the film’s closing moments, when after a car crash with Tommy puts her in the papers once again, her final performance is a sell-out show. However, this audience is here not as fans of Hedwig, but to see the ‘freak-show’ from the papers. It is this fundamental disregard by the audience for Hedwig’s female identity that is the catalyst for her breakdown, shedding her female form and returning for closure with Tommy, nude, male, and with no audience left to hear her story.

This article set out to explore the relationship between queer identity and performance in the glam-rock scene. It also aimed to discover whether the queerness promoted by glam-rock stars can be considered authentic. In both *Velvet Goldmine* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* we find that the sexual identity of Brian Slade and the gender identity of Hedwig
Robinson can be considered, to some extent, fabricated and exaggerated. This is seen in Brian’s ability to discard his bisexuality when it is no longer popular, and Hedwig’s lack of a desire to become female. Despite this, I have shown that it is impossible to deny that these characters are queer, only that they cannot be categorised in the restrictive identities that they promote as a part of their stage presence. Brian and Hedwig are required to perform certain roles, whether to generate a profit or a fan-base, or to find a method of escape from a previous, equally restrictive life. Yet, their performance is based on essential truths. Both films use myth and fantasy as a way of demonstrating that sexual and gender identity categories are reductive and beyond the simplistic, performative binaries of male/female or gay/straight. In _Velvet Goldmine_, it is the extra-terrestrial Maxwell Demon who represents the uncategorisable, while _Hedwig and the Angry Inch_ uses Plato’s _Symposium_ to provide theories on gender that differ from the accepted norm. In conclusion, while it is impossible to argue that the glam-rock scene exaggerated and exploited queerness, these films argue that this performance emerges from an authentic queer identity that has merely been expanded from the personal to the public.
References


Mitchell, John Cameron (2001), Hedwig and the Angry Inch, USA: Killer Films.