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IF I COULD CHOOSE:
INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA OF THE QUEER CINEMA MOVEMENT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Television, Radio, Film and Theatre

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

James J. Flaherty

May 2010

The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA OF THE QUEER CINEMA MOVEMENT

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James J. Flaherty

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF TELEVISION, FILM, RADIO AND
THEATRE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2010

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ABSTRACT

IF I COULD CHOOSE:
INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA OF THE QUEER CINEMA MOVEMENT

By James J. Flaherty

This thesis offers a critical examination of essentialist and constructionist theories of queer identities, with emphasis focused on portrayals of internalized homophobia in film. The thesis examines three films released at the latter part of the first New Queer Cinema movement (1991 – 2000) – *American Beauty* (1999), *Urbania* (2000) and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998). Using criticisms of Queer as performativity, as theorized by Judith Butler, in addition to the works of Gregory M. Herek, Harry M. Benshoff, Jeffrey Weeks, as well as other theorists and academics, the thesis analyzes the use of characterization, mise-en-scene, and spatial and temporal relationships in these films as consideration for social, cultural, and psychological influences on the development of internalized homophobia in queer identities. The thesis also examines how these identities under discussion may have sustained or bolstered commonly held perceptions, or stereotypes, attributed to the behaviors and mannerisms of homosexual men during the time period.

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

I. Variations on a Theme: Social Theories on Queer Identities

In a 1998 interview with *The New York Times,* Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick, one of

the leading Queer theorists of the 1990s, stated that among the social, political and

academic problems in accepting Queer theory was the debate that "one cannot understand

desire and repression without understanding gender, [and therefore], sexual practice and

sexual identity" (Turner 4). Sedgewick, along with Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis,

laid much of the groundwork for the emerging field of Queer in the 1990s, noting its

inextricable place among discussions of politics, desire, sexuality and representation.

According to William Turner, author of *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*, it was de Lauretis

who was first credited with use of the term "queer" while describing "her own [personal]

intellectual endeavors [in juxtaposition with women's political issues]" (4). She was

questioning the ability of women to represent themselves through a language and

conceptual framework created by men, but "in a social and political order, [that took]

little account of [them]" (5). As such, Queer owes much of its derivation, if not the

majority, to feminist political and scholarly activities as compared to gay political and

scholarly activities. Queer is a conceptualization that takes the notion of grounded,

centered identities and challenges how society arrives at such identities, all in an effort to

question society's preordainment of specified gender roles and orientation.

In a sociological context, Queer describes an "oxymoronic community of

difference" (Benshoff 63). The rapidly growing study of persons who self-identify as gay

and/or lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transvestite, drag queen, leather daddy, lipstick

lesbian, pansy, fairy, dyke, butch, femme, feminist, asexual, or other non-heteronormative identities, prompted "an [increased] deployment of the [umbrella] term 'queer'" (Jagose 1). Queer theory "offers methods of imagining difference on its own terms" (Francis 74), yet traditional analytical models only succeed in "[dramatizing] incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (Jagose 1). Additionally, Queer theorists are credited with "consistently [celebrating] the unformed, inchoate, provisional character [of 'queer']" (Turner 9). Queer theory lends itself to the defiance of heteronormative gender and sexual identity standards, and among some theorists, is considered the epitome of authentic resistance and nonconformity.

Because the fundamentals of Queer are so diverse and undefined, several philosophical debates have been posited to come to an understanding of "queer." Queer theorists view conformity as an acceptance of "straight" gender and sexual roles, and largely against the progressive nature of "queer." By contrast, gay and lesbian studies predominantly involve the analysis of "gay" and "lesbian" social and anthropological models, and is also regarded by Queer theorists as more defined, less amorphous, and thus contradictory to the fluidity and ambiguity of Queer. Queer constitutes a challenge to the foundations of heteronormativity. This is the essence of Queer activism – a defiance, if not an unruly determination, set upon "dismantling the oppressive assumptions of heterocentrist discourse" (Benshoff 64). That which is embraced by Queer theorists is therefore empowered with unacknowledged values otherwise disregarded by what is considered "non-queer."

The History of Sexuality, written by French philosopher and theorist Michel

Foucault, is considered among the definitive studies of gender and sexual development,

and has been critical to the development of queer and feminist thought. Foucault's

interest in the ordainment of personal truths led to the belief that "individuals governed

themselves and each other using the truths that they so derived" (Turner 37). Therefore,

personal truths, being unique to the individual, were seen as "an expression of an

individual's psyche" (Sullivan 3). Foucault's writings on early sexual discourses suggest

they were "imbued with age-old delusions, but also with systemic blindnesses" (Foucault

55), stemming from a refusal by doctors and authority figures to acknowledge, let alone

understand, the information brought forward by their patients. He emphasizes that this act

of refusal was consequently a refusal to acknowledge the thing itself. In this argument,

Foucault emphasizes the need to uphold these sexual discourses as valid to the individual,

stating "misunderstandings, avoidances, and evasions were only possible, and only had

their effects" (57) because the subjects were discussing sex. These variegated responses

suggest a problematic reaction to, if not an intentional sublimation of sexual truths, and

provided a forum for disavowing individual truths with clinical falsehoods.

Additionally, Foucault critiqued the notions of power, specifically disciplinary

power, when contrasted with practice and accumulated experience. He criticizes the way

in which those who exercised power "[refused] to acknowledge their own participation in

domination through their own forms of explanation and rationalization of the power they

wielded" (Turner 38). Foucault sought to explain how by imposing order through the

device of self-identity, mankind is able to "use institutions and practices to impose order

on our society" (40). In sexual discourse, this idea of power becomes an inflexible judgment against individualized experiences of pleasure, which are instead measured in terms of intensity, quality, duration and reverberation in the soul. Each of these distinctly individualized gauges is encompassed in the practice of confession, which Foucault regards as "one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth" (Foucault 59). Through confession, one is able to expunge that which is most difficult to tell, and that which is most sanctimonious and true to the individual. If confession is not procured from a freely given, internal impetus, it is instead forced to reveal itself through coercive tactics of violence, physical threat, or torture. As Foucault states, "torture has accompanied [confession] like a shadow" (59), creating an inextricable link between the two. The withholding of confession and truth can also be construed as torture to the individual, as the obligation of confession is so deeply ensconced in the individual that it demands to surface. Failure to do so, Foucault states, is attributed to "a constraint that holds it in place, the violence of a power [weighing] it down" (60).

How one arrives at a non-heteronormative sexual identity raises the question of social and biological influences on sexual orientation development. J. Michael Bailey, author of "Biological Perspectives on Sexual Orientation," examines a list of alternative constructs to the question of sexuality and biology. In the first debate to which he alludes, Biological Determinism vs. Free Will, he argues that homosexuals could never have chosen heterosexuality because their homosexuality could have been predetermined biologically. Therefore, it is unfair to judge their sexual behavior in a moralistic way. While this is a sympathetic view of homosexuality, its relationship to choice is a tenuous

conclusion if one considers that all human behaviors – including behaviors that should not be excused, such as murder – are also biological. The second debate, Innate vs. Acquired, is an argument suggesting that behaviors are genetic and inherent to the individual, therefore "[developing] in a uniform or fixed pattern without being learned," (Bailey 105). This scenario fails to take into account that behaviors can also be acquired through conditioning, emulation and persuasion. The third debate, Genes vs. Environment, is similar to Innate vs. Acquired due to the idea that predetermined genetics are responsible for a lack of control in one's own development. Bailey argues that were homosexuality genetic, the necessary developmental steps into one's orientation would be acquired through environmental conditioning, therefore establishing homosexuality as a psychosocial condition.

Bailey finds more credibility in the discussion of Essentialism vs. Social Constructionism, a debate pioneered by British sociologist Jeffrey Weeks in an effort to classify the homosexual as a distinct social identity. The debate between Essentialism vs. Social Constructionism is characterized by the argument about whether "[different] sexual orientation[s] [are universal] to every culture, or merely an arbitrary categorization" (106), implying that they are more specific to Western cultures and observers, rather than the subject observed. Essentialists believe that all sexual identities are inherent and have been present in all times and places. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Social Constructionists emphasize "cultural variation in homosexual behavior" (106). This implies that a person's sexual orientation is cultivated within the individual, and can be influenced by extraneous elements that are not genetically innate to the

person. This concept is also supported by British sociologist Ken Plummer, who explained in his work *Social Stigma* that a person may feel a desire or attraction to a person of the same sex, but "he or she must [also] learn that these feelings are sexual and that they indicate a homosexual identity" (Seidman 27). While it is widely considered among activists and scholars that homosexuality has always existed, the social constructs of heterosexism and homophobia have worked as inhibitors to prevent homosexuality from being acknowledged positively. As independent scholar Jonathan Ned Katz states in his works *Gay American History* and *Gay / Lesbian Almanac,* "homosexuality has changed from a behavior (sodomy), to a type of gender deviance (invert), to an abnormal personality (the homosexual), to an affirmative social identity (gay / lesbian)" (28).

Edward Stein, a Professor of Law and Co-Director of the Program in Family Law, Policy, and Bioethics at the Cardozo School of Law in New York City, has authored numerous articles on sexual orientation, cognitive science, and lesbian and gay studies. In his book *The Mismeasure of Desire*, Stein explores the nature of what is considered a natural "human kind," and questions if sexual orientations are merely arbitrary groupings, or if they imply something inherent in human nature. Stein explores the idea that mankind is able to categorize itself through a variety of different groupings through measures that are either natural, or social. A classification through a natural condition is a "natural human kind," and would be inclusive of features such as eye color and blood type. A "social human kind," however, would refer to a classification of features that do not exist in nature and only come into existence through virtue of human intention. These features are only created and sustained at particular moments, and do not exist until their

creation by mankind. This concept raises the issue of choice, challenges the existence of sexual minorities across cultures, and has significant ramifications for social, ethical and political issues as well.

While echoing Bailey's writings on the differences between Essentialism and Social Constructionism, Stein remains uncertain as to the role that choice plays in the development of sexual orientations. He also suggests that sexual identities and behaviors are predicated on the two positions of Voluntarism and Determinism. Voluntarism involves the process of identifying as one thing, when one is in fact the opposite; when applied to sexual identity, Voluntarism "involve[s] choosing to *identify* as heterosexual, but [does] not involve choosing to *become* heterosexual" (Stein 260). A person can therefore claim to be heterosexual, yet still conceivably maintain a sexual lifestyle that is homosexual. Stein argues that Voluntarism is not a plausible concept, citing the fact that "most people do not choose their sexual orientations, most people's sexual orientations do not seem changeable, and the most plausible theories of how human sexual orientations develop seem to entail that choice does not play a role in its development" (261). By contrast, Determinism is the absence of choice, the understanding that one is determined to be the way they are born, and that "people do not choose their sexual orientations without opening up a complex set of metaphysical issues" (263). Stein acknowledges that theories of Determinism reduce the development of sexual orientations to simplistic terms, negating the potential of social, cultural or environmental influences, and notes that, while a person may not choose his or her sexual preference, he or she will make other decisions that affect their perception of sexual arousal. In this

case, Stein also proposes the third possibility of "Nondeterminism" as a means of sexual

identity development, suggesting instead that while queer persons may not choose their

same-sex attraction, a series of indirect choices play a role in the development of their

sexual orientations.

UC Berkeley professor and philosopher Judith Butler takes the concept of choice

even further by suggesting a connection to choice with the illusory effects of masquerade

and performance. Butler has made substantive contributions to queer, feminist, political

and ethical schools of thought, and is one of the preeminent Queer theorists in the United

States. In her pioneering work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, she

examines the language of Jacques Lacan to discuss designations of power between men

and women, and the "appearance of being" in possession of power. According to Butler,

Lacan states that the ontological specifications of "being" are signified through the

language of paternal law, which Butler observes as a parameter able to restrict the

ascension of a "thing" within its own structure of signification. She argues that a "thing"

is restricted into a state of "being" by the predisposition of the "Phallus" (implying the

male "penis"), which Butler empowers as the "authorizing signification of the Law"

(Butler 44). She regards the state of "being" versus "having" the Phallus as a litmus test

that determines the status of power – the state of "being" the Phallus, implying being the

power, versus "having" the Phallus, which denotes the position of wielding that power.

While the juxtaposition of "being" and "having" denotes differing sexual positions, it

also signifies the representation of desire between the rule of Law and the Other. Butler's

position on Lacan suggests that "power is wielded by [the] feminine position of not-

having [the Phallus]" because the masculine subject "requires the Other to confirm [the existence of such power]" (44). This view would therefore place women in the position of power, while relegating men to the position of "having," yet not "being" the power.

Butler cites Lacan's argument that women appear to "be" the Phallus through masquerade – a term indirectly suggesting that identities of all forms are therefore reduced to appearance. The significance of the masquerade is left open to a variety of interpretations. It could be that the essence of appearing is sexual ontology's attempt to make itself convincing as "being," or it could also be read as "a denial of feminine desire that presupposes [prior] ontological femininity regularly unrepresented by the phallic economy" (47). Masquerade could be the consequence of a lack of feminine desire, or a denial *of* the lack for the purpose of appearance. Masquerade could also be used to "disguise bisexual [possibilities] that otherwise might disrupt the seamless construction of [heterosexuality]" (47). Butler asks if the female masquerade requires the rejection, lacking, or lack of a presumed masculinity in order to assume the role of the Phallus, does this lead to the construction of female homosexual identities, and conversely, all homosexual identities? Her theory posits that if homosexuality can be resultant of a disappointed heterosexuality, it could also be possible for heterosexuality to be resultant of a disappointed homosexuality. This careful navigation between heterosexual and homosexual identities suggests that a "disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality" (135). This "production of gender effects," though critical for the outward

appearance of a palatable "sense" of heterosexuality, acts to conceal irregularities between gender and identity while suppressing the interiority of the individual.

Butler states that the desire to reproduce an idealized core of coherence results from a need of corporeal signification. While the way an individual acts and feels may register internally, the effects one produces on the surface is attributed to "signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause" (136). Therefore, the appearance on the surface of the body – the fabrication of corporeal signs – is considered "performative" in order to project an idea of essence or identity that one would otherwise reveal. Through performance, Butler points to the idea that the individual uses the body for a discursive outward appearance of gender, rather than an authentic embodiment of that gender. This implies that the "interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse" (136). Therefore, human development has no true ontological status apart from these precariously demonstrated "acts." Instead, a daily practiced socialization results in the body's signification of gender. This creates the illusion of harmony between the interior and organizing gender core, "discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (136).

The subject of performativity with respect to choice, as well as personal, social and cultural factors that influence both performativity and choice is central to the discussion of this thesis. The following section will further examine these cultural influences and how they are manifested through institutionalized hegemony, heterosexism and homophobia.

II. Butching Up: How Hegemony, Heterosexism and Homophobia Induce Gender Performativity

A deeper examination of human sexuality by early sexologists such as Sigmund Freud, Sandor Ferenczi and Alfred Kinsey indicated that many, if not most people "engage in both homosexual and heterosexual acts and / or desires at some point in their lives" (Benshoff and Griffin 5). The belief that sexuality is not fixed, but rather a more fluid essence of human behavior, gave way to Kinsey's six-point scale of human sexuality, with "exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality on either end of the continuum" (5). Western social perceptions of the binary relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality, along with the cultural dominance of heterosexuality, have led ontologies of gender and sexuality to establish the types of identities that *should* exist. This has evolved into a cultural standard of hegemony. For men, hegemonic masculinity serves as a model of ideal masculinity that both implicitly and explicitly maintains social control over appropriate gender behavior. It instills an "external pressure [that] 'encourages' individuals to conform to social expectations and/or hide forms of behavior that are likely to be considered inappropriate" (Sullivan 9). While hegemonic masculinity enforces mannerisms and behaviors that are acceptable, it concurrently regulates those that are not.

The concordance of, or discord among, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual behavior opens up a range of discussions and opinions regarding performative aspects of gender. While there has been substantial progress in Western cultures toward social and political acceptance for sexual minorities, a distinct uneasiness still exists. This

is evidenced through examples of legislation at the state and local levels, such as

California's Proposition 8 (2008), with the sole purpose of denying gay men and lesbians

additional rights and protections that might not otherwise be provided for them. Indeed,

lesbians and gay men are "the last group against whom it is still legal and acceptable to

discriminate, publicly denigrate, and socially ostracize" (Walters 39), making one's

visibility prone to social victimization and alienation all the more plausible. As these

social attitudes are allowed to perpetuate, so too are the ideologies of heterosexism and

homophobia.

Heterosexism is a "belief in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality"

(Sears 16), and is implemented through the deliberate or incidental exclusion of non-

heterosexual persons. Heterosexism can be demonstrated as "cultural heterosexism," a

"stigmatization, denial, or denigration of non-heterosexuality in cultural institutions"

(16), or "psychological heterosexism," an implicit validation of heterosexism through an

individual's "internalization of this worldview" (16). Both forms of heterosexism apply

pressures of conformity on sexual minorities to be, or at least to appear, "normal." This

reinforces the position of the homosexual as a victim of heterosexism's policing of

human behavior. If sexual orientations were in fact chosen, wouldn't one select

heterosexuality, if in fact a choice were possible? Sedgwick attributes this "defense" as a

response to heteronormative culture's desire to demonize making the *wrong* choice,

reaffirming an unstated belief that "gay people *not be*" (Whisman 25).

While heterosexism is a more understated and covert form of control over non-

heteronormative behavior, homophobia serves as an overt reaction to "the revulsion

toward homosexuals, accompanied by the desire to inflict punishment as retribution"

(Sears 15). Homophobia is a pattern of thought that is instigated by prejudiced social

institutions or individual beliefs. Dr. George Weinberg first coined the term

"homophobia" in his work *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, referring to "the dread

of being close to a homosexual" (Keller 176; Plummer 4). Sears cites Weinberg's model

of five different social and cultural motivations which are responsible for incurring

individual attitudes of homophobia: "religious beliefs, repressed envy, fear of being

homosexual, threat to values, and existence without vicarious immorality" (Sears 17). In

many cases, an individual's homophobia stems from a latent desire to either consciously

or subconsciously quell one's own same-sex feelings.

In his work *Queer (Un)friendly Film and Television*, English professor James R.

Keller refers to the work of French philosopher and sociologist Julia Kristeva to

contextualize the way homophobia impacts self-definition within Kristeva's theory of

abjection. In Kristeva's *Power of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection*, she identifies the

theory of abjection as a "rejection and sublimation of those characteristics that the subject

views as the 'not self'" (Keller 175). Kristeva defines the "not self" as an *abject*, and

likens the process of renouncing the "not self" to a jettisoned object that "draws [one]

toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2). The recognition of the abject

both harkens to and pulverizes the subject who experiences it, inciting a struggle between

the ego that aligns itself to the abject and the superego that drives it away. The rejection

of the abject is consistent with an existence sustained on the basis of exclusion,

challenging the unconscious with its inextricable link to neurotic and psychotic

tendencies. The oppositional relationship of the "I / Other" in neurotics can manifest when "normally unconscious [contents] become explicit, if not conscious, in 'borderline' patients" (7). This is exhibited through speech patterns and behaviors targeted at symbolic manifestations of the abject, sublimating any potential discourse rather than proposing a rational one.

Keller adds that Kristeva's theory of abjection is beneficial to understanding the social hysteria incited by homophobia. This theory likens itself to the "gay panic defense," a plea bargaining tactic that has been used in courts of law with the intent to mitigate punishment for violent acts perpetrated against non-heteronormativity. The gay panic defense assumes that the governance of the self is temporarily destabilized in response to the rejection of these abject manifestations. Instead of accepting responsibility for their actions, the perpetrator professes a "[momentary] rage and fear initiated by the revelation of [the] victim's sexual orientation" (Keller 175). The claim of gay panic is assumed to incite temporary insanity because the thing itself is too horrible to exist, "effectively render[ing] the victim guilty of his [or her] own injury or death" (176). Homophobia therefore becomes permissible when homosexuality signifies "the return of all that the heterosexual male has suppressed in the process of forming a normative sexual identity" (176). This was the rationalization given by the defense in the Matthew Shepherd murder trial, as well as the trial of Jonathan Schmitz, the man who murdered his friend Scott Amedure after he learned of the latter's homosexual crush on *The Jenny Jones Show*.

Studies into the impressions, attitudes and feelings towards lesbians and gay men frequently reveal that the negative views of homosexuality typically come from respondents with more conservative backgrounds and infrequent association with lesbians and gay men, as compared to those who viewed homosexuality more positively. Those with negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men will typically adopt traditional views regarding the roles and behaviors of men and women; they have "conservative, non-permissive attitudes towards sex; [a] belief that homosexuality is 'caused' by social or environmental factors; negative interpersonal experiences with lesbians and gays, or a lack of homosexual acquaintances or friends; religiosity factors and frequent attendance at religious services, [or are] older and [have] relatively little education" (Simon 62). These negative attitudes are acquired through socialization, tend to be enduring, and create predispositions that influence human behavior. These beliefs are also largely responsible for the creation of stereotypes, as they can be "overgeneralized and [are] based on too limited a set of experiences" (Biery 48).

In extreme circumstances, individuals who are incapable of conforming to traditional hegemonic gender roles, yet also fail to accept their own homosexuality, may experience feelings of persistent distress or self-loathing. Based on Kristeva's writings, the person therefore becomes the abject that they despise. For this reason, the diagnosis of *ego-dystonic homosexuality* (EDH) was added to the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association. A predisposition to internalizing negative societal attitudes was the impetus for establishing EDH as an illness requiring psychiatric treatment. The addition of EDH

as a mental condition was widely opposed by gay-affirmative psychiatrists and psychologists for many reasons, primarily "because of its misuse by clinicians who advocated reversal of homosexual orientation for their patients" (Meyer and Dean 164). EDH was eventually removed as a clinical diagnosis in 1987 as it was determined to be a socially induced condition rather than a mental disorder, and was instead replaced with the term "internalized homophobia."

Patients who exhibit high levels of internalized homophobia are individuals who "seek to become heterosexual exactly because they cannot envision satisfying lives as gay persons" (164). They may suffer from feelings of deeply rooted shame, loneliness, inability to have intimate relationships, or exhibit a propensity for high-risk behavior. This has an effect on the patient's identity formation, self-esteem, and frequently leads to an elaborately constructed, personal defense mechanism, an outward "demonstration" of gender behavior as protection of the person's true sexual identity. Sedgwick attributes this type of demonstration to the phenomena known (within a homosexual context) as the "closet," a performative measure "initiated as such by the speech act of a silence" (Sedgwick 3). The act of being "in the closet" for a homosexual is a charade of words and behaviors constructed by the individual to prevent anti-gay discrimination; in passing for straight, a person is therefore protecting him or herself from potential victimization. However, the closet does not negate nor prevent manifestations of internalized homophobia. It also reinforces the idea that life as a homosexual is shameful, prevents the individual from developing personal relationships, and further perpetuates the invisibility of sexual minorities. Clinical and theoretical literature relates numerous mental health

problems to internalized homophobia, while attempts at reparative therapy are usually

"doomed to failure" and "further damage the individual's self-image and mental health"

(Meyer and Dean 164).

In the article "Psychological Heterosexism in the United States," UC Davis

Psychology professor Gregory M. Herek correlates psychological heterosexism to

manifestations of stereotypes and outward displays of anti-gay attitudes. Herek cites a

"functional approach" to attitudes, a belief that people "express particular attitudes

because they derive psychological benefit from doing so" (Herek 327), which allows the

individual a sense of belonging and enfranchisement within a particular group while

instilling a sense of acceptance, approval or love from others. This desire for communal

solidarity relegates homosexuals, and homosexuality in general, to a symbol of

opposition to heteronormativity. Herek also defines "ego-defensive" psychological

heterosexism as an unconscious strategy through which a person can avoid internalizing

conflicted feelings of homosexuality by externalizing it instead, and "projecting it onto a

suitable symbol apart from themselves" (330). This is usually expressed through strong

feelings of disgust, perceptions of danger, and outward displays of hostility.

The connection between heteronormativity and performative aspects of masculine

violence is a multi-dimensional discussion with a wide range of interpretations and

motivations. An assailant may believe, either consciously or unconsciously, that outward

"performances" of violence create an impression of sexual identity that is both socially

and psychologically convincing. These demonstrative acts of violence frequently target

gay men and lesbians, and are usually driven more by the perception of, rather than the

actual, sexual orientation. While underreporting of crime in general is a categorical

problem in the United States, for anti-gay hate crimes, the statistics show that "perhaps as

few as 10 percent are reported" (331). The fact that most of these crimes go unreported is

a reflection of the lack of trust of local law enforcement personnel, the victim's

unwillingness to be attached to a homosexual identity, as well as the fear that reporting

will be met with either indifference or "additional harassment and recriminations" (331).

While there are various motives that underscore the reasons for anti-gay violence, this

thesis will examine the performative aspect of ego-defensive violence as a model of

behavior that "affirm[s] [one's] own heterosexuality or masculinity [through] attacking

someone who symbolizes an unacceptable aspect of [one's] own [personality]" (333).

Ego-defensive violence may be deliberately orchestrated as a vehicle for using maleness

and masculinity to attack the anti-male (in this case, the queer). In other cases the true

motivations for the attacks are unrecognized, even by the perpetrator themselves. Ego-

defensive violence is typically the result of an assailant's attempt to suppress their

conflicted homosexual attraction to the victim. It is also a desire to punish the victim for

arousing the attacker's repressed homosexual inclinations. By attacking a "symbol" of

homosexuality, the assailant unconsciously constructs a "performance" of their

biologically engendered sexual identity. The assailant is thereby vindicated of their

repressed sexual identity and "[embraces] what the culture has defined as 'masculine'

characteristics" (334).

III. The First New Queer Cinema Movement (1991-2000)

The Hollywood Production Code regulated the content of motion pictures from 1934 to the mid-1960s, and among a myriad of restrictions, forbade representations of homosexuality or anything construed as sexual perversion. The only depiction of sexuality allowed was that of a palatable, married, procreative heterosexuality. In spite of this, some filmmakers were able to intimate queerness through a process of connotative homosexuality – an "[implication] that a character might be queer through subtle mannerisms, costuming or speech patterns" (Benshoff and Griffin 9). Author Vito Russo's groundbreaking work *The Celluloid Closet* (first published in 1981, and revised in 1987) chronicles the history of homosexual images in Hollywood films as a parade of invisibility or innuendo, perpetuating "a sissy stereotype, a tragic neurotic, or even a psychotic criminal" (14). Indeed, many films released during the Production Code era, especially those of Alfred Hitchcock, contained characters with sublimated or connotative homosexual undertones. Both of Hitchcock's films *Rope* (1948), with its portrayal of two male urbanites that strangle another young man, and *Psycho* (1960), with its notorious depiction of Norman Bates, succeeded in supporting the notion that there was a link between queerness, criminality and mental illness.

Even after the Production Code ban was lifted in 1966, most homosexual characters featured in films were presented as victims of self-hatred and internalized homophobia (*The Boys in the Band*, 1970), murderers and sociopaths (*Cruising*, 1980), or found redemption from homosexuality at the climax of the film (*Personal Best*, 1982). Queer characters were typically depicted as "mincing and menacing sissies, as

malevolent and preying bull dykes [or] as tormented spies" (Walters 132). This may be the reason why, even after the Production Code was eliminated, mainstream Hollywood films remained reluctant to embrace queer identity in film, as "identifying with a queer character [was] threatening to someone's sense of his or her own gender or sexuality" (Benshoff and Griffin 11).

The first New Queer Cinema movement (1991-2000) was instrumental in changing the depiction, and for a time the perception, of queer identity in film. Film critic B. Ruby Rich was originally credited with coining the phrase "New Queer Cinema" in a 1992 article that heralded a new wave of several gay-themed films by mostly queer directors. New Queer Cinema (NQC) was a movement of intellectually independent films, by self-identified queer persons, that centered on queer social and political issues as well as forces that regulated sexual identities. The films functioned both as a catharsis for the AIDS epidemic as well as a response to right-wing conservative oppression. They went against mainstream cinematic conventions and were branded by their "irreverence, brashness and defiance" (220). This fervor for queer films empowered directors with "decisions to make visible certain ideas about who [gays were] and [could] be" (Gamson 233). Films such as Todd Haynes' *Poison* (1990), Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992), and Greg Araki's *The Living End* (1992) were instrumental in bringing NQC to the forefront of independent cinema. These films were championed for their edginess, and were "purposefully variegated and uncontainable as a movement" (223).

While NQC films drew much of their inspiration from Queer and Feminist theories, they were also conceptualized through models of auteurism, spectatorship, film

genre, and the psychological process of identification with queer characters. What united these films was not so much cinematic conventions, but rather the sense of attitude that they projected – anti-establishment and overt defiance, speaking to audiences who identified with queer characters and subject matter. The films were also united by a determination to project their version(s) of queer identity. Early NQC films were known for flaunting negative queer images "in order to critique the idea that there [were] 'correct' [queer] identities and behaviors" (221). They "[opted] for denaturalization as [their] primary strategy" (Jagose 98). This stance of "decentering" sexuality supported the position that there was not one single, solitary, homosexual identity, but a variety of sexual identities. In spite of queer's rejection of heteronormativity, however, it is still forced into an interdependent relationship with it, rather than an oppositional one; to contextualize a queer character's sexual identity, a queer film depends on the presence of a heteronormative center to show that it is off-centered.

The success of NQC sparked an interest in Hollywood with queer characters and queer-themed films in general. While this may have seemed a favorable direction for queer visibility to move, the films were frequently panned by queer critics for assimilated representations of queer characters. Films such as *Philadelphia* (1993), *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) and *The Birdcage* (1996), were each mainstream hits, but were also lambasted for presenting desexualized queer characters that lacked forms of intimacy or a sense of queer community. These films were criticized as an "imitation of what Hollywood [imagined] gay life to be," (Walters 144), and projected images of queer characters that were neutralized and non-threatening to

mainstream, heterosexual audiences. Susanna Danuta Walters, author of *All the Rage:*

The Story of Gay Visibility in America, acknowledges that the increased visibility of

homosexual identities has led to a false understanding of gay people. And since films

must tell their stories within a limited timeframe, directors may feel compelled to project

instantly recognizable images, or stereotypes, to establish characterization. These

stereotypes serve as justification devices for categorical acceptance or rejection of a

particular group, and work as a "screening or selective device to maintain simplicity in

perception and thinking" (Biery 47). Queer images in film created a false consensus of

queer people, convincing heteronormative audiences that their knowledge of

homosexuality was correct, when in fact they were only familiar with a stereotype.

Consequently, gay representations in the media project a "cognitive dissonance," which

psychologists identify as a "disjuncture between lived experience and cultural

representation" (Walters 23).

The growing popularity of queer films saw production and distribution grow

exponentially. By the late 1990s, there were well over 100 film festivals billed as queer,

with "80 per cent of the work shown there [never shown] outside the queer circuit"

(Rich). According to B. Ruby Rich, this surge in production also saw a gradual decline in

the quality of NQC, along with the sense of urgency that accompanied the earlier works

in the movement. When Rich discusses this decline in the article "Queer and Present

Danger," she notes that the increased interest in queer films began to attract heterosexual

directors who were eager to cash in on queer buying power. Casting also became an

integral part of the success of these films, fueling the desire to attract recognizable actors

who would ensure financing and distribution. From Ally Sheedy's "comeback" performance in *High Art* (1998) to Hilary Swank's Oscar winning performance in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), interest in queer films shifted from those within the director's personal circle to industry professionals looking to make a bold career-making move. Rich argues that this commercialization of queer films relegated NQC to nothing more than a "niche market," and notes that lack of creativity and community involvement created "fairly innocuous and often unremarkable films targeting a narrow, rather than all-inclusive queer audience" (Aaron 8).

IV. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine queer identities in films selected from the latter part of the first New Queer Cinema movement (1998-2000), focusing specifically on representations of characters that exhibit behaviors indicative of internalized homophobia. The time period is of particular interest to this thesis, as it will be used to reflect perceptions toward homosexuals in pop culture, and if these perceptions were shifting toward a more positive and accepting position. In spite of the appearance of progression, there remained a social as well as legal inflexibility toward a totalizing acceptance of homosexuality. Therefore, the discussion will focus on films selected for representations of internalized homophobia and analyze the individual characters' efforts to suppress these representations. The methods of suppression range from characters that lead a closeted existence to representations of the "killer queer," whose performed revulsion toward homosexuality leads to violence or murder. While such portrayals have

been condemned for perpetuating negative and dangerous stereotypes, others have suggested that these portrayals (specifically in NQC films) "represent sophisticated attempts to deconstruct the Hollywood stereotype, and/or show how social and cultural forces can shape murderous identities" (Benshoff 173). For the purpose of this thesis, these representations will be suggested as stereotypes able to sustain or reinforce negative social opinions toward queer identities.

Due to the length of time elapsed between the time of this study, the release of the films, and the accessibility of film reviews, the thesis will utilize a random sampling of ten film reviews from Internet film sites and major news publications. These reviews will be evaluated for critical reception to these films, and extrapolated for their commentaries (or lack thereof) on internalized homophobia. Thus, these reviews will be used to infer individual comprehension and understanding of the film's portrayals of internalized homophobia and/or willingness to confer this as a point of reference for a larger audience.

In discussing the complex relationship between homophobia and the performative nature of queer identities, University of North Texas professor Harry M. Benshoff references Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of "the closet" as the "defining structure of gay oppression in this century" (173), and points to the studies of Gregory M. Herek for an explanation of societal homophobic reactions. In Benshoff's article "Reception of a Queer Mainstream Film," he cites Herek's three-tiered explanation of homophobic reactions in society: *experiential homophobia*, which is based on actual negative experiences with homosexual people; *symbolic homophobia,* which involves conscious or

unconscious alignment with ideological concepts that are tied to one's notion of self or social networks; and *defensive homophobia,* a condition that arises when an individual has conflicted same-sex feelings and internalized homophobia at the same time. Benshoff explains how the concept of defensive homophobia was originally conceived by Sigmund Freud and further adapted by Sandor Ferenczi to suggest that men's hostility toward male homosexuality was really "reaction formations and [symptoms] of defense against affection of the same sex" (173). This notion of defensive homophobia was supported in a 1996 study published in *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, in which male subjects were separated into two groups and tested on their responses to different forms of erotic stimuli. The findings revealed that "men who had been rated as non-homophobic showed no measurable response to the gay male erotica, whereas men who had been rated as highly homophobic did exhibit a significant sexual response to gay male sexual images" (174). This response implies defensive homophobia may clearly contribute to the symptoms of ego-defensive violence.

Benshoff also lists four possible overlapping constructions of male queer identity in relation to social and psychological closets:

1. individuals may be both psychologically and socially out of the closet, though still navigate various closets (i.e., career, social status) on a daily basis;

2. individuals may be consciously queer but socially closeted;

3. individuals may be psychologically in the closet but socially out; or

4. individuals are both unconsciously queer and socially closeted. (This fourth

    type of queer identity creates a need in the individual to maintain a straight

    social identity while negotiating their inherent same-sex desires.)

This thesis will rely on Herek's explanation of experiential, symbolic and

defensive homophobias, as well as Benshoff's model of closeted queer identities, to

examine characters in the films under discussion that exhibit behavioral patterns

indicative of internalized homophobia. By assessing the form of constructed queer

identity of each character, this thesis will draw conclusions as to the type of homophobia

that is being portrayed. The study will then reexamine Herek's discussion of ego-

defensive violence to assess the examples of violence performed by the subjects

discussed in each film. This, along with examinations of dialogue, will be used as the

primary focus for character analysis in this study. In addition to characterization, the

thesis will incorporate analysis through the elements of mise-en-scène, including

costume, figure action and reaction, color, lighting and camera angle. The thesis will also

examine the elements of setting, and will look at spatial and temporal influences on

characterization. The purpose of this is to elucidate the relationship between character

and environment, and how environs can be instrumental, or detrimental, to the character's

internalized homophobic behavioral patterns.

For methods of examination, and due to the accessibility of the material, the thesis

will rely on readings of the cinematic texts as they are presented in their DVD releases,

and not from original screenplays. All direct quotes will be taken from the released DVD

product. When relevant and available, this thesis may also incorporate narratives from the commentary tracks and director's notes.

While the implications of queer identity as performance has been the subject of many studies and documentaries, this thesis will attempt to question the cultural attitudes of audiences toward queer representation at the end of the millennium. The use of critical reviews is intended to provide additional insight into the impressions toward representations of internalized homophobia in the selected films.

V. Films for Study

As James Joseph Dean indicates in his article "Gays and Queers: From the Centering to the Decentering of Homosexuality in American Films," there are three different sub-types of films that project gay visibility. These include mainstream Hollywood films, gay standpoint films, and queer cinema films. In his explanation of the differences between gay standpoint films and queer cinema films, he states that "gay standpoint films are distinguished by their narrative focus on a gay and lesbian subculture, whereas queer cinema generally depicts representations of a character's sexuality as decentered" (Dean 363). This thesis will examine one film from each sub-type: *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), *Urbania* (Jon Shear, 2000) and *Velvet Goldmine* (Todd Haynes, 1998). These films were selected because they each fall into one of the categories of gay visibility, and their respective release dates are concurrent with the time period under examination.

The order of analysis will begin with *American Beauty*, then *Urbania*, and conclude with *Velvet Goldmine*. The purpose in presenting the films in this order is to examine how the production value of a mainstream film, a gay standpoint film, and a queer cinema film each differ in their portrayals of internalized homophobia. A mainstream film will, by definition, reflect a social environment contextualized in heteronormativity. A gay standpoint film will focus its social environment on a gay or lesbian subculture, yet depends on the presence of heteronormativity for the purpose of contextualizing the subculture as off-centered. A queer cinema film does not always present a realistic continuum of time and space (such as *Velvet Goldmine*), and will present sexual identities as decentralized, and potentially androgynous. Arranging the films in this order invites the reader to observe the spatial and temporal relationships that the characters have with the worlds they inhabit. It also encourages the reader to question if the film type affects the degree of stereotype represented in the identity under discussion. While the characters under examination each display performative behaviors indicative of internalized homophobia, the films themselves, through their own language, will project differing tones and attitudes about the time period in which they were released, along with their individual implications of social attitudes toward sexual minorities.

It is important to recognize the limitations that come with selecting specific films for a comparative study. The three films under examination were released in consecutive years at the end of the first New Queer Cinema movement. This was a time when the saturation of homosexual identities in media and popular culture appeared to indicate that

social attitudes towards queer persons were shifting in a more positive direction. The settings of the films are also equally important to the character portrayals, as there are potential ramifications associated to the space (suburbia, urban city) and time (sexual revolution of the early 1970s versus 1980's conservatism) of which the characters inhabit. It must be said that not every portrayal of a queer male character in film is a case study of internalized homophobia. The fact that this study is limited strictly to the analysis of queer male characters also does not diminish the importance of comparable studies conducted on queer female characters or other sexual minority characters in film.

CHAPTER 2:
STRUCTURE AND DISCIPLINE: *AMERICAN BEAUTY* AND THE STATE OF SUBURBAN CONFORMITY

"Never underestimate the power of denial."

– "Ricky Fitts," *American Beauty*

I. Looking Closer: Screenwriter Alan Ball and Life Behind Things

The earlier films released during the first New Queer Cinema movement pushed queer to a heightened level of visibility. This was accomplished by way of their unconventional cinematic style, as well as the challenges they presented to the media's conventional queer representation. As the movement progressed, and queer films and characters proliferated in mainstream Hollywood, a surge in mainstream Hollywood films with queer content soon followed. As discussed, these films were criticized for the lack of edginess and attitude that had been synonymous with the earlier films of NQC. Additionally, the draw of the queer dollar soon "attract[ed] heterosexual directors eager to make their mark and skilled enough to do it well" (Rich). Soon enough, the "sheer volume [of queer films] diluted the quality" (Rich). As Rich states, the overabundance of queer films was also blamed for dwindling public support, as lesbian and gay moviegoers could no longer be counted on to support "queer" work.

In this chapter, the discussion will examine one of these mainstream Hollywood films – 1999's *American Beauty*. The film invites the audience to "look closer" at the way cultural conformity institutionalizes marked and unmarked identities. Specifically, the film is a scathing commentary on the traditional suburban family, as well as a

suggestion of the assimilative and dangerous effects internalized homophobia has on the closeted homosexual. The discussion will analyze the central characters, the Burnhams, while focusing more closely on their neighbors – Jim and Jim, and Colonel Frank Fitts, USMC. Through this examination of Jim and Jim and Colonel Fitts, the discussion will suggest a deeper understanding into the performative aspects of their sexual identities, and how suburban conformity plays an important role in suppressing them.

American Beauty was a remarkable union between Sam Mendes and Alan Ball – two first-time filmmakers, who came to the project from respected backgrounds in theatre and/or television. Mendes received critical acclaim for directing the 1998 Broadway revival production of *Cabaret*, while Ball was an experienced television writer for sitcoms such as *Grace Under Fire* and *Cybill*. *American Beauty* became one of the most successful films of the year, earning the Academy Award for Best Picture, as well as Oscars for Directing and Original Screenplay for Sam Mendes and Alan Ball, respectively. The positive reception of *American Beauty* was pivotal in shaping successful careers for both Mendes and Ball; Mendes went on to direct films such as *Road to Perdition* (2002), *Jarhead* (2005), and *Revolutionary Road* (2008), while Ball found additional success as a writer and executive producer with HBO's *Six Feet Under* and *True Blood*.

Ball discusses several of his inspirations for writing the screenplay for *American Beauty* in Peter N. Chumo's interview, "American Beauty: An Interview With Alan Ball." Among these was the media frenzy surrounding the Amy Fisher trial in 1992, giving Ball the idea that "there was a real story underneath the media hype [that was] way

more fascinating and way more tragic" (Chumo 26). Ball also discusses a moment when

he worked in the World Trade Center in New York City and observed a plastic bag

blowing in the wind, a visual that later became one of the more iconic scenes in the film.

Ball also recalls experiences in his childhood as sources of inspiration, growing up with a

"troubled father figure and a somewhat shut-down mother figure" (27). Ball adds that

when he revealed his own homosexuality to his mother later in life, she blamed his father

for his condition, stating that "[he] was that way too" (Hausmann 128).

Ball's work is known for infusing family drama with biting humor and realism,

frequently depicting the "[incisive] unraveling [of] the perfect American family" and

emphasizing the need "[to reject] neurotic and narcissistic attachments to material

success" (Munt 264). *American Beauty*'s edgy critique of middle-class American values

portrays suburban society as a place where individuals are both conscious and

unconscious of their material success. The film becomes a testament to the link between

suburban materialism and the construction of individual identities by way of conformity

to social environments. In his book *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and

the Grammar of Social Identity*, author Wayne Brekhus' discussion of identity strategies

suggests that people "incorporate spatial and temporal variables into their socially

constructed identity" (Brekhus 6). Therefore, individual identities conform to the space

and time they inhabit. In Brekhus' view, the suburbs become the ideal location to

"observe individuals playing up their 'averageness'….as their most distinctive facets of

self" (6). This would imply that in the suburbs, the state of "averageness" is a

characteristic that is not only coveted but also celebrated. It also suggests an inherent

need among suburban individuals to project this state of "averageness" as a standard for social acceptance and integration – while refraining from that which would be noticed as "non-average." *American Beauty* explores the concept of sexual identity as performative in nature by suggesting individual identities are influenced through conformity to societal expectations, and that a person's true identity may lie beneath the "averageness" of a well-cultivated surface.

American Beauty explores the way suburban conformity adversely affects individual identity development through the story of Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey), a man whose marriage, career, and responsibilities have beat him into a state of perpetual sedation. While he is the protagonist of the film, Lester narrates through flashback as a dead man – a cinematic convention recalling the character of Joe Gillis, who narrates as a dead man in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Lester's omniscient presence provides the knowledge that he will be "dead within a year," to which he adds that in many ways, "[he] is dead already." Mendes states on the DVD commentary track that the film is about "imprisonment, and escape from imprisonment as a rights of passage story" (Mendes, DVD Commentary). Lester is a man who "hates his job, his wife Carolyn (Annette Bening) is too focused on her real estate career to care much about him, and his teenage daughter Jane (Thora Birch) feels increasingly alienated from him" (Chumo 27). At the beginning of the film, Lester is portrayed as a man who seems to be completely unaware of his own imprisonment. He is incapable of standing up for himself against his wife, and his attempts to relate to Jane are feeble and unsuccessful. Lester's state of mind changes when he and Carolyn attend one of Jane's cheer performances at a high school

basketball game, and he becomes immediately smitten with Jane's friend Angela Hayes (Mena Suvari). Angela reawakens a sexual lust in Lester that had been dormant for many years; he begins to have "vibrant, [rose-tinted] dreams about her" (28), as she becomes more than just a sexual fantasy for him. Lester's transformation is further escalated when he meets Ricky Fitts (Bentley), the teenage son of the family that recently moved next door. Ricky is a drug dealer and videographer, with a sense of recording the world "as a way of uncovering the beauty that most people miss" (28). Ricky's views on life eventually regenerate Lester, starting him on his unwavering path of rebellion.

American Beauty creates a dystopic suburbia where the characters "perform" an exterior image as they are confined by their inner demons underneath. This is supported through the film's use of characterization and mise-en-scène. For example, Lester's appearance is made comical by his "mechanical inelasticity and lack of awareness" (Boeck 184). He is middle-aged, pallid, out of shape, and slouches when he walks. His first few appearances on screen depict him in a series of jail cells – he awakens to a sparsely decorated bedroom, he is confined while masturbating in the shower, and he is peering out at Carolyn through one of the paned-glass front windows of their house. On his way to work, Lester's only view of the outside world is through the back seat window of the family SUV. Lester's office is drab and lifeless, constructed with several columns to suggest the image of a prison. As Lester works at his desk, the audience sees his reflection superimposed against vertical green columns on his computer monitor, an image reminiscent of prison bars (Mendes, DVD Commentary). When Lester is called into his boss' office to discuss "who is valuable…and who's expendable," extreme

camera angles show a vulnerable Lester seated in the middle of the office and far from his boss' desk. While each of these images places Lester as a contributing member of middle-class suburbia, they also suggest a latent desire to rebel against his state of confinement.

Like Lester, Carolyn is another character who finds her individuality impaired by suburban conformity. However, Carolyn would rather embrace conformity than rebel against it, as through it she achieves a sense of personal success and self-worth. While she appears to be driven to become successful as a real estate agent, the audience learns that her tough exterior conceals a fragile interior. The scene in which Carolyn holds an open house is an example of her desire to "perform" the image of success. As she begins the day by setting up the "For Sale" sign in the front yard of her listing, she notices the sign of her successful competitor Buddy Kane (Peter Gallagher), the "King" of Real Estate, across the street. Inspired by Buddy's projection of success, Carolyn opens the front door of the house and proclaims, "I will sell this house today." This statement becomes her personal mantra and she connects the material success of selling the house to her own happiness. Carolyn works meticulously to prepare the house for viewing, only to experience a series of frustrations with every prospective buyer.

The scene ends with Carolyn drawing the blinds on the back sliding glass door, and suddenly erupting into a fit of emotional hysteria. As she sobs, she begins to smack her face while screaming, "Shut up! Stop it! You weak, you baby! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" This moment is revelatory of Carolyn's insistence to "perform" an essence of success in public, rather than allow any signs of weakness or vulnerability to permeate

through. Alone and with the blinds closed, Carolyn has created a darkened prison of her own. This reveals her fierce determination to prevent her weaknesses from coming out in front of others. The scene ends as Carolyn regains her composure, fixes her face, and walks out of the house; she has convinced herself that her moment of weakness is unacceptable, and will continue coveting success as a measure of happiness.

The subjects of rebellion and formulation of identity are discussed by University of London professor Beverley Skeggs in her work *Class, Self, Culture*. She refers to the bourgeois' efforts to rebel against capitalism and respectability as a "luxury," open only "to those wealthy enough to choose, and sly enough to present themselves sympathetically" (Munt 265). The action of rebellion by the bourgeois – a relinquishing of status and stature – requires an ability to both articulate as well as validate personal experiences of pain, while having a platform through which they may relate these experiences. This action of rebellion against a class system is also a form of performativity, allowing a person to refigure their identity into "something to be owned and articulated as the property of [that] person" (Skeggs 59), while freeing themselves from their original class structure. Lester rebels against his own middle class status and lifestyle in an effort to reclaim a spiritual sense of self; he quits his job while blackmailing his former boss, takes a minimum-wage job in a fast food restaurant, starts to smoke marijuana and begins to transform himself through a rigorous exercise routine. Carolyn, on the other hand, accepts her suffering as a consequence for coveting the image of success over the individual needs of the self. Instead of rebelling against suburban conformity, Carolyn rebels against the suburban ideal of marriage by becoming involved

in an affair with Buddy Kane. For Carolyn, subscribing to Buddy's personal mantra that "in order to be successful, one must project an image of success" becomes more important to her than maintaining the illusion of the happy marriage.

While *American Beauty*'s criticism of materialism and conformity mainly targets the heteronormative community, Mendes uses homosexuality to create a moral dichotomy between idyllic behavior and immoral psychosis. The following sections will examine the Burnhams' neighbors (the queer characters in the film), and the ways in which they adapt to, and unravel through, suburban conformity.

II. Character Analysis: Jim and Jim

The Burnhams live next door to "Jim and Jim" (Scott Bakula and Sam Robards), a gay couple that actually aspires to the sense of sameness and conformity that appears as more of an affliction to the heterosexual characters in the film. While the two characters make few appearances in *American Beauty*, their harmonious existence serves as the antithesis to the dysfunctional family dynamic of the Burnhams (and their other neighbors, the Fitts family). Through their suburban conformity, Jim and Jim aspire to a sense of respectability that would otherwise be disavowed to them as homosexual men in a heterosexual world. Their presence in the film not only contextualizes the heterosexual characters as dysfunctional, but also suggests that homosexuals can only be accepted into such environments when their sexual identities have been neutralized.

Jim and Jim's status as a gay couple creates situational irony between their good intentions to assimilate into middle class suburbia, with their obvious state of otherness as

gay men. In *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*, Susanna Danuta

Walters refers to Jim and Jim as "the one normal couple [in the film]" (Walters 159).

From their initial appearance, they appear to be happy and well-adjusted men with

successful careers. They are seen jogging together, "parenting" their dog Bitsy for

barking too much, and welcoming the newly arrived Fitts family with a gift basket. This

is a stark contrast from the frequent quarrels of the Burnhams, and the uncomfortable

silences of the Fitts family. For the purpose of assessing examples of internalized

homophobia in queer cinema, Jim and Jim may not fit the methodological criteria of this

thesis because they are not characters that exhibit behavioral patterns of sexual identity

suppression to the point of denial or self-loathing. Jim and Jim are both psychologically

and socially out of the closet, and do not appear to navigate socially constructed closets in

order to maintain their identities. However, Jim and Jim are relevant to the discussion of

internalized homophobia in queer cinema, as they are presented as gay men who might as

well be straight.

    Jim and Jim are examples of what Brekhus refers to as culturally "marked"

identity attributes in an "unmarked" identity space – the suburbs. Their presence in the

film is unique due to their conflicting memberships in worlds of stigmatized gayness and

privileged suburbia. As openly gay suburbanites, Jim and Jim balance their "potentially

stigmatizing [queer identities] with [their suburban identities]" (Brekhus 5). Jim and

Jim's identities are "marked" because of their homosexuality; marked identities are

socially specialized, while the unmarked "represents the vast expanse of social attributes

that are passively defined as unremarkable, average, and socially generic" (14). The very

nature of the middle class suburban identity is one of an institutionalized cohesion that limits the presentation of social extremes; it embraces "homogenizing performances of genericness rather than conspicuous displays of social markedness" (18). Therefore, it might be considered impossible for Jim and Jim to ever be truly accepted into a heteronormative suburban standard, as the marked nature of their relationship defies such conformities.

The inclusion of Jim and Jim suggests a "covetous delight in and desire for suburban respectability" (Munt 265), and their presence in the film mirrors and parodies the conflicted conformity of the heterosexual characters. Jim and Jim aspire to the same material successes as their heterosexual counterparts. Further, their conformity to the same suburban lifestyle masks the difference of their queerness, the "compulsory 'inner truth,' or deep structure [of their identities]" (265). Their characters are desexualized repressions of queer identity; when they appear on screen, they are well groomed and professional, never touch each other, and refer to each other only as the other's "partner," a word much less confrontational than "husband" or "lover." Jim and Jim perform their identities in a manner that is safe, palatable, comical, and ultimately non-threatening to the heteronormative standard. As Walters contends, their portrayal follows one of the dominant patterns of gay visibility in the 1990s, as characters "assimilated into the filmic narrative and viewed as being just like straights" (Dean 364). This is because the suburban middle-class environment of *American Beauty* isolates the two men from the queer subculture that would otherwise define their identities. By assimilating to suburban conformity, their queerness is suppressed in favor of the respectability that accompanies

appearing "straight." Yet because of their marked identities, Jim and Jim can never fully attain the suburban, heterosexual respectability they aspire to.

Ultimately, the presence of Jim and Jim serves to counter the deep-seated internalized homophobia of Colonel Frank Fitts, USMC. The brief exchange between the three characters establishes the characterization of Colonel Fitts, and provides the focus for the discussion of sexual identity in this film.

III. Character Analysis: Colonel Frank Fitts, USMC

In the article "Envisioning the (W)hole World 'Behind Things': Denying Otherness in *American Beauty*," author Vincent Hausmann notes that the inspiration for the character of Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper) was related to Alan Ball's attempt to "fathom his own father's sadness, a state that [he] traces to a repression of homosexual desire" (Hausmann 128). Though Ball was uncertain of his father's true sexuality, his perception of his father was that of a deeply saddened and unhappy man. Ball conceptualized the character of Colonel Fitts in an effort to "imagine how his father may have responded to his own and to his son's homosexuality" (128). Colonel Fitts is a man whose military career has forced him to deny his true queer identity, yet is consumed by a deep-seated hatred and personal anxiety of the presence of homosexuals in his environment. The sequence of events that depict Colonel Fitts' contempt for homosexuality, followed by the revelation of his own internalized homophobia, make him an integral and controversial character to the overall story and the film's violent conclusion.

It is important to contextualize the US military's policies about homosexual

conduct in order to understand a character like Colonel Fitts, and how one in such a

position may reconcile his or her sexual identity in relation to it. In Judith Butler's work

Excitable Speech, she discusses the recent efforts on behalf of the US military to sanction

the self-identification of active duty homosexuals. Butler states that the military's motion

to restrict homosexual speech mandates that the term "homosexual" be "disallowed as

part of a self-ascription or self-definition on the part of military personnel" (Butler 104).

The term can be used to describe another person, but not to describe oneself.

Consequently, a homosexual man or woman may be identified by others but is "denied

the act of self-definition with respect to his or her sexuality, [and becomes] one whose

self-denial is a prerequisite for military service" (105). The reason for such regulations

stems from the policy by the Department of Defense which construes statements

themselves as conduct, and that a declaration of one's own homosexuality "present[s]

evidence of a homosexual 'propensity' that poses an unacceptable risk for the military"

(106). When statement is considered conduct, and if one declares that one is a

homosexual, "then the statement that one is a homosexual is construed as acting

homosexually on the person to whom or before whom it is uttered" (112).

This policy is also responsible for cultivating attitudes within the US military that

shape acceptable as well as unacceptable preconceptions of masculinity and manliness. In

Excitable Speech, Butler recounts examples of Freud's view of conscience to describe the

exertion of masculinity in the military subculture. She states that in the military, the

repression of individual male homosexuality is a prerequisite for manhood, noting that

the consequences of this regulation would therefore "[produce] a notion of the 'man' as a self-denying homosexual" (108). She also discusses Freud's concept of the "ego-ideal" in his essay "On Narcissism," as the desire for a "common ideal of a family, a class or a nation" (109). When homosexuality is transformed into feelings of guilt during social interactions, the homosexual will suppress his (or her) libidinal tendencies out of "fear of parental punishment" and "the dread of losing the love of fellow men" (109). The paranoia of losing that love, whether from family or society, induces this introversion of homosexuality. Consequently, the fear of ostracization is what controls the homosexual and causes him or her to disavow this sexual identity.

Colonel Frank Fitts is presented as a man with a generally pessimistic outlook on life and a percolating hostility underneath. He is a man who "sees faggots everywhere," (Keller 180), yet cannot acknowledge his own queer identity. The first scene involving the entire Fitts family places Colonel Fitts at the breakfast table, reading the newspaper and shaking his head with disdain. When Ricky innocuously asks him, "What's new in the world Dad?", Fitts responds with the condemnatory, "This country is going straight to hell." The silence of the morning is suddenly interrupted by a knock at the door, arousing suspicion and prompting Fitts to ask both Ricky and his wife Barbara, "Are you expecting anyone?" This line is an early intimation of the secretiveness of Colonel Fitts, and a suggestion of his desire to protect an "inner truth" or identity. Fitts opens the front door to discover his new neighbors, Jim and Jim, welcoming the family to the neighborhood with a gift basket. After the introduction is made, Fitts gives his name as "Colonel Frank Fitts, US Marine Corps," an indication of how intertwined the military

has become with his own identity. Fitts' initial impression of Jim and Jim is that they are businessmen trying to sell something; when he learns what their businesses really are, his facial expression changes to read a sublimated "Oh," suggesting discomfort in the revelation that his new neighbors are gay men.

The brief exchange with Jim and Jim segues into Fitts driving his son Ricky to school. This moment provides the audience with the knowledge of Fitts' vehement contempt toward homosexuals, as he states to Ricky, "How come these faggots always have to rub it in your face?" This scene not only alludes to Fitts' inherent wish to control the actions of others, but also his desire to render his neighbors' representation of homosexuality completely invisible. He continues his diatribe to Ricky, insisting that homosexuality is something to be ashamed of, which causes Ricky to digress and agree with his father in a falsified effort to placate him. This scene is important as it both establishes Colonel Fitts' homophobic demeanor, as well as the psychological devices Ricky uses to quell his father's anger. It also supports the film's formula of portraying characters in a manner that changes by the film's conclusion.

The DVD commentary track for *American Beauty* offers a glimpse into the estranged, often violent relationship Colonel Fitts shares with Ricky through the director's comments about Fitts' secretive past and homosocial relations as a Vietnam War veteran. On the DVD commentary track, Mendes discloses that flashback scenes involving Colonel Fitts with a fallen buddy in Vietnam were among those that were eventually cut in order to control early character exposition in the film. In his view, these scenes interrupted the film's continuity, as they were the only scenes in which a character

experienced a flashback of previous events. In these scenes, Colonel Fitts is seen "entwined in the anus of a man, who then dies at the hands of the Vietcong" (Hausmann 128). This causes Colonel Fitts to internalize the shame attached to his sexuality as if he were being punished. Ball confesses that these scenes were originally written to contextualize Colonel Fitts' history, so in his (Ball's) mind "[he] knew what happened to him" (Chumo 33). Ball adds that what the audience does not know is that Colonel Fitts has named Ricky after his fallen buddy.

The dynamics between Colonel Fitts and Ricky evolve from closely watched suspicion to sudden outbursts of brutalized violence. Ricky is subjected to "intrusions into his privacy, random drug testing, and corporal punishment" (Keller 181) as a means of regular parenting by his father. Ricky has been conditioned to respond to his father with military precision, an exaggerated mimicry that provides insight to his father's time in the military. Colonel Fitts' violent parenting is usually the end result of spying on Ricky and misunderstanding his actions. The first incident occurs after Ricky shows Jane his father's Nazi memorabilia plate and forgets to relock the cabinet where it is stored. Colonel Fitts barges into Ricky's room and strikes him across the face in punishment for breaking into the cabinet. He shouts at Ricky, "Fight back! You little pussy!" But instead of fighting back, Ricky acquiesces to his father's violence and submits the responses that his father wants to hear. To stop his father's punches, Ricky parrots back his father's orders that he needs more "structure and discipline" in order to gain respect for other 's belongings. In this case, Colonel Fitts' explosive rage is a performance of hypermasculinized (heterosexual) violence that allows the Colonel both to mask any

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implications of (homosexual) weakness and to recast it as homosocial pleasure in brutal physical contact. Hausmann reads this as a thinly veiled disguise of Fitts' desire to be "fuck[ing Ricky through] discipline" (120). The father's constant surveillance of his son, accompanied by the frenetic and sexualized physical abuse, "betray[s] an intense, unacknowledged erotic investment in his own son" (120). The fact that his prized possession is a Nazi plate also points to a symbolic underscoring of the Colonel's brutality with the Nazi's efforts to fabricate a mastered cultural conformity.

The second incident of violence committed by Colonel Fitts against Ricky occurs after he observes Ricky alone with Lester in Lester's garage. Fitts misconstrues Ricky to be performing oral sex on Lester, when the reality is that he is rolling Lester a joint. This misperception is accomplished due to the gap between the two windows in Lester's garage, which, as Mendes narrates on the DVD commentary, are placed strategically in order to obstruct the Colonel's view and omit the actual details of the exchange between the other two. The misreading produces a horrified reaction in Fitts, as he now incorrectly assumes Ricky and Lester are conducting a homosexual affair. To further underscore the Colonel's misunderstanding, Mendes and cinematographer Conrad L. Hall film this scene by having Fitts step back from the window, away from the light, with his silhouette symbolically ensconced in darkness. When Ricky returns home, he is overtaken by his father, who has been waiting in darkness for him. Fitts strikes Ricky across the face, telling him that he would rather that his son "were dead than a fucking faggot." It is at this moment that Ricky gains the advantage against his father by telling him that he "sucks dick for money," and preys on the Colonel's fears of homosexuality in order to

subdue him. He leaves his father in tears, with his fists raised in a weakened defense. Ricky recognizes his father's weakness is his perception of himself. He overpowers his father by making Fitts reflect on his own sexuality.

Colonel Fitts' internalized homophobia is revealed in the subsequent scene, when he seeks out Lester after witnessing his exchange with Ricky. Venturing into the rain, Fitts goes next door to confront Lester in his garage. As Fitts enters, the audience notices that the interior scene is framed with a red lamp; Mendes employs the color red as an understated motif throughout the film to signify moments of passion, warmth, and the vitality of life. Red also suggests a sexual undertone to the scene. Fitts is seeking the sexual gratification that he mistakenly perceives just occurred between Lester and his son. Lester welcomes Fitts into the garage, empathizing with him for being soaked and noticeably upset. He believes that Fitts has come next door for Ricky, when the reality is that he wants Lester himself. When Fitts asks Lester where his wife is, he responds that he doesn't know and doesn't care, adding that their marriage is "….just for show. A commercial for how normal [they] are, when [they] are anything but." This response, along with Lester's expression of concern for Fitts, further encourages Colonel Fitts' assumption that Lester is gay. Fitts responds with a smile, an embrace, and unexpectedly, a kiss. When Lester backs away and tells Colonel Fitts "he has the wrong idea," Fitts reacts with pain, dejection and embarrassment at his sudden vulnerability. With the truth of his sexuality exposed, Fitts can no longer camouflage it through conformity. He returns later and kills Lester by shooting him in the back of the head, an action that can be read as an allusion to sexual penetration. Fitts' suppression of his sexual identity

evolves from his projected violence toward his son, to his repressed desire for Lester, and finally "his desperate endeavor to punish the queer desire in himself [through Lester's murder]" (Keller 181). The murder serves as Fitts' retreat from openly acknowledging his homosexual desire, and allows him to return to the sanctuary of the closet.

Using the methodological approach in this thesis to analyze behavioral traits of internalized homophobia, it can be determined that the portrayal of Colonel Fitts recalls both symbolic and defensive homophobias. His interaction with Jim and Jim triggers his deep-seated hatred and resentment of homosexuality. Fitts has aligned himself with the ideological norms of structure and discipline, embodied by suburban and military conformity, as a means of protection as well as shrouding his own queerness. Colonel Fitts serves as an example of a queer identity that is consciously queer yet socially closeted. Though he maintains his heterosexual appearance, his sexualized exchanges with his son make him aware of his queer desires. To counter this, Fitts retreats into the protective closets of the military as well as the family to sustain the illusion of heterosexuality. The use of physical aggression and violence not only further perpetuate this illusion, but also allow Fitts to experience homosexual intimacy vicariously through brute force. Fitts' displays of violence are his efforts to suppress his attractions to both Ricky and Lester, while Lester's murder frees Colonel Fitts from his repressed sexual identity and sudden vulnerability.

American Beauty is a film about suppression – specifically, sexual suppression – and instills a perception that queer individuals must suppress their true sexual identities in order to gain acceptance into heteronormative society. The film implies that while the

idea of conformity may be integral to material and social forms of success, the act of conforming negates the importance of personal identity, and that the suppression of personal identity can have potentially violent results. Jim and Jim are portrayed as clones of suburban materialism for comic relief. Their queer identities have been neutralized in their aspirations for acceptance and respectability. The film also "pathologizes gays as self-destructive," (183) implying that a societal coercion upon gays to repudiate their identities will incite violence within the individual. Through his implied psychosocial conditioning, Colonel Fitts remains a man who relegates his queer identity to a form of weakness, while fabricating an exterior identity that remains passable for heteronormativity. While the final revelation of Fitts' queer identity is treated with dignity, the character's evolvement throughout the film is framed by his brute force and antagonism toward others. This sets up Fitts as a man alienated from the other characters, largely because of his suppressed sexual identity.

The following chapter will continue the discussion of internalized homophobia by examining a gay standpoint film - Jon Shears' *Urbania*. The discussion will focus on sexual deviance in queer identity, as well as behaviors of internalized homophobia as exhibited by the character of Dean.

CHAPTER 3:
HEAR ANY GOOD STORIES LATELY?: DISSOLVING MYTH AND REALITY
IN *URBANIA*

"Don't worry. I've got everything under control."

– "Charlie," *Urbania*

I. John Shear and a Study of Controlled Urban Sexuality

This chapter continues the discussion of internalized homophobia through examination of Jon Shears' independent film *Urbania*. This film is unique as a gay standpoint film with its incorporation of urban legends as a motif that blurs the differences between reality and non-reality. The discussion will center on sexual deviance as a form of performance, and examine how internalized homophobia may be responsible for constructing sociopathic behaviors through analysis of Dean, the central antagonist of the film.

Like *American Beauty*, Trimark Pictures' 2000 release *Urbania* was another collaboration between two first-time filmmakers – Jon Shear, the director, and Daniel Reitz, the screenwriter, who adapted the script from his original stage play, *Urban Folk Tales*. On the DVD commentary track for *Urbania* entitled "Everything Under Control," Shear admits that what motivated him to venture into directing was the importance of regaining control over his own life. Shear, "a West Coast actor and theater director who [had] worked under the name of Jon Matthews" (Honeycutt), gave himself a personal challenge to take on new tasks if he found that he complained about them more than three

times. In Shear's opinion, the best way for one to regain control over one's own life is to admit a complete lack of control. It is this idea of lacking control, whether over one's destiny or identity, and the choices one makes to regain control, that is at the core of *Urbania.*

Also like *American Beauty, Urbania* examines the relationships characters have with the time and space in which they inhabit. Instead of middle-class suburbia, however, *Urbania* explores the development of queer identities in the dissociative urban city. In contrast to the institutionalized conformity found in *American Beauty* as well as in Brekhus' views on suburbia, large cities are an amalgam of more diverse populations. This creates communities that are more closely aligned around specific commonalities – including queer communities and neighborhoods, sometimes disparagingly referred to as "gay ghettos." Queer communities are not necessarily segregated by geographical boundaries though, as the community itself is more encompassed by "sociological entities comprised of institutions, values, and customs" (Biery 81). Queer communities also seem to be framed by an absence of youth; Rutgers University professor Dr. Robert W. Bailey cites Manual Castells' study of spatial patterning by sexual identity, and determined that "the [small] percentage of the population under 18 years of age [was] a strong descriptor of gay vs. non-gay territories" (Bailey 232). By asserting such a territory, homosexuals are able to seek out and associate with others like them, enabling "community protection from [heterosexuals] and strength to resist [heteronormativity]" (Bech 115). Therefore, queer communities are appealing to homosexuals because of the allotted control to enhance individual living conditions while constructing social lives based on their own

terms. The community becomes a plurality of queer identities that share similar interests, depending on the pleasures one is seeking.

Urban sexuality, especially the bonds that exist between gay men, is one that transcends traditional Western social courtship and dating behaviors by seeking immediate correspondences to the caprices of attraction. It is a sexuality framed in performativity, confined in the "rules and rituals of dressing, posing, glancing, [and] staging a performance…knowing that there are spectators and of being oneself a spectator of others' performance[s]" (Bech 119). Urban sexuality is one of exchanges of power and supremacy, where unspoken codes of conduct regulate the intimacy and anonymity of the sexualized space. Consequently, occurrences of intimacy are also controlled through one's attraction to another, and the immediacy of human needs.

In *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity*, author Wayne Brekhus discusses nighttime's proliferation of sexual activity, noting that "the night is more deviant and sexier than the day" (Brekhus 17), because of the heightened sense of sexual awareness nighttime shares with its inhabitants. This contributes to the night's more sexualized identity, and ultimately, a greater frequency of deviant behavior. Brekhus adds that "it is not so much that *deviants* and *sexual beings* are nocturnal, but rather *deviance* and *sexuality* themselves….occupy a greater territory at night" (18). Additionally, marked identities typically congregate where there is less of a likelihood of standing out; in a sense, obscurity is found in the safety of numbers. Those whose identities already exist at a social extreme, such as homosexuals, find that they "get pushed to the spatial and temporal extremes [as well]" (19). As a result, there are

typically higher congregations of homosexual persons in large cities than are found in suburban or rural environments. Likewise, deviant behaviors find greater protection in the obscurity and danger of night; the greater the deviancy, the "further into the temporal extremes of the late night" (19).

Urbania links behavioral patterns of internalized homophobia to the proliferation of sexual deviance and victimization through sex. This is evident by the film's exploration of "violence [though] sexual domination, and particularly the quasi-erotic violence of homophobia" (Keller 184). The film follows Charlie (Dan Futterman), a troubled and tentative character, into his nightmarish existence. He struggles to make sense of the chaos in his own life, while "shifting back and forth between his immediate and remembered experiences" (Fuchs). The fact that Charlie states twice during the film, "Don't worry. I've got everything under control," only underscores the situational irony and complete lack of control he really has. Through brief scenes that allude to his past, the audience can gather that Charlie is now alienated from his past existence. It is not until twenty minutes into the film that the audience learns Charlie is gay, and his despondency is promulgated by the loss of his boyfriend Chris (Matt Keeslar).

The storyline for *Urbania* explores the underside of urban sexuality by following Charlie on an endless night out in Manhattan, as he "trawls the city, looking for experiences and affiliations" (Fuchs), and encounters a variety of other characters with sexually-primed stories of their own. The majority of *Urbania*'s characters "are hunting for sex on the streets and in the bars" (Holden), and Charlie appears to be no exception. Indeed, Charlie's pursuit of Dean (Samuel Ball) appears to be more of a ritualistic

cruising, as he convinces himself that Dean is "the guy who's going to make everything right." Dean is only shown in brief moments during the first hour of the film through flashback and chance encounters on the street. The initial impression of Charlie's interest with Dean seems to be a dark crush. Dean is a menacing "tattooed thug" (Von Busack) with the image of a snake wrapped around a heart on his arm. Charlie, on the other hand, is much more demure and average in appearance, leaving one to assume the two would have no reasonable interaction with each other. Charlie finally connects with Dean at a bar called Karma – an appropriately symbolic name alluding to destiny, retribution, and the events that later unfold. It is not until this fateful encounter that Charlie's interests become clear: Dean is the man who murdered Chris, and Charlie means to exact his revenge.

Urbania's cinematography further enhances the film's juxtaposition of realistic vs. non-realistic moments through its deliberately fragmented style. This stylized approach supports the film's suspense by keeping the audience continually guessing what is and is not real. The film's use of mise-en-scène incorporates dissolve and disjunction to shroud its storyline in a "deliberately fractured narrative that nonetheless assumes coherence" (Levy). Many of the scenes that unfold in Urbania are edited in a way to create a "disintegrating mosaic," an effect characterized by "spastic stop-and-start [speeds], [collisions], [missed] connections and overlapping [of narrative]" (Fuchs). Many of the beginning scenes of the film bleed into the next, or contain interrupting moments of jarred camera movement. This effect, along with the fact that the film was shot in super 16mm cinematography and later digitally transcribed to 35mm, give

Urbania a surrealistic grit. Shear discloses on the DVD commentary that the fragmentation and stylization of the film achieved "a documentary feel for Charlie's experience, for what the world looks and sounds and feels like to someone who has been through the horrors he has been through" (Shear, DVD Commentary).

The film continues to explore the juxtaposition of reality vs. non-reality by incorporating moments of flashback that temporarily snap Charlie out of his present continuum. These flashbacks slowly reveal memories of a happy past for Charlie that doesn't exist anymore. Shear's use of distortion captures the urban landscape through extreme camera angles, creating a dystopic perspective of the world Charlie lives in. The opening credits appear as vapors of smoke, and disappear behind structures and people. The city skyline towers over the gaze of the camera, but with an off-balanced and dizzying perspective. The first few minutes of the film capture images of Charlie harkening back to his interrupted past while observing the absence of a significant other – he watches a (heterosexual) couple as they walk down a street holding hands; he stares at the empty other side of his bed; he uses a pay phone, while the phone booth next to him is noticeably empty. Additionally, contrasts in color counter the vibrancy of scenes from Charlie's past with the dulled and drab hues of his present. All of these techniques affect a nightmarish exterior that matches Charlie's unstable interior, and fuel the impression that his world is shaped by alienation and lost love.

The presence of urban legends in *Urbania* supports its intentionally disjointed storytelling, and accomplishes a dismantled reality that leaves the audience, and Charlie, questioning reality. Their inclusion in the film also underscores the dangers of urban

existence and courtship. Urban legends are fictitious stories that are presented in truth, but are too bizarre and coincidental to sustain their validity. *Urbania* is structured in a series of vignettes that are framed around a well-known urban legend, usually "in which the characters [of the legend] are victimized by sex" (Keller 184). As the film unfolds, the characters that Charlie meets (usually, the female characters) share a "story" that they have heard. Among the urban legends shared include the story of the "kidney thief" – a tale involving a person who has a casual sexual encounter with someone who drugs them, only to awaken in a bathtub filled with ice, and the horrific discovery that their kidney has been stolen by an organ thief. Another urban legend included in *Urbania* is "Welcome to the world of AIDS" – a story involving someone who, after a night of sex with a stranger, awakens to find this message scrawled across their mirror. These stories are strategically placed to add additional layers of mystery and danger to the characters' lives, leaving the audience to question whether they are fact or fiction. On the DVD commentary track entitled "Legend Master," University of Utah professor Dr. Jan Brunvand defines an urban legend as "a true story, that's too good to be true" (Brunvand, DVD Commentary). As Shear states during the director's commentary track, many of the more common urban legends "frequently deal with [fears] of penetration" (Shear, DVD Commentary), as well as the fear of marginalized or minority people ascending to positions of power in society. With each story reinforcing the disparate relationship between reality and non-reality, the urban legend motif in *Urbania* leaves the viewer with the impression that "each of us is very literally an author of our own identity through the abuse of others' faith in our stories" (Chaw).

Urbania provides an insight into what one experiences living alone in a big city, and more specifically, "the alienation and physical danger that accompany homosexual desire" (Tobias). Charlie's projected sense of helplessness in seeking justice points to the societal disconnect homosexual persons experience in a heteronormative society. The realization of one's own homosexuality inevitably incurs feelings of separation and detachment with heteronormativity, which can cause the individual to feel outside of this social infrastructure. The audience is provided with brief examples of Charlie's helplessness to bring justice to Chris' death; this occurs when he places a phone call (supposedly to the police) asking for help, but digresses instead, stating, "you know what, I'm going to do this myself." Additionally, Charlie is seen at the end of the film looking at a sign stating "Wanted: Lover Slain." This sign was posted by the New York Police Department in connection with Chris's murder, however it now appears weathered and long ignored. Charlie's victimization and frustration with authority propels him to seek out Dean in a case of vigilantism. In doing so, Charlie must navigate a fine line with the closet to gather information and acceptance from the people he meets. It is only when Charlie suppresses his queerness that he is able to get closer to Dean, convincing Dean of his heteronormativity. While his queerness is never denied, it is his deference to heterosexual "averageness," along with Dean's inability to recall who Charlie really is, that allows Charlie to momentarily take back control of his own life.

The next section will discuss *Urbania*'s portrayal of internalized homophobia through the character of Dean and the performative aspects of his hypermasculinized sexual identity. Dean's lack of awareness of his sexual identity is among the many facets

that support the film's overarching theme of loss of control, and adds to the film's fragmented representation of reality.

II. Character Analysis: Dean

Urbania first explores the power and supremacy of instant attraction associated with urban sexuality when Charlie experiences his first chance encounter with Dean. As Charlie is walking home after work, he is stopped on the street by a smooth-talking swindler who tells a story about being robbed while using a public restroom. The story sounds like it is being made up on the spot, and Charlie clearly has no interest in listening, yet the man keeps talking. Just as the swindler is leading up to his inevitable pitch for money, Charlie's attention is immediately drawn to the appearance of a dark figure dressed in a black t-shirt and black leather jacket, leaving Karma with his girlfriend. It isn't until Dean turns face-forward toward Charlie (and the camera) that the audience sees who he is. It is at this moment that Charlie's facial expression changes from momentary infatuation to a horrified instant recognition. Dean's quick departure with his girlfriend causes Charlie to run down the street in an attempt to catch up with him, but he is too late. The brief reappearances Dean makes throughout the first hour of the film leave the audience assuming some connection with Charlie's past and present state, but the character's significance is purposely kept a mystery.

Dean's physical description attests not only to his hypermasculinized performance of heterosexuality, but also to the dominant sexual energy he conveys to give the impression that he is straight. His physical appearance – reflected in his rebellious

persona, his all black clothing and black leather jacket – is a carefully crafted

performance that represents the anti-establishment heterosexual. With his leather jacket

off, the oppressive and prophetic image of his tattoo is once again highly noticeable.

Dean's few scenes with his girlfriend imply a relationship that is both punitive and

controlling; as the two are exiting Karma she sees Charlie and smiles, but her smile

quickly fades when Dean's eyes turn in the same direction as hers. She diverts her eyes,

her body language tenses, and she resigns to a submissive stance. Dean orders her to "get

in the fucking car" as they walk down the street. Later, when Charlie does finally meet up

with Dean at Karma again, Dean relates that since he is "banging the hell out of [his

girlfriend]," this dynamic should establish a familial relation to his girlfriend's family,

and consequently qualify him to receive the respect from them that he is not getting. This

admission not only justifies Dean's bad behavior, but also becomes his acknowledgement

of dominance as a "heterosexual" man. This also establishes the mental and sexual

pleasure Dean incurs as a result of his dominance.

Dean's oversexed personality and dominance over his girlfriend recalls Judith

Butler's theory that one "becomes" a gender through stimulation of specific body parts to

correspond to their distinguishing gender identity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler discusses

the action of becoming a gender as a process of naturalization, involving a

"differentiation of bodily pleasures and parts on the basis of gendered meanings" (Butler

70). This process requires "some parts of the body [to] become conceivable foci of

pleasure precisely because they correspond to a normative ideal of a gender-specific

body" (70). She identifies this as a conflation of desire with the real; for a homosexual,

this would involve the "sexed surface [emerging] as the necessary sign of a natural(ized) identity and desire" (71). Butler explains that this behavior is a syndrome of melancholic heterosexuality. The queer individual's rejection of homosexuality "reemerges as the self-evident anatomical facticity of sex" (71). According to Butler, a melancholic heterosexual male is a man seeking to prove his manliness through sexual empowerment of his literal gender embodiment. This implies that "the man" never loves another man because he *is* a man.

As Butler states, this literalization of anatomy "not only proves nothing, but is a literalizing of restriction of pleasure in the very organ that is championed as the sign of masculine identity" (71). Consequently, the relationship with the female becomes less of a romantic interest and more a symbolic exertion of masculine identity; she is a "woman-as-object," who "displace[s] and conceal[s] [the] preheterosexual history in favor of one that consecrates a seamless heterosexuality" (72). Dean's diatribe with Charlie is interrupted by brief flashback scenes showing him engaging in aggressive sex with his girlfriend and later pouring beer on her head as a joke. This supports the idea that his relationship with his girlfriend is one of sexual dominance and objectification. Dean further attests to his lack of commitment to her by confiding with Charlie that he will never get married, because he "like[s] his freedom."

Dean and Charlie embark on a journey into Manhattan's homosexual underworld, where Dean's reaction to outward displays of homosexuality is a reinforcement of his hypermasculinized performativity. Dean's responds to the representations of homosexuality that he sees with contempt, yet he is incapable of masking his underlying

fascination with them. The first example of this occurs when the two men leave Karma to share a joint in a secluded doorway. During this exchange, Dean observes a display of affection between two men through one of the windows to their apartment. Dean remarks, "Next on our channel we've got 'At Home With Homos,'" as if he is watching television. In spite of his disdain for the two men in the window, Dean continues to watch them. On the DVD release's deleted scenes, an extended version of this scene depicts a riveted Dean watching the two men for a longer period of time. The next scene places Dean and Charlie in a darkened area of catacombs and columns, while other men are seen standing in the shadows cruising for sex. Dean taunts the men lurking in the darkness, comparing them to wild animals as he comments that he feels like he is "on safari." This outward display of performed hypermasculinity again can be attributed to Dean's efforts to subvert his own internalized homophobia. Though he projects revulsion at the homosexual symbols he sees, he still pursues them into their private sexual enclaves and obtains gratification by perpetrating violence against them.

The pleasures that Dean extracts from brutalizing other homosexual men is a representation of sadomasochism, a form of performativity where the individual receives sexual gratification from the infliction of cruelty and punishment on one's sexual partners. In the article "Sexual Sadism and Masochism," Psychology professors Bethany Lohr and Henry E. Adams refer to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) to define sexual sadism as "consisting of recurrent urges, fantasies, and behavior that center on physical or psychological suffering or humiliation of a victim [that is] sexually exciting to the person" (Lohr and Adams 257). By contrast, masochism

is demarcated by "repeated urges and behavior involving being subjected to physical or psychological suffering or humiliation" (257). For one to receive sexual gratification from such an act, the "fantasies or acts must be real (not simulated) and must cause subjective distress to the individual" (257). Therefore, Dean's efforts to victimize gay men suggest his desire "to punish his potential sexual partners for their attractiveness to him, because they represent that which he has abjected [in his own sexual self-image]" (Keller 184). While at the cruising spot, Dean invites the sexual propositioning of an older man in order to subdue and stab him, but is foiled when the unexpected entrance of the two men from the window interrupts his plans. Dean's weapon of choice, the knife, serves as both an instrument of death as well as a phallic symbol of sexual penetration; the knife allows Dean to substitute the act of sex with murder. The film later reveals that Chris was murdered when Dean slit his throat. This moment further underscores that Dean's use of a knife serves as both a weapon for murder and a device for sexual pleasure.

Lohr and Adams refer to the findings of UCLA Psychiatry professor Dr. Robert J. Stoller to discuss the issues of sadistic rape and murder. Stoller finds that "the most important issue to sadomasochists is the difference between consensual and non-consensual activity" (Lohr and Adams 261). Perpetrators of sadistic rape and murder can be both men and women, though the typical profile of sexually assaultive males includes "antisocial personality traits such as impulsivity and irresponsibility, and dominance over and hostility toward women" (263). While sadomasochistic incidents involving sadistic rape and murder of non-consensual victims are rare, the action of non-consensual

violation qualifies as sexual sadism, and may be indicative of antisocial personality disorders as well. Forms of sexually assaultive behaviors, while varying in degree of force, typically include "verbal coercion, threat of physical violence, actual physical force, and the use of deadly force" (261). What appeals to the sadist is the element of control, and a "marked preference for [nonconsensual] and aggressive sexual fantasies and activities" (262).

It is through the performance of these sexually assaultive behaviors that *Urbania* reveals Dean's queer identity by showing the homoerotic pleasure he experiences both as the attacker and as the victim. This is presented during the film's incorporation of a three-scene montage that simultaneously brings together the past and the present, while explaining the significance of each of Charlie's jolting flashbacks. The three scenes occur during the present moment (Charlie driving an intoxicated Dean out to a secluded area); in the past (the scene where Dean initially attacked Chris and Charlie); and a fantasy scene (Charlie visits Chris at his "new home"). The montage begins in the present scene as Charlie has driven Dean's car out into a secluded area, stopping briefly to relieve himself in the bushes. While he does this, Dean falls out of the car and vomits. When Charlie returns to Dean, he reveals that he now has a knife. Charlie attacks Dean, first by kicking him, then by threatening him with the knife. As this happens, the scene is interspersed with flashbacks of the moment when Dean and his buddies subdue Chris and Charlie. In this flashback scene, Dean's two friends have Charlie locked in a hold, allowing Dean to place a knife to Charlie's face. Dean says to Charlie, "Do you want me to fuck you, cunt?", which is immediately followed by Charlie repeating this same line in

the present. Next, the fantasy scene is introduced to allow Charlie one final moment with Chris. Charlie has come to Chris to tell him what he has done to Dean, with a twist on the story that portrays the two of them as victorious over their attacker. For Charlie, this moment allows him to finally reclaim a sense of happiness with his dead lover. It also allows him a moment of catharsis to overcome any feelings of shame and regret for his inability to protect Chris before.

In the present scene, Charlie orders Dean to drop his pants. At first Dean protests and calls Charlie a faggot; when Dean finally does what he is told to do, he reveals that he has an erection. Charlie remarks, "Jesus Christ, Dean, is this exciting to you?" This brief revelation exposes Dean's sexual gratification both as a sadist (the inflictor) and as a masochist (the inflictee). With his truth exposed, Dean covers his groin with his hands while yelling "Fuck you!" at his attacker. Charlie orders Dean to drop to his knees, at which time he forces Dean to fellate the knife that he is holding; this causes Dean to succumb to an unexpected seizure. It is here that the sequence in the present takes two different versions, which is relayed in the fantasy scene between Charlie and Chris. At first, Charlie tells Chris that he killed Dean, and the present scene shows Charlie cutting Dean's throat. This is juxtaposed with the scene in the past that finally reveals the truth about Chris' murder. The audience sees that Charlie is forced to watch while Dean coerces Chris into performing sexual favors on him. This culminates in Dean breaking a bottle over Chris' head before slitting his throat. The montage returns to the fantasy scene where Chris refutes this story, pleading with Charlie to tell him the truth. The audience is then shown a repeat of the present scene, only this time we see Charlie helping Dean

recover from his seizure. The truth was that he did not kill Dean, but rather left him

behind in the dirt. The scene ends with Charlie getting into Dean's car and driving away.

Like Colonel Fitts in *American Beauty*, Dean is also a representation of symbolic

and defensive homophobias. He uses the images and ideologies of heterosexual ideals as

a moralistic weapon to denounce homosexuality, while secretly coveting queerness for

his perverse sexual gratification. His manifestations of aggression, violence, and

condemnation of homosexuality also provide Dean with a sanctuary from his conflicted

same-sex feelings. Additionally, Dean's outward bad boy image, complemented by his

all-black clothing and leather jacket, permits membership into the worlds of the hardened,

rebellious heterosexual, and the fetishized leather queer. Dean is an example of a queer

identity that is both unconsciously queer and socially closeted. His desire to stalk and

brutalize homosexuals in their world underscores his latent desire to be among them, yet

is superceded by his additional need to dominate and subdue them. The sexual

stimulation that he receives as a result of this domination further attests to his inability to

recognize his own queerness. Finally, Dean's impulsive desire to scar or murder his

victims supports his use of sadomasochism as a means of projecting hypermasculinity.

As a gay standpoint film, *Urbania* confronts its audience with a referendum of

"what the homosexual culture believes about the heterosexual culture, and vice versa"

(Chaw). *Urbania* attempts to teach its audience about the predatory nature of

homophobia, how it is "embedded in American culture, and the harrowing end of its

effects" (Tobias). The film confronts the idea of selective societal ignorance towards hate

crimes and gay advocacy, while debunking myths that denounce intimacy and

meaningfulness in homosexual relationships. In spite of these intended positives, *Urbania*

sustains a connection between internalized homophobia and violence by portraying Dean

as a closeted homophobe who preys indiscriminately on other gay men. The film forges a

connection between this subversive behavior with sexual domination and deviancy. It

also portrays Charlie and Chris as passive characters that, in the end, resign themselves to

accepting the tragedy that has befallen them. Charlie's revenge never actually occurs,

implying that "gay men are not sufficiently bloodthirsty to revenge even the most heinous

crimes against them" (Keller 185), and not capable of commandeering effective

retaliation. *Urbania*'s conclusion never reveals if Charlie ultimately triumphs over Dean,

and leaves a lasting impression of the character's understated helplessness.

The following chapter will discuss Todd Haynes' 1998 film, *Velvet Goldmine*.

The discussion will examine the way the film infers the differences between essential and

constructed forms of queer identity, and will also profile behaviors of internalized

homophobia as represented by the characters of Arthur Stuart and Brian Slade.

CHAPTER 4:
VELVET GOLDMINE AND THE DEATH OF GLITTER

"Yesterday upon the stair
I saw a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
How I wish he'd go away…."

   – William Hughes Mearns, *"Antigonish"* (1922)

I. Todd Haynes and the Mythology of Gay Style

This chapter examines the queer cinema film *Velvet Goldmine*, the 1998 release by noteworthy queer filmmaker Todd Haynes. As a queer cinema film, *Velvet Goldmine* suggests pop culture's responsibility for sensationalizing gender play and sexual ambiguity in an unapologetic rebellion against heteronormativity. The discussion will focus on the authentication of essential and constructed forms of queer identity, how queered identities are affected through pop culture's employment of image and spectacle, and how the demands of projecting an appealing pop cultural image can yield behaviors of internalized homophobia. The discussion will look at the way sexual identity and forms of expression were affected by the cultural revolution of the 1970s as well as the counter-revolution of 1980's conservatism, and will also examine internalized homophobia as it is represented in the characters of Arthur Stuart and Brian Slade.

Director Todd Haynes had already made a name for himself as a film director long before New Queer Cinema came to fruition as a movement. His films were known for projecting a cinematic style termed by B. Ruby Rich as "Homo Pomo," a conceptualization centered on "appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind" (DeAngelis 41). Haynes'

earlier works, such as *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) and *Poison* (1990) were groundbreaking in their ability to blend seemingly discordant genres while rejecting realistic aesthetics and essential gay sensibilities. *Poison* was heralded by Rich as one of the films to launch the NQC movement; the film "won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance in 1991" (Turan), and incited a funding controversy with the National Endowment for the Humanities. Haynes' contributions to NQC reject notions of essential identities in favor of "restructuring spatial and temporal relations that order them" (DeAngelis 42). Haynes' films succeed in forging a new relationship with space and time, allowing queer identities to exist in a realm of fantasy that is detached from the confinement of heteronormative society. This approach to setting differs vastly from those established in *American Beauty* and *Urbania*, both of which present queer identities existing in recognizably fixed spatial and temporal environments.

Velvet Goldmine, the 1998 release from Miramax Studios, is a visual and sensory overload – a feat evidenced by the film's emphasis on the outrageous and insistence to be played at "maximum volume." The use of costumes, make-up, sexuality, and shock factor create a kaleidoscopic rock opera of social extremes that transcends the fixed spatial and temporal environments of heteronormativity. *Velvet Goldmine* is Haynes' homage to 1970's glam rock, a film that explores "personal liberation through sexual abandon, self-indulgence, role playing, experimentation of all kinds and the anti-establishment contrariness that always defines rock 'n' roll" (McCarthy). While the film is a loosely interpreted biopic centering on the lives of glam rockers David Bowie and Iggy Pop, it also hypothesizes the cultural impact glam rock had on its fan base, and its ephemeral

moment in music history. The film explores how, through the emergence of an underground gay culture, glam rock attempted (yet failed) to yield a polysexual paradise for its participants through "inversion of sexuality, performance and identity" (Taubin). *Velvet Goldmine* is less a factual biography of the two singers than it is a re-imagining of glam rock as a cultural movement. The film acknowledges its own artistic liberties yet does not take itself too seriously; the opening credits admit *Velvet Goldmine* is a "work of fiction," and Haynes' interjection of fantasy adds noticeable suspensions of reality throughout the film.

In his work *Getting Loose*, Emerson College sociology professor Sam Binkley examines the sexual and cultural revolution of the 1970s as a rebellion against the xenophobic rise of postwar suburban development, racism, and sexism permeating the American middle-class. Binkley refers to the work of Dr. Eugene E. Landy, who in 1971 published *The Underground Dictionary* as a means of mediating the communicational divide between the self-identifying "Establishment" and the 1970's underground culture. Landy's explanation of the underground culture's vernacular bridged an understanding between the status quo and the emerging subculture's oppositional style and disposition. Landy profiled a youth culture that existed in an immediate sense of *now* – a need to adopt a "primordial vitality, to become an artist of oneself and of one's identity….[assuming responsibility] for what one made of oneself through the crafting of a distinctly loose style of life" (Binkley 4). This rise of alternative values was construed as the self-fulfillment ethic, "which idealized gratification of all inner needs and desires" (Levine 71). Binkley also refers to the work of philosopher and Political Science

professor Marshall Berman, who stated that the postradical, countercultural dreams of world transformation were instead "replaced with self-transformation in the realm of lifestyle" (34), a theme that is also present throughout *Velvet Goldmine*. This countercultural movement was a reaction to the 1960's willingness to "overturn cultural and moral authorities handed down from tradition" (32), and a desire to retreat from a rebellion that defined the 1960s – a rebellion that was now overwhelming.

The storyline for *Velvet Goldmine* is structured as an investigative piece that allows its central characters to reflect on their former selves, the cultural movement that cultivated their identities, and the circumstances that caused them to change. The film pays tribute to the narrative structure of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) by contextualizing the story of Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers) and Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor) through the perspective of one of their former fans, Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale). The film's inclusion of Arthur – representing the fan that, as an adult, has abandoned his love for his former idols – serves as a symbolic intermediary to juxtapose the entrapping alienation of the present with the sexual liberation of the past. Arthur's existence in 1984 (he lives in New York City and works as a reporter for *The Herald*) is a deliberate throwback to the character of Winston Smith in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and the Orwellian theories of a dystopic future. His life has become gruesome, marked by "sunless exteriors; cold, dark and colorless spaces stripped of ornament; crowds of workers with blank and worn-out expressions; muffled voices over loudspeakers announcing the clichéd platform of an unseen President Reynolds, who urges citizens to join the 'Committee to Prosper'" (DeAngelis 47).

Through Arthur, the film examines how the contrasting cultural moments of the 1970s and the 1980s were pivotal in shaping or containing individual identities. When Arthur is commissioned to do a news article on the ten-year anniversary of Brian Slade's faked assassination, he narrates his reluctance to recall "all the things that money, the future, and the serious life, made so certain I'd forget." This is the first indication of disconnect between Arthur's present and past existence, and intimates his unease in revisiting that existence. For Arthur, the assignment becomes more of an exposé into the death of his own past life than the research into Brian Slade. Arthur reveals through his meditation that the penultimate force calling him back is a mysterious and unidentified "you;" this establishes the film as an investigative piece to find out who the "you" is. Like *Citizen Kane*'s efforts to solve the riddle of "Rosebud," *Velvet Goldmine* seeks to answer the mysterious "you" through flashbacks and testimonials from other characters that witnessed Brian Slade's ascension to superstardom and subsequent demise. This puts Arthur in contact with Cecil, Brian's first manager (Michael Feast); Mandy, Brian's ex-wife (Toni Collette); and eventually with Curt Wild, the intimate link that Arthur shares with Brian.

Velvet Goldmine examines the formulations of essentialist and constructionist queer identities through an allusion to authenticity, and how a person arrives at a genuinely queer identity. While the film portrays queer as essential to some of the principal characters, the question of authenticity remains for many others; is the character genuinely queer, or do they engage in queerness for the sake of popularity? And if they are genuinely queer, why then, were they incapable of sustaining their queer identity?

The beginning of the film suggests an extra-terrestrial, almost celestial nature to the origins of queerness through the depiction of its cosmic arrival – via spaceship, which upon its entrance, delivers an infant Oscar Wilde to the doorstep of his parents. Haynes treats the birth of Wilde with reverence, portraying him as the grand dandy of all queers, and implies queer originates from another world. Accompanying Wilde is an emerald green jewel pinned to his baby blanket, which the film empowers as an avatar to denote the authentic queer essence of its bearer. The jewel passes from Wilde to Jack Fairy (Micko Westmoreland), the only character who maintains control and power over his queer identity throughout the film. From Jack, the jewel passes to Brian Slade, who steals it from Jack. The jewel then passes to Curt Wild, and ultimately, to Arthur.

In contrast to these essentialist identities, the film's depiction of Brian Slade's fanatical fan base suggests a less intrinsic value to the origin to queerness. The fans respond to the queer theatrics and outlandish behavior as Brian's onstage persona, Maxwell Demon, by emulating him. They embrace his attitude, his clothing, and ultimately, his lifestyle. Through the fans, the film treats the tendency toward bisexuality and androgyny more as a cultural response to the trendiness and popularity of glam rock. During the opening credits, frenetic hoards of colorful fans race through the streets of London to attend Brian Slade's concert, pausing only briefly to apply more make-up at a mirror with the phrase "Last Mirror Before Maxwell" lovingly scrolled across it in lipstick. The fans are galvanized by Brian's / Maxwell's sexual reinvention, as evidenced by their unapologetically queer appearances – tight and mismatched garments, fishnets, feather boas and knee-high boots signify "'appropriated goods' – weapons in a street-

level guerilla war [against the appearance of the status quo]" (doCarmo). The fans serve as a performative extension of glam rock's efforts to queer cultural norms, supporting the idea that challenges to hegemony "are most often expressed obliquely, in style" (doCarmo; Hebdige 367).

Haynes provides the public reactions to the glam rock movement through news footage capturing the word-on-the-street opinions of this performative display. The range of opinions varies from stoicism and pure revulsion, to individuals who openly embrace the movement and unabashedly profess their bisexuality. When the BBC reporter interviews Curt Wild (before his significance in the film is established), he states that the popularity of queer is "because it's supposedly the thing to do right now," adding that one "just can't fake being gay." Curt further prophesizes that most of the fans "are not going to make [being gay]." Though Curt is alluding to the way the fans have embraced the anti-establishment attitude of queerness, the line serves as a premonition to his own impending career failures and doomed relationship with Brian Slade. The diligence of the fans to perform along with Brian / Maxwell only sets them up for the extreme betrayal induced by his faked assassination. This failed publicity stunt leaves the fans without a leader, and signifies the film's "death of glitter."

The following sections will further examine *Velvet Goldmine*'s portrayals of essential and constructed queer identities through the character developments of Arthur Stuart and Brian Slade. While both characters are portrayed as genuinely queer, their abilities to authenticate themselves are compromised by the cultural as well as professional obstacles they encounter. Both characters perpetuate acts of "violence" to

suppress their true identities, though in this case the acts serve as symbolic endings to their former queered existences.

II. Character Analysis: Arthur Stuart

Arthur Stuart is a case study of how a person with a conflicted queer identity is coerced into abandoning their former self in order to conform to their present spatial and temporal environments. While Arthur's presence in the film mainly serves as the investigative vehicle to tell the story of Brian Slade, his character's connection to the glam rock movement, as well as its iconic leaders, place Arthur in the role of the symbolic "Everyfan." He becomes the representation of the heightened highs championed at the pinnacle of the glam rock movement, as well as the abandon and rejection that ensues at its end.

During the 1984 scenes, Christian Bale portrays Arthur in a state of numbed affectation, a man whose torment over his past existence implies his inability to reject it. Haynes' use of mise-en-scène frames Arthur's introduction to the story as someone foreign and alienated in the environment where he now finds himself. An extreme close-up is first used to reveal a distance in Arthur's eyes, a view that slowly pulls out to reveal an overall troubled expression. When Arthur is shown on screen, he is standing in the office doorway or seated at his desk, both locations that are far removed from the rest of his coworkers. When his boss asks him to write the investigative piece on Brian Slade, he momentarily questions if he was chosen because he was the "token Brit [in the office]." This self-identification immediately places Arthur in the position of foreigner, and

outside of his contemporaries' cultural norms. The clear indication of his reluctance to do the investigative piece "sets the stage for Arthur's self-examination, initially occurring not out of his innate desire to know, but specifically because he has been professionally commissioned to do so" (DeAngelis 46). For Arthur, the source of his conflict lies in his conciliatory position of remembering his past while trying to forget it.

Velvet Goldmine places Arthur's teenage years at a time when the exaltation of glam rock encouraged the cultural momentum of queerness and sexual exploration. For Arthur, this time also provided the means of escaping the repressions of his conservative life in Manchester. The film reveals several flashback moments that show Arthur's early attempts at queer expression, however, these moments were met with criticism from either his parents or his peers. As a result, Arthur learns to protect his queer identity by only revealing himself in environments where he is most comfortable to do so. Anthony R. D'Augelli, a professor of Human Development at Pennsylvania State University, examines the way social coercion affects real life expression of youth identity in his article "Developmental Implications of Victimization of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths." In the article, D'Augelli examines sexual orientation victimization and coercion among youths, and suggests that the "biological processes of puberty accelerate the intensity of same-sex orientation, while the increasingly demanding heterosexual social pressures of adolescence preclude its expression" (D'Augelli 190). The stigmatization of homoerotic social and sexual bonds is also responsible for inhibiting positive identity development or resolution. This can cause the individual to develop coping mechanisms, especially when at risk of social and familial retributions – actions of secrecy,

withdrawal, or attempts to force a "straight" identity. As D'Augelli states, "if developmental opportunity loss is the first type of victimization lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths experience, self-doubt induced by cultural heterosexism is the second" (191). Feelings of marginalization can be responsible for the deconstruction of these coping mechanisms, leaving LGBTQ youth susceptible to "school problems because of harassment from other students; [running] away from home [or ending] up homeless; conduct problems that bring them in contact with authorities; [or] abuse [of] alcohol, drugs, and other substances…" (194). The fact that Arthur withdraws from his family and keeps his queer identity a secret further represents D'Augelli's findings.

Like Brian's incarnation of Maxwell Demon, Arthur's initial infatuation with glam rock and Brian Slade allows the protection of exploring queerness in a manner that is condoned as part of a cultural fad. However, the social conservatism of Arthur's life polices him with a "confluence of concern and anticipatory shame [to] forcefully extinguish 'nonconforming' behavior" (190). The first depiction of this source of conflict centers on Arthur's innocuous adoration of Brian Slade while perusing the shelves at a record store. Amidst a sea of other pop records, the album he selects for purchase is Brian Slade's "The Ballad of Maxwell Demon." The album cover is adorned with a picture of a nude Brian Slade, lying in a sexually inviting position on a sea of red velvet. Arthur's attempt to purchase the album is met with disdain by the other young men in the record store, including the store employee, who refers to Slade as a "pouf." They are disgusted by Brian Slade because of his queerness, and by extension, by Arthur himself. Arthur's shame in purchasing the record manifests in his facial expressions and body language as

he leaves the store; he appears dejected, his head hung low, and he walks at a slowed and meandering pace. However, he has still managed to purchase the record, now encased in a nondescript, brown paper bag.

In Manchester, Arthur only permits his queered identity to emerge at carefully selected moments that allow him freedom from judgment or indignation. These moments usually occur in the privacy of his bedroom, or in the company of others like him. When he returns home from the record store, he immediately retreats to the sanctity of his bedroom. He barricades his door (to prevent his parents from coming in), and begins playing the record. Arthur's reexamination of the album cover, along with a tabloid newspaper devoted to stories about the glam scene, becomes a moment of adoration that is almost pornographic nature. A quick scan of Arthur's room reveals a multitude of Brian Slade posters, as well as other glam rocker posters on the walls. When Arthur prepares to go back out again, he zips his jacket up all the way to conceal what he is wearing underneath in order to bypass his parents. Once outside, Arthur ditches his coat in a planter, revealing a shirt adorned with colorful buttons and stars. Arthur is suddenly free to be himself again. This sequence underscores the notion that, like many GLBTQ youth who navigate the confinement of a conservative household, the pleasant memories of Arthur's past lie away from the alienation of his parents and "outside of the domestic sphere" (De Angelis 48). It also presents the past as seductively vibrant and colorful, a stark contrast to the drab and muted colors of 1984.

Haynes blurs the lines between reality and fantasy to depict moments of sexual liberation for Arthur, as well the other characters in the film. One such incident centers

around the film's elaborate montage during Brian Slade's concert performance of Brian Eno's "Baby's on Fire." The scenes from the concert are interspersed by an orgy scene attended by Brian and his entourage, as well as a third scene of Arthur masturbating to a tabloid picture of Brian and Curt Wild kissing. The starkly discordant ambient sounds of "Baby's on Fire" underscore the promiscuity of the orgy and Arthur's simultaneous sexual awakening. Haynes' incorporation of these three scenes as one simultaneous moment signifies a freedom, if not a dark celebration, of sexual exploration for all participants. As Brian performs in the concert scene, he is joined by Curt Wild on stage. The two electrify the crowd by engaging in unapologetic sexual antics, including Brian dropping to his knees and kissing Curt's guitar in a mocked fellatio. Meanwhile, the other two scenes thrive in a suspension of time and space as they escalate in their sexual abandon. However, the moment is suddenly interrupted for Arthur when his father bursts into his room and proceeds to condemn his sexuality as "shameful" and "filthy." Arthur's ability to relish the freedom of sexual expression has once again been denied by the repression of his domestic prison. The scene ends with Arthur crying while looking at his own reflection in the mirror. This also marks the end of Arthur's residency with his parents; the next scene shows Arthur boarding a bus bound for London, his mother running to wave goodbye to him as the bus pulls away.

The two encounters Arthur shares with Curt Wild cast him as a genuinely queer character and lead to his sexual awakening, self-realization and eventual acceptance of his own queerness. By the time Arthur finally meets Curt, Curt has abandoned his relationship with Brian Slade and managed to revive his music career. Arthur's meeting

with Curt is treated with a sense of mysticism. The communication between the two becomes nearly telekinetic, as their eyes communicate in place of their mouths. At this moment, Haynes reverts to fantasy and reintroduces the spaceship that delivered Oscar Wilde to his parents. The presence of the spaceship repositions queerness as an otherworldly and privileged identity. The spaceship rains glitter down onto Arthur and Curt as it passes over them, and Curt encourages Arthur to "make a wish." While the wish is never revealed, the audience can gauge that it is to be with Curt. The two have sex on the rooftop, allowing Arthur liberation and momentary release. This scene establishes the intimate history between Curt and Arthur, and positions Curt as the potential answer to Arthur's mysterious "you." His final encounter with Curt, in the back room of a musty bar after the Tommy Stone concert, solidifies Arthur's acceptance of his queerness. This occurs when Curt passes the emerald green jewel to Arthur – the signifier of a true and essential queer identity. Curt's insistence that he has had the jewel for too long, and that Arthur should now have it, symbolically portrays Arthur's final acceptance of his essentially queer identity. Haynes uses this moment in the film to suggest the critical need of one to embrace and accept one's own individual truths.

As the film ushers in the "death of glitter," an act of tribute to glam rock and its icons, the cultural revolution of the 1970s is overtaken by a 1980's conservatism that condemns freedom of sexual expression. Martin P. Levine examines the contrast of these two cultural climates in the article "The Life and Death of Gay Ghettos." In his article, Levine suggests that the conservative climate of the 1980s was a response to the "unchecked consumerism and erotic hedonism [that] became impractical in an era of

economic deterioration, [as well as the proliferation of] genital herpes, hepatitis B and

AIDS" (Levine 71). Instead of relishing in freedom of sexual expression, the 1980s

ushered in an era of conservative constraint that affected both the heterosexual and

homosexual communities. As a result, "sensual indulgence was [instead] tied to physical

well-being…and materialism [to] materialistic pursuits [that] were linked to autonomy

and creativity" (72).

The film also suggests that the pressures of career, adulthood and fiscal

responsibility are the contributing factors that force Arthur to abandon his former self and

suppress his sexual identity. The idea that force can be a contributing factor to the effects

of sexual identity performance is discussed by Timothy Gould in his article "The

Unhappy Performative." Gould discusses the writings of J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida and

other theorists to suggest the effect of force on performative utterance, and consequently,

the way a performance is received. Citing Austin's analysis of the descriptive and the

constative, Gould writes that the purpose of this analysis was to "[isolate] and [map] the

performative utterance to render first visible, and then salient….the dimension of

happiness and unhappiness" (Gould 23). Austin's purpose was not to analyze

performance for judgments of truth or falsehood, but assess the dimensions of happiness

and unhappiness to determine how this "afflicts our performative utterances" (23). This

would suggest that any number of contributing factors have caused Arthur to abandon his

queerness, and would also explain the read on his behavior as expressions of sadness,

withdrawal, and discontent with what his life has become.

Gould also notes that Austin's desire was to "free the analysis of performative from the authority of the value of truth….and to substitute for it at times the value of force, of difference of force…" (25). By applying this theory, Arthur's life in 1984 can be interpreted as an "unhappy performance" in response to the pressures of conformity that have made him abandon his past. However, this theory may bear more influence in transforming the critique of such a performance, than the performance itself. Instead of assessing the authenticity of the performance, there becomes a greater scrutiny to closely examine the relationship between "inner" structure and "outer" performance. Applying such an examination to the differences between structure and performance also necessitates a greater comprehension between "inner" cause (Arthur's sexual identity) and "outer" consequence (Arthur's outward appearance). Arthur's behavior in 1984 may or may not be the result of an unhappy performance, but the film contextualizes this by suggesting his life in 1984 is unhappy when compared to his former self in 1974. While the film never reveals the real reason(s) why Arthur abandons his former self, his final meeting with Curt Wild and acceptance of the emerald jewel suggests he is destined to make peace with it.

Arthur's internalized homophobia is unique from the other characters examined; while it is still demonstrative of symbolic homophobia, the persecution is directed toward himself rather than others. Arthur makes a conscious as well as an unconscious decision to forget his past in an attempt to deny it. Though he aligns himself with the ideological pragmatism of 1984, he is incapable of "[releasing] himself from the history of his own identifications and desires" (De Angelis 51). Therefore, he constructs a queer identity that

evolves from being both consciously and socially queer, to consciously queer yet socially closeted. Though Arthur does not commit any direct forms of violence, his indirect efforts to suppress his essential self is a commission of psychological violence against his state of happiness. His final chance encounter with Curt Wild ultimately allows Arthur to release himself from his own self-imposed sexual repression.

Through Arthur's investigation, the audience is introduced to the character of Brian Slade (and his alter ego, Maxwell Demon). Brian's quest for sexual fulfillment and celebrity is portrayed as an impetus for the unapologetic self-indulgence of the glam rock movement. Unfortunately, Brian is incapable of combining his queer existence with his relentless pursuit of stardom. This causes Brian to "assassinate" himself, which in turn causes the glam rock movement to self-destruct.

III. Character Analysis: Brian Slade / Tommy Stone

Velvet Goldmine positions Brian's sexual identity for debate from his first introduction as a teenager in Birmingham, and whether he is, in fact, genuinely queer. His appearance reiterates Brekhus' views of how a distinctly marked identity stands out in an unmarked space. Brian's flamboyance, when compared to the conservative and uniform appearance of the other young men his age, suggests an initial desire to be different. He is shown dressed in a black pinstripe suit, purple shirt and tasseled hair – a stark contrast to another well-groomed young man dressed conservatively in a gray suit, red vest and tie, and pressed white shirt. Cecil, Brian's first manager, describes his look as being inspired by Little Richard, identifying Brian with the fledgling "mod" crowd that "wore mascara

and lacquered their hair." At one moment Brian is shown openly making out with a girl in an alleyway, only to immediately pick up a minor preparatory school boy walking by with his classmates. This brief introduction establishes Brian's bisexuality, while alluding to his inhibition at pushing the boundaries of socially conservative sexuality.

As *Velvet Goldmine* chronicles Brian's evolution from a fledgling musician to a pop icon, it also suggests his essentially queer identity evolves into a constructed queer identity for the sake of sensationalism and entertainment. Brian first gains notoriety during his debut performance at The Sombrero Club, where he attracts Cecil's attention. As Cecil is describing another uneventful night out with his older homosexual friends, he narrates that his attention is suddenly glued to the stage to observe Mandy, the American with the affected British accent, as she introduces Brian Slade – her husband. Once on stage he energizes the crowd with a rendition of Roxy Music's "2HB." Cecil is transfixed by Brian's performance, and before the week is out, the two have signed a record contract. Unfortunately for Cecil, Brian's ultimate aspiration – to incite a sexual revolution – fails to materialize under his management. Brian's first performance at an open-air rock concert is a PR disaster, and he is booed off the stage. This leaves Brian initially frustrated and doubtful of his ability to connect with the crowd.

Brian later becomes inspired to push the limits of conservative sexuality when he sees Curt Wild give a performance that offends yet electrifies the crowd. Curt flips off the audience, turns a canister of glitter into a showering phallic symbol, and drops his leather pants to perform in full-frontal nudity. Brian, who is mesmerized by Curt's performance for his blatant display of sexuality and shock factor, later laments that he had not thought

of it first. By the end of the next scene, Cecil has been fired as Brian's manager and replaced by Jerry Divine (Eddie Izzard), a slick and stylized producer who promises to make Brian into a star. Jerry's superficiality is summarily echoed through his pronouncement that "it doesn't really matter much what a man does with his life…what matters is the legend that grows up around it." This statement is a suggestion that one's true identity is irrelevant when it comes to the image that is understood in its place. Jerry's grandstanding is met with resounding approval from a panel of industry executives – all older white men in suits, all dreaming of Brian's money-making potential. This sets up *Velvet Goldmine*'s effort to depict mass culture as a "through-and-through capitalist nightmare" (doCarmo 396) that sustains an essence of falsity for the purpose of profit and marketability.

Brian evolves into the physical embodiment of the glam rock icon, capitalizing on his queerness to perpetuate an enigmatic image of himself. His open displays of queerness both ignite his fan base and incite controversy at the same time. Haynes intimates that Brian's antics and exploits of his queer sexuality are more for the sake of publicity than a model of essentially queer behavior. During his ascension to pop idol status, Brian is portrayed as a "confused opportunist [and] cultural magpie cribbing indiscriminately from a multitude of role models" (Romney). Once there, his queerness can be regarded as both essential and constructed; this is achieved through the binary relationship between his public flamboyance and on-stage outrageousness as Maxwell Demon (a "space creature who becomes a rock and roll messiah, only to be destroyed by his own success"), and the perpetuation of a straight "mask" through his marriage to

Mandy. While Brian may possess the green emerald jewel, the film's signifier of an essential queer identity, the fact that he must steal it suggests his possession of it may have been "cosmically" unintended. It also suggests his inability to fully embrace an essential queered identity, as he doesn't inherit the stone properly. Brian's marriage therefore becomes a marriage of convenience, allowing him to appear "straight" while performing as queer, a maneuver that permits him to retreat into a socially palatable straight identity when it suits him. Therefore, Brian is able to project the identity of a straight man that experiments with queerness in an effort to shock and titillate his fan base.

Velvet Goldmine positions glam rock as a cultural artifice, suggesting its characters are able to subvert their identities behind a superficial façade. Haynes uses fantasy in the film as "a way of possessing your idols by turning them into your personal toys" (Romney). The film encourages Brian's queer identity to be viewed not as an essential trait, but as a product for personal gain; those who are closest to Brian, including Brian himself, are able to take advantage of this. One example of this occurs at Brian and Jerry's business lunch with Curt to discuss cutting a record with him. As Curt agrees to do it, Haynes reveals flashing hearts superimposed over Brian's eyes as he gazes adoringly back at Curt, a clear indication of Brian's lust and true intentions in working with him. At the same moment, Jerry's eyes are superimposed with dollar signs, forecasting his plans to use the couple's queerness as a promotional "Tracy and Hepburn for the 70s." Haynes' incorporation of Barbie dolls in the guise of Brian and Curt is also used to act out the couple's implicit desires for each other, as the depths of their love

become more explicit. Both of these examples affect stylistic devices of camp as fantasy to convey Brian and Curt's brewing infatuation with each other, yet the corporate conceptualizing of their queer identities contaminates their relationship.

Brian's manipulated identity is also demonstrated during a mocked press conference, staged metaphorically as a circus. By this time, Brian has engineered his alter ego, Maxwell Demon, as the focal point of his performance art. This fantasy sequence places Brian center stage as ringmaster, where he uses philosophical wit to field the barrage of questions from reporters. This sequence is a noticeably contrived over-performance meant to sensationalize Brian and exploit his relationship with Curt. Brian is dressed for show in a gold tailcoat and top hat, and responds to the questions with stylized showmanship and vanity. When asked if he *is* Maxwell Demon, Brian's manipulated response purports that "man is least himself when he talks in his own person….give him a mask and he'll tell you the truth." This line represents the affected configuration of Brian's queerness, down to the words he speaks, which "are all Oscar Wilde's, [read] from cue cards" (Romney). The corporate executives who benefit from Brian's queer image are content to keep it an anomaly, as this not only fuels public intrigue into "what" Brian really is, but it also makes them rich in the process. The way Brian is puppeteered by the executives is a testament to "popular media's power both to create, disfigure and eliminate narratives [for professional gain]" (Landy 129).

Though Brian projects a socially constructed queer identity as "Maxwell Demon," his affections for Curt Wild, along with his disregard for his marriage with Mandy, supports that idea that his sexual identity is still essentially queer. As Brian "glams"

himself to create a sensationalized identity, he truly idolizes Curt and expresses genuine affection for him. However, his happiness with Curt seems to manifest more during moments of suspended time and fantasy. Haynes reintroduces the celestial motif to depict Brian and Curt's love as a carnival ride through the dark, underscored by Lou Reed's "Satellite of Love." This scene creates a "hallucinatory mix of lights and spaceships [that] swirl behind them in the night sky" (Pizzello), and provides an early indication of the happier times they experience with each other. Additionally, the orgy scene provides "liberation from spatial and temporal groundings" (De Angelis 50) as a suspension of real time, allowing Brian and his entourage the freedom to release their uninhibited sexuality. In this scene, Brian's entourage engages in their own respective debaucheries, while Brian and Curt exchange beckoning glances to each other from across the room; as Curt gets up to leave, Brian follows him out, alluding to their imminent sexual rendezvous. His deliberate choice to pursue Curt over Mandy is significant in showing his growing disenchantment with his wife, sustaining the idea that his marriage, like his identity, is a façade. Haynes' structuring of the fantasy scenes projects them as "orchestrated and idealized desire, rendered so that [they] can be remembered as perfect, unchangeable, and insusceptible to the workings of time" (48).

Brian's life as Maxwell Demon, represented by his socially constructed queer identity and pursuit of stardom, proves to be more important to him than preserving his relationship with Curt. Curt's drug use, coupled with his violent and unpredictable nature, places Brian in the difficult position of supporting his lover or protecting his own interests. When Jerry coerces Brian into protecting his own interests and backing out of

producing Curt's comeback record, Curt responds by storming out of the recording studio, a decision that effectively ends the relationship between the two. The film submits this altercation as the impetus for Brian's faked assassination; he beseeches Jerry to be released from his contract, which Jerry is unwilling to do. The faked assassination (on stage, while performing as Maxwell Demon) is a symbolic gesture that effectively kills his alter ego and his career. While the film never fully explains why Brian chooses to end his career, it does suggest this move is in response to Brian's unraveled relationship with Curt and unwillingness to continue projecting a false queered identity. This move also sets the stage for an elaborate comeback, with the emergence of Tommy Stone in 1984.

As Tommy Stone, Brian is reborn into pop idol status with a second chance to construct a desexualized identity bearing no resemblance to his former queer self. Tommy Stone is the 1980's pop music answer to Brian Slade, forged with a colder sense of theatrics and lacking Brian's sense of flash and elaborate spectacle. His fans adore him, but his engineered image (a pompous right-wing goon who sings the praises of "President Reynolds") serves as a cultural attaché to the projected mindlessness of 1984. His super-produced and chilly hit songs suggest an "increasingly vapid FM music [world]" that is "little more than accouterment....for market-tested personalities" (doCarmo 397). Additionally, the film stages Tommy Stone's concerts as a synthetic fabrication – a stark contrast to the warmth and glow of their 1970's counterparts. The vibrancy of the earlier concerts has instead been replaced by cool colors that are much more corporate and cold, alluding to Brian's "[loss of] passion, sensuality and creativity" (Pizzello). Tommy Stone is a character that has abandoned the sensationalism of 1970's

self-fulfillment in favor of mass-marketing appeal. By reincarnating himself as Tommy Stone, Brian is allowed the freedom to establish a sterilized public image that is independent of his private life. The film culminates in Arthur exposing the truth about Tommy Stone when Arthur forces Tommy to address allegations connecting him to Brian Slade. The press conference is immediately cut short, and Tommy is whisked away from the reporters.

Brian's socially constructed queer identity abandons his essentially queer nature in favor of projecting the excess and self-fulfillment of glam rock's cultural movement. The character's internalized homophobia could be suggested as experiential rather than symbolic or defensive. Yet Brian's response to the negativity experienced with Curt is more indicative of a universal upset connected to the ending of a relationship, than fallout over his queer sexuality. Brian's impasse with Curt causes him to choose career over intimacy. His complex queered identity is one that appears as psychologically in the closet yet socially out; he makes no apologies for his queerness, yet is incapable of escaping the demands cultural hegemony places on him. To escape these demands, Brian performs an act of violence on himself through his faked assassination – an act that is driven more by the public perception of his sexual orientation than a repression of his own queerness. In spite of the fact that Brian is genuinely queer, he is induced into projecting an identity that has become larger than himself. The public fallout he experiences from his fans' rejection single-handedly liberates Brian from the polysexual dictum of Maxwell Demon, yet the emergence of Tommy Stone attests to Brian's inability to exist beyond conformism and the appeal of celebrity.

CHAPTER 5:
ASSESSING THE CRITICAL RECEPTIONS OF *AMERICAN BEAUTY*, *URBANIA*, AND *VELVET GOLDMINE*

I. A Model For Social Reception: Benshoff's Assessment of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

This thesis has offered discussions of the films *American Beauty, Urbania* and *Velvet Goldmine*, each selected as a representation of different sub-types of gay visibility, to explore the subject of internalized homophobia as a performative aspect of sexual identity. By contextualizing the discussions with the works of Judith Butler, Gregory M. Herek, Harry M. Benshoff, Jeffrey Weeks, as well as other theorists and academics, this thesis has suggested a link between internalized homophobia and the efforts of Western social and cultural hegemony to regulate, if not eliminate, the development of non-heteronormative sexual identities. This thesis has discussed this link through examination of these cinematic representations, their depictions of sexual identities, suggested attitudes toward homosexuality, and explored individual character relationships with other characters. The characters discussed have also been evaluated for their histories with queerness to suggest and interpret behavioral links to experiential, symbolic, and defensive forms of homophobia. Additionally, the cinematic devices of spatial and temporal relationships, as well as mise-en-scène, have been examined in terms of how they work to represent internalized homophobia within the story. Through this examination, this thesis has suggested that the selected films have projected representations of internalized homophobia, and that these representations are capable of both positively and negatively influencing the perception, as well as the development, of individual queer identities.

To continue the discussion of internalized homophobia, this thesis will examine a random sampling of critical reviews that correspond with the release dates of each of the discussed films. The purpose in doing this is to gauge the social reception of these films while observing if the selected critical reviews not only recognize, but also attempt a discussion of these representations of internalized homophobia. In order to evaluate the social reception of these films, this thesis relies on a model of evaluating social reception posited by Professor Harry M. Benshoff in his article "Reception of a Mainstream Film." This study uses a random sampling of ten reviews of each film from journalistic critics and film scholars to yield a contained examination of responses to the films under discussion. As stated in Chapter One, these reviews are evaluated for their commentaries (or lack thereof) about the behavioral traits, physical appearances, speech patterns and spatial and temporal relationships that reinforce behaviors of internalized homophobia. The purpose is to infer individual and critical comprehension of the films' portrayals of internalized homophobia, and / or the critics' abilities or willingness to communicate this as a point of reference for a larger audience.

Benshoff's article, "Reception of a Queer Mainstream Film," is a critical discussion of Anthony Minghella's film *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), as well as an examination of the journalistic and popular reception of that film. According to Benshoff, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is a film that "[partook] of concepts either drawn from or consistent with queer theory and the New Queer Cinema" (Benshoff 172). With its mainstream marketing, the experience of viewing the queer content and subject matter in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* may have been unexpected by a mainstream audience. To

conduct his analysis of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Benshoff's study "draws upon a random sampling of approximately 150 film reviews and / or user commentaries collected via several searches on the World Wide Web, and from clipping files housed at the AMPAS library in Los Angeles" (173). Among the websites used to extract film reviews and commentaries were *N:Zone Magazine* (atnzone.com), *The JoBlo Movie Network* (joblo.com), and Yahoo! Movies. His objective within the article was to study how actual viewers were able to receive and synthesize the queerness of the film, and to examine the extent to which the film reinforced preexisting stereotypes of queer identity. Benshoff was specifically interested in determining if the audiences' responses perceived a link between queer desire and criminality, and if those responses perceived the portrayal of Tom Ripley as a testament to "how violence can and does arise from conflicted social and sexual identities" (173).

The film was poised to benefit from mainstream exposure due to the notoriety of its lead actors (including Matt Damon, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Cate Blanchett, and Philip Seymour Hoffman), and its joint commercial distribution by Miramax Films and Paramount Studios. However, in spite of its mainstream positioning, Benshoff notes that a survey conducted about *The Talented Mr. Ripley* indicated "very few American moviegoers understood the film to be about the concerns, dynamics, and tragic consequences of the closet, let alone queer concepts of sexual identity" (177). He also found that most critical and popular reviews assessed the film more for its entertainment aesthetics than its commentary on the effects of internalized homophobia.

Each of the three films discussed in this thesis share similar qualities with the production value and content of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Their respective release dates, each from the late 1990s to 2000, place each film in the latter part of the first New Queer Cinema movement. Each film includes representations of queer characters with behaviors indicative of internalized homophobia – behaviors that, at times, lead to violent ends. Each film also partakes in the essentialist and social constructionist debate around the formation of individual sexual identities. While the messages conveyed in each film are distinct and individual, they also differ in their respective distributions and targeted audiences. *American Beauty* enjoyed the success of a mainstream film, though *Urbania* and *Velvet Goldmine* did not. Those films (gay standpoint and queer cinema, respectively) both had smaller production budgets and limited releases, which consequently inhibited viewing by a wider audience.

Due to the amount of time that has elapsed between the respective release dates of *American Beauty, Urbania,* and *Velvet Goldmine*, and the date of this study, the reviews of these films are no longer available on some of the websites used by Benshoff to conduct his research. Therefore, to assess the social reception of the selected films, this thesis utilized RottenTomatoes.com as an Internet search engine for obtaining film reviews. Through this process, ten reviews for each film were selected randomly. The purpose in selecting only ten reviews was to examine the films in a method that was contained and precise for each film, yet would yield a variety of different opinions and impressions of each film's queer subject matter.

II. *American Beauty*

This thesis utilized ten randomly sampled reviews from film critics and film scholars to assess the social reception of Sam Mendes' mainstream film, *American Beauty* (1999). The reviews selected were by Roger Ebert for *The Chicago Sun-Times*, Cynthia Fuchs for *Philadelphia Citypaper*, Eleanor Ringel Gillespie for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Desson Howe for *The Washington Post,* Todd McCarthy for *Variety*, Margaret McGurk for *The Cincinnati Enquirer,* Christopher Null for FilmCritic.com, Peter Rainer for *New York Magazine*, Marc Savlov for *The Austin Chronicle,* and Kenneth Turan for *The Los Angeles Times*.

The initial observation of the critical reviews selected for *American Beauty* was commensurate to Benshoff's analysis of the reviews of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. The majority evaluated the film more for its aesthetic entertainment value than for its communication of queer themes. *American Beauty*'s exploration of sexual awakening affects most of the principal characters in the film, and unfolds concurrently with the film's depictions of social repression. This makes the act of sexual awakening integral to many of *American Beauty's* messages about social conformity. Therefore, the critical reviews' lack of acknowledgment of *American Beauty*'s queer themes is suggestive of the viewers' inability to broach the subject, whether unintentional or deliberate, as well as the far-reaching implications of the closet as an institution of concealment.

Many of the critical reviews examined *American Beauty*'s classification as a comedy-drama film, and provided summative explanations of the film's plot. In the article "'American Beauty' Gets Under Your Skin," *Washington Post* critic Desson Howe

employs a serio-comic tone in his description of the main plot and the frustrations

endured by the primary characters, especially Lester, Carolyn and Jane. Howe

patronizingly refers to Lester Burnham as "poor old Lester" (Howe), and makes a point

of including Lester's daily masturbation ritual as an affirmation of his sexual frustrations.

Howe makes no mentioning of Jim and Jim, and only provides a very brief description of

Colonel Frank Fitts. Howe connects Ricky's suffering to the "physical abuse from his

disapproving, machismo father" (Howe), and later commends Chris Cooper's

performance of Fitts for finding "deft grace notes in that spit-and-polish character"

(Howe). Howe's use of adjectives, such as "poor old," spit-and-polish," and "machismo,"

and his particular inclusion of Lester's sexual frustrations, seems to reveal a more

empathetic tone toward the frustrated heterosexual male, than acknowledgment of the

repressed homosexual male. Additionally, the article makes no mentioning of the film's

queer themes or characters, therefore neglecting the revelation of Colonel Fitts' sexuality

and how it affects the conclusion of the story. Similarly, Margaret McGurk, critic for *The

Cincinnati Enquirer*, commends the film as a "dire tragedy about dying spirits"

(McGurk), and refers to the characters as a "sad and damaged bunch" (McGurk). Colonel

Fitts is once again mentioned in context with Ricky, but referred to as his "fascist father"

– presumably in reference to his Nazi plate memorabilia. McGurk does mention Jim and

Jim (Scott Bakula and Sam Robards) only to provide significance to Colonel Fitts' fury at

the presence of them. The review is even more desexualized than Howe's, and provides

no suggestion to *American Beauty*'s incorporation of queer themes.

Other critical reviews that were used either fail to mention Colonel Fitts at all (Marc Savlov of *The Austin Chronicle*), or merely glance over his significance to the film. They refer to Fitts as "a just-retired military man" (Turan), a "brutally repressive Marine ex-colonel" (Rainer), a "stern ex-Marine" (Null) or "a former Marine who gives his son regular urine tests" (Ringel Gillespie). *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert, however, does intimate the film's thematic queerness by stating, "nobody is really bad in this movie, just shaped by society in such a way they can't be themselves, or feel joy" (Ebert). This message can be applied to each of the character developments in a variety of ways, but clearly underscores Colonel Fitts' inability to overcome his internalized homophobia and accept his sexual identity.

Of the ten reviews sampled, only two of the critics identified the film's queerness, with only one critic commenting on the repressive powers of internalized homophobia. Queer theorist and film scholar Cynthia Fuchs identifies Fitts as a "menacing dad" whose "salient traits are ruthlessness, rigidity and homophobia" (Fuchs). She aligns these traits to warning signs of an "imminent suburban-guy breakdown" (Fuchs), yet refrains from connecting "homophobia" to the repressed queer identity of Colonel Fitts. Todd McCarthy of *Variety* criticizes the film as "unusually off-center for a major studio venture" (McCarthy), and is skeptical of the film's ability to break through to the mainstream public (which, ironically, it did). In spite of this criticism, he does approach the subject of internalized homophobia, however, he considers this to be a distractive quality and among *American Beauty*'s most significant flaws. McCarthy comments that "making the climactic drama hinge upon the sexuality of one character, whose repression

smacks of hoary Freudianism" is a weakness that "provokes momentary disappointment" (McCarthy). In this case, the presence of Fitts' internalized homophobia is regarded almost as a cliché, and McCarthy does not acknowledge its placement among the other, more hegemonic representations of repression portrayed in the film. While McCarthy praises Cooper's performance, he views the presence of internalized homophobia as a distraction, and the character's performative behavior is delegitimized as unnecessary when regarding the film's messages about social and sexual repression.

III. *Urbania*

As with *American Beauty*, this thesis utilized a random sampling of ten reviews from film critics and film scholars to assess the social reception of Jon Shear's gay standpoint film, *Urbania* (2000). The reviews selected were by Walter Chaw for FilmFreakCentral.net, Cynthia Fuchs for PopMatters.com, Jed Horne for *The Tech*, Desson Howe for *The Washington Post*, Michael D. Klemm for CinemaQueer.com, Emanuel Levy for EmanuelLevy.com, Christopher Null for ContactMusic.com, Steve Simels for *TV Guide,* Amy Taubin for *Village Voice,* and Richard von Busack for MetroActive.com.

Similar to the findings with *American Beauty*, a number of the reviews sampled for *Urbania* also provided summative reviews of the film while evaluating its entertainment aesthetics. The film is praised as "very heavy and intense" (Klemm), "ambitious, if overly theatrical in its structure" (Taubin), and "defies categorization" (Howe). Some of the negative reviews referred to *Urbania* as "unsettling and willfully

obscure" (Chaw) "nonsense" (Null), and commented that the actors involved in the film "[were] almost as unremarkable as their resumes" (Horne). But unlike the reviews for *American Beauty*, the majority of *Urbania*'s reviews readily addressed the film's queer themes and homosexual content – though as a gay standpoint film, these aspects are difficult to ignore. Like the discussions of Colonel Fitts in *American Beauty*, the reviews for *Urbania* refrain from revealing the suppressed sexual identity of Dean, instead focusing more on his physical appearance. These descriptions included phrases such as "a mysterious, tattooed stranger" (Levy), to "a tattooed thug" (von Busack), to "a [tantalizing and] good-looking man …whose arm is tattooed with a heart, surrounded by a snake" (Howe), or just "hunky" (Simels). Some of the reviews did identify Dean as "homophobic" (Horne; Klemm), though stopped short of connecting this to the character's internalized homophobia. This may be more suggestive of the critics' efforts to withhold spoilers than a selective disregard of internalized homophobia. A few of the critics did choose to intimate, rather than fully disclose, Charlie's purpose in pursuing Dean, while only one critic figuratively broached the subject of Dean's performed heterosexuality.

Desson Howe, the critic for *The Washington Post* who refrained from addressing *American Beauty*'s queerness, again only approaches the subject connotatively. He suggests Charlie is "fatalistically drawn to Dean, the drunken, modelish man who detests gay men" (Howe), and when recounting the people Charlie meets while out on the town, he mistakenly includes Charlie's "old flame named Chris" (Howe) in the bunch. Howe also attempts his own effort to interpret Charlie's thoughts on Dean's sexual identity,

arguing that Charlie is thinking "the lady doth protest too much" (Howe). Howe does allude to Charlie and Dean's face off at the end of the film, but refrains from citing the circumstances leading up to this encounter. Overall, Howe is complimentary of *Urbania'*s ability to keep its audiences in the dark.

Amy Taubin, critic for the *Village Voice*, provides a mostly summative review of *Urbania* that speaks more of its storytelling component. Like the other critics, Taubin points out the fact that Charlie is gay, he has lost his lover, and "that somehow violence is part of the picture" (Taubin), but she allows the audience to formulate their own opinions and judgments over the way Charlie lives his life. Taubin does allude to the film's sense of dominance and hypermasculinity (as portrayed by Dean) when she discusses *Urbania'*s "twist in noir by excavating the castration anxiety and homoeroticism that usually remain buried in the subtext" (Taubin), yet she stops short of mentioning the character of Dean or connecting these traits to his presence in the film.

In Benshoff's assessment of *The Talented Mr. Ripley,* he identifies "aspects of heterosexism and homophobia at work within the arena of reception itself" (Benshoff 179). This is evidenced by individual reviewer observations of comments and demonstrative acts by other audience members in response to the film, supposedly as a method of acting out a "straight" sexual identity. This behavior, which Benshoff refers to as "performative heterosexuality," aligns itself with verbal protests or physical responses registering the individual's distaste at open displays of queerness, meanwhile "announcing to those around them that they are indeed straight" (179). In the review of *Urbania* by Jed Horne, critic for MIT's *The Tech*, he reveals that behavioral patterns of

performative heterosexuality were also present in the audience during his viewing, noting the "grimaces and turned heads by a few audience members [at displays of homosexuality]" (Horne). However, Horne goes on to negate the importance of homosexuality at the heart of the story, refuting the believability of Charlie and Chris' relationship because they appear "a little too straight and curiously devoid of the usual homosexual stereotypes" (Horne). Though Horne later retreads this statement by noting the film "[treats] a gay relationship with as much weight and seriousness as a straight one" (Horne), he has suggested the legitimacy of queered identities is predicated on the character's communication of commonly held gay stereotypes. Horne's comment is also suggestive of the improbability that a queer person could project an identity that is not obviously queer or directly shaped by stereotype.

IV. *Velvet Goldmine*

As with the previously discussed films, this thesis utilized a random sampling of ten reviews from film critics and film scholars to assess the social reception of Todd Haynes' queer cinema film, *Velvet Goldmine* (1998). The reviews selected were by James Berardinelli for ReelViews.net, Roger Ebert for *The Chicago Sun-Times*, Joey Guerra for *The Houston Chronicle,* Edward Guthmann for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Brandon Judell for Critics, Inc. / America Online, Todd McCarthy for *Variety*, Russell Smith for *The Austin Chronicle,* Paul Tartara for CNN.com, Kenneth Turan for *The Los Angeles Times*, and Stephanie Zacharek for Salon.com.

By examining the differences between queer cinema films and other films,

Michelle Aaron notes in her work *New Queer Cinema: An Introduction* that queer cinema

films are primarily demarcated by their "focus on the gay and lesbian community, [and

specifically] the sub-groups contained within it" (Aaron 4). When describing the qualities

of queer cinema films, she notes that they are known to "eschew positive imagery [of

queer culture]" (4), and do not refrain from presenting queer character faults or

weaknesses. Queer cinema films are also characterized by their extreme sense of

defiance, whether "[defying] the sanctity of the past, especially the homophobic past" (4),

defying traditional cinematic conventions, or defying death itself. All of these

characteristics are present within *Velvet Goldmine*, whether through its affectionate

portrayals of the glam rock fan base, its projection of unrestrained drug use and

hedonism, its incorporation of fantasy as a measure of queer sanctuary, or its

interpretation of a glam rock icon *inspired* by David Bowie. In spite of the casting of

noteworthy actors such as Ewan McGregor, Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, Toni Collette and

Christian Bale, as well as the film's distribution by Miramax Films, *Velvet Goldmine*'s

unconventional style may have doomed the film as a critical and box office failure. Of the

three films discussed in this thesis, the reviews sampled for *Velvet Goldmine* appear to be

the most negative.

Most of the reviews sampled for *Velvet Goldmine* discussed the film's message of

sexual liberation, whether observing Brian Slade's bisexuality, noting the film's "in-your-

face homoerotica" (Judell), or how the film "bristles with a vigorous sense of originality

and sexually charged energy" (Guerra). Brandon Judell, writing for Critics Inc. / America

Online, details Arthur's sexual awakening as a fan of Brian Slade, describing the posters

of Slade in Arthur's bedroom, and discussing how Arthur's transformation included

"[powdering] his hair blue, [dressing] like Slade, and [trying] to have sex like Slade"

(Judell). This comment by Judell provides an understanding of the impressionable

influence glam rock had on its devoted followers, as represented by Arthur, and how

many of Slade's fans emulated his image – in spite of the fact that his image was

(unknown to them) false. Judell also recalls the era's innocuous partaking of pleasure, by

referring to Haynes' film as a "marvelous recapturing of a more innocent, yet sexually

more raucous time" (Judell).

The review by Russell Smith, critic for *The Austin Chronicle*, was unique among

the reviews sampled due to his reference of Haynes' use of fantasy in *Velvet Goldmine*,

and the film's allusion to fantasy as a shelter for queerness. When Smith discusses *Velvet

Goldmine's* opening scene, and the arrival of Oscar Wilde via alien spaceship, he

comments that this scene "[asserts] that the Wildes, Baudelaires, and Marc Bolans in our

midst are made of finer, more ethereal stuff than the gray mass of men" (Smith). This

reinforces Haynes' attempt to affect a sense that queerness is otherworldly in nature when

compared to the mores of traditional hegemony, and therefore special. Smith comments

on Christian Bale's performance as "touching," noting that as a fan of glam rock, he is

"not just transported by the theatrical conjury….but *transformed* into an honorary alien

himself" (Smith). This statement also indicates an understanding that Arthur's sexual

awakening is not only an explorative process for him, but also an affirmative one. In

spite of the reviews by Smith and Judell, however, many of the reviews failed to look

past the sexual openness of *Velvet Goldmine* or attempt to identify the film's queer

themes or importance of fantasy. *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert appears to be at

something of a loss to explain Haynes' use of fantasy, when he comments, "I guess this

prologue is intended to establish a link between Wilde and the Bowie generation" (Ebert).

A few of the reviews sampled were highly critical of Bale's performance in *Velvet

Goldmine*, suggesting a greater intent to critique the film's performances than assess the

content of the film. For example, Joey Guerra of *The Houston Chronicle* comments that

the only weak link in the film is Bale, whose "straight-laced portrayal seems a bit dull in

the face of so much decadence" (Guerra). This comment was also echoed by Kenneth

Turan of *The Los Angeles Times,* stating that the film's framing device around Arthur

Stuart "often feels awkward" (Turan), as well as Todd McCarthy of *Variety*, who stated

Arthur "simply isn't very interesting, especially after what's come before" (McCarthy).

James Berardinelli of Reelviews.net also weighs Bale's performance of Arthur against

the flamboyance of the film, stating that while Bale is "not the strongest performer in

good circumstances, [his performance] comes across flat and uninteresting"

(Berardinelli). And lastly, Paul Tartara's review for CNN derides the film as "fun and

empty," stating that the lack of development for Arthur is because he "seldom even gets

any real dialogue, outside of asking former glam participants what they know about

Brian" (Tartara). Each of these criticisms, examined together, seem to decry Bale's

performance for lacking the showmanship and spectacle that encompassed the rest of the

film. This may suggest that Arthur's withdrawn behavior and efforts to put his former

self behind him may have been misunderstood by the critics – if not completely

overlooked. This also suggests a failure to fully understand, if not fully identify, that while Arthur may serve as the vehicle for the story, his presence also highlights the struggles one endures when forced to suppress an internal sexual identity for the sake of conforming to hegemonic norms.

As with the criticism of Bale's performance as Arthur, the varied critical reception of Jonathan Rhys-Meyers' performance also suggests an inability to gauge the way Brian uses his queerness for personal and professional advantage. Joey Guerra of *The Houston Chronicle* praises Rhys-Meyers' "nicely balancing vulnerability and brattiness" (Guerra). Likewise, Todd McCarthy's review describes Slade as "the ultimate in cool, a frankly bisexual rock star who pushes the edge in style, music and attitude" (McCarthy). The more negative reviews of Rhys-Meyers' performance described his "pouty insouciance but not much else" (Zacharek), or stated he "never registers onscreen" (Guthmann), a criticism suggesting the film fails to convey Brian Slade as a deliberately constructed image. Russell Smith of *The Austin Chronicle* provides one of the more insightful critiques of Brian Slade; by observing Brian's embracing of the all-importance of superficial images, Smith notes that Brian is "little more than a vivid, epigram-spouting holographic image" (Smith). This comment clearly attests to Slade's "devolvement" from a fledgling musician into a vessel of corporate excess.

Roger Ebert's comments, though more cynical in tone, identify Brian as an "ambitious, semi-talented poseur who cheated his audience once too often, and then fooled them again in a way only the movie and its inquiring reporter fully understand" (Ebert). Though Ebert's comment minimizes Haynes' underlying message of the

influential effects of pop culture, he perceptively identifies Brian's ability to capitalize on his success at the expense of those around him, even hinting to Brian's later reinvention as the corporately engineered Tommy Stone. However, neither Ebert nor any of the other reviews sampled bother to examine Brian's real sexual identity, and only provide peripheral discussions of his relationships with Curt Wild and Mandy. Russell Smith comes closest to observing the importance of Brian's relationships, by observing the importance of Curt Wild as "first inspiring [Brian's] career, then threatening to destroy it" (Smith). Smith fails, however, to elaborate on the importance of this relationship, how it contextualizes Brian as an essentially queer character, and how it ultimately ends Brian's career.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

While the number of critical reviews cited in this thesis only presents a small sample of opinions on the discussed films, and does not represent a more extensive investigation into the critical reception of *American Beauty*, *Urbania* or *Velvet Goldmine*, it does suggest that queer studies, and queer sexuality in general, were still relatively marginalized issues among a general population in late 1990's culture. In spite of the surge of gay iconography at the time, from music artists, television shows such as *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk*, to emerging gay icons such as Ellen DeGeneres, Melissa Etheridge or Barney Frank, the social vernacular to comprehend and communicate queer subject matter was significantly restricted. Whether this restriction was unintentional or deliberate is uncertain, but it is suggestive of a selective and comfortable ignorance toward queer issues that pervades social consciousness to this day. As this social ignorance perpetuates, so too do the cultural institutions of heterosexism and homophobia. This allows manifestations of fear, prejudice, misunderstanding, and ultimately cultural stereotype to flourish – both outside and within the LGBTQ population.

In spite of this, the media continues to present queer issues. Films, television shows and commercials with queer themes, queer characters, and queer subject matter continue to be developed. Queer actors, actresses, musicians, sports figures and celebrities continue to cautiously reveal themselves. Queer persons have slowly emerged as political figureheads – and sometimes, even win elections. Political issues pertaining to LGBTQ rights, protections, and integrities continue to push hegemonic boundaries.

Every incident that places queer issues into the social consciousness, whether met positively or negatively, is an action that increases public awareness of these issues. Through this awareness has also emerged a commensurate interest in queer studies, queer theory, an increased number of queer scholars, and an increased understanding of queer sexual identity development.

The examination of the films discussed within this thesis, with specific focus on character analysis, spatial and temporal relationships, and mise-en-scène, has suggested a link between cultural hegemony, social conformity, and manifestations of internalized homophobia. By utilizing Judith Butler's theory of performativity as a foundation for examination, supported by theories of essentialism and social constructionism as conceived by Jeffrey Weeks, and suggestions of the development of queered masculine identities as conceived by Harry M. Benshoff, this thesis has examined the selected characters for behavioral patterns indicative of internalized homophobia, as well as the social, cultural and temporal factors that may contribute to this condition. Through this examination, this thesis has suggested that individual development of queered masculine identities is the result of conscious as well as subconscious performances intended to navigate social codes and hegemonic dictations of acceptable forms of masculinity. By sampling one film from each sub-type of gay visibility (mainstream, gay standpoint, and queer cinema), this thesis has offered varying interpretations of internalized homophobia, while attempting to delineate the way each cinematic sub-type presents a queered identity indicative of this behavior.

Through representations of social and sexual repression, *American Beauty* testifies to the repressive power of institutionalized conformity as a symptom of hypermasculinity, while suggesting the navigation of this conformity leads either to assimilation, as with Jim and Jim, or violence and self-destruction, as with Colonel Frank Fitts. *Urbania* builds on the examination of hypermasculinity while exploring the dangers of urban legends, urban sexuality, sexual deviance and masculine domination. *Urbania*'s representation of Dean suggests an inextricable link between the repression of queered masculine identities and the proliferation of sexual deviance and sadomasochism. *Velvet Goldmine* juxtaposes time and space to relegate queerness to a performative act of emulation inspired by popular trends, as with Arthur, or else a carefully constructed façade for the purpose of attention or professional gain, as with Brian Slade. The film's incorporation of fantasy also suggests that when positioned against hegemonic norms, queerness may be construed as an essentially alien behavior that is foreign to the given human existence, or is only able to find harmony in moments of suspended reality and disbelief.

While the subject of internalized homophobia is still frequently portrayed in the filmic narrative, some recent films to explore this subject have received more positive critical and public reception. Films such as Patty Jenkins' *Monster* (2003), Bennett Miller's *Capote* (2005), and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) are among the many independent and mainstream films with representations of internalized homophobia that have received critical praise and awards. Internalized homophobia has also been explored in documentaries, including Kirby Dick's *Outrage* (2009), a referendum on suspected

queer politicians and their support for anti-gay legislation at the state and federal levels. Additionally, ad campaigns (such as the one mounted by ThinkB4YouSpeak.com) have worked to curtail the effects of heterosexism and homophobia by reaching out to high school populations, increasing awareness of the issue, and discouraging the use of the expression, "that's so gay." However, the cultural institutions of heterosexism and homophobia continue to endure – locally, nationally, and also globally. Bringing attention to this issue works toward a greater cognizance of the problem it represents, and with it, the urgency to eradicate it.

Through the discussion presented in this thesis, it is my hope is to encourage individual reflection on the attitudes that color the social perception of LGBTQ individuals. It is also my intention to encourage the reader to consider the damaging effects social and cultural hegemony has on queer sexual identity development. While many social, cultural and political advances have been made to remove the barriers to full equality, these barriers still exist. An increased understanding of sexual identity development will hopefully yield a greater awareness of and sensitivity toward behavioral patterns of internalized homophobia. An open discourse and increased awareness of internalized homophobia can deconstruct these social barriers, remove these social stigmas, and allow these individuals their sense of dignity and legitimacy. Therefore, the damaging psychological and developmental effects of internalized homophobia are subjects that deserve further exploration and clarification, by sociologists, filmmakers, and film scholars alike.

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