THE SPIRIT OF SPECTACLE: 
ANXIETIES OF AUTHENTICITY AND THE PUNKED RENAISSANCE FILM

By

JAMES NEWLIN

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In this analysis of what I call the Punked Renaissance Film, I am querying the critical assumptions about authenticity and staged spectacle often made about both early modern British drama and punk and alternative rock subcultures. These issues are at the forefront of an underexamined subgenre of films that use the signage of punk subcultures to reinterprete early modern or Renaissance drama for filmed adaptations. Specifically, my thesis addresses films by Derek Jarman, Gus Van Sant, and Alex Cox.

Using theorists and critics like Stephen Orgel, Joel Fineman, and R. Allen Shoaf, I examine the familiar trope of conflating adaptation with “raping” a text. In this sense, “punk,” with its etymological link to prison rape, serves not only a stylistic function for the Punked Renaissance filmmakers, but also an ontological one as well. It is my contention that these films do more than just rape the texts that they are adapting: they “punk” them. It is precisely in their departures (departures which are also penetrations) that these sometimes quite shocking films tap into the spirit of spectacle that haunts our critical readings of early modern drama.

My introduction partly addresses the problem of the “punk rock film”; namely, does it exist? “Punk” is a notoriously contentious term and concept, and I challenge a number of assumptions and claims about its definition by prominent cultural critics like Rombes and
Hebdige. I suggest that punk’s true “frozen dialectic” is not Hebdige’s reading of punk’s interplay between black and white culture, but rather between queer and straight subcultures. This understanding of queerness informs the Punked Renaissance films, both in their understanding of adaptation/translation-as-rape and in their content (both Jarman and Van Sant are associated with the New Queer Cinema).

In the following chapters, I read the impulses of Jarman, Van Sant, and Cox’s treatments of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Middleton as “punk.” In my Jarman chapter, I read the often critically ignored pop promos that Jarman directed as a vital feature in his career-long interrogation of the Renaissance. In my analysis of Van Sant’s My Own Private Idaho, I focus on the way Van Sant positions Shakespeare’s Henriad alongside a variety of other paratexts (such as songs by the Pogues and B-52’s and the hustler narratives of JT LeRoy) so that Shakespeare penetrates Van Sant’s text, and not vice versa. Finally, using Tim Blake Nelson’s O (a hip-hop revision of Othello) as a counterexample, I assess whether a twenty-first century example of the Punked Renaissance film like Cox’s Revengers Tragedy can make the same claims of authenticity and spectacle as earlier example, focusing on Nelson and Cox’s claims of prophecy and “realness” regarding the Columbine massacre and the attack on the World Trade Center.

It is my hope that this discussion of the Punked Renaissance Film provides valuable insights into the use of figurative language in critical discourse, as well as a helpful critical understanding of this genre of film.
Punk rock died when the first kid said “punk’s not dead.”

—The Silver Jews, “Tennessee”

Does the “punk rock film” genre even actually exist?

There are certainly films about punk, punks, and punk rock. As of early 2009, Netflix listed 307 items under the category “punk” – nearly half as many films as they list under the category “France.” And even at its outset, punk rock and its accompanying youth movement was a filmed and filmic phenomenon: not only were many of the earliest gigs filmed, but the impulses and artistic concerns that grew into punk impresario Malcolm McLaren’s SEX shop and his conception of the Sex Pistols first arose in his discarded *Oxford Street* film project, begun while he was an art student at Goldsmith’s College (Savage 40-1). According to Jon Savage’s indispensable history of the British punk movement, as well as other sources, McLaren always envisioned his Pistols in cinematic terms. Early in the movement, he emphasized the distinction “New Wave” over “punk,” because of the obvious allusion to French cinema, and he began constructing the Sex Pistols movie that would grow into *The Great Rock ‘N Roll Swindle* well before the band even had a recording contract.

Though probably the most famous punk band, the Pistols are not wholly representative of this highly disputed subculture (former punk musician, novelist, and general punk historian Stewart Home argues the Pistols were not “a ‘PUNK’ band at all”) (10). While not every punk band had a manager/Svengali like McLaren, a stage show rooted in spectacle is clearly a prerequisite of the genre. That punk was something to see as well as (perhaps more than) something to hear may help explain the proliferation of documentaries about punk rock that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including Amos Poe’s *The Blank Generation* (1976),
Don Letts’s *The Punk Rock Movie* (1978), Lech Kowalski’s *D.O.A.* (1980), and Penelope Spheeris’s *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981). Each of those films are a generalized study of a single, localized punk scene, but the documentary film impulse splinters and extends to individual punk bands as well: the partly fictionalized *Swindle* (dir. Temple, 1980) and *Rude Boy* (about the Clash) (dirs. Hazan and Mingay, 1980), *X: The Unheard Music* (dir. Morgan, 1986), and the plethora of “tour diary” videos that make up the bulk of the Netflix list.

Perhaps tellingly, the finest examples of the “tour diary” film (films marketed primarily towards the band’s fans and released directly to home-viewing formats like VHS or DVD) appear during the 1990s: Sonic Youth’s *1991: The Year Punk Broke* (dir. Markey, 1992), Fugazi’s *Instrument* (dir. Cohen, 1998), and G.G. Allin’s *Hated* (dir. Phillips, 1994).\(^1\) Can individual bands command a fuller focus only after discussions about the historical moment of 1970s punk concluded?\(^2\) Or is the growing demand for documentaries about punk and independent rock bands simply a result of the growing affordability of home video media, as films like Letts’s *The Punk Rock Movie* no doubt are indebted to the growing pervasiveness of Super-8 in the 1970s?

Regardless, there are a lot of documentaries about punk rock and punk rock bands. But are these films themselves inherently “punk” films? Stylistically, most of these films are no different from that prototype for the tour diary film, D.A. Pennebaker’s *Don’t Look Back* (1967). Even the more adventurous or *avant-garde* examples of the genre (such as *Instrument* or *The

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\(^1\) But the trend has certainly not ceased. The twenty-first century has seen no abetting of punk bands or videos. Some punk bands who have released tour diary, concert, or retrospective documentary films in the 2000s include: the Bouncing Souls, Against Me!, the Dropkick Murphys, the Refused, and Blink 182.

\(^2\) The debate over whether or not punk is “dead” will inform, but not be a focus of, this paper. Discussions of punk’s death are legion. Those interested in historicizing the splinter genres of New Wave (also known as New Pop), Hardcore, Post-Punk, and Indie Rock, which grew during the 1980s, should consult Reynolds’s *Rip It Up And Start Again*, which focuses largely on U.K. acts, and Azerrad’s *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, which focuses exclusively on American underground rock bands.
Year Punk Broke) are no more so than Jean-Luc Godard’s Sympathy For the Devil (1968) or Robert Frank’s Cocksucker Blues (1972). But we do not refer to Don’t Look Back as a “folk” film or Cocksucker Blues as a “rock” film. Documentaries like Martin Scorsese’s The Last Waltz (1978) are generally considered “music” films, but they are distinctly not considered “musicals”: the distinction refers to the subject matter, and not the film’s genre or method.

Perhaps the “punk” film, if it exists, is a fictional, narrative one; Derek Jarman’s imaginative Jubilee (1978) is commonly considered “the first punk movie,” and scene documentarians Poe and Spheeris both went on to direct fiction films focused on characters or starring actors who identified as punks (Gibson 364). But this is ultimately the same question that the punk documentaries raised; namely, do we identify the genre based on its subject matter?

Take these two differing views of Alex Cox’s punk rock biopic Sid and Nancy (1986), a fictionalized account of the final days of Sid Vicious, the “ultimate punk,” and his girlfriend Nancy Spungeon:

the punk history, which takes up roughly the first half of the film, gets it only partly right. But once Sid and Nancy move to America, the romance kicks into overdrive, and, in an odd and even charming way, with that romance, the movie becomes legitimately punk. It thrashes expectations … who would have thought to tell the story of punk by depicting the love of two people for each other? Perhaps no one, and that’s the punk thing about it. (Rubio 149)

and:

Punk rock movies are shambolic. Or at least they ought to be. Both Cox’s Sid and Nancy and Spheeris’s Suburbia may be feature films which have the veneer of punk—punk characters, punk living, punk music—but neither are essentially punk rock movies. Lech Kowalski’s D.O.A., on the other hand, is. Of course, there is a natural divide in that Kowalski is no filmmaker and he lacks the technical competence of Cox and Spheeris, but Kowalski brings to his film an impetuous energy—his shortcomings as a filmmaker result

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3 Spheeris’s Suburbia (1984) is concerned with a group of teen runaways who build a squatters’ community in the midst of the Los Angeles punk scene, and features performances from D.I., T.S.O.L., and the Vandals. Poe’s fiction films, often featuring punk luminaries like Debbie Harry, Anya Philips, and Lydia Lunch, are best understood as a part of the New York-based No Wave scene of the early 1980s. For a discussion of No Wave, see Masters or Sargeant.
in a form of “earnest anarchism” and the film itself the visual equivalent of the Three Chord Trick. (Kerekes 69)

In these two “punk” analyses of Sid and Nancy, we can detect a series of assumptions about what this vexing word may mean for film and cultural studies.

From a purely formal standpoint, Kerekes’s criticism seems unfair. In his equation, the punk film is a documentary, the not-punk one a fictionalized biography. The latter requires a script and an element of foresight and planning that the documentary does not; a “shambolic” documentary could well be fascinating because of its subject matter, whereas a shambolic fiction film would likely be unwatchable in spite of its subject matter. But Rubio’s analysis is unfair as well: what exactly does it mean to be “legitimately” punk? To be able to “thrash” expectations? Then how could the Ramones, who wore the same outfits and never veered from the same basic song structure for nearly a quarter of a century, be considered punk? Rubio’s understanding about the punk viewer or listener’s expectations seems illogical upon reflection, but Kerekes’s correlation between “earnest anarchism” and the “three chord trick” (i.e. the I-IV-V progression) is equally contradictory. What is anarchic, or even all that impetuous, about reverting again and again to a predetermined and easily identifiable chord progression?

Both analyses teeter between concrete observations and suggestions (clarifying the film’s “romance” or “technical competence”) and a mystical understanding about punk’s “energy.” In one reading, Sid and Nancy demonstrates a sufficient amount of “energy” as it “kicks into overdrive”; in the other, Sid and Nancy lacks “energy” because it lacks impetuousness. But if punk was “anarchic” and “impetuous,” does that suggest that punk music is always improvised? While a Sex Pistols concert may well be anarchic or chaotic—John Holmstrom described the band’s infamous San Antonio performance, where Vicious’s attack on a fan with a bass led to a full-on riot, as “what Punk Rock was supposed to be,” “the ultimate show”—the record Never
Mind The Bullocks is flawlessly played, carefully produced, and without a missed or wrong note (qtd. in Savage 449). The songs are certainly energetic, but they are never shambolic; the party line is that the punks could not play their instruments, but even a cursory listen to Bullocks proves that, at worst, the band had “technical competence.” Why is Kowalski’s film more punk for lacking it?

Kowalski says Sid and Nancy is not punk because Cox’s filmmaking is too accomplished; Rubio says that the film is punk for something that it does not really do. The American passages of Sid and Nancy are where the film “kicks into overdrive?” Those scenes maintain a far slower tempo than the earlier, largely expositional scenes set in Britain – often quite literally so, such as during the gorgeous, iconic, and slow-motioned shot of Sid and Nancy kissing in the midst of cascading garbage. What Rubio means by the film’s “overdrive” may have to do with the tension imbued in the viewer’s awareness of the plot’s trajectory. Even for viewers who were unaware of the titular characters’ early passing will “know how it ends”: Cox’s film opens with Nancy’s death and then flashes back. But Rubio writes that it has more to do with Sid and Nancy’s traditionalism: that it is, in many ways, an old Hollywood “romance.” In Rubio’s reading, Sid and Nancy is punk precisely because it is not really all that punk.4

The logic of these punk film critics seems to be as fluid as Justice Potter Stewart’s: as with pornography, we know punk when we see it. By contrast, Stacy Thompson’s materialist analysis of punk cinema is far more inflexible:

two vectors run through punk as a whole, aesthetics and economics. The history of punk is the history of the interplay between these two lines of force which find expression in and through one another. Within punk productions, the aesthetics always give voice to the underlying economics and vice versa. Consequently, there is no purely punk aesthetic or economics; neither can stand alone. (22)

4 Alex Cox himself describes the film’s narrative structure as “fairly conservative” (qtd. in Mendik 197).
By “punk economics,” Thompson means producing punk records outside of the “Big Five” system; therefore, the punk cinema must produce film outside of the “Big Nine.”⁵ According to Thompson’s understanding, a band like Green Day would not be punk just because they released their breakthrough album *Dookie* on Reprise, and *Sid and Nancy* would not be punk simply by virtue of its distributor (New Line); questions about its “energy” or “technical competence” are moot.

The problem with this dogmatic reading of punk’s economics is stated but not exactly recognized in Thompson’s essay.⁶ Namely, the problem of availability related to punk cinema. According to Thompson’s economics, “punks purposefully relegate their productions to the margins” of each industry: the “Big Five” labels take up “between 80 and 90 percent of the global music market” but “the Big Nine” studios make up 98 percent of the American film industry’s revenue. There is an enormous difference between a punk consumer’s access to ten-to-twenty percent versus two percent of a market: punk film viewers can only be satisfied with a fraction of two percent of the films produced each year? And they can only enjoy them in theaters or from DVD distributors who have no corporate affiliation at all?⁷

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⁵ Thompson’s “Big Five” refers to the “Major” labels Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, the EMI Group, Warner Brothers Music, and BMG. His “Big Nine” refers to the major studios Warner Brothers, Disney, Twentieth-Century Fox, Columbia, DreamWorks, Newmarket, Universal, Paramount, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/United Artists.

⁶ Not surprisingly, Thompson’s punk materialism is indebted to the controversial punk zine *MaximumRockNRoll*. *MRR* and its founder Tim Yohannon have often faced criticism from others within the punk community, perhaps most vocally from former Dead Kennedys vocalist Jello Biafra. Biafra claimed in an interview in rival (and in my view, the far superior) publication *Punk Planet* that *MaximumRockNRoll* maintains “the same kind of fundamentalist mind-set that makes fundamentalist Christians so dangerous” and suggests that if the seminal Dead Kennedys song “‘Holiday in Cambodia’ were released today, it would be banned from *MaximumRockNRoll* for not sounding punk” (Grad 32).

⁷ One cannot help but wonder what Thompson’s reading would do with a product like Rhino Records’s *No Thanks!: The ’70s Punk Rebellion*. *No Thanks!*, a four-disc box set, is an invaluable resource for both newcomers to and devoted fans of punk rock, collecting the A-sides of every major group from the era except the Pistols. Yet Rhino is owned by Warner Brothers. Are bands that were in Thompson’s view economically punk, like the Vibrators or the Dead Kennedys, no longer so because of this belated association with the Big Five?
This fracturing, whether it is as “purposefully” self-inflicted as Thompson claims, is so rigorous that not even those influenced by Thompson’s work seem to take it particularly seriously. The writers in Nicholas Rombes’s collection *New Punk Cinema* posit their subjects as the heirs to what Thompson critiques, but regard films like *The Blair Witch Project* (dirs. Myrick and Sanchez, 1999), *Timecode* (dir. Figgis, 2000), *Fight Club* (dir. Fincher, 1999), and the works of Harmony Korine or the Dogma 95 group as somehow “legitimately punk” despite their distribution and/or production affiliations. To incorporate a group of films this diverse, Rombes defines the New Punk Cinema not as a formal movement or genre like the Cinema of Transgression (which Kerekes claims is “the only true punk celluloid”) but “rather a tendency and an approach to filmmaking that share certain key gestures and approaches with punk” (Kerekes 69, Rombes “Introduction” 11). I began this essay questioning if a film’s subject matter determined its genre (i.e. is *Sid and Nancy* a punk film just because Sid and Nancy were punks?); Rombes begins his collection positing that a film’s subject matter is not important, only its “gestures” and “approaches” are.

The criteria of a New Punk film, or a film with New Punk tendencies, include: addressing the “aesthetics” and “politics” of 1970s punk, maintaining “the same do-it-yourself approach” of independent music, and sustaining “the animating spirit of punk” (Rombes “Introduction” 2-3).

Again, we return to the mysticism inherent in Kerekes’s and Rubio’s readings of *Sid and Nancy* (Rubio’s essay is drawn from Rombes’s collection), the “punk spirit” that is also detectable in

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8 The “purposefully” marginal reading seems problematic to me. After all, if Green Day and Chumbawamba are no longer punk because they record for major labels, and “purposefully relegate their productions” within “the margins,” they are not necessarily “purposefully” rejecting the punk label. It is the punk arbiters of taste (namely, writers for zines like *Maximum RockNRoll*) who strip them of that designation.

9 Thompson is primarily interested in No Wave films, with a particular emphasis on Amos Poe’s *The Foreigner* (1978), though the version of the “Punk Cinema” essay reprinted in *New Punk Cinema* includes a “punk critique” of Godard’s *In Praise of Love*. Predictably, Godard’s film is dismissed as not being punk, because despite its “socializing impulses,” “the movie ultimately makes money for Vivendi/Universal” (37).
what Jon Savage calls “the Punk DNA” (xvii). As a punk rock fan, I have an inkling about what this “spirit” may be; as a critical reader, I am as skeptical about the term’s application in Rombes’s collection as I am about calling Michael Moore’s documentaries, the protests of the WTO in Seattle in 1999, and even the internet “punk.”

The critical impulse to encapsulate punk music and culture—because nobody denies its impact on fashion, filmmaking, and publishing—with a “spirit,” DNA, or general ethos is the compulsion to address what Jude Davies has called punk’s “problem of consensus” (8). Other than as a generalized opposition to the 1970’s “hit parade,” Davies argues that it is impossible to construct a “unitary” politics or aesthetics for punk (9). In addition to the debatable questions about punk’s aesthetics, politics, and economics, punk also raises questions of identity: can a musician who is not a punk play punk music? Can a punk musician play anything but? No identity, like no man, is an island, and punk has always formed a curious relationship with its forefathers. An understanding of what Dick Hebdige calls punk’s “dubious parentage” leads to, in his understanding, a kind of cultural paralysis in punk (25):

[the tension between rock and reggae] gave punk its curiously petrified quality, its paralyzed look, its “dumbness” which found a silent voice in the smooth molded surfaces of rubber and plastic, in the bondage and robotics which signify “punk” to the world. For, at the heart of the punk subculture, forever arrested, lies this frozen dialectic between black and white cultures—a dialectic which beyond a certain point (i.e. ethnicity) is incapable of renewal, trapped, as it is, within its own history, imprisoned within its own irreducible antinomies. (69-70)

By declaring “No future!,” the punks may not have paradoxically created one (as The Record Mirror dryly noted upon the release of the “God Save The Queen” single in 1977) so much as

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10 Here I am referring to the conclusion of Don Letts’s 2005 documentary film Punk: Attitude. Legs McNeill, clad in a Ramones t-shirt: “Michael Moore, making that movie against Bush, is really punk!” Jello Biafra cites punk’s influence in the WTO protests, and filmmaker Mary Harron claims the “actual, whole internet is a very punk idea.” The reasoning behind these claims is not only their birth in grassroots movements (or, in the internet’s case, its capability for encouraging grassroots movements) but in their overall symbolic gesture and attitude which is translated by Biafra, Siouxsie Sioux, and Henry Rollins as “fuck you!”
they declared themselves to be history (qtd. in Savage 356). The racial makeup and the conflicting racial antecedents of punk lead to an interplay between white and black cultures that never actually enters into play. Punk, then and now, is about looking backwards: whether it is a defensive reading of punk’s significance, ala Marcus’s understanding of punk as a continuation of the Situationists and Dada, or in the British punks’ appropriation of the swastika.¹¹

Let us look back further than the Nazis, the SI International, and reggae and “race records.” According to the OED, the word first appears as early as 1575 (spelled “puncke”) in a folio of bawdy lyrics; this sense of the word also appears four times in Shakespeare, twice spoken by Lucio in *Measure for Measure*:¹²

> My lord, [Mariana] may be a punk, for many of them are neither maid, widow, nor wife. (5.1.177-8)

and:

> Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging. (5.1.515-6)¹³

The first punks were whores. And if we indulge our perceptions of coincidence, we may notice a number of similarities between Lucio’s definition of “puncke” and punk’s problems of consensus. Lucio identifies Mariana, and other punks by extension, by what she is not; it is a definition of negation that is not dissimilar from the way punk rock’s many shifting definitions skirt between negation and nihilism.¹⁴ And if we can suggest, as Katherine Eisaman Maus has, that Isabella and Angelo’s “fervent yearning for constraint … seems luridly imbued with sadomasochism” long before either Sade or Masoch were alive and able to imbue anything, then

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¹¹ One of the more curious mistakes in Cox’s *Sid and Nancy* is that Sid Vicious’s famous red swastika t-shirt is replaced with a red t-shirt depicting a sickle and hammer.

¹² The other instances are in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2.2.122) and *All’s Well That Ends Well* (2.2.19).

¹³ All quotations from Shakespeare are drawn from the *Norton*.

¹⁴ See the prologue of Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces*, particularly pages 8-9.
we may as well recognize Lucio’s sexualizing of punishment in the second quotation (310).

Three hundred fifty years before Malcolm McLaren marketed bondage gear as fashion, Shakespeare had already associated punks with S&M.

Punk’s link to Renaissance England, as minor as it may seem, will be of more consequence to this paper’s broader concerns about filmed adaptation of Renaissance drama. But first we should return to the OED to trace another definition, one that made a more transparent impact on the punks of the 1970s:

2. a. Originally: a boy or young man kept by an older man as a (typically passive) sexual partner, a catamite (obs.). Later: a man who is made use of as a sexual partner by another man, esp. by force or coercion. Now chiefly Prison slang.

*to make a punk of*: to make (a man) the passive partner in homosexual intercourse (obs.).

The obsolete usage is the only one that suggests anything resembling consent; the word “punk” is saturated with force, captivity, and queerness. On the same page of McNeil and McCain’s oral history of punk rock in the 1970s, *Please Kill Me*, where you find James Grauerholz’s claim that “punk was a direct descendant of William Burroughs’ life and work”—yet another claim for Hebdigian “dubious parentage”—you will find Burroughs’s own quizzical response to the genre: “I always thought a punk was someone who took it up the ass” (208).

Punk’s relation to queerness is its true frozen dialectic. Hebdige comes close to recognizing this in *Subculture* with his repeated close readings of Jean Genet – including Genet’s fetishizing of the identification “jerk” which, considering what the OED says about “prison slang,” could just as easily and accurately be translated as “punk.” Aside from the overall sense of closetedness in punk (both Hebdige and Marcus compare the subculture to a “secret society”), the transferences between the punk and queer subcultures are legion (Marcus *Lipstick* 36). SEX clerks Jordan (“the first Sex Pistol”) and Michael Collins’s contacts in London’s gay scene filled the store and helped define the earliest punk scene in London; Patti Smith and Richard Hell each
quoted Rimbaud incessantly (and Crass singer Penny Rimbaud adopted the poet’s surname for his stage moniker); the first place most punks felt welcome were London’s gay clubs (Simon Barker: “straight clubs didn’t want us”); the label Rough Trade was named after a slang term for hustling; Dee Dee Ramone recounted his own experiences as a hustler in the song “53rd and 3rd” (Savage 93, qtd. in Savage 186). Punk singers as diverse as Wayne County (a.k.a “Jayne County”), Darby Crash, Phranc, Pete Shelley, and Bob Mould were or are queer; the “homocore” and “queercore” subgenres appeared throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. But the usage of queer terminology and signs does not mean the scene was necessarily progressive: friends of Darby Crash blame his suicide on the prevalent homophobia in the Los Angeles scene, Shelley’s most explicitly queer-oriented song (“Homosapien”) was released after he left the Buzzcocks, and references to “the rough trade,” the notorious SEX cowboy t-shirt, and bandnames like the Queers and the Homosexuals are, in the opinion of Tavia Nyong’o, “meant as a ‘fuck you’ rather than an identification” (“Punk’d Theory” 25). Still, in Nyong’o’s Lacanian rewrite of Hebdige’s semiotics, queerness is punk’s “sinthome,” and if the punks did not identify as “gay,” they still identified as sexual others (“Do You Want Queer Theory”). Namely, they were “a-,” not “gay.”

“It’s hard to remember just how ugly the first punks were,” writes Marcus in Lipstick Traces (73). Using Adorno, Marcus reads the punks’ displays of ugliness as a political assault in line with “banishing the love song” (so that “people discovered what else there was to sing

15 For a discussion about Darby Crash and the Germs’s influence on punk’s treatment of homosexuality and how this treatment is reprocessed in Dennis Cooper’s fictional examination of the punk scene in the short story “Horror Hospital Unplugged” and the graphic novel (with Keith Mayerson) Horror Hospital Unplugged, see my “‘Gimme Gimme This, Gimme Gimme That’: Confused Sexualities and Genres in Cooper and Mayerson’s Horror Hospital Unplugged” (forthcoming) in ImageText Summer 2009. For an analysis and brief history of San Francisco’s “queercore” scene, see Schalit.

16 For an oral history of Darby Crash’s band, the Germs, see Bolles, et al. For a discussion of the SEX cowboy shirt, see Savage 100-103.
about”) (77). That may well be, but what strikes me as more important to the punk project is that the punks’ means of assaulting sexual desire were spectacle and theater. Savage, on McLaren and Vivienne Westwood’s use of pornography at SEX:

Printed in brown on pink, or red on green, these images were simple but complex: as McLaren and Westwood knew, there was a world of difference between an image in a brown-bag pornzine and a silk-screen blow-up worn in public display. The effect could be curiously asexual … [McLaren and Westwood’s] blow-ups of fetish imagery were polemical, a comment on the images’ primary use. The overt sexuality became an abstraction of sex. (100-1)

The codes of homosexuality provided punk with a sense of otherness, but it was not “other” enough. To achieve what Marcus identifies as punk’s goal of reversing perspective and values, what is overt must become abstract; what happens behind closed doors or is demarcated into protective “brown-bags” must go on public display; the pornographic must become asexual. If punk is a masculine concept (and, given its etymology, why not think of it that way?), then it emasculates itself as soon as it goes onstage.

Punk’s emasculation is intrinsic to the jailhouse rape scenario that its very name alludes to. Summarizing the “situational homosexuality” depicted in the Oscar-winning documentary Scared Straight! (dir. Shapiro, 1978), Tavia Nyong’o remarks:

What the inmate “confesses” to is his readiness to play the “masculine” role in prison society, and his readiness to feminize the youth, to turn them into women … Male rape, along with “coarse street talk,” is called forth to supplement the social order. (“Punk’d Theory” 27-8)

Since Nyong’o considers the punk scene “antisocial,” the shock-effect of a jail-punking is not cited, as Scared Straight! does, in order to protect the social order, but rather to oppose or subvert it (“Do You Want Queer Theory” 107). And this subversion, with its “feminizing” impulse, is notably a gendered inversion as well. Punk’s translations, its punkings—of Queen Elizabeth in Jamie Reed’s “God Save The Queen” image, in bands’ cover versions of songs that
they hated rather than admired, in its various references and allusions to its “dubious
parentage”—are a kind of textual rape.17

R. Allen Shoaf writes in *Chaucer’s Body* that:

The translator always does some violence to the body of the original. The translator is
always at some risk of becoming a rapist … The translator betrays the body of the original
by effacing it, substituting his own body for the original’s – he puts his in (the place of) the
other. (116)

We know that using one text as a source for a second one makes no actual physical changes to
the first, yet we often discuss texts this way. Notice the tenuousness about “violence” that we
find in a seminal critical text like *Between Men*:

the violence done by my historicizing narrative to the literary readings proper shows
perhaps most glaringly in the overriding of distinctions and structural considerations of
genre … At the same time, the violences done to a historical argument by embodying it in
a series of readings of works of literature are probably even more numerous and damaging.
(18)

For Shoaf, translation—which is itself a kind of adaptation, a mimetic treatment of
another’s mimesis—is not just a substitution of one text for another, but it is an actual
penetration of the primary text: what Sedgwick calls “embodying,” is for Shoaf an “in-bodying.”
The translation, as the penetrator, is always male and not only takes something away from the
first text (Shoaf reminds us elsewhere in *Chaucer’s Body* that rape “also means ‘theft’”), but also
leaves something behind as well – what Donne might call “the tillage of a harsh rough man”
(Shoaf 100, Donne 38). Sedgwick’s discussion takes the point even further: her concern is less

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17 Punk rock’s use and treatment of the cover song demands its own article. In *England’s Dreaming*, Siouxsie Sioux
recalls an early Banshees gig (featuring Sid Vicious in the band) made up primarily of covers of “canonical” songs
like “Smoke On The Water” and “Knocking On Heaven’s Door” (as well as the genuinely canonical “Lord’s
Prayer”). Sioux: “It was taking the piss out of all the things we hated” (Savage 219-20). See also Marcus’s *Lipstick
Traces*, particularly the discussions of “Road Runner” and “Johnny B. Goode,” featuring Johnny Rotten’s
interruptive “I hate songs like that… Stop it, stop it! It’s torture!” (59-60). One of the more fascinating
demonstrations of what Lester Bangs famously referred to as punk’s “self-hate” was also a cover song: the openly
bisexual punk performer Black Randy’s “eulogy” to the closeted Darby Crash (275). Crash’s suicide was
overshadowed by John Lennon’s murder the next day; Black Randy performed a bizarre rendition of Lennon’s
“Imagine” (“Imagine there’s no Darby…”) to a largely shocked audience. See Bolles, et al. 264.
with the violence done “to” Shakespeare’s sonnets or Our Mutual Friend than in the transference between the arguments within her own text. And like Shoaf, she takes care to place her concerns about criticism’s textual violence alongside concerns about actual rape, admitting a page later that she relies on a “perhaps inappropriately gentle” treatment of gender issues rather than rashly cover the “complicated relations among violence, sexual violence, and the sadomasochistic sexualization of violence” (19). Both critics take care to emphasize that no disrespect is meant in discussing the body of a text the same way we discuss the body of a person. There is no real comparison between raping a text and raping a person. But we make them anyway.

All punkings are violent; they might all be rapes. But unlike readings and translations, punk could be literally, as well as literarily, violent. When Adam Ant recalls how he “used to wear rapist hoods, and just attack the audience,” he is not just speaking figuratively: he “punks” the crowd in the same context of the actual riots that occurred at Sex Pistols concerts (qtd. in Savage 376). The San Antonio concert that John Holmstrom described as “the ultimate show” was also referred to as a “Shoot-Out” in the local press; captured on film, you can see for yourself when Sid Vicious takes a full can of beer to the face and, unshaken, continues to perform with blood pouring down his chest. He later plunges into the crowd and swings his bass at an audience member.18 Punk rock was more than music because it was also spectacle; a very key aspect of its spectacle was a very real, very authentic sense of danger.

Perhaps the reason why a truly punk cinema does not exist is because recorded danger is never as transgressive or as exciting as actual danger: Never Mind The Bullocks still shocks listeners, but does it scare any? But I am ultimately more interested in the critical question about

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18 The most readily available place to see this footage is its excerpts in Julien Temple’s The Filth and the Fury (2000).
punk’s spectacle; namely, how does the individual critic write about a spectacle that he or she
was not personally privy to? Again, let us look backwards to the English Renaissance.

The Renaissance stage must have been quite a show, even on nights when onstage
cannon fire did not literally bring the house down.19 It is a critical commonplace to read the
Renaissance stage as, in Jonathan Goldberg’s wonderful assessment, a venue that was “permitted
to rehearse the dark side of Elizabethan culture” (“Sodomy and Society” 80). Goldberg’s “dark
side” is both politically subversive (“kings were the puppets of writers”) and sexually liberating
(“sodomites could be publicly displayed”) (80). Goldberg’s subject is Marlowe, and one needs
only a cursory catalog of that author’s stage directions to imagine the spectacle that Renaissance
audiences enjoyed: brainings, rapes with spits, self-immolation. But unlike the violence of Sex
Pistols concerts, Renaissance spectacles were scripted and therefore organized, perhaps to the
point of meticulousness. Recall the organization that Catherine demands of Guise: “What order
will you set down for the massacre?” (Massacre At Paris 1.4.27).20

But the planning and scripting was there presumably to give these spectacles the illusion
of frenzy, particularly in regards to the depictions of violence. As Simon Shepherd has noted,
while most of the staged representations of place and setting may have been “sketchy,” the
corporeality of the characters’ violence was not just realistic but actually “real in that a sheep’s
bladder full of animal blood might be used” (38). Though Shepherd elaborates that these effects
were a kind of technical “illusionism,” his first point is more interesting: the blood onstage,
though not belonging to the actors, was real. Molly Easo Smith has linked the audience of
Renaissance theater to that of executions, suggesting that the violence’s realism was not just a

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19 I am referring, of course, to the June 29, 1613, performance of All Is True.

20 All passages from Marlowe are excerpted from the Penguin edition edited by J.B. Steane.
prerequisite, but that the gore’s reality-effect may have had to compete with reality itself. Again indulging our sense of coincidence, can we not suppose that the effect of seeing an Elizabethan actor covered in animal gore was comparable to seeing Sid Vicious or Iggy Pop drenched in their own blood?

What I mean to raise by such a comparison is not to insist that these various viewing experiences are somehow equivalent, that a Sex Pistols concert is of equal historical merit as a performance of *All Is True*, or that we think of Shakespeare as a punk, proto- or otherwise, or that the Globe functioned in any way similar to the Masque, CBGB’s, Max’s Kansas City, or any other punk rock stage. Instead, I want to reflect on my own *impulse* to make these comparisons. Critiquing these historical documents—be their author Shakespeare or Sid Vicious—demands an awareness of the spectacle they accompanied. Yet in discussing both Renaissance drama and punk rock alike, there is also a logistical inability to “read” these spectacles so much as theorize about them. What can we make of this tendency to treat our primary sources—even those as rare and “authentic” as the First Folio or the extremely valuable A&M pressing of “God Save The Queen”—as paratexts to an absent and irretrievable text: their staging?

Stephen Orgel has raised a variant of these concerns in his treatment of what he calls the “authenticity topos”:

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21 Although it is suggested in Trevor Kelley and Leslie Simon’s *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture*, a jokey guide to the punk subgenre “emo,” that we “make no mistake about it: William Shakespeare was emo to the core” (4).

22 I do not intend to denigrate the scholarship that has so aptly documented both of these eras, nor am I unaware that many of the historians of the punk era (Savage, Marcus) were also participants in that era and are often their own primary sources. I am merely commenting on the problem of historicity that critics face: our desire to, in Stephen Greenblatt’s words, “speak with the dead” (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 1).
What is authentic here is something that is not in the text; it is something behind it and beyond it that the text is presumed to represent: the real life of the characters, the actual history of which the action is a part, the playwright’s imagination, or the hand of the master, the authentic witness of Shakespeare’s own history. The assumption is that texts are representations or embodiments of something else, and that is that something else which the performer or editor undertakes to reveal. (Authentic Shakespeare 256)

Orgel’s examples include James Macklin dressing his Macbeth in a kilt or Orson Welles speaking his with a “Scottish brogue.” But Orgel is equally concerned with not the “something else” that performers and editors “reveal,” but the critic’s search for “an authentic Shakespeare, to whom every generation’s version of a classic drama may be ascribed” (256). In other words, we want confirmation for our own readings, and the pursuit of that confirmation/authenticity, can be to obsess over the “something else” outside of the text.

“The realization of a Shakespeare text,” Orgel writes earlier in the same chapter, “involves a considerable departure from the text” (238). Returning to the imagery of Shoaf and Sedgwick, why do critics and viewers so often think of “departures” as the polar opposite of an exit: as penetrations? In a practically hysterical analysis of Tim Blake Nelson’s O (2001) and Ronald Joffé’s The Scarlet Letter (1995), James Welsh writes:

The movie would have more accurately been titled “The Harlot Letter, or Hester Fucked,” for that is what Joffé’s soft pornographic treatment is really about: that is its true content. What happens to Hester also happens to Hawthorne. Later on Hester is nearly raped by a randy Puritan named Brewster, but Hawthorne has utterly been raped. (223)

By conflating treatment with content, Welsh glosses over the creative goal of cover songs and filmed adaptations alike: this is a question about style, the primary concern of punk scholarship since Hebdige. And Welsh’s blunt synecdoche (“Hawthorne has utterly been raped”) makes Joffé’s silly additions to The Scarlet Letter more than just departures, and more than just a textual rape: Joffé punks Hawthorne.

But Shakespeare does not possess the same kind of textual purity as Hawthorne; Shakespeare’s texts are supposed to be performed, supposed to be departed from, and therefore
supposed to be raped. As Orgel suggests, it may better to think in terms of the text as a departure from the performance, rather than vice versa: what was performed before the King was not what was performed before the audiences at the Globe and what was performed before the audiences at the Globe was not what was performed before students at Oxford and none of these performances “was the text that came from the author’s pen” (*Authentic Shakespeare* 22). Indeed, it is perhaps because of the way the “authentic” spectacle of the Renaissance stage lingered in an audience’s memory that it was not for generations that any staging claimed authenticity, to be “as written by Shakespeare.” If any Shakespeare, text or person, has been raped here, perhaps it is this: what the authentic Shakespeare—that is the actual, historical figure who was writer, actor, and shareholder of the King’s Men—imagined as a staged spectacle has been violated by our “authentic Shakespeare”—that is, the vast editorial reconstructions and grouping together of an array of texts. But it is also, as Orgel reminds us, “a mistake to believe that our sense of Shakespeare, whether we are scientific bibliographers or casual playgoers, is not ‘contaminated,’ and indeed determined, by a myriad of other texts” (35). Our readings may violate Shakespeare, but they also—as Sedgwick ponders about her own historicizing impulses—violate themselves.

The translation, violations, and punkings are historically layered. Orgel quotes Peter Hausted, “one of the least of the Sons of Ben,” on the virtues of a bare stage:

> I doe confesse we did not goe such quaint wayes as we might have done; we had none of those Sea-artes, knew not how, or else scornd to plant on Canvas so advantageously to catch the wayward breath of the Spectatours; but freely and ingenuously labourd rather to merit then ravish an Applause from the Theatre. (qtd. in *Authentic Shakespeare* 60).

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23 Here I am conflating Orgel’s observations in two chapters of *The Authentic Shakespeare*: “Acting Scripts, Performing Texts” and “The Authentic Shakespeare.” In particular, I have in mind Orgel’s discussion of David Garrick’s 1744 production of *Macbeth*.
Hausted’s pompousness is laced with so much false modesty that his ironic confession seems like a genuine one. Which came first? The “scorn” for breathtaking canvas backdrops or the realization that he “knew not how” to make them? And what does it mean to “ravish an Applause” from someone? What kind of an audience applauds their own rape, and what kind of rhetorical “merit” would want to compete for those affections? It is difficult to find our theoretical footing here: who is (figuratively) raping whom? The historical Renaissance audience is raped by the spectacle which is then raped by our historicized reading, staging, or editing. And what of staged rapes – say, Edward’s execution in Edward II or Lavinia in Titus? Which has the more scarring effect on the reader or viewer? Could there be, conversely, a diminishing of tension and anxiety about rape, when we are confronted with so many non-physical violations?

New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt began with a desire to speak with the dead; Never Mind The Bullocks begins with a desire to “see some history” (Shakespearean Negotiations 1, “Holidays In The Sun”). Looking backwards is the shared, impossibly fulfilled need of literary critics and punks alike. There is a spirit of punk, but it does not “animate,” like Rombes suggests in New Punk Cinema. It functions more like Orgel’s notion of the “Authentic Shakespeare”: it is “behind” and “beyond” the text, haunting our readings whenever we recall that our enjoyment of the text could not be at more of a remove from its original, intended spectacle. The spirit of spectacle haunts us when we bring what was once shocking, something that is comparable to a Bakhtinian carnival, into our offices, homes, and classrooms.²⁴

These various concerns about adaptation, authenticity, history, spectacle, and sexuality are all addressed in a peculiar film subgenre that stages Renaissance dramas in the context of

²⁴ For this notion of “spirit” I am indebted to conversations with Richard Burt.
punk or independent rock music. Expanding on Shoaf and Sedgwick’s notions about textual violence, it is my contention that these films do more than just rape the texts that they are adapting; they “punk” them. Yet it is precisely in their departures—departures that are also penetrations—that these sometimes quite shocking films may tap into the spirit of spectacle that nags our reading of Renaissance drama. By tapping into the punk impulse to not only view spectacle, but to document and film it as well, the Punked Renaissance film manages to converse, perhaps even argue, with the dead and “see history” precisely by disregarding our anxieties about anachronism and about violating canonical texts.  

25 My interests lie primarily in Renaissance drama, but I can imagine reading other “historical” films as punkings as well. Sofia Coppola’s Marie Antoinette (2006), with its Jamie Reed-inspired opening credits and its New Wave-packed soundtrack, springs immediately to mind. And though I use it as a counter-example in this essay, a similar argument could be made about the use of hip-hop in rewriting “classic” texts in Tim Blake Nelson’s O or the made-for-MTV film Carmen: A Hip Hopera (dir. Robert Townsend, 2001), starring Beyonce Knowles and Mekhi Phifer.
CHAPTER 2
VIOLATING DUSTY OLD PLAYS:
DEREK JARMAN’S VISION OF THE RENAISSANCE AND PUNK DISCOURSE

My art has always been Tory art. Politically I’m not a Tory; culturally I am.

—Derek Jarman

Derek Jarman’s treatment of early modern literature and art, specifically the canonical
texts of his homeland, has been well and extensively documented by critics both in and out of
academia. Kirsten Wächter, with as much focus on his command of forms other than
filmmaking as well as his recurrent subject matter, dubs Jarman “the last Renaissance artist”; the
introduction to Rowland Wymer’s book-length study of Jarman is subtitled “Renaissance Man in
Search of a Soul”; David Hawkes calls Jarman’s oeuvre a “Renaissance Cinema” and Jim Ellis
refers to “Jarman’s Renaissance.” Each of these critics are making an argument not just about
Jarman’s subject matter but about his subjectivity as an artist; he is not just an artist inspired by
or even obsessed with the Renaissance, but that he is, despite the obvious anachronism, an actual
Renaissance artist. As opposed to a director like Kenneth Branagh, a contemporary director who
uses Renaissance text, Jarman’s adaptations are somehow authentically Renaissance texts
themselves.1

The irony is, of course, that Jarman’s Renaissance films are decorated with exaggerated
anachronisms themselves: Caravaggio’s lover fixes a motorcycle, AIDS activists appear in
Edward II, and his Tempest is costumed in, in his words, “a chronology of the 350 years [since]
the play’s existence” (Dancing Ledge 196). These too have been cataloged and analyzed by

The epigraph to this chapter is drawn from an interview with Jarman by Hugo Davenport entitled “Making the Most
of His Gifts.”

1 For a representative example of criticism’s contrast between Jarman and Branagh, see Colin MacCabe’s “A Post-
National European Cinema.” MacCabe rebukes Branagh’s Henry V for its “sheer bad taste” and for being “tepid,”
whereas MacCabe finds Jarman’s Edward II to be the true heir of Olivier’s Henry, for its bold response to “pressing
contemporary concerns” (154).
critics, the consensus being that—the films of the 1980s, in particular—are constructed in direct opposition to the jingoistic, British “heritage cinema.”

According to Jim Ellis, Jarman’s films function as political weapons by “constitut[ing] a series of such counter-memories, which function as challenges to the nostalgic, Thatcherite construction of England’s glorious past” (“Queer Period” 290). In Jarman’s view, “filmed history is always a misinterpretation” which is both indicative and supportive of widespread, cultural delusions (“collective amnesia”) (Queer Edward II 86). His films, by fully embracing anachronism, resist that misinterpretation.

Except for that, admittedly, they don’t: “Social realism is as fictitious as the BBC news which has just one man’s point of view. Like my film … Our Edward as closely resembles the past as any ‘costume drama’ (which is not a great claim)” (Queer Edward II 86). Jarman “confesses” to the same sin of subjectivity that distorts the costume drama’s view of history; both are “fictitious” and neither is “great.” If there is anything to celebrate about this approach, it is the self-awareness of a specifically post-modern artist. So why the claims of a Renaissance-authenticity?

My contention is that Jarman’s understanding of the Renaissance is intertwined with the signage and attitudes of punk and underground music, beginning with and most obviously in “the first punk film” Jubilee (1978), but reflected in his less explicitly punk-oriented films as well. Even aside from the obvious “do it yourself” ethos of films like Last Of England (1987), which utilizes home video and abstract montage techniques that could be reasonably compared to the collage of punk rock zines, Jarman’s films often carry the same intensity and forcefulness of punk rock, the resistance epitomized by the Sex Pistols’ declaration that “we don’t care!” (Never

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2 Jarman’s hatred of Hugh Hudson’s Chariots of Fire (1981), perhaps the most famous and widely acclaimed example of the “heritage” cinema, is well documented in his own writing; he describes the film as “jingo, crypto-faggy Cambridge stuff” in (the book) Last of England and as a “damp British Triumph of the Will” in Dancing Ledge (112, 197).
Mind the Bollocks “Pretty Vacant”). The threat of violence, as well as the flair that makes up what Kerekes dismisses as the “veneer” of punk, is what makes it seem so serious, and what justifies the intermingling of the authentic with the artificial (69).  

Take Jarman’s indignant preface to Queer Edward II, the published shooting script of Edward II (1991):

How to make a film of a gay love affair and get it commissioned. Find a dusty old play and violate it.

It is difficult enough to be queer, but to be a queer in the cinema is almost impossible. Heterosexuals have fucked up the screen so completely that there’s hardly room for us to kiss there. Marlowe outs the past – why don’t we out the present? That’s really the only message this play has. Fuck poetry. The best lines in Marlowe sound like pop songs and the worst, well, we’ve tried to spare you them…

Thomas Cartelli notes a “mystery” and “erotic charge carried by the word violation” in this passage (214). Jarman is clearly playing with the familiar metaphor of an adaptation’s rape of a text as well as, in the title of the published script, the notion of “queering” a Renaissance text. He queers Edward II as a reversal and counteraction to the “fucking up” of the screen by heterosexuals and the process of queering is a process of raping, a mysterious and erotic “violation.” And, of course, this is a play where a male character is raped by other male characters in prison in what Martin Quinn-Meyler calls the play’s “death fuck”: in what way is Jarman not describing a punking (129)?

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3 Though I am unaware of any readings comparing Last of England to the collage techniques of the fanzine subculture, Jarman was clearly influenced by such publications for both the scriptwriting process and final filmed product of Jubilee, as detailed in the diary collection Dancing Ledge 168-70.

4 Simon Frith writes in Sound Effects that punk “queried the ‘naturalness’ of musical language … these musicians valued the pop quality that rock fans most despised – artificiality” (162). This is punk’s inverting of artifice: by celebrating artificiality, punk lets its audience in on the secret, thereby inviting the audience’s participation through the breakdown of the binary of audience and performer. This sense of inclusion is intrinsic to a listener or critic’s notion of “authentic” or “real” punk. See also Barker and Taylor.
Whatever we can say about punk’s attitude and general insolence, even without resorting to the mysticism of its “spirit,” I think we can relate it to Jarman’s preface, with its repeated, blunt profanities. Declarations like “fuck poetry” lack the arbitrariness of Johnny Rotten’s “fuck this and fuck that and fuck it all,” because, unlike Rotten, there is a righteousness to Jarman’s indignation (*Never Mind the Bollocks* “Bodies”). Still, Jarman’s rejoinder carries Rotten’s punk rock succinctness, as well as the political-mindedness of later punk groups like Crass. If Jarman’s “fuck poetry” is not from Johnny Rotten, perhaps it comes from Penny Rimbaud: “Do they owe us a living? / Yes they fucking do!” (Crass).

Notice as well the dichotomy between “poetry” and “pop songs” that Jarman focuses on. This binary is crucial to the goal of “outing” the present – namely, punking the past. “Poetry” in this sense is associated with the ideal of British high culture, which Alan Sinfield has demonstrated is characterized by stereotypes of effeminate, homosexual sensitivity. Jarman says “fuck that,” recalling our dialectic of penetration/departure from before: in *Edward II*’s eroticization of Gaveston’s (played by actor Andrew Tiernan) body, we see him both slow dancing with his lover to Cole Porter’s “Every Time We Say Goodbye,” dressed in matching Marks and Spencer pajamas, and **clad in the shared sign of both the punk and gay subculture, the leather motorcycle jacket.** The binary of “pop song” and “poetry” is a bit of a ruse, as is the

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5 Near the end of *England’s Dreaming,* Savage discusses how punk “[tore] itself apart,” when the political and social realities of 1978 proved the Pistols prescient (“‘No Future’ came true”) (479, 480). Those who continued to be punks had to address the use of swastikas and other racist imagery, even ironically, during rise of the National Front and New Right, as well as the effectiveness of punk’s “deliberately vague” libertarian politics (Savage 481). The most interesting post-Pistols punk bands, at least until the advent of New Wave and post-punk (and even most of those), tended to embrace radical left politics. Crass is the most influential and vocal of these acts; singer Penny Rimbaud: “Our anathema was no future” (qtd. in Savage 481). See also Rimbaud’s memoir, *Shibboleth: My Revolting Life.*

6 See “Queers, Treachery and the Literary Establishment” in *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain* 60-85.
binary of past and present. Jarman regularly embraces the visual codes of what he is rejecting or querying.

*Edward II* is Jarman’s penultimate narrative film—*Wittgenstein* (1993) is followed by *Blue* (1993) and the posthumous *Glitterbug* (1994)—and it is often noted for being his angriest (though it is improbably enough followed by *Wittgenstein*, perhaps his brightest and easily his funniest). Perhaps the anger in *Edward II* is unintentionally concurrent with the anger of punk and post-punk music; Jarman’s targets are well documented and highly personal. Wymer claims “[Jarman] had become angrier and angrier with the state of British society, the film industry, and his own failing body” in the years just prior to *Edward II* (143). Still, the anger in *Edward II* is clearly the descendent of the punk fury that Jarman documented in *Jubilee*; in no other film does he so clearly satirize living political figures than those two. And if *Edward II* is the coda to Jarman’s work of—and, in Wymer’s estimation, his escalating anger from—the 1980s, then it is also a coda to his association with the New Romantic movement, an off-shoot of punk and New Wave fashion.7

For all of his treatment and use of anachronism, Jarman was equally fond of the presence of the authentic in his films. In the *Projections* interview with Gus Van Sant, Jarman claims to have cast his actor “to the historical descriptions of Edward,” that “I’m certain that Steve Waddington looked exactly like Edward” (95). Still, though his films demonstrate a fascination with Renaissance culture from paintings by Caravaggio to drama and poetry by Shakespeare and Marlowe to “the discourses of Neoplatonism, hermetism, and alchemy,” he showed practically no interest in historical or classic modes of music (Ellis “Queer Period” 291). Unlike Jarman’s

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7 The New Romantics are more often mentioned than they are analyzed. My summary and reading is indebted to Michael O’Pray’s essay “‘New Romanticism’ and the British Avant-Garde Film in the Early 80s.” For a personal, and highly cynical, memoir of the scene, see Rimmer. However, Rimmer is barely concerned with the filmmaking concerns of the New Romantics.
rival Peter Greenaway’s films, whose work with composer Michael Nyman references and often mimics Purcell, Mozart, and Dowland, Jarman’s are scored and soundtracked by almost exclusively modern and underground rock artists. Jarman’s recurrent composer of choice, Simon Fisher Turner, played for both Adam and the Ants and The The, and performed as the King of Luxembourg, a postmodern rock collaboration with Mike Alway. The industrial, avant-garde band Coil scored Jarman’s version of the Sonnets, *The Angelic Conversation* (1985); Coil also contributed to *The Garden* (1990) along with Turner and the band Miranda Sex Garden.\(^8\) *The Last of England* features songs by Marianne Faithfull, the Red Krayola’s Mayo Thompson, Gang of Four’s Andy Gill, and Magazine’s Barry Adamson, in addition to Turner; *Blue* (1993) features contributions from the legendary producer and post-punk artist Brian Eno, as well as songwriter Momus. The two films that do address or feature classical or non-popular music were twentieth century compositions like *War Requiem* (1989), based on the 1962 Mass composed by Benjamin Britten, or a part of a collaborative compilation film (“Depuis le Jour” in *Aria* (1987)).

Jarman’s friend and critic, Michael O’Pray, claims that “*Jubilee* is the film in which Jarman found his voice and style”; that *Jubilee* is a confrontation of Jarman’s concerns about England’s past with the exorbitant style of punk is all but metonymic for the rest of his career (*Dreams 99*). Jarman had been a curious participant in the earliest days of the punk scene: scenery from *Sebastiane* was used to decorate the set of an early Pistols gig, and some of Jarman’s super-8 footage of the group appears, uncredited, in Julien Temple’s documentaries (Savage 147, Wymer 54). But, like Savage, Jarman was skeptical about just how liberating this movement really was. Though punk’s extension from the gender-bending glam rock seemed to

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8 An interesting piece of miscellany: Coil shared Jarman’s love of Pier Paolo Pasolini as well as his interest in gay and AIDS activism. The 1986 album *Horse Rotorvator*, largely influenced by the AIDS-related deaths of several friends, also includes the song “Ostia (The Death of Pasolini).”
signal a new openness about sexuality, as the movement attracted more and more attention, the “link with the subterranean sexual world would be conveniently forgotten” (Savage 190).9

*Jubilee* remains one of Jarman’s most ambitious feature films, and one of the few to emphasize exterior cinematography (*The Angelic Conversation, The Garden*, and *Last of England* all obscure their exterior locales with their distorted visuals). The use of location shooting placed the “documentary” in Jarman’s early characterization of the film as a “fantasy documentary fabricated so that the documentary and fictional forms are confused and coalesce” (*Dancing Ledge* 177). In a number of ways, *Jubilee* is an upending of the Sex Pistols’ definition of punk: rather than Jamie Reed’s image of an oblivious Elizabeth II sporting a punk safety pin, *Jubilee*’s Elizabeth I is an appalled observer, and it is the *punk* who are oblivious of her presence.10 Jarman, for all of his sympathy with the punk scene, still sides with Elizabeth’s revulsion:11

[Punks] were posturing violence, they were singing about it, they were writing violent things, but one knows that when it actually happens … it is going to be a completely different thing. This was what I wanted very much to underline in the film, because there was a climate of intellectual violence—“Dada” violence—and that sort of thing can very easily become the forerunner of the real thing. (qtd. in Wymer 64)

Jarman’s words proved somewhat prophetic, anticipating both the ironic tragedy of Sid Vicious’s passing and the way the National Front co-opted the punk rock image and scene. Though he

9 Savage and Jarman even collaborated together on the scrapped film project *Neutron*, a sci-fi version of the Book of Revelations that was to star David Bowie (O’Pray *Dreams* 129-30).

10 David Huxley on Reid’s famous collage:

> Although still immediately recognizable as a photograph of the Queen, not least because of her still visible tiara and necklace, the words [“God Save The Queen”] rob the face of its human characteristics. There is also an inherent violence in the image [because of the “blackmail” type “cut-up” lettering] … It implies an anonymous, criminal message, with a hint of threatened violence. Yet for all the apparent “amateurishness” of the lettering the layout is very carefully designed … It is, in effect, a highly recognizable corporate logo (87).

11 Jon Savage quotes Jarman saying: “I thought punk was an understandable and a very correct disgust with everything, but it wasn’t focused” (377).
would return again and again to the imagery, fashion, and general attitude of punk, Jarman disowned the distinction and, through his association with the New Romantics, is more often (and perhaps more accurately) linked with New Wave or New Pop music. Whereas punk’s films originated as vérité documents of the scene, New Romanticism grew out of the flashy, surface aesthetics of groups like Spandau Ballet and Depeche Mode; New Romantic filmmakers turned to Cocteau for inspiration, not the Maysles brothers. Though Jarman and Greenaway are the most cited examples of this genre, perhaps New Romanticism’s most enduring legacy is detectable in the promo films made for pop artists like Boy George.

Though by no means the inventor of the genre, Jarman was an early innovator of the pop music promos that would evolve into the music video craze when MTV was launched in 1981. Jarman directed a short film for Marianne Faithfull’s 1979 album Broken English, which featured footage from the “Jordan’s Dance” short included in Jubilee, as well as a rather blunt montage that compares Hitler and Mussolini to the National Front (O’Pray Dreams 126). Jarman claimed to work in the music video format for financial reasons, but it was a medium that allowed him to play out most of his artistic obsessions and which demanded the challenge of collaboration that he valued about filmmaking. In addition to work with more overtly commercial New Wave groups like Wang Chung and Lords of the New Church, he also collaborated on a film for the extremely confrontational group Throbbing Gristle called TG Psychic Rally in Heaven, which provided the opportunity to (in Jarman’s words) take “experiments with superimposition and refilming … as far as I can go” (qtd. in O’Pray Dreams

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12 Not only did Jarman disown “punk,” but punk partly disowned him as well, most angrily in Vivienne Westwood’s “Open T-Shirt to Derek Jarman” (see Jarman’s At Your Own Risk 86-8)
But the slow motion effects and abstraction of the subject (singer Genesis P-Orridge can be detected only in “fuzzy outline”) of the Throbbing Gristle film is clearly a predecessor for the technical construction of *The Angelic Conversation* (O’Pray *Dreams* 128). It is not surprising that, given his interest in the jarring dissonance of Throbbing Gristle, that his only full-length film of this period would be the heavily distorted *Angelic Conversation* (*Conversation*’s unique tableau was crafted by videotaping the projection of a Super-8 image and then blowing the resulting video up to 35mm film).¹⁴

But, inarguably, it was the collaborations with the Pet Shop Boys and the Smiths that were Jarman’s finest treatments of pop music. In the case of the Pet Shop Boys, Jarman’s expertise as a set designer on Ken Russell’s films and stage productions were used to design the band’s entire life performance; the group’s first tour featured a backdrop of videos directed by Jarman and elaborate props like a large mock phallus (which recalls the opening sequence of *Sebastiane* and the Rolling Stones 1976 tour) and Kenneth Anger-inspired costumes (O’Pray *Dreams* 176).¹⁵ As with the Pet Shop Boys, Jarman appears to have been drawn to the Smiths because of frontman Morrissey’s foppish treatment of masculinity and sexual identity.

¹³ For an examination of Throbbing Gristle’s fascinating deconstructions of punk and industrial music, including a discussion of this paper’s shared concerns about identity and authenticity, see Reynolds 124-38.

¹⁴ Genesis P-Orridge provided the soundtrack for Jarman’s short film about William S. Burroughs, *Pirate Film/Tape (WSB)* (1982) with his later band Psychic TV. In *Dancing Ledge*, Jarman discusses his admiration for P-Orridge (“providence in the form of Genesis P. Orridge arrived today…”) and their shared admiration for Aleister Crowley, William S. Burroughs, and Caravaggio (235-6).

¹⁵ The Pet Shop Boys are not a punk group, *per se*; they are more accurately characterized as a synth pop group. But the group marks an interesting example of the splintering of punk into subgenres like New Wave, post-punk, Brit-Pop, and house music. Tennant’s music career started not as a musician, but rather as a critic for *NME*, and he attended and wrote about many of the earliest Sex Pistols gigs (including the notorious performance at the London club the Nashville on April 23, 1976) (Savage 168). Tennant’s role as a detached observer of performance may explain the Pet Shop Boys’ use of artificiality and pastiche in their music, covering and remixing pop classics like “Can’t Take My Eyes Off Of You” and “Always On My Mind,” as well as recruiting Dusty Springfield’s vocals for their “What Have I Done to Deserve This.”
But in addition to the shared reference point of queer identity, Morrissey and Jarman both use their art to engage in a very personal conversation with their national history, particularly literary history. In the song “Cemetery Gates” [sic], Morrissey’s morose speaker retreats with a friend to a mythical cemetery that houses Wilde, Keats, and Yeats, on a “dreaded sunny day”:

So we go inside and we gravely read the stones  
All those people all those lives, where are they now?  
With loves, and hates, and passions just like mine  
They were born and then they lived and then they died. (Queen Is Dead)

The speaker’s companion goes on to plagiarize Richard III (“The early village cock / Hath twice done salutation to the morn” becomes “ere thrice the sun hath done salutation to the dawn”), but is unable to outwit the “well-read” speaker who has “heard [these words] said / A hundred times (maybe less, maybe more)” (5.5.163-4). Here, Morrissey’s speaker conflates familiarity with identification; because he is better acquainted with the writers’ texts, he is better acquainted with the writers themselves. This acquaintance leads naturally to a kind of authority, in the song’s conclusion which places a funny twist of its own chorus: “I meet you at the cemetery gates / Keats and Yeats are on your side, but you lose / Because Wilde is on mine.” Adding the insistent “but you lose,” which almost garbles the speaker’s metre, not only further bests the companion in their competition over British literary history, but it singularizes the identification with the dead that the speaker postulated by “read[ing] the stones.” The companion “loses,” because the speaker has “loves, and hates, and passions just like” Wilde.\(^\text{16}\) In his journals, interviews, and other writings, Jarman would clarify similar identifications; in Queer Edward II, he remarks that

\(^{16}\) Morrissey’s obsession with Oscar Wilde is well documented in interviews and concert footage. He frequently appeared in a t-shirt with Wilde’s visage and claimed to base his stage persona and appearance (such as always carrying daffodils in his back pocket) on Wilde. In a 1984 interview with Ian Birch for Smash Hits, Morrissey was photographed with his collection of books by and about Wilde, and explained “I used flowers because Oscar Wilde always used flowers.” Jarman also thought of Wilde as a kind of literary soul mate; for a discussion of Wildean aesthetics in Jarman’s later films, see Porton.
Gaveston’s lines about “a lovely boy in Dian’s shape” are in the play because, not unlike Jarman himself, Marlowe was “such an intellectual queen” (*Edward II* 1.1.61, *Queer Edward II* 14).

O’Pray recalls that the Smiths and Jarman “seemed a perfect match” because of their shared interest in England’s past and their worries over England’s present (*Dreams* 154).

Jarman’s *The Queen Is Dead* promo video—a thirteen-minute long film later spliced into three separate music videos “The Queen is Dead,” “There Is A Light That Never Goes Out,” and “Panic” for broadcast—is a fascinating mélange of influences and of Jarman’s style past and future. Jarman’s treatment of the pop video is an under-examined facet of his career; *The Queen Is Dead* promo is his finest accomplishment in that genre. Filmed and edited, according to O’Pray, between completing *Caravaggio* and beginning *Last of England, The Queen Is Dead* promo feels like both a return to Jarman’s *avant-garde* roots (with its scratched film and quick cuts, it is the work that most demonstrates his debt to Brakhage) and as a dry-run of the “looser” narrative of *Last of England*. If *Last of England* is a response to the frustrations of working with the restrictions of Channel Four and the British Film Institute, who required he work in 35mm and who sliced his funding, the frenzied vision of the *Queen* promo should be considered a part of the same response (Wymer 92). Though Jarman stated in interviews that he disliked making music videos because they were childish (“a bit like being seventeen always”) and because he disliked editing as “eighty cuts per minute,” I suspect that the director protests too much (qtd. in Gomez 91). If the frenetic editing of videos annoyed him, why use that technique in his most personal projects? *Last of England*’s disco sequence contains at least “1,600 cuts in

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17 In the Van Sant *Projections* interview, Jarman claims that his interest in filmmaking began with “American underground cinema” like “Brakhage, or Michael Snow, Warhol, Bailey, Anger” and that “my films came out of that” (98). In the same interview, Jarman elaborates on his notion of “loose” and “tight” narratives (97-8). “Loose” narratives are films like *The Garden* and *The Last of England*, which were pieced together from several, largely improvised shoots with the Super-8, rather than larger-scale “tight” productions made on 35mm, where the narrative is constructed *before* the shoot, rather than afterwards, during editing.
only six minutes of finished film” (Hoyle). With *Last of England*, the director was stepping away from *Caravaggio* far more than from *The Queen Is Dead*.

Actually, *Last of England*’s most infamous sequence features Jarman’s lover Spring stepping *on* *Caravaggio*. Earlier seen in the film preparing to shoot up and wandering through a catacomb-like environment holding a sparkling flare, clad in a leather jacket as a precursor to Jarman’s image of Gaveston, stomping upon a copy of “Profane Love” with the heavy jack-boots associated with punk groups like Sham 69. 18 But what seems, at first, like a disavowal of his earlier film and of his romanticization of the past (when Nigel Terry’s narrator sneers “all you did in the desperation was celebrate the Windsors yet again!,” is Jarman writing about himself?) is complicated when a montage made up of flashes of Jarman’s mother picking a flower, Jarman filming his own shadow upon a dune, and the negative photo-strip of a moth (clearly an allusion to Brakhage) ends with footage of Spring attempting to copulate with the painting. Panting can be heard, and the scene is filmed from multiple angles at varying speeds, ending with the placement of Jarman’s shadow into the shot, blanketing Spring’s thrusting buttocks. In the book *The Last of England*, Jarman remarks that Spring’s assault on “Profane Love” is “a love/hate relationship” and that the intrusion of his own shadow marks that his is “not a passive camera but a cinematic fuck” (190).

Jarman’s goal of an active gaze that functions like a phallus is not a wholly original concept, as those familiar with the work of Laura Mulvey will attest to. Still, what is interesting

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18 Wymer compares the image of *England*’s “figures who move through this landscape holding aloft a flaring torch” to the image of Virgil guiding Dante through Hell in Doré’s illustrations of the *Divine Comedy* (112). As for the jack-boots, in addition to punk, they signify the ultra-right wing group the National Front, which co-opted the look of the punks during the early 1980s, claiming bands like Sham 69 as their own (see Sabin “‘I Won’t Let That Dago By’”). Why Jarman is alluding to punk’s more thuggish persona here may be purely coincidental, as Wymer suggests that the screened Spring is “not entirely out of keeping with his off-screen persona” (116). Though perhaps there is a commentary on how non-threatening the punk guise had become by 1987, that punk’s rebellious veneer needed a queering in order to upset or disrupt.
here is that Jarman is not trying to translate one artform into another—as he had by adapting Shakespeare’s drama for The Tempest or in the staged models of Caravaggio’s most famous images in Caravaggio—but rather trying to translate a physical action into filmmaking: not drama into film, but fucking into film. He is not wholly successful. Jarman’s intentions are impossible to discern without his own footnotes; as an autobiography, Last of England is all but impenetrable without its epitexts. How else would you know the woman in the Super-8 footage was Jarman’s mother, or that Spring was his lover? That is far too much mediation and commentary for the organic “fucking” that Jarman is aiming for. But what does come through in each viewing, tempered by paratextual references or not, is the scene’s forcefulness in capturing a eroticized defilement of high culture: not every viewer is privy to the cinematic fucking, but most detect a cinematic punking.

The cues and discourse that make up this punking are detectable in Jarman’s Queen Is Dead. The three short pieces that comprise The Queen Is Dead are focused around the conceit of layering images through dissolves, and many of the images are inversions of themselves—presented as the image’s negative. But the fact that Jarman uses these methods in Last of England—as well as relying heavily on the disorienting effect of the Super-8’s tendency to speed up, so that each sequence looks unnaturally fast when spliced into another film stock—is not as key as the way he recycles icons and images from the earlier film. Many critics have noted, as Chris Lippard has, that England is set in “the same decaying urban landscapes” as Queen Is Dead, but few have seen the films’ other shared images (“Introduction” 4).19 Tilda Swinton’s

19 And, of course, the portrait of “decaying urban landscapes” must recall the exterior sequences of Jubilee, yet another shared code between these films and punk discourse. Jarman’s video for the Smiths’ “Ask” also alludes to Jubilee; a punk in a Roman guard costume, sporting a shield decorated with a Union Jack, ala Jubilee’s “Rule Britannia” sequence. Ellis suggests that both The Queen is Dead and Last of England are built around hermetic symbolism (“Queer Period” 296). Perhaps, but the use of flowers may just be coincidence, considering Morrissey’s Wildean obsession (see above).
gorgeous dance as the nameless bride at the conclusion of England is a rewrite of a sequence in Queen Is Dead, where an androgynous woman bears her breasts (as Swinton cuts open her dress with a knife in the latter film) and dances with a giant Union Jack, blowing in the wind (as Swinton’s dance is accessorized by dramatic wind gusts). Spring’s hedonistic punk is a revision of Queen’s spraypaint-can wielding punks; the burning houses of England recall the burning car that’s the focal point of the “There Is A Light That Never Goes Out” sequence; the soldiers who wrestle on top of the Union Jack in England (are they fighting or fucking?) recall the androgynous lovers kissing in the park in Queen (is this a homo- or heterosexual act? if it is hetero, which lover is male and which is female?). And the latter film’s many images of execution are a recycling of the one shot of Morrissey in Queen Is Dead; in a shot near the end of the “Panic” sequence, the singer kisses a skull and then gags, in what Wymer argues is a clear allusion to the duke’s death in Middleton’s Revenger’s Tragedy (14).20 Both films are, like Jubilee before, Jarman’s confronting nationality and eroticism in the shadow of a metaphorical apocalypse (representing, alternately, the AIDS crisis or Thatcherism). Last of England is, in O’Pray’s estimation, “arguably Jarman’s most brilliant film, a major artistic achievement,” and it is also, like Jubilee, a feature-length engagement with punk discourse, existing the way that it does because of Jarman’s experiences and experiments as a music video director (Dreams 156).

The last film Jarman would make that so directly confronted his concerns about national identity and his sexuality would be Edward II. Like most of Jarman’s films and like all punks, Edward II looks backward. Perhaps one reason why critics think of Jarman as an authentic Renaissance artist is because he is interested in more than one artist of the Renaissance; while adapting a Shakespeare play for film guarantees a certain cultural currency for your project, the

20 Surely this image inspired Alex Cox’s “Jarmanesque” take on Middleton’s drama, discussed later in this paper.
likes of Middleton and Marlowe are less of a draw. With Marlowe, it is not hard to see why: while Shakespeare’s plays revel in ornate language that is apt to intimidate film audiences, Marlowe all but disavows language throughout his plays. In spite of all of his elaborate speeches, Tamburlaine prefers when “our swords shall play the orators” and learns upon Zenocrate’s death that words do not “serve,” that all his “raging cannot make her live” (1.1.2.132, 2.2.4.120-1). Books may cause Faustus to sell his soul, but not necessarily their text: the “necromantic books are heavenly” because of their “lines, circles, scenes, letters and characters,” not because of their words (1.1.49-50). And when discussing which way he will “draw the pliant king” how he pleases, Gaveston knows that—as much as Edward loves “music and poetry”—he loves the image of a “lovely boy in Dian’s shape” concealing “those parts which men delight to see” with an olive leaf far more (1.1.54, 61,65). Marlowe, perhaps more than any other Elizabethan playwright, reminds his audience to focus on the spectacle of the stage, rather than the ambiguity of words.

Jarman is very cognizant of this aspect of Marlowe’s drama and, in his “improvement,” emphasizes the spectacle even more than Marlowe’s original text: we do not just hear about the “lovely boy” from Gaveston, we see him, draped in a boa-constrictor, as Gaveston’s monologue becomes voiceover. By showing us the masque, Jarman is consciously referring to his earlier realization of Renaissance drama, *The Tempest*. That film moves Miranda and Ferdinand’s marriage masque to the film’s conclusion and drapes it in with dancing sailors, a coy interplay of the campy imagery of both Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes* with the outlaw-erotics of Genet’s

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21 See Cartmell.

22 Cartmell calls this the Shakespeare film’s “anxiety of influence,” which she sees in direct opposition to the “punk, disrespectful attitude towards Shakespeare” that she detects in Jarman’s *Tempest* (31, 30). Cartmell argues that the “punk” Shakespeare film was “short-lived”; I respectfully disagree.
**Querelle.** In *Edward II*’s masque, there is no such sense of play: the “lovely boy” has none of the *Tempest* sailors’ effeminacy, the gold laurel on his head comes to jagged points, and when he kisses the snake it is as menacing as it is erotic.

Stephen Orgel claims that, for Renaissance audiences, “every masque moved toward the moment when the masquers descended and too partners from the audience, annihilating the barrier between the ideal and the real” (50). By beginning his film—his most *angry* film—with a masque, Jarman’s political implications are clear: the audience needs to be involved. Since obviously Jarman cannot, *Purple Rose of Cairo*-style, bring audience members onto his stage/screen, he uses anachronism to come as close as he can:

> Along with Annie Lennox’s performance, the OutRage activists are the most jarring and insistent intrusions of the present into the film, although they can both be linked to Renaissance theatrical practice … When the film reveals at the end that it is a performance staged for the activists, it make sense to read their earlier entrance into the fiction as the masquers, the forces of good who do battle with the anti-masquers, as emblematic of all that threatens civil society. (Ellis “Queer Period” 309)

I admire Ellis’s reading; paired with Ariel greeting the camera as though it were a wedding guest in *The Tempest*, I think that it could be argued that Jarman’s vision of the Renaissance film is *always* a kind of participatory masque. Still, considering the film’s particularly dark vision, the visage of a New Wave-Annie Lennox dressed in funeral black instead of *The Tempest*’s harmless pun (“Stormy Weather,” get it?), and the violence of the OutRage activists battling with a riot squad, I would say that Jarman’s attitude in this film is more indebted to the Hollywood club The Masque than it is to any Renaissance notion of the masque. Punk’s stage, too, belonged to the audience as well as the performers: at one Throbbing Gristle concert, Genesis P-Orridge “invited half a dozen members of the audience onstage and handed them instruments” (Reynolds 129).

Jarman turned to the Renaissance again and again because he loved it and, like Spring with “Profane Love” in *The Last of England*, he wanted to somehow *mark* the way he loved it.
But you cannot film or stage an emotion the way you can film or stage an action; what the Punked Renaissance cinema of Derek Jarman shows most candidly is not his love for the Renaissance but his love with the Renaissance, a love that is sometimes forced and rarely gentle. Jarman’s films fuck the Renaissance (up).
I identify quite a bit with the punk-kid gay culture.

—Gus Van Sant

Around the same time that disgraced author James Frey was outed for attempting to pass off wholesale literary invention as his own experiences under the guise of a “memoir,” another literary façade crumbled. JT LeRoy, the bestselling “high risk” author whose tales of teen prostitution and sexual abuse attracted the acclaim of both established authors and various hipster celebrities, was revealed to be a fiction invented by author Laura Albert. “LeRoy’s” few public appearances were actually enacted by Albert’s lover Geoffrey Knoop’s half sister, Savannah Knoop, with Albert in tow, as LeRoy’s hanger-on “Speedie.” Even hot on the heels of Oprah’s public shaming of Frey, The San Francisco Chronicle famously called the LeRoy charade “the greatest literary hoax in a generation” (Benson).

More than just using a pseudonym, LeRoy was an elaborately constructed persona with a devastating backstory: though LeRoy’s work was ostensibly fiction, Albert’s agent and publisher emphasized that LeRoy’s fiction was autobiographical.¹ In the preface to the Paris Review interview where Albert officially confirmed that LeRoy was an invention, Nathaniel Rich dryly notes that “the many articles about [LeRoy] tended to focus less on his writing than on his life story” (144). The irony, of course, is that not only was LeRoy’s “life” (“how he came from West Virginia, was often homeless, and had drifted around the country with his mother, Sarah,

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working as a truck-stop prostitute and street hustler”) more or less identical to what was printed in his books, making any “focus” on one over the other slightly redundant, but that LeRoy’s “life” was a piece of writing (Rich 144). It was not always text, exactly—performance art, perhaps?—but it was always fiction.

The connection with Frey proves intriguing: Frey deceived his audience by designating his work nonfiction, but LeRoy’s three books (the novel Sarah, the collection The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things, and the novella Harold’s End) were always presented as fiction. As far as the literary product goes, Albert had not deceived anyone: if anything, what was once thought to be fiction should still be thought of as fiction—more so, even. If readers confessed to feeling “deceived” by the emotive power of LeRoy’s writing, they would have to confess to a readerly fallacy: that it was the books’ fetishistic authenticity as the product of an abused child, rather than their realism as works of well-crafted fiction, that they found so moving.

What interests me about the fallout of the JT LeRoy/Laura Albert revelation is not Albert’s reader’s personal conundrum, but that Albert continues to make claims of authenticity about the LeRoy persona even after being exposed as a charlatan. In the Paris Review interview, Albert insists that LeRoy was not a “hoax,” but rather a “veil upon a veil—a filter” and that readers who read Sarah, The Heart is Deceitful and Harold’s End as LeRoy’s autobiographies were not far off: “Everything you need to know about me is in my books, in ways that I don’t even understand” (167). Suggesting that she writes about herself and yet does not understand her own writing is an extension of Albert’s claim that JT LeRoy existed “independently” of her own personality (“it really felt like he was another human being”) (qtd. in Rich 156). In one of the interview’s oddest revelations, Albert describes her friendship with Smashing Pumpkins singer Billy Corgan; Corgan was aware of the secret, and yet Albert would alternately converse with the
singer as LeRoy or herself, often during the same conversation: “and JT would say things to
Billy that I, as Laura, wouldn’t dare say to Billy” (qtd. in Rich 164).

Among the many celebrity admirers that LeRoy accumulated was filmmaker Gus Van
Sant, who commissioned a script from LeRoy for his school-shooting film *Elephant* (*LeRoy’s*
script was not used, though “he” retains an associate producer’s credit) (2003). Their friendship,
like most of LeRoy’s associations, was primarily based on conversations over the telephone, two
of which appear on the Criterion Collection’s deluxe, 2005 DVD release of Van Sant’s *My Own
Private Idaho* (1991). One is an audio clip of a conference call between LeRoy, Van Sant, and
filmmaker Jonathan Caouette, and the other is a partly transcribed interview between LeRoy and
Van Sant included as an essay by LeRoy in the DVD’s booklet insert.

The very brief essay, titled “Boise on the Side,” features a handful of elegiac descriptions
of scenes in the film (“a lost kid, unloved, unmoored, unmourned on a desolate road”) intercut
with quippy back-and-forth between Van Sant and LeRoy, including a discussion about a
memory of sharing a hotel room together: considering the later revelations about LeRoy’s
identity, I wonder if the story ever happened (perhaps it was Savannah Knoop in Albert’s
stead?). Filling out the rest of the three pages are a number of long quotes from the film that
appear to be drawn from Van Sant’s published script, rather than the film itself (8). LeRoy’s
text alternates between bold, italicized, and natural font and caps-lock with little rationale,
perhaps to emulate the naturalized stream-of-consciousness of an outsider artist.

The essay, with its variations in font and its genre-bending, has a collage-like feel. Or
perhaps, given its use of LeRoy’s journalism—both as a reporter for music magazines and as a
kind of diarist—it should more accurately be described as a scrapbook:

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2 A reference to Van Halen in the script was changed to Sinead O’Connor in the film; LeRoy’s excerpt refers to Van
Halen.
THIS IS NOT AN AFTER-SCHOOL SPECIAL. THERE IS NO SOCIAL WORKER OR ADULT WITH A HEART OF GOLD THAT RESCUES THESE KIDS. THERE ARE TRICKS, DATES, MEN WHO GIVE MONEY FOR WHAT YOU’RE CARRYING, YOUR BODY’S WORTH. AND THEN THERE IS BOB. THAT’S THE STREET. THE ADULT WHO IS LOVED IS THE ONE WITH THE BEST DRUGS.

[We’d stand outside a theater in the Castro waiting for My Own Private Idaho to let out. Guys came streaming from the movie hungry for meat like a pack of lions smelling their first deer in a month. Those nights we could charge four times what we normally got… (8)

LeRoy’s caps-locked text emphasizes the film’s neo-realist authenticity (“THIS IS NOT AN AFTER-SCHOOL SPECIAL”) by laying out a minimalistic summary of the film in blunt slogans. Then, using the method of stage directions (italics and brackets), LeRoy launches into a (fabricated) memory about prostitution, implying that, despite the film’s grittiness (“THAT’S THE STREET”), Idaho romanticizes prostitution, at least for a certain kind of viewer.

Before turning to my reading of Van Sant’s film and, in particular, its punking of Shakespeare’s Henriad and Orson Welles’s earlier version of the Henry plays, Chimes At Midnight, I would like to focus on another of the film’s paratexts: the song “The Old Main Drag” by the Irish folk-punk band the Pogues, which appears over the film’s final credits.3 A first-person narrative of a London rent-boy, the song is shocking in its explicitness:

There the he-males and the she-males paraded in style
And the old man with the money would flash you a smile
In the dark of an alley you’d work for a five
For a swift one off the wrist down on the old main drag …

And now I’m lying here I’ve had too much booze
I’ve been spat on and shat on and raped and abused

3 I do not focus too much on the similarities between the two films’ narratives, but rather the way Shakespeare’s language helps inform Idaho’s traversal of genre. For a clearer catalog of similarities between the Henriad and My Own Private Idaho, see Arthur and Liebler, Wiseman, or Davis. As for the Pogues, newcomers to the group’s music may not detect much of a “punk” influence other than in the band’s use of tempo and in MacGowan’s sneering vocals. But their link to the SEX scene has been documented in both Savage’s England’s Dreaming and Temple’s Filth and the Fury, as well as in MacGowan’s dubious but incredibly enjoyable autobiography A Drink With Shane MacGowan (co-written with Victoria Mary Clarke). The band has inspired a legion of Irish folk-inspired punk acts, such as Flogging Molly, the Dropkick Murphys, and Black 47. See also MacGowan’s first band, a more obviously “punk” act, the Nipple Erectors (a.k.a. the Nips).
I know that I am dying and I wish I could beg
For some money to take me from the old main drag.  

The Pogues’ genius was not just the way their music married traditional Irish balladry with punk rock but how, at the height of their powers, they transitioned so effortlessly between their own work and that of their forefathers. “Old Main Drag” shows the mastery of the tropes of folk song storytelling—the rhymes are prominent but unobtrusive and never inane, the speaker’s details are immaculately chosen—that demonstrates songwriter Shane MacGowan’s skill. But it is not just a question of quality. MacGowan’s command of form (as well as the band’s arrangements of traditional folk instruments like fiddles, pipes, banjos, and mandolins) does not mean that songs like “The Old Main Drag” are meant to “stand on their own,” but rather that they ought to stand alongside classic folk songs like “Jesse James,” Ewan MacColl’s “Dirty Old Town,” or Eric Bogle’s “The Band Played Waltzing Matilda,” all of which are featured on *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash*. By placing his own songs among these covers, MacGowan is not just inviting the comparison of his work to the folk canon, he is proposing that his work is a new classic; that despite the punk influence, these are “authentic” folk and Irish songs.

The poetic realism at play in “Old Main Drag” is a facet of the Pogues’s more general claim of authenticity. MacGowan is not claiming to be authentic “rent boy,” but rather an authentic folk music troubadour like Bogle, speaking for the people by speaking *as* the people.

Perhaps the catalog of ailments listed by the disenchanted soldier in “The Band Played Waltzing

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4 For the sake of space, I have only included the second and fifth verses of “Old Main Drag.”

5 My understanding of folk music, outside of my own listening history, is largely indebted to Klein’s famous biography of Woody Guthrie and Greil Marcus’s *Invisible Republic* (now in print as *The Old, Weird America*). I am aware that both of these texts focus on American folk music and that their rubric may not apply to MacGowan (who is Irish) and Bogle (born in Scotland, naturalized Australian). Still, while both Bogle and the Pogues lay claim to the folk traditions of the British Isles, as late twentieth-century folk composers, they tend to be as inspired by American politically-minded folk singers like Phil Ochs, Pete Seeger, and Guthrie as they are by, say, the Child Ballads. This is readily apparent in *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash*’s inclusion of “Jesse James” and in the Pogues’ b-side “Body of an American” (which has since been immortalized on HBO’s *The Wire*). For a discussion of “troubadour,” in the sense of medieval poetry, and its influence on recent folk music, see Haines.
Matilda” (“the legless, the armless, the blind, and insane”) may be echoed in the line “I’ve been spat on and shat on and raped and abused” as the song’s title sounds somewhat similar to “Dirty Old Town.” But by placing “Drag” near the beginning of Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash’s song sequence and by placing “Matilda” at the very end, it actually sounds like the reverse: that Bogle’s song is indebted to MacGowan’s.

MacGowan’s song strikes me as both more authentic and more realistic than LeRoy’s narrative not just because his language is more graceful and because we know that LeRoy’s anecdote about tricking outside of Idaho screenings is a complete fabrication, but also because he is only claiming to be an observer, not the song’s speaker himself. Both pieces are about male prostitution, and both are attached as paratexts to My Own Private Idaho specifically because of their subject matter – nothing else about the film is particularly Irish and there are no other creative pieces by novelists or prostitutes in the DVD booklet other than LeRoy’s.6 The examples of LeRoy’s essay and MacGowan’s ballad suggest that hustling narratives make a claim about authenticity or realism through attempting to document either participation or observation: are we positioned inside or outside of these boys’ experience? If it is a question of placement, where does Van Sant place the viewer’s gaze in My Own Private Idaho? Where does he place Shakespeare?

Multiple critics have identified a “gritty realism” in Van Sant’s film, often linked with cinema vérité or Italian neorealism.7 Kathy Howlett’s materialist reading of the film—heavily influenced by Jameson—suggests that the film’s “gritty realism” “emphasizes the gulf between

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6 The rest of the DVD insert books is comprised of an essay about the film by Amy Taubin written for the DVD release, an essay that previously appeared in American Film upon the film’s theatrical release, and two interviews from Interview magazine.

7 Neo-realism is a common reference point for the New Punk critics; McRoy’s essay about the Italian influence on the New Punk filmmakers features an extended reading of Van Sant’s Elephant (2003).
rich and poor in order to demystify “the ideological function” of Orson Welles’s vision of the
tavern world in Chimes At Midnight (171). But in her often very astute reading of Van Sant’s
“degrading” of Welles’s film and its “utopian” vision of the past, she never clarifies exactly what
makes Van Sant’s vision realistic. Similarly, in Mark Adnum’s rebuttal to the popular reading of
the New Queer Cinema, River Phoenix’s Mike is described as “hust[ling] to survive and to
escape the no-hope hell of his Midwestern home.” This is an overly romantic reading of the film
with the “youth at risk” genre projected onto it. Despite its explicitness, this is not first-and-
foremost a hustler narrative any more than it first-and-foremost a Shakespeare film.

There is no escape from the Midwest depicted in the film; Idaho begins after Mike has
left home, never mind whether it was or was not a “hell” of any kind, and, far from escaping, he
voluntarily returns, in search of his mother. (He also involuntarily returns, in the uncanny
reappearances on the road like a “fucked up face”). Secondly, aside from a teary request for a
couple of extra bucks from a john early in the film, which could just as easily be read as an
affectation, since the plea is based on an elaborate lie about his father’s suicide attempt, there is
little in the film that suggests that Mike views his straits as being particularly dire. Mike, who
has been called one of the most “profoundly unconscious” heroes of cinema, never exerts the
kind of desperation or struggle of someone “hustling to survive” (Arthur and Liebler 28).

Gritty realism? Presumably a gritty and/or realistic depiction of prostitution would want
to show sex scenes that are gritty or realistic, but none of Idaho’s couplings are either. There is
the trick where Mike’s orgasm is represented by a farm house falling out of the sky and crashing
into the ground in slow motion; the one where Mike dresses like a “Little Dutch Boy,” and the
date transforms into a parody of old Hollywood musicals, set to Rudy Vallee’s “Deep Night”; the
ménage a trois with Scott Favor (Keanu Reeves) and Hans (Udo Kier), filmed in the same
imitations of still-photography as Scott’s love scene with Carmella, and which Adnum notes is “in the style of porn magazine photo stories.” Not only are these scenes not realistic, they verge on the ethereal: instead of “grit,” Van Sant comes close to glorifying these boys’ lifestyles.⁸

The “gritty realism” reading appears to assume that Van Sant’s hustler narrative makes the same kind of claim for authenticity or realism that hustler narratives normally maintain and that we expect, be it the actual autobiographical elements of Genet or Rechy, the fabricated autobiography of LeRoy, or the “man of the people” folk singer affect of the Pogues. But though the film does incorporate at least one explicitly vérité moment (when two actual hustlers give interview-style monologues describing their first tricks, both of which involve rape, during the diner scene), it is intercut with the fictional interaction between Mike and an unnamed female character. The tension from the hustlers’ practically detached, matter-of-fact recollections (“he put a fuckin’ wine bottle up my butt, right?”) is diminished by what Van Sant punctuates their stories with in the film’s editing. First, according to their sightline, the hustlers are addressing an unseen interviewer to the right of the camera, documentary style; the woman eating with Mike looks directly into the camera, puncturing the established vérité “gaze” with fiction. This puncture occurs on the soundtrack as well, not only with Phoenix’s cacophonous, exaggerated coughing fit that interrupts the two monologues, but also with the use of Madonna’s “Cherish” on the soundtrack. As Madonna sings “Romeo and Juliet / They never felt this way I bet,” one of the hustlers remarks that his first trick “had this big old fucking cock and shit, and, um, it was this totally awful experience.”

⁸ JT LeRoy’s “memories” of charging four times his usual rate after an Idaho screening suggests that the film does not exactly discourage hustling. A personal anecdote to support this “glorizing” reading: a (heterosexual) friend of mine once detailed his high school obsession with Idaho, which led to briefly wearing a “cock-strap” as a bracelet, ala Scott Favor in the Falstaff/Bob Pigeon scenes, much to the shock of his parents and teachers.
The juxtaposition with Madonna’s reference to Romeo and Juliet—placed in the context of a formerly promiscuous speaker convincing her new lover that she is ready for commitment and is finished with “casual encounters”—erases the hustler narrative’s claim for authenticity and replaces it with a sick joke. Van Sant’s placement of the Pogues song over the closing credits works much the same way. The closing moments of the film, where the narcoleptic Mike, passed out on the side of the highway is first robbed of his shoes and duffle bag and then, in a very wide shot, carried sleeping by a stranger into another car to the film’s light motif of “America The Beautiful” appears to be an allusion to the parable of the Good Samaritan. But the Pogues’s accordion replaces the dreamy pedal-steel rendition of “America the Beautiful” as the mystery car drives off into the horizon. Read alongside MacGowan’s lyrics of being “raped and abused,” as well as the probably sarcastic final title card (“have a nice day”), the Samaritan’s rescue becomes an abduction and, quite likely, the prelude to an off-screen rape.

Still, if we read the final scene of *Idaho* as an abduction and assault, we should not jump to the conclusion that the scene itself is necessarily “gritty” or even “realistic.” Van Sant’s primary goal in this film is not in writing a morality play about rent-boys, but rather in exploring the fluidity of form. If queerness is about transcending identities, specifically identity binaries, then this is clearly one of the queerest films ever made.⁹ Though unquestionably a mélange of sources, tones, and attitudes, these features of *Idaho*’s cinematic collage are addressed dialectically, so that the film presents and then resists categorization: hustler narrative bleeds into

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⁹ Without rehashing or oversimplifying the history of queer reading and queer activism, I will quote the introduction to Michele Aaron’s *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* to justify this generalization: “queer’s defiance is leveled at mainstream homophobic society *but also* at the ‘tasteful and tolerated’ gay culture that cohabits with it … [queer artists] were defined as much, if not more, by their opposition to gay culture as well as straight” (7). *My Own Private Idaho* is often cited as a one of the flagship films of the New Queer Cinema, appearing at the same film festivals alongside Tom Kalin’s *Swoon* (1992) and Gregg Araki’s *The Living End* (1992) where B. Ruby Rich first noticed the trend. Still, there is no essay length treatment of Van Sant or this film in Aaron’s *Reader*, which seems to be more concerned with NQC’s influence on post-1992 queer films.
rock film bleeds into Shakespeare adaptation bleeds into road movie bleeds into surrealism and so on. The treatment of earlier genres, specifically the way these genres look at the past, recalls Jarman’s decree that “filmed history is always a misinterpretation,” so why not embrace the anachronisms (Queer Edward II 86)? And like Jarman, perhaps even more so, Van Sant’s intertextuality is almost always informed by the codes of popular music, specifically underground and punk acts.

The switch from “America, The Beautiful” to “The Old Main Drag” illustrates the film’s odd, under-discussed nationality dialectic, replacing the dream-vision of one country with the gritty narrative about another (“Drag” begins “When I first came to London…”). The blunt Britishness of the Pogues song both echoes and represents the intrusion of the Henriad into the hustler narrative with the appearance of Bob Pigeon. Why would a film with a title that immediately inscribes it as a work about a (particularly American) sense of inwardness make so many allusions to the British stage?

And, as has been noted again and again, the film does far more than just “allude” to the Henriad; tucked between the “research consultant” and the “production accountant” in the film’s final credits is an “additional dialogue by” credit for William Shakespeare. But Van Sant does not just transcribe Shakespeare’s language, he translates it. Hal’s chiding “unless hours were cups of sack” and “dials the signs of leaping-houses” becomes “unless hours were lines of coke, or dials looked like the signs of gay bars” (1.1.2.6-7). But, though Jonathan Goldberg suggests it is Hal we desire, I find that it is “all but impossible to resist the attractions of” John Falstaff (or Bob Pigeon) (Sodometries 145):

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10 In an interview with Jarman for Projections, Van Sant describes Jarman’s influence on his own work stylistically and as a fellow queer artist: “Derek Jarman was a symbol of the future, of what my life as a filmmaker would someday resemble. He was breaking new ground as an openly gay film director, and his politics and lifestyle were exciting new things to behold” (90).
You have corrupted me, Scotty. I was an innocent before I met you. And now look at me, just a little better than wicked. I used to be a virtuous man! [Scott laughs loudly.] Well, virtuous enough. I swore a little, I never gambled more than seven times a week. Poker! I never picked up a street boy more than once a quarter. [A boy shouts: “Of an hour!”] Of an hour. Bad company has corrupted me. I’ll be darned if I haven’t forgotten what the inside of a church looks like.

The sound of church bells (“chimes”) faintly appears as Bob Pigeon finishes this monologue, in a not so subtle clue about its source material:

Thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal—God forgive thee for it! Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing; and now am I, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked (The Prince begins to laugh.). I was as virtuously given as a gentleman need to be, virtuous enough; swore a little, diced not about seven times a week, went to a bawdy house not above once in a quarter… (Pauses) of an hour … Villainous company hath been the spoil of me. If I have not forgotten what the inside of a church is made of, call me a peppercorn… (Welles 48).

And Welles, of course, is not transcribing Shakespeare either. Instead, like Van Sant, his film is a kind of collage. The above speech is pieced together from Falstaff’s dialogue in 1Henry IV 1.2.30-85, 3.3.12-15, and 3.3.6-7, not unlike the Burroughsian “cut up” constructions that Jim Ellis notices in Jarman’s Tempest (“Conjuring” 265).

Hebdige read the first, British punk culture as a “white” translation of “black ethnicity”; by accessing Shakespeare through Welles, Van Sant’s translation of another culture is far more complex than the one-to-one relation of, say, the skinheads (64). Welles, an American in exile, was forced to place the Boar’s Head Tavern and the Battle of Shrewsbury in the deserts of Spain. Van Sant is an American like Welles, but an outsider due to his sexuality. He films the Chimes homages in his hometown of Portland, yet gives his film an expatriate’s restlessness, by returning Mike to the desolation of Idaho again and again throughout the film and briefly strands him in Italy. But the method is much the same as the punks, and if the ethnic differences between America and England do not carry the same tension as the “frozen dialectic” of the
punks, perhaps it is anxieties about authenticity—either as a “Shakespeare film” or as a hustler narrative—provide the impetus for what Van Sant has done with Welles and Shakespeare.

When, during the café scene that introduced viewers to the vérité hustlers, Scott tells Mike that he and Bob “had a real heavy thing going,” that “he taught me better than school did,” and that “I’d say I love Bob more than my mother and my father.” The implication is, despite Bob being “fucking in love with” Scott, that Bob is responsible for Scott’s foray into prostitution. That Bob, in other words, “turned Scott out” and that, in JT LeRoy’s estimation, is “loved” because he provides drugs to his young, impressionable victims. Even with Scott’s clarification of who was the object for whom (“he was fucking in love with me”), it is still implied that Bob is an abuser and that Scott, like the boys who share their stories with whomever sits next to the camera, has been abused.

Until Van Sant puts Shakespeare into the film. Bob and Budd (who speaks variations of Shallow’s lines) enter to the sound of Renaissance faire music on the soundtrack and a chorus of boys shouting from the rooftops; their ramshackle hotel, with its empty wall-frames, resembles the claustrophobic set of Chimes of Midnight’s Boar’s Head Inn. Van Sant does not just allude to Falstaff’s presence in Portland (the way that the Good Samaritan may or may not be in Idaho at the film’s conclusion), he announces it. And by doing so, he upsets the viewer’s expectations about the characters’ previous abuse; Falstaff is, as Jonathan Goldberg has demonstrated, a masochist, and not a sadist.\(^\text{11}\)

Arthur and Liebler disparagingly call the use of Shakespeare’s text the film’s “Elizabethan intertextual baggage,” and Susan Wiseman argues that, like in the earliest silent films, which co-opted Shakespeare for respectability, My Own Private Idaho uses the Henriad as

\(^\text{11}\) See Sodometries 153-4.
a “cultural anchor” (26, 201). But the use of the Falstaff character, in all of his pathetic glory, is not only to imbue Van Sant’s film with more cultural capital; it serves to invert the stereotype of the predatory homosexual. John Falstaff may visit a brothel four times every hour, but if Bob Pigeon is a pimp, then “picking up a street boy” that often is more than just *self*-destructive. Falstaff could “know nothing” in a bawdy house; going to one every quarter of an hour, one imagines he would know “nothing,” Elizabethan slang for the pudendum, quite well! But Bob Pigeon claims that he was a virgin, “an innocent,” and that he has actually been deflowered by his love for Scott. The use of “darn” rather than one of the “swears” that he apparently uses so often now is a feeble rebuke of Scott’s influence.

Kenneth Rothwell suggests that at the end of the twentieth-century, critics “gradually, subtly” changed their interrogations of Shakespeare films: “we have ceased to ask ‘Is it Shakespeare?’ but instead ‘Is Shakespeare in it?’” (91). Perhaps unintentionally, Rothwell makes the same pun that R. Allen Shoaf uses about translators: what kind of a penetration is it when Shakespeare is inserted “in” to another text? In the case of *My Own Private Idaho*, I think it is as a kind of rape. Far from a “cultural anchor” lending a teen heartthrob movie a little art house respectability, Shakespeare subverts our expectations of narrative by replacing “gritty realism” with theatrical verse and inverts our notion of abused and abuser. Shakespeare punks the film’s narrative, just as the Pogues punk “America, The Beautiful” at the film’s conclusion.

The film does something to Shakespeare as well, but I am not sure that it is a radicalization like Wiseman suggests (209). Rather, it is a process of inclusion, rather than inversion. While Welles’s and LeRoy’s collages were pieced together from like pieces produced by the same writer (Welles’s sources being Shakespeare, and LeRoy’s being LeRoy), Van Sant’s work claims the randomness of bricolage. There is a punk heritage here, as well; David Huxley
ascribes *The Great Rock 'N Roll Swindle*'s punk-ness to its resemblance to “a mobile equivalent of a Jamie Reed collage” (88). Van Sant uses Shakespeare the way he uses the Western, porn mags, and rock music: as a source presented without commentary. And, as viewers able to diffuse the various sources, we conflate these disparate forms as well; we are forced us to treat Shakespeare like a cowboy and like a punk.

The film’s title is drawn from a B-52’s song, “Private Idaho.” But Van Sant changed the song’s directive, in the second-person, to a first-person confessional. So what seems to the listener like a tirade against introversion (“You’re living in your own private Idaho… Get out of the state you’re in!”), becomes a celebration of escapist fantasy. But what Van Sant’s film is really escaping is the call for representing the authentic. LeRoy speaks for the hustlers; MacGowan speaks for the folk singers; Van Sant speaks for himself. And though Jarman’s films resemble masques, and Van Sant’s film takes its text from a history, perhaps it is better thought of as a romance, where authenticity is not much of a concern, because it is superseded by the interplay of the fantastic, the pastoral, and the social: the kind of place where, in Scott’s words, time itself could be a fair hustler in black leather.
Even in terms of its broader cultural influence, it is arguable that punk had its most provocative repercussions long after its supposed demise.

—Simon Reynolds

In what may be a metatextual commentary on all of the staged carnage that preceded it, both *Othello* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* endings feature a call for silence.¹ Vindice whispers to Lussurioso, the man whose confidence he gained while serving as a “bawd,” that

VIN. Now thou’lt not prate on’t, ‘twas Vindice murdered thee!
LUS. Oh.
VIN. [Whispers] Murdered thy father!
LUS. Oh.
VIN. [Whispers] And I am he! Tell nobody. (5.3.76-80)

Even if we read Lussurioso’s final remark (“my tongue is out of office”) as describing a physical ailment—like his father, he is struck dumb before he is struck dead—his interjections seem weirdly calm (5.3.75). Vindice’s quick, direct stage-whispers, by contrast, seem insistent, no doubt because of the exclamation points: so often seen in disguise as Piato, he not only gives “Vindice” credit for the murders, but also clarifies that he *is* Vindice, even though, since he is no longer in disguise and has been serving under his real name (and has “killed” Piato), that is unnecessary. Vindice takes an extra line or two of verse to name himself as he takes credit for the murders when a more succinct use of the first-person would have perhaps made the stage whispers a touch more believable. There is a similar mark of excess with the final dictum (“tell nobody”); after all, Lussurioso is *unable* to tell anyone, since he cannot “prate on’t.” But these

¹ Though I am aware of recent scholarship attributing *The Revenger’s Tragedy* to Thomas Middleton, all excerpts are from the Fraser and Rabkin, where the play is attributed to Cyril Tourneur.
murders were also theater—Lussurioso and his nobles were stabbed by the characters during a masque—and I think we should read Vindice’s somewhat unnecessary elucidation as a kind of reality effect: for either himself, his victim, or a shocked audience, he must make the murders feel more real.

Vindice’s decree (“tell nobody”) is an almost exact reversal of Iago’s vexing final lines: “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word” (5.2.309-10). Whereas Vindice demands recognition and understanding from a private audience that he addresses in whispered asides (an audience who, incredulously, seems almost uninterested), Iago denies the assembled cast the explanation that they demand about his exposed villainy. Vindice tells his victim not to speak; Iago will not speak. Their use of silence says plenty about the two plays’ dramatic effect. Vindice’s need for recognition is the trajectory for the play’s final moments; confessing to Antonio strikes the audience as both foolhardy and disingenuously generic, fulfilling all too cleanly the expectations of a “revenge tragedy.” But though Revenger’s Tragedy contained the masque, it is Othello that breaks down the binary of audience and performer. Iago chills us because he becomes like us; he is a spectator, watching silently as Othello pathetically tries to explain his sins away and then commits suicide.

Considering how much these films manage to say with and about silence, it is somewhat fitting that two recent film versions of Othello and Revenger’s Tragedy are read as commentaries on current events that they do not actually comment upon. The theatrical release of Tim Blake Nelson’s O, a “tradaptation” of Othello set in a South Carolina boarding school, was delayed for more than two years because O’s finale (supposedly) too closely resembled the Columbine High

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2 Vindice himself comments on the genre expectations when he tells Hippolito “‘Tis time to die when we ourselves are foes” (5.3.110).
And Alex Cox’s cyberpunk adaptation of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* originally concluded with, in Cox’s summary:

a shot of the World Trade Center collapsing, as Vindici’s wife’s skull screamed for revenge. I thought it was timely and appropriate, given that “we” (the Pentagon and NATO) had just embarked on an open-ended war for revenge. At the time I imagined that the press would treat these new wars of aggression—no different from the US wars against Vietnam or Latin America—as acts of revenge, and that the words “Revengers Tragedy” would soon be commonplace in our political discourse, in order to describe this folly and self-destructive wickedness. (269)

The footage of the September 11 attacks was pulled from Cox’s film at the insistence of his producers at the New Cinema Fund and replaced with footage of an atom bomb exploding, with Cox suggesting a similar reading of American military “revenge,” though one “lacking the immediacy of the WTC footage” (Cox 273).

Both controversies—O’s plotline’s similarity to the Columbine massacre and Revengers’s nixed allusion to the September 11 attacks—arose during the films’ post-production work. Nelson, in an editorial for the *New York Times*, remarks that O “seemed to imitate” the news footage from Columbine, even though principal photography ended weeks before Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris terrorized their fellow classmates and the nation. Like Cox’s astonishment at his film not becoming a household name following September 11, Nelson’s editorial for the Times contains some unconvincing modesty (“Sadly, O had the feel of truth”), concluding that Miramax dropped the film because it was too “real.” Both filmmakers, in these defensive epitexts, make claims about their films’ authentic commentary on events that followed any conceptual screenwriting, acting, or principal photography. Like Derek Jarman describing

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3 The phrase “tradaptation” is Michel Garneau’s, applied to *O* by Hodgdon (99).

4 Like Nelson, Cox renames his source material in his film’s title. For a discussion on why *The Revenger’s Tragedy* became *Revengers Tragedy*, see Spiller.

5 Cox’s autobiography, *X Films*, is a charming and entertaining litany of such compromises, such as the decision to change the title *Love Kills* to *Sid & Nancy*. 

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Jubilee, Cox and Nelson present their movies as being not just accurate, but as actual works of prophecy.6

Analyzing how texts from the past can illuminate the present is not unheard of or even a fallacy; some texts can, upon history’s remove, seem alternately prescient or monstrous. For instance, consider the many responses to John Carey’s 2002 TLS article (“A Work In Praise of Terrorism?”) about Samson Agonistes’s many similarities to the September 11 attacks.7 But what interests me about the responses from these two filmmakers is that their claims of authenticity about these events (September 11 and Columbine) appear to supersede the commentaries each film features about other, earlier cultural or political references that are addressed explicitly in the mise-en-scène: e.g. O’s allusions to the O.J. Simpson murder trial or Revengers Tragedy’s visual treatment of the news media’s handling of Princess Diana’s death. Since both films are adaptations of Renaissance plays, we get a sense of anachronism in overplus: the film’s initial commentary made with anachronism is displaced by an anachronistic application of a more current news item’s impact on the film’s message.

It is specifically because these films are identified as “Renaissance films” that their seemingly contradictory traversal of past, present, and future is not easily dismissed. As Deborah Cartmell notices, “Shakespeare on screen is now firmly placed within the literary canon”; giving the bard a screen credit is an almost guaranteed means of achieving “academic respectability” (29). O, with its nearly fawning recycling of Othello’s plot-structure, fully embraces the expectations of a “serious” art-house, Shakespeare film, even as it also embraces

6 From Dancing Ledge: “Afterwards, [Jubilee] turned prophetic. Dr. Dee’s vision came true – the streets burned in Brixton and Toxteth, Adam was Top of the Pops and signed up with Margaret Thatcher to sing at the Falklands Ball. They all sign up one way or another” (172).

7 For a fine treatment of and rebuttal to Carey’s argument, specifically his clash with Stanley Fish, see Mohamed.
the teen movie or youth-at-risk subgenres. In a corrective to the film’s initial mixed critical reception, Steve Criniti argues that the film’s claims of genre are its very point:

the very fact that a Shakespearian tragedy, especially one as utterly dark as *Othello*, could be convincingly transplanted into a contemporary South Carolina high school is the entire disturbing point of Nelson’s production … Nelson, though, is the first [filmmaker] to lay *Othello* in the hands of mere teenagers. The fact that he could credibly do so is the film’s very meaning. Inherently, *O* is a comment on the dark and tragic behaviors that often plague contemporary high schools and the timelessness of such primal human emotions like jealousy and rage. In order to truly make his point that the message is in the concept, Nelson adheres closely to Shakespeare’s original text. (116)

Can a film have an identity crisis? Criniti’s defense of *O* hinges on how the film is “convincing,” yet the critics he rebuts all unanimously decry the film’s inauthentic representation of American high school life. Regardless, in order for the film to work the way Criniti describes, it would have to be both authentically high school and authentically Shakespeare; otherwise, the portrayal of “primal human emotions” like jealousy may not strike viewers as “timeless” so much as familiar, possibly clichéd. With this formulation in mind (the film is true because it is Shakespeare and it is Shakespeare because it is true), Nelson’s description of his film as being too “real” for Miramax becomes a question of canonicity as well as a moral examination of a filmmaker’s depiction of violence as realistic or authentic.

Implicit in the film’s title is the claim that this film is *not* by Shakespeare: this is *O*, not *Othello*. It is not just the play’s name that has been changed, either: Othello becomes Odin, Iago becomes Hugo, Desdemona becomes Desi, Emilia becomes Emily, and Roderigo becomes Roger Rodriguez. The effect of the name changes is, for those who know the play particularly well, somewhat distracting. Like naming a hotel where Odin and Desi have sex “The Willows,” the reference points seem to exist only as reference points, fulfilling some imaginary Shakespeare

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8 Criniti cites Amy Taubin’s *Village Voice* review (“It’s simply impossible to accept that these are high school kids”) and Peter Travers’s *Rolling Stone* review (“*O* relies on plot mechanics from the Bard that make no sense in a contemporary context”) (qtd. in 115). *O*’s devotional attachment to *Othello*’s plot is central to my argument.
The Roderigo character seems particularly dispensable in Nelson’s revision and, like Vindice’s persistent self-naming while he murders Lussurioso, there is something telling about the insistent doubling of “Roderigo” in “Roger” and “Rodriguez,” especially since the actor cast as Roger is not Hispanic.

O wants to have it both ways: it wants to rename Othello and un-name it at the same time. This, as readers familiar with Joel Fineman’s extraordinary essay about the play will attest, is tricky ground, because taking “Othello” out of Othello is taking Shakespeare out of Othello. Fineman attributes the Moor’s name to the Greek verb ethelo, meaning “wish” or “will,” so that the title of Shakespeare’s play could well be translated The Tragedy of Will (marking the title as Shakespeare’s signature on the play) or The Tragedy of Desire (marking the play as proto-Lacanian) (145). I do not know if Nelson, or his screenwriter Brad Kaaya, is familiar with Fineman’s essay, but if he is, this passage would certainly explain the decision to title the film O instead of Odin:

[Desdemona’s “Willow Song”] marks the place where Shakespeare’s own name, Will, is itself marked off by the invoked, cited sound of the sound of the O in Othello—“Sing will-ow, will-ow, will-ow.” If this is the case, then we can say, at least in this case, precisely what there is in a Shakespearean name that makes it Shakespearean. It is specifically the O, calling to us from an elsewhere that is other, that determine the Shakespearean subject as the difference between the subject of a name and the subject of full being, or, even more precisely, as the subject who exists as the difference between the Will at the beginning of Will-iam and the I of Williams’s I am: Will-O-I am. (158)

9 The term “teensploi” and its related “Shakesploi” originate with Richard Burt (see Unspeakable Shaxxxspeares). For a discussion of why O should not be “relegat[ed]… to the ‘teensploi’ category,” see Semenza (106). O’s many overlaps with the “teensploi” and “Shakesploi” subgenres are difficult to ignore, however. Like Ten Things and Never Been Kissed, O features the prerequisite classroom scene where the characters discuss an actual Shakespeare text; Iago’s machinations are briefly interrupted by a nosy English teacher who asks if he can “name one of Shakespeare’s poems…” And, of course, the film aligns itself with the “Shakesploi” subgenre by casting Julia Stiles (the Dame Judi of Shakesploi) as Desi. See Deitchman for a careful analysis of Stiles, girl culture, and Shakespeare adaptations.
The sound of “O” which persists throughout Othello is the mark of poetic subjectivity that obsesses Fineman’s work. “O” is both a signature and a reminder of the reign of the signifier, a ghostly wail from “elsewhere that is other” reminding us that the subject is inherently subjective, and therefore not wholly determinable. There is something melancholy about this subjectivity, the inability to make what seems be. Fineman’s epigraph is Lacan’s “catastrophe” of Love, that “it is not the meaning that counts, but rather the sign,” and Fineman is able to reduce that estimation (and perhaps the play as a whole) to something much more succinct and powerful: a cry, “O!” (qtd. in 143).

O’s title retains the cry but, in taking out the –thello, it plugs in a “J.” Perhaps overshadowed by the controversies related to the Columbine tragedy is the film’s co-opting of the discourse and anxieties surrounding the O.J. Simpson murder trial. Aside from the film’s portrayal of Othello as a sports star instead of a soldier, there is also the matter of Odin’s initials (his last name is James). In her close reading of O’s poster, Barbara Hodgdon even notices similarities between O’s advertising campaign and Time magazine’s notorious doctored image of Simpson’s face in 1994 (100). Still, Nelson’s after-the-fact reading of his own film (O is about Columbine now, not O.J.) is representative of his film’s process of adaptation. The allusions to the Simpson trial and the surrounding uproar serve to, in Hodgdon’s reading, “flesh out” Iago/Hugo’s “notorious ‘motiveless malignity’”: “O’s narrative is driven by the envy of a white boy who loses his place to a black man” (101). This “fleshing out” is, Fineman would no doubt remind us, more like filling in the Lacanian “gap.”10

O’s rewrite of Othello is more than just a translation, it is a deconstruction, taking the play apart and putting it back together in such a way that while the individual parts remain, such

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10 Fineman’s reading of the gap (a.k.a. the “absence, disjunction, hole”) is in the Othello essay (“The Sound of O in Othello”) in The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition (154).
as the characters’ names and the play’s key speeches, which are reworded into American teen dialect. But in O’s re-construction, there are new parts as well. In other words, in filling in Othello’s gaps, O highlights its own inadequacies: by telling more than Othello, it proves itself less than Othello. By equating Othello’s mastery on the battlefield with Odin’s skill as a basketball player, Nelson interjects battle scenes into Othello, since we see Odin on the basketball court. Similarly, Nelson’s film fills in the gaps of Othello and Desdemona’s marriage: Odin and Desi not only consummate their relationship in the film’s controversial “hate fuck” scene, but O’s audience is also privy to Othello’s seduction of Desdemona, where “with a greedy ear” Desi “devour[s] up” Odin’s discourse (Desi to Odin: “You do have the best stories”)

11 For a characteristic example of what I mean by “translation,” compare Odin’s final speech to Othello’s. Odin:

    Somebody needs to tell the goddamned truth. My life is over. But while all of you all are out here living yours, sittin’ around talkin’ about the nigger that lost it back in high school, you make sure you tell ‘em the truth. You tell ‘em that I loved that girl. I did. But I got played. He twisted my head up, he fucked it up. I ain’t no different than none of you all. My moms ain’t no crackhead. I wasn’t no gang banger. It wasn’t some hoodrat drug dealer that tripped me up. It was this white prep-school motherfucker standing right there. You tell ‘em where I’m from didn’t make me do this.

Othello:

    Soft you, a word or two before you go.
    I have done the state some service, and they know’t.
    No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
    When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
    Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
    Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
    Of one that loved not wisely but too well,
    Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
    Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
    Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
    Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
    Albeit unused to the melting mood,
    Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
    Their medicinable gum… (5.2.347-60)

Both Odin and Othello make, like Hamlet before them, pleas to be remembered correctly after their death (“goddamned truth” = “speak of me as I am”). Both also raise the question of racial otherness and how their actions will be confused with stereotypes (“gang bangers,” “base Indians”), but are in fact the fault of the one who “perplexed [them] in the extreme”: Iago/Hugo.
But since Desi has far more agency than Desdemona, she interrogates him as well. Odin’s “disastrous chances” are, like some of Othello’s, fabricated (1.3.133). And Nelson’s film fills in the blanks about why a (white) “maiden never bold” might “fall in love with what she feared to look on” when Desi recounts a bizarre fantasy built around Odin’s otherness: “You said that I was so fine that you’d let me dress you up and play Black Buck got loose in the big house” (1.3.94, 98).

Desi/Odin’s Mandingo-inspired fantasy—it is not clear who “wants” this role play scenario—is all the more disturbing placed in a scene where Desi is wearing a tank top with a Confederate flag on it. Still, the film’s boldness regarding contemporary anxieties of miscegenation and sexual power-dynamics does not extend to its treatment of Shakespeare’s text. These themes are not strange to Othello, which opens with references to “thick-lips” and old black rams “tupping” white ewes, but it is not surprising that the most audacious moments in O (the hate-fuck, the seduction scene) are in the addendum scenes, rather than the translated ones (1.1.66, 1.1.88-9). For all of Nelson’s claims about the timelessness of Othello’s themes, more often than not contemporary concerns are placed alongside the play’s course of action, rather

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12 Semenza:

In her description of the scene, Amy Taubin uses ‘hate fuck,’ a slang term for vicious sex between consenting parties, instead of ‘date rape’ or ‘rape’… The terminology is a problem in all three cases. ‘Hate fuck’ ignores the fact that Desi eventually pleads Odin to ‘stop.’ ‘Date rape’ and ‘rape’ ignore the fact that the sex is consensual until the very last moment. (121)

Hodgdon also discusses the “hate fuck” (103). The scene is unclear about what exactly is transpiring at this “very last moment” where Desi screams for Odin to stop, but I think the film is suggesting both by Desi’s initial come-on (“I want you to be able to do anything, I want you to do what you want with me, I want you to have me however you want … Don’t hold back”) which suggests that Odin’s sexual needs are somehow unusual, as well as the implicit homoeroticism of Odin’s dream sequence (where in the mirror his visage is replaced with Michael’s) that Odin has switched from vaginal to anal penetration. For more on the scene’s homoerotic undercurrent, and how that relates as a threat to Odin’s racial identity, see Hodgdon 103.

13 Othello’s fabrication is the narrative about the handkerchief. Rephrasing one of his pre-narrative seduction stories (told first to seduce his wife, later to terrify her), for Desdemona the origin of “the napkin” is “an Egyptian,” though actually it was a gift from his father (3.4.54, 5.2.223-4). Similarly, Odin’s story about being a “C-section baby and they cut too far” is a lie (“I fell off my skateboard”).
than penetrating it. Like the opening scene’s transition from Verdi’s *Otello* to hip hop music, the past and the present often coincide but never quite intermingle in *O*: Shakespeare’s text is rearranged, but is never raped, never punked; it has merely been repackaged and, when necessary, ignored.

Cox’s *Revengers Tragedy*, on the other hand, more ably fits my rubric for a Punked Renaissance film; rather than merely transferring the play’s setting to a different period, like *O*, it positions it in a timeless otherworld where the past interacts with the anachronistic and with a clear attachment to punk or post-punk musics as well as the original Jacobean verse, Cox implies a comparison between the two, like Jarman’s claim that Marlowe’s best verse sounds like a pop song. But, like *O*, Cox’s *Revengers Tragedy* is a film that is emphatically situated post-punk. *O* attempts to jar its viewer by juxtaposing Verdi with Outkast and Black Star on its soundtrack but, ironically, by setting the film in a wealthy, primarily white Southern prep school, Verdi is a much more marked subcultural other than hip hop. At the party scene early in the film, where

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14 This coincid-ing/ence effect is perhaps most blatant at the film’s conclusion, where Hugo’s rewrite of Iago’s final lines (“From this time forth I never will speak word” becomes “From here on out I say nothin’”) are nullified by concluding the film with Hugo’s voice-over. What Hugo says *after* he promises to “say nothin’” is, aside from rewriting the opening voice-over (the film’s much discussed “I always wanted to live like a hawk” speech), an allusion to the kinds of rhetoric associated with school shooters: “One of these days, everyone is gonna pay attention to me.” This voice-over “narrates” the film’s chilling images of police cars and news station wagons arriving at the school to document the carnage and is, like Hugo’s opening monologue, scored by *Otello*’s “Ave Maria.” But despite the nod to Verdi, this is not a rewriting of *Othello* – which ends with Lodovico closing the bed curtains and letting Iago’s “work” be hid, rather than displaying the bodies like Nelson’s film does. It is a rewriting of the familiar signs of violence captured by news reporters, specifically school shootings. *O* makes no particularly clear link between the news media’s depiction of violence and Shakespeare’s depictions of violence other than that they are both violent. The complaints about *O*’s resemblance to the Columbine massacre are practically unfounded: Odin and Hugo’s rampage through a prep school dormitory converted from a plantation house bears no visual resemblance to the expansive, twisting hallways of a large public school. Still, Hugo’s desire for “attention” is clearly a reference to the familiar (and simplistic) reading of school shooters’ motives. For a provocative but helpful dissection of the school shooting and “rage murder” phenomenon, see Ames.

15 Odin’s threat to “fuck [Roger’s] punk ass up” all but proves Nyong’o’s observation that the hip hop term “punk’d” has “eclipsed” punk rock as the preeminent definition (“Punk’d Theory” 21).

16 For analyses of the white consumer’s relation to the primarily black culture of hip hop, see the work of Tricia Rose, in particular *Hip Hop Wars* 87-89.
Odin is clearly the school’s only black student, rap music is blasted, not opera. *Revengers* uses its treatment of musical subculture to inform the early modern text with Cox’s contemporary concerns about film genre and politics.

Cox, for those who know his work at all, is known for his adamant political stances and bravado, such as his pro-Sandinista production *Walker* (1987), filmed in Nicaragua during the Iran-Contra scandal. In his autobiography/treatise on filmmaking, *X Films*, he explains why, contrary to most filmmakers interested in the Renaissance, he rejects the Bard:

Shakespeare, for all his greatness as an artist, was a reactionary. His plays esteemed kings, and portrayed groveling before them as appropriate … it makes Shakespeare less admirable than the author of *The Revengers Tragedy*. Add to this his acquisition of a coat of arms (mocked by the jealous rebel, Ben Jonson) and his utter failure to educate his daughters, and the “historical” Shakespeare seems a bit of a sexist social climber. It isn’t bold to dedicate yourself to pleasing the powerful. Shakespeare had brains and brilliance; but the author of *Revengers* had balls – mocking dukes, lords and a corrupt, syphilitic court. (245-6)

The merits of Cox’s “reactionary” understanding of Shakespeare aside, this is a very telling passage regarding the motives of some Punked Renaissance filmmakers. There are hints of Jarman’s rhetoric here, particularly his remark in *Smiling In Slow Motion* that “if Elizabeth I was dishing out knighthoods, Shakespeare would have been at the front door with a begging bowl, Marlowe would have run a mile” (162). Both Jarman, particularly after his work on *The Tempest*, and Cox claim a certain kinship with early modern dramatists, just not the most revered early modern dramatist.\(^\text{17}\) For both filmmakers, Shakespeare represents England itself – because of his coat of arms and because he “would have” accepted a knighthood. England/Shakespeare/the System can be “cut up” and criticized, the way that Jarman uses the Burroughsian method in

\(^{17}\) Cox tellingly refers to the Middleton/Tourneur text by his own respelling (*Revengers* instead of *Revenger’s*), collating authorship.
The Tempest and by excising any indication of heterosexuality from the Sonnets in Angelic Conversation, or the way that Cox stages Julius Caesar in Walker, where Shakespeare’s drama functions for the titular character as a de facto justification for slavery. Shakespeare can be deconstructed, but only the supposed lesser dramatists can be re-constructed, rescued from obscurity. But this may be self-defeating since, as is the case with the subculture of the punk rock scene, obscurity is half of the allure.

Here it is worth remarking on the soundtrack to Cox’s Revengers Tragedy, which is completely composed by the Leeds anarchist rock group Chumbawamba. Though best-known for their 1997 hit song “Tubthumping,” which married football chants with dance music, the band began as a Crass-inspired punk act known for its vicious attacks on the pop music elite. Their debut record (1986’s Pictures of Starving Children Sell Records) was an album-length skewering of Bob Geldof and Live AID, and even during the band’s stint with major label EMI Records, Chumbawamba placed its anarchist politics up front and center. But the band’s music has long ceased to sound “punk,” instead, Chumbawamba’s recent work alternates between folk and techno oriented songs; the band’s soundtrack for Cox’s Revengers tragedy is indicative of its techno influence, specifically, the Ecstasy-driven dance music associated with the rave scene.

Since Chumbawamba is a punk band co-opting the rave culture of the Madchester/Summer of Love scene, a musical genre associated with decidedly non-political acts

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18 In Dancing Ledge, Jarman recounts his “cut-up” technique with something resembling impish glee: “In such a fragmented culture messing with Will Shakespeare is not allowed. The Anglo-Saxon tradition has to be defended; and putting my scissors in was like an axe-blow to the last redwood” (206).

19 In this scene, the soldier of fortune-turned-dictator William Walker bounds up onstage to take over the role of Caesar, then uses the stage as a bully-pulpit to proclaim the country’s switch to slavery (“so the South will rally to our cause”).

20 For example, when Chumbawamba performed “Tubthumping” on The Late Show With David Letterman, they added a chant in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal; singer Alice Nutter also recommended that fans shoplift copies of the bands’ album when she appeared on Bill Maher’s Politically Incorrect in 1998.
like the Happy Mondays and DJs like Paul Oakenfeld, yet maintaining their radical Leftist politics suggests that Cox chose the group for his film because they will function subversively. But this may not be the case. Cox’s portrayal of rave culture in Revengers is clearly parodic: the two heroes, Vindici and his brother, are working-class stiffs at the mercy of their decadent employers, the “dukes, lords and corrupt, syphilitic court” clad in the over-the-top cosmetics of neon silk shirts, glitter-paint, and piercings. Cox’s post-apocalyptic, distopian vision of Liverpool is one of a subculture triumphant, a world where the punks and club kids rule.

This demonizing of the subculture, as well as a number of visual references to the earlier film, suggests that Revengers could be read as a remake of Jarman’s Jubilee. Or is it a rewrite of the Jamie Reed collage where Queen Elizabeth was mocked by being made punk, with a safety pin inserted through her nose? Or is punk itself being punked, by virtue of being made respectable? When an actor as revered and “serious” as RSC veteran Derek Jacobi (who plays the Duke) starts sporting the exaggerated makeup and nail polish of a club-goer, what kind of oppositional power does the signage of this subculture still possess? Revengers’s vision of the future corresponds with the problem we find in O’s vision of the present: that the subculture has ceased to speak for the oppressed or ignored. In O, hip hop music and speech does not signify Odin anymore than it does Hugo or Michael; in Revengers Tragedy, rave, punk’s descendant, is used to represent the ruling class, even as it continues to be a vehicle for an authentically

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21 For an academically-minded history of how punk became new wave which became house and rave music, you could consult Neil Nehring’s autobiographical essay “Everyone’s Given Up and Just Wants to Go Dancing: From Punk to Rave in the Thatcher Era” (Popular Music and Society 30.1 pp 1-18). But Factory Records founder Tony Wilson’s memoir (and the 2002 film it inspired, directed by Michael Winterbottom) 24 Hour Party People is a far more informative and much more delightful read.

22 Cox’s film’s Vindice is clad in a non-descript black frock coat for the duration of the film, whereas his brother (called Carlo in the film; another character is dubbed Hippolito) is some sort of a police officer or security guard, dressed in a fluorescent traffic patrol slicker. The outfits of the Duke’s court, specifically his sons Supervacuo, Spurio, and Junior (“Younger Son” in the play), may also be inspired by the costuming of Julie Taymor’s Titus (1999), where Tamora’s sons are dressed as “club kids.” For a discussion of some of this paper’s concerns in regards to Taymor’s Titus, specifically the screening of spectacle, see Starks “Cinema of Cruelty.”
resistant group like Chumbawamba. One of Hebdige’s most famous examples of punk’s “frozen
dialectic” is Richard Hell’s claim that “punks are niggers” (qtd. in 62). What are we to make of
punk’s future, where punks are not “niggers,” but CEOs or politicians? Perhaps Cox’s film is
prophetic not because it addressed “revenge” right before the American military’s retaliation for
the September 11th attacks, but because it foresaw a world where Rolling Stone’s Anthony
DeCurtis observed in an interview with the BBC that “the Republicans have gotten much more
punk rock than the Democrats” and where GOP National Committee chairman Michael Steele
speaks with The Washington Times about an “off the hook” public relations strategy to apply
conservative “principles” to “urban-suburban hip hop settings” (Fowler, Hallow).

Cox and Nelson’s revisions of Renaissance texts using alternative music forms as an
apparatus of adaptation suggest not the death of punk or the death of hip hop, but the death of a
particular kind of spectacle. Cox’s Revengers Tragedy features at least one stunning set piece: a
game of table soccer played in an empty soccer stadium. The game is still an event (fans gamble
on the game, which they watch on TV at a local pub, and the Duke’s sons party in a skybox
suite) but only the Lord Antonio and his wife watch the game live in the stadium and, even then,
they are so far from the table, one wonders what exactly they are cheering for. If there are no
spectators, is there a spectacle? And if the spectators are at a mediated remove, is the spectacle
itself diminished?

Hebdige observed that punk is “in a constant state of assemblage, of flux” so that its
reader is able to “slip into” the disorientation of meaning (126). But Cox and Nelson’s film do
not fill in the gap of punk or hip hop, they attempt to fill in the gaps of early modern spectacle
with punk or hip hop. But that assumes that either of those significations is somehow stable,
which makes these adaptations fundamentally conservative and safe. The Renaissance spectacle
remains evasive, and the spectacle of punk is too tired from all of its constant revisions to provide a sufficiently shocking substitute.

Then again, those of us who actually care, who allow ourselves to be haunted by the spirit of Renaissance spectacle are, like the tiny audience present in the enormous, empty stadium in Cox’s film, an elite. Or, rather, a subculture. Shakespeare?, says Hugo in Nelson’s O, “I thought he wrote movies.” Then we laugh, because we get the joke.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Truth may seem but cannot be.

—William Shakespeare, “The Phoenix and Turtle”

Joel Fineman’s essay, “The Significance of Literature: The Importance of Being Earnest,” is so brief and so exhilarating (not to mention disorienting) that one is tempted to compare it to a punk song. The essay builds with towards one of Fineman’s most provocative inventions—a prime example of the kind of “zaniness” that Stephen Greenblatt writes about grappling with in his introduction-cum-eulogy to Fineman’s posthumous collection of essays, The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition—that “the fundamental desire of the reader of literature is the desire of the homosexual for the heterosexual, or rather, substituting the appropriate figurative embodiments of these abstractions, the desire of the man to be sodomized by the woman” (xii, 37).1 The desire, in the terminology that this paper has insisted upon, to be punked by an imaginary phallus.

We can theorize about what this imaginary phallus actually signifies, its origins in Lacanian semiotics, about the obvious link between the imagery of sodomy and a play so obsessed with “bunburying,” or even about how this leads to Fineman’s own desire (what he “would like”) at the conclusion of his essay to “draw the moral” (38). But I would like to focus on the interplay between “fundamental” and “figurative” that Fineman posits. What is “fundamental” is what is fixed, basic, and permanent – some things that desire never is. Does what’s truly fundamental need “figurative” embodiments or abstractions?

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1 Greenblatt’s introduction is both a touching remembrance of his friend (concluding with a haunting portrayal of Fineman on his deathbed) and a quizzically critical reading of his colleague’s scholarship. Greenblatt himself makes this distinction, referring to Fineman by his surname when he is “willing to grant” and “emphatically not willing to concede” various points made by “Fineman” throughout his career, and to “Joel” during the deathbed narrative he concludes his essay with.
I am not trying to rebut, rebuke, or try and out-reason Fineman’s inspiring display of deductive logic. I merely want to reflect upon a few of his observations and how they pertain to the central concern of this paper: how does one text affect another? Fineman’s concerns are, perhaps, both more microscopic (concerned with how not just texts but individual words affect one another, as his readings on “Will” attest to) and macroscopic: the problem of how, to amend Stanley Cavell, we say what we mean.

In an extensive footnote, added for the conference paper’s publication in October, Fineman examines, in his characteristically baroque style, the nature of farce. According to “tradition” (that is, Aristotle’s *Poetics*), farce is the “least important” genre, because it “imitates imitation (literature or literariness), which is nothing” (39). What Fineman means by “nothing” is not just the fact that literature is mimetic and therefore a signifier (meaning it can “seem” but not “be”) but that its primary signified is idea: “as serious tragedy to trivial farce, so philosophy to literature” (40). Fineman may be implying that the Platonic or Aristotelian impulse to equate philosophy with “something,” as though it were not still the product of signifiers, is unfair; what concerns me more is the way literature (“nothing”) is categorized in the equation. How can one kind of “nothing” be worth more than another? And if “nothing” can be imitated at all, could it not be imitated endlessly without losing any of its (non-)worth?

Here, of course, the equation breaks down for the sheer logistical problem that we like some (people’s) signifiers more than others and we like some (people’s) imitations more than others. If all mimetic representation of previous mimesis was “lower,” than what does that mean for cover songs, filmed adaptations, or Shakespeare’s plays, which themselves are composed out of any number of determinable sources? Whatever each of these nothings do to each other when they become something new needs a name and, as I have been exploring, we tend to name it after
something violent, but potentially productive or fertile: rape. These formulations suggest that texts have the capacity for desire, if only because they have the capacity to be forced to do something that they do not desire. But what of the reader’s desire to be sodomized? Is it still rape if we desire it? Is the reader’s desire to be the passive partner in sodomy a return to the earlier notion of “punk,” a consensual “catamite?” If, according to Fineman’s abstraction, readers want to be sodomized by another traditionally passive sexual partner, what we desire from a text can only come from a text that has already been penetrated somehow. This is the desire of the reader for a text that has already been read: adaptations, farces, cover songs, and other recycled narratives.

But this paper is not concerned with reading as much as it is concerned with viewing. Fineman’s reader is also a writer, the writer-critic who writes “readings.” But who is the viewer of the Punked Renaissance film and what does he or she desire from watching the result of one text raping another? Is that viewer’s desire at all comparable to the desire of the Renaissance audience? Is it a kind of pleasurable anxiety, as Stephen Greenblatt suggests:

> Anxiety takes its place alongside other means—erotic arousal, the excitement of spectacle, the joys of exquisite language, the satisfaction of curiosity about other peoples and places, and so forth—that the players employ to attract and satisfy their customers. The whole point of anxiety in the theater is to make it give such delight that the audience will pay for it again and again. And this delight seems bound up with the marking out of theatrical anxiety as represented anxiety—not wholly real, either in the characters onstage or in the audience. (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 135)

One of the Punked Renaissance films’ lingering concerns is the question of whether spectacle can be authentically captured on film or videotape, or whether or not it has to be “real.” Yet Greenblatt suggests that what we consider “real” in the more spectacular theaters is still “represented” and “not wholly real.” It is the understanding of the falseness of mimesis, that this is seeming and not being, that makes the sight of anxiety and spectacle tolerable, but it is our ability to suppress our own understanding and submit to “delight” that makes it enjoyable. A
pleased audience (a “ravished” one, as Peter Hausted would say) is a submissive audience, but it is a self-endowed submission. The anxieties about authenticity are, at least partly, a wild goose chase: no representation can ever be truly authentic. But this is what Fineman is elucidating when he argues that our desire as readers is both fundamental and abstract. Like anything else, desire and anxiety can only be understood in the ambiguity of signifiers.

Hebdige writes that punk’s death was “presaged” by a write-up in *Cosmopolitan*, a sign that the flux of the subculture has been “frozen” into “generally available commodities” (96). Punk died, that is, when its signifiers became unambiguous, just as the Punked Renaissance film flourishes when it indulges in the near limitlessness of anachronism—Jarman had 350 years of reference points for his *Tempest*, as opposed to whatever temporal possibilities an “authentic” adaptation might have—and never quite settles into definition. Greenblatt writes in his introduction to *The Subjectivity Effect* that Joel Fineman’s dream was that “there is nothing but writing,” and that that dream was punctured by Fineman’s awareness of his own failing body (xix). The Punked Renaissance films are texts and do not have any such awareness, yet their trajectory as an actual film genre, from Jarman’s films to Cox’s *Revengers Tragedy*, seems like an inversion of Fineman’s notion: beginning with the idea that the Renaissance could be resuscitated as more than just words on a page, the genre dies when it is recognized as a not a spectacle but a textual impulse with recognizable signs and symptoms. It dies when it is read.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

As an undergraduate, James Newlin studied at Davidson College, with a semester abroad at Edinburgh University. His undergraduate work, primarily with Gail McMurray Gibson and Randall Ingram, focused on the portrayal of sexual performance anxiety in early modern British verse. After graduating from Davidson, James spent two years teaching literature at a private high school in Naples, Florida, and writing record reviews for an online magazine. He received his Master of Arts in the English Department at the University of Florida in the spring of 2009. He currently lives in Gainesville, Florida, with his dog Gail.