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Toward a Postmodern Pastoral: Another Look at the Cultural Politics of *My Own Private Idaho*

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Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) is a film that rewrites Shakespeare's *Henriad*¹ by following the adventures in the Pacific Northwest of two male prostitutes, Scott Favor (played by Keanu Reeves) and Mike Waters (played by River Phoenix). The film is a spicy conceit, but in the criticism produced so far on it, cultural critique is bland and predictable, a register less of the film's politics than the critics'. In these essays, the scene is familiar, as critics invoke a landscape of "crisis" (Romàn 311) — the Culture War, the Gulf War, globalization, the New World Order — populated by controlling figures like Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Lynne Cheney, Clarence Thomas, and even Kenneth Adelman, whose actions result in specific deleterious effects on 1) the environment, no longer held as "sacred" (Breight 312), 2) individuals, particularly homosexuals "insidious[ly] oppress[ed] . . . in governmental policies on AIDS, social liberties, and privacy matters" (Romàn 319; see also Bergbusch 213-214) and 3) "contemporary American (and global) youth — the homeless, unemployed, underemployed — vulnerable to economic 'restructuring'" (Breight 310; see also Bergbusch 213). Against these controlling figures are a number of artists and intellectuals, who, like the salmon in *Idaho*, swim against this powerful tide, determined, says David Romàn, to skip "the yuppie comforts of the Pacific Northwest" (327) and to resolve the crisis in terms more favorable to the disenfran-

chised, with whom they claim allegiance. The cultural politics of the late 1980s and early 1990s reveal a pretty binary: on the one hand, the disenfranchised and their champions, certain artists and intellectuals; on the other hand, elite figures like Reagan, Bush, and Cheney, and even their putative lackeys at the local level, the “mere mayors, state senators, small businessmen and ranchers” who, as in *Idaho*, victimize the country’s “young dispossessed and native inhabitants” (Breight 312).

But is this description accurate? In constructing this binary, have we accurately read the cultural politics of the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly with respect to the Pacific Northwest and to the screenplay and film of *My Own Private Idaho*? For example, are the film’s Native Americans, who appear only briefly, as a statue and a policeman, “none the less a constant ideological presence” because “salmon, forests — indeed, the whole natural world — are sacred to these people” (Breight 312)? Does Van Sant’s insider joke² about a statue commemorating “The Coming of the White Man,” located in a Portland park frequented for cruising by gay men (Handleman 61), refer primarily to “the colonization of the New World as ‘rape’” and thus imply “an analogy between the colonization of Native peoples and the cultural oppression of ‘sexual deviants’ in mainstream American culture” (Bergbusch 221)? I suggest that the answer to these questions is “no.” In what follows, therefore, I look again at the cultural politics of the film’s contemporary moment, bringing to light an aspect of it that has not been addressed in the literature on *Idaho*. Placing the film as specifically Western, indeed as a Western,³ and, therefore, as a version of the pastoral, I argue that what complicates *Idaho*’s political import is the film’s status as pastoral: “Mike Waters in the wilderness,” as Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler put it (27). *My Own Private Idaho* demonstrates “the continuing viability of pastoral experience and of pastoral representation” (5) in the politics of the post-industrial world, a viability that is based in the pastoral’s political and ideological complexity: “American pastoral [is] both counterinstitutional and institutionally sponsored,” (20) a means of “expressing alienation, yet also, on another level, a means by which alienation is mediated” (Buell, “Pastoral” 23).

Pastoral ideology can work to critique the social order or to normalize it, which is what makes *Idaho* interesting politically; one cannot easily peg the film’s politics in this respect. Arthur and Liebler contend that Van Sant puts his audience in a politically “productive state of cognitive dissonance,” which results from *Idaho*’s studied neutrality about the social worlds it depicts: “in *Idaho* as in the *Henriad*, neither of the two socially antagonistic domains — the one governed by Mayor Favor and inherited by his pivotal son, and the one misgoverned by Bob — is allowed to dominate. . . . There is no legible dramatic or ideological hierarchy to *Idaho*’s mesh of discursive codes” (36). In this, Arthur and Liebler disagree with most critics, who locate *Idaho*’s sympathies and optimism in the world of Bob and Mike, as Hugh M. Davis for instance suggests: in “following Mike and not Scott . . . Van Sant is questioning

the norm, asking viewers to judge whether money and prestige (and, in Scott's case, a heterosexual lifestyle) are worth the cost they bring to lives, friendships, and families" (119).⁴ My sense, too, is that the film sides, finally, with the world of Mike and Bob, but it does so without optimism and only just barely. After all, Scott's world is Van Sant's world — Scott is Van Sant (Handelman 62; Fuller xlii) — and, as I shall argue, *Idaho's* capitalists and politicians do not constitute the kind of evil empire described by most critics who have written on the film. Indeed, "just barely" is probably about as far as "a preppy [filmmaker] who golfs and drives a BMW" can be expected to go (Handelman 62).

Much has been made of Van Sant's collaborative and improvisatory approach to filmmaking and the fact that the finished film is quite different from the published shooting script. Not surprisingly, given the landscape of the cultural politics it addresses, particular focus has been trained on the scene featuring Mike and Scott around a campfire, which was rewritten by River Phoenix to make Mike "more gay," someone capable of love, and not the "out of it, more myopic" character written by Van Sant (Warren 39, Taubin 13).⁵ Much less has been made of a scene in the film that has no counterpart in the published screenplay, a reworking of Act 3, Scene 2 of *1 Henry IV*. After the robbery of the concert promoters, and shortly before Scott and Mike leave for Idaho and subsequently for Italy, Scott, dressed in jeans, an open leather jacket, and studded dog collar, meets with his father in the mayor's nicely appointed office. In Shakespeareanized language, Jack Favor sadly upbraids his son:

I don't know whether it is God trying to get back at me for something I have done, but your passing through life makes me certain that you are marked, and that heaven is punishing me for my mistreatings. When I got back from France and set foot in Clark County and saw what your cousin Bill Davis had done at his family's ranch, I thought, by my soul, he has more worthy interest to my estate than you can hold a candle to. Being no older than you are, he organizes operations for state senators, lobbies for the small businessman, and has an ambitious five-year plan for the forests that even I would like to support. And then I have to think of you and what a degenerate you are.

Scott implores his father not to think so poorly of him, and promises that, in time, he will "make this northern youth trade me his good deeds for my indignities." He embraces the old man, who grimaces, apparently in pain — a suggestion, perhaps, that he has little time left on this earth.⁶

An ambitious five-year plan for the forests: Jack Favor invites us into the specifics of the cultural politics of the Pacific Northwest in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly as they relate to the film's pastoralism via issues of land-use central to the pastoral since the begin-

ning,⁷ and the film's focus on family dynamics and homelessness. And yet no critic has seen fit to follow the invitation, to travel down that road (a road, perhaps, on which we might get stuck, as Mike is stuck in Idaho). No one has seen fit to invoke, much less examine, the complex politics of land-use in the Pacific Northwest, and particularly its timber war, a war that began quietly in the 1970s only to pit, eventually and loudly, owls against jobs and greens against timber corporations (with the government in the middle, variously aligned or not with both groups), and that, like the culture war described by Romàn, reached its "crisis" in the years *Idaho* was conceived and produced. In June 1990, following a legal and legislative battle of three years, environmentalists succeeded in listing the northern spotted owl as an endangered species. In May 1991, U.S. District Court Judge William Dwyer upbraided the Forest Service for dragging its feet in efforts to protect the owl and reimposed his March 1989 injunction halting most Forest Service timber sales in the region (Brown 27-33, Dietrich 257-264). And, in this same time period, in rural communities throughout the Pacific Northwest, "poor and working people [were left] to cope [by themselves] with the fallout" of "this polarized battle between industry and environmentalists" (Brown 17), a fallout that included the loss of well-paying jobs and, in some cases, property, as well as "access to the 'public commons' of fishing sites, blackberry patches, and mushrooming areas" (O'Dair 112). Tens of thousands of the working-class moved to the region's cities, and others adopted a sort of semi-permanent vagabondage, moving from place to place, even camping in parks, and "turning," as one local put it, "into turtles, carrying our house on our back" (Raphael 265). An unknown number of them ended up like Mike, living on the streets of Portland and Seattle, their dispossession and homelessness caused in no small measure by environmentalists, by, in other words, the left.⁸

Reading the literature on *My Own Private Idaho*, however, one would know neither that a twenty year battle for control of land in the Pacific Northwest reached its climax in 1991, nor that this battle was, in large part, a class war, effecting a transformation of many Pacific Northwest communities from sites of working-class logging and wood products work to sites of upper middle-class eco- and cultural tourism. Rather, one reads interpretations that fit comfortably into the binary described in my opening paragraph because, I suspect, many critics can read cultural or literary scenes only in terms of it. Such critics do not see when left policies result in deleterious effects on the poor, and they cannot imagine that proponents of policies different from their own might have motives and interests other than simply the nefarious. Thus, when Curtis Bright comments on the scene between Scott and his father, he offers a reading for which the only justification is the implication of the binary itself: in "the *Henriad* royalty and nobility wreak havoc, but in *Idaho* even the lowest levels of the socio-political hierarchy destroy the environment: the plan for the forests is a plan to cut them down" (311). No evidence in the film or the published screenplay supports the notion

that Bill Davis's plan is to cut down the forests; such a plan is not mentioned elsewhere. Indeed, such a conclusion is possible only if one assumes that all plans for the forest promoted by local politicians and businessmen are plans to cut down the trees. But that assumption is belied by Jack Favor's line — Bill Davis's "ambitious five-year plan for the forests" is one, he says, "that even I would like to support" — which suggests not only that many plans for the forests are being floated (which is, of course, a historical fact) but also that differences of opinion on the matter, and possibilities for negotiation and compromise, exist among the "mere mayors, state senators, small businessmen and ranchers" who, for Bright, appear uniform in their desire to destroy the environment and oppress the poor.

This reading is not alone in being determined by a binaric and abstract vision of the cultural politics of the Pacific Northwest in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Consider Bright's comments on the scene that rewrites Act 5, Scene 5 of *2 Henry IV*, in which Scott rejects Bob, his Falstaff. This scene opens with a shot of Mike, Bob, and Budd, sitting on the sidewalk outside of Powell's Bookstore, an institution central to Portland's construction of itself as left or radical⁹; nearby is an up-scale restaurant, Jake's, which has served the city since 1892. As Bob talks with Bad George, whose dress recalls that of an Elizabethan jester, Bob notices that Scott and his Italian wife, Carmella, are about to enter Jake's, whereupon he decides that it is time to call in Scott's debts to him, and indeed, to them all. Bright nicely makes much of the fortuitous pun on jakes — "the Elizabethan word for a privy: Scott rejects Bob in a shit-house filled with the well-to-do" (313) — but he nevertheless allows the binary to dictate his reading of the scene:

When Scott enters "Jakes" he is greeted by a sycophantic guy who introduces him to "Tiger Warren." The credits claim that Tiger is playing "himself," encouraging us to believe that he is an actual restaurant tycoon. He says — "Scotty, you ever considered a political career?" Scott's smiling glance suggests willingness to become a(nother) "vile politician" (*1 Henry IV*, I.iii.238) and in this respect we are reminded of Henry V's rhetoric to his troops at the siege of Harfleur — "imitate the action of the tiger." Scott's initiation into the ruling bourgeoisie is curiously bathetic. But now he is in the *tiger warren*, a contrast to the rabbit warren of the first scene in which Mike associates himself with an innocuous bunny — "Where do you think you're running, man? We're stuck here together, you shit."

(313)

Like his reading of the scene between Scott and his father, Bright's interpretation of this scene depends upon the implication of the binary, the assumption, for example, that small businessmen and local politicians are uniformly evil. Thus relieved of having to discover anything

about this “actual restaurant tycoon,” Breight reads Jake’s restaurant as at once a shithouse and a tiger warren, filled with sycophants, vile politicians, and predatory tycoons.

Just a bit of digging, however, would have revealed Tiger Warren as a rather different sort of businessman. Now deceased — he died, along with his three sons, in November, 1999, when the floatplane he was piloting crashed into the Columbia River — Warren was the son of Portland industrialists, and from an early age he enjoyed and stretched the limits of his privilege. Down-to-earth, creative, and mischievous, he was, according to one old friend, “more like Peter Pan than anyone I’ve ever met” (Leeson). In his twenties, Warren moved into an old parking garage in downtown Portland, establishing one of Portland’s first lofts as a space to indulge his interests in art, vintage cars, and parties (Leeson). Also during this period, he made a few films, including *Skateboard*, “a cool movie” according to Boardwild.com, “one of the first features on the sport,” and *Rockaday Richie and the Queen of the Hop*, a violent film based on “the 1950s Midwestern homicidal crime spree led by Charles Starkweather” (Leeson). In the 1980s, perhaps feeling the need to prove himself to his family, he founded Macheezmo Mouse, which quickly expanded into a chain of fast-food outlets serving low-fat and vegetarian Mexican food in “quirky, high-tech, sci-fi surroundings” that reflected his personality (Leeson, Brooks). When Van Sant was filming *Idaho*, Macheezmo Mouse was at the height of its popularity and success, but after going public in 1994, the company steadily lost money.

It is difficult to imagine Peter Pan in the tiger warren, and Macheezmo Mouse, an antidote to Taco Bell, is just the kind of place likely to be frequented by greens and others on the left. Yet it is not difficult to imagine Gus Van Sant in Tiger Warren: nearly the same age, sons of upper middle-class Portlanders, each found it impossible to hew to his family’s expectations for life and career. Arguably, therefore, *My Own Private Idaho* establishes a nexus of political and economic privilege different from the one established by Breight, Bergbusch, Romàn, and others. Gus Van Sant, Tiger Warren, and Scott Favor do not evoke Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and the New World Order so much as Bill Gates, Kevin Kelly of *Wired* magazine, and the New Economy — “the libertarian hipster, the Republican Deadhead, the rock ‘n’ rolling millionaire, the dope-smoking stockbroker,” as Thomas Frank describes them (83). These capitalists and the politicians they favor can see the forests *and* the trees; having co-opted “just about every academic-sounding critique of Western civilization to have trickled down in recent years,” (196) they know, says Frank sarcastically, “the value of the wisdom of the East” and have “no problem with difference, lifestyle, and pleasure” (300).

Because Breight assumes small businessmen and local politicians are uniformly evil, and because he cannot resist the fortuitous double entendre provided by the tycoon’s last name, he is led to a peculiar, if not incoherent argument: “But now [Scott] is in the *tiger warren*, a con-

trast to the rabbit warren of the first scene in which Mike associates himself with an innocuous bunny —“Where do you think you’re running, man? We’re stuck here together, you shit.” (313). Here Bright suggests both that Scott is in danger, the object of the predatory tiger, and that, in contrast to the tiger warren, the rabbit warren is innocuous, a safe haven for Mike and the “bunny.” But this is plainly incorrect, since, as the *OED* explains, a “warren” is “a piece of land enclosed and preserved for breeding game.” For both tiger and rabbit, a warren is an unnatural space, far from innocuous, in which their lives are valuable insofar as they serve the pleasures of gentlemen. If Scott is in a tiger warren, he is the predator, just as Mike is the predator in the film’s opening scene; “you shit” hardly suggests a kindly association between man and rabbit. Indeed, in the film, before Mike speaks the lines quoted by Bright, he makes a howling sound, like a coyote’s; the implication is that he scares the “bunny” for the hell of it, to see it run. This reading is supported by the screenplay in which the stage direction says, “Mike suddenly lunges at the little rabbit . . . , and the rabbit runs for his life,” and in which Mike says, “I just love to scare things. . . . I don’t know. It gives me a sense of . . . Power” (Van Sant 110).

And, if you will excuse a descent into near cliché, power is what we are talking about here, power exercised in complicated ways that do not fit easily into a binary opposition, no matter how nicely drawn. Thus, as I have suggested, and as the invocation of a rabbit warren allows me to repeat, the politics of land-use is far more complicated than is typically acknowledged. In the sixteenth century or in the eighteenth, for example, the needs of capitalist agriculture did not drive all efforts to enclose land; poor and rural populations were frequently displaced, says Annabel Patterson, “in the service of the gentlemen’s park” (195). In the twentieth century, too, in the Pacific Northwest, a form of enclosure was “performed in the service of the gentlemen’s park”: as a result of the timber war, the forest was gentrified and is now a pastoral playground for a green upper middle-class, and, in many cases, the working-class people who once made a living there have been displaced, forced off the land and into the cities.¹⁰

My Own Private Idaho alludes in one other place to the complicated politics of land use in the Pacific Northwest, and this allusion is one that critics have chosen, so far, not to discuss.¹¹ In *Idaho*’s replay of the Gad’s Hill robbery of *1 Henry IV*, Bob, Budd, and the other robbers disguise themselves in saffron gowns, as Rajneesh; chanting in an undisciplined way, they create “a facsimile of Rashneesh, but a bad act,” according to the screenplay (Van Sant 147). Their victims, the drunk concert promoters, recognize them as such, and begin to harass them, pouring a beer on the head of one of them, just before Bob pulls out his guns and says, “up against the wall, you silly scumbags!”¹² In the screenplay, one of the concert promoters says, “I thought that all you Rashneesh had up and left . . . ” (148), a line that occurs in the film, though it is barely audible, and that alludes to the collapse in 1985 of the

commune established by the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh in rural Oregon, near the small town of Antelope. Founded in 1981, on the 64,229 acre Big Muddy Ranch, which the *Willamette Week* described as “severely overgrazed,” the commune, aiming to create a “self-sufficient utopia of organic farming and dynamic meditation,” spent \$30 million dollars in two years to construct “a small city, complete with a post office, a school, a shopping mall, and housing for 1,000 people” (Graham).¹³ The commune was quickly incorporated as Rajneeshpuram.

The commune’s history illustrates how difficult it is to assess the politics of land-use law and regulation in the Pacific Northwest. On one hand, the Rajneesh are but one part of the hundreds of thousands of upper-middle class people who migrated to the Pacific Northwest from California and elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s. According to *Willamette Week*’s Rachel Graham, the Bhagwan’s followers were drawn to his “feel-good philosophy” and were “overwhelmingly well-educated, affluent urbanites with every intention of remaining in the world — on their own terms.”¹⁴ Furthermore, their eventual and, according to Carl Abbott, “nearly inevitable” cultural conflict with the 47 residents of Antelope — which occurred when, for example, “the local diner became a vegan cafe” (Graham) and the Bhagwan drove there in a Rolls-Royce, and when the Rajneesh took over the city council and petitioned to incorporate Antelope as part of Rajneeshpuram — exemplifies in an admittedly over-the-top way the experience of many Pacific Northwest communities when upper middle-class migrants began to constitute a significant proportion of the population.

On the other hand, like many of Oregon’s poor and working-class citizens and despite their wealth and power, the Rajneesh were subject to, some might say victims of, Oregon’s highly restrictive land-use laws. Having come “to central Oregon to be alone,” the Rajneesh “found themselves in the midst of a fully articulated institutional framework,” (Abbott 100) and the Bhagwan’s plans for Rajneeshpuram were contested repeatedly by the 1000 Friends of Oregon, an environmental watchdog organization with “a reputation for tenacious and consistent use of litigation to require strict adherence to Oregon’s statewide land-use goals by both state and local officials” (Abbott 89).¹⁵ Litigation over whether Rajneeshpuram was consistent with Oregon’s statewide land-use laws continued for years, indeed long after the commune collapsed and the Bhagwan and many of his followers left the country on the heels of likely prosecution for immigration violations.¹⁶ In 1987, and after the expenditure of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of dollars, the many land-use cases were resolved for the most part in favor of the Rajneesh by the Oregon Supreme Court, and judgments were ratified in 1988 when the United States Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal (Abbott 101-102). But the victory was hollow; in the late 1980s, Rajneeshpuram was “empty, bankrupt, and legal within Oregon law” (Abbott 100).

In three significant allusions, then, *My Own Private Idaho* invites us into the cultural politics of the Pacific Northwest in the late 1980s and

early 1990s. When we follow those leads, we find a landscape considerably different from the one reflected in most of the literature so far produced on the film. Here, *Idaho's* cultural politics is a pastoral politics, illuminating the land and its use. Here, upper middle-class environmentalists play a principal role in the state's bureaucratic regulation of land-use; New Economy capitalists and entrepreneurs support rather than hinder that regulation; and resisters to bureaucratic control face harassment, deviant status, and eventual dispossession, this regardless of whether they are dressed in tattered salmon-colored jackets or in expensive saffron-colored gowns. If it is "more than coincidental" that Mike wears such a jacket at various times in *My Own Private Idaho* (Bergbusch 215), it may be more than coincidental that Bob and the other robbers are dressed like Rajneesh. It may be more than coincidental that after the robbery Mike himself looks like a Rajneesh, dressed in red jeans that almost match his jacket. In the Pacific Northwest, no one escapes the long arm of the green law.

In the context of pastoralism, of course, the notion of a green law is an oxymoron. If only in the imagination and if only temporarily, the green world, the wilderness, is where the upper middle class go to escape the constraints and laws of the city. Pastoralism appeals to readers and viewers because it offers "relief from the pressure of daily concerns (*negotium*) in a 'liberty' and 'freedom' (*otium*) consciously contrasted to the workaday round, a praise of simplicity (and therefore, of 'nature') as opposed to the artificiality of urban life" (Colie 248).¹⁷ In contrast, and as the cultural politics surrounding the film suggests, *My Own Private Idaho* collapses the pastoral distinction between country and city; the film does not idealize nature.¹⁸ The country is no less corrupt than the city; indeed, it is because of its corruption that Mike leaves the country for the city. City dwellers themselves conduct business in the country, like Hans the auto parts dealer and even Mike and Scott, for whom Hans is a customer; in so doing, they rely on and are subject to the constraints of a law enforced (or not) by native Americans, "natural" men no longer. *Idaho*, then, like Oregon itself, would seem to mark an end to pastoral space, a perhaps not surprising result in a world that has also marked the end of nature, as Bill McKibben put it in his 1989 best-seller. No part of the planet exists that has not been affected by human activity; "the human and the natural," says William Cronon, "can no longer be distinguished" (82). Nature now involves "some sort of mutual constitution of the natural and the social" (Buell "Toxic" 657).

Rather than an end to the pastoral, however, what *Idaho* may mark is an end to a certain understanding of pastoralism and, not incidentally, to a certain understanding of environmentalism, both dictated by Romantic poetics, which, as Paul Alpers argues, "exaggerate[s] the importance of idealized nature" (27). Another understanding of the pastoral exists — for Alpers this understanding is pre-Romantic, but I suggest it may be post-Romantic or postmodern, as well — in which "not nature but certain kinds of human beings and human experience are central" (Alpers 37) and in which, as noted above, personal alien-

ation from the social order can be both expressed and mediated. In this tradition, focused on human experience rather than idealized nature, the central question is “ethical stability in one’s present world, rather than a yearning for one’s past” (Alpers 37) or, as we might put this in the context of today’s environmentalism, the central question is how to achieve social and environmental justice, rather than how to preserve a putatively untouched nature.¹⁹ By this token, *Idaho* maintains its force as pastoral, as a Western,²⁰ and as a work of art addressing the current moment, in particular the complex relationships between personal identity and, on the one hand, familial and social locations and, on the other hand, cultural and economic politics.

Regarding the latter, which has been my focus in this essay, *Idaho*’s postmodern pastoralism offers a politics more complicated than is suggested in the commentaries of critics who either have not registered or have ignored a substantial body of academic research that would undermine their binaries, research demonstrating how, for example, native Americans altered their environments and how such labor damaged the land.²¹ *Idaho* instead registers a postmodern pastoralism or environmentalism that acknowledges “the inextricable imbrication of outback with metropolis” (Buell “Toxic” 659); the potential for conflict among groups of people over the meanings of nature; and hence, the importance of developing “an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as *not* using it” (Cronon 85). In this sense, it is essential that Scott leave the streets and enter the upscale Jake’s, and that Mike, like innumerable Western heroes before him, become what he calls a “connoisseur of roads.”²² As a result, Scott and Mike become not just the Hal and Pains of a postmodern Shakespeare but also, if I may adapt Lawrence Buell’s felicitous phrasings, the Tityrus and Meliboeus of a postmodern pastoral, one man content and normalized, the other alienated and dispossessed (“Pastoral” 23). As Buell suggests, the terms have changed since Virgil wrote his *Eclogues*, but debate continues today about how humans ought to relate to their environments and to one another.

Notes

1. And the film rewrites Shakespeare by way of Orson Welles’s *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), a film that made Van Sant realize “Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* plays had this gritty quality about them” (Fuller xxv). Van Sant “referred to the original Shakespeare” when writing *Idaho*, but he did so out of fidelity to Welles, not Shakespeare: “I tried to forget the Welles film because I didn’t want to be plagiaristic or stylistically influenced by it” (Fuller xxxvii). Not very successful, since, in several instances, “Van Sant copies Welles’s mise-en-scene shot for shot,” Van Sant clearly filters his Shakespeare through Welles, who occupies “roughly the same uneasy position of authority and identification for

Van Sant that Shakespeare held for Welles" (Arthur and Liebler 33). As Susan Wiseman observes, *Idaho* is "richly intertextual": whether alluding to low or high culture, including John Wayne, the B'52s, gay male pornography, the Fun Factory, the paintings of the Renaissance, and Orson Welles, "'Shakespeare' is far from the only cultural marker in the film" (225).

2. *Idaho* contains other insider jokes. Only in Portland will audiences laugh at "the actor playing the city's chief of police . . . Tom Peterson, a local appliance-store owner long known for his brash late-night TV commercials" (Handelman 62).

3. Van Sant points out that *Mala Noche*, *Drugstore Cowboy*, and *My Own Private Idaho* "are really modern Westerns because they're written in the West and take place there . . . Portland is a Western town. Only fifty years ago, Portland had dirt streets. The people that live there are descendants of the original pioneers and of the Indians" (Fuller xlv). Classic American cowboy songs are featured prominently in *My Own Private Idaho*, which also includes an important allusion to Howard Hawks's *Rio Bravo*, a film that "itself [is] an important nexus of generic revision" (Arthur and Liebler 28).

4. On this issue see also Wiseman, Bergbusch, Breight, and Willson.

5. In contrast to most critics, Arthur and Liebler cite the scene as an instance of the other "skein of cultural allusion" in *Idaho*, that of an ongoing re-appraisal of the Western and of the Western hero (27, 28).

6. Robert F. Willson, Jr. adds that the grimace might be read differently: is Scott's father "repelled by the embrace of his notoriously bisexual offspring? Here Van Sant has problematized the scene and source: Scott's complicated sexuality undercuts the emotional climax of the reconciliation scene. Any attempt by this Hal to assume the mantle of traditional manhood must be regarded as heavily ironic" (34).

7. On the intersection of the pastoral with issues of land use, see Alpers, Marx, Montrose, Patterson, and Williams.

8. Exactly how many working-class jobs were lost to environmentalism is difficult to figure. At the time, both sides exaggerated their estimates, with industry claiming losses of 100,000 and environmentalists claiming none, or almost none. Moreover, job loss in the industry is attributable to restructuring and technological innovation, and not all who lose their jobs lose their homes or land (see O'Dair 104-105). To this day, social scientists disagree about the effects on jobs of efforts to protect the spotted owl; because of the political and ideological implications of those efforts, Carroll et al. may be correct in judging that the debate, having now perhaps moved into the realm of historical analysis, "may continue virtually forever" (325). For an illuminating exchange on the issue, one that addresses ideology as well as scientific validity, see Freudenburg, O'Leary, and Wilson; Carroll et al.; and Freudenburg, Wilson, and O'Leary.

9. Of necessity, critics must be less than comprehensive in commenting on the details of a text. Nevertheless, one wonders whether significance

attaches to Van Sant's placing of Mike, Bob, and Budd outside of this particular business establishment.

10. See also O'Dair 89-114.

11. Willson, Jr. says that "the thieves wear monklike robes with hoods" (34). About the scene, Bright comments on the weapons Scott and Mike use to rob their friends: "they . . . appear to be 'Easton' aluminum baseball bats, an expensive symbol of suburban athletic boyhood and American 'little league' baseball" (310). Apparently, Bright does not know or has ignored the fact that aluminum bats do not (or rarely) break. If more expensive than wooden bats at the outset, aluminum bats are less expensive over the course of a season or several seasons. Not expensive symbols of suburban boyhood, aluminum bats are standard equipment for males and females at all levels of amateur baseball and at all levels of softball, whether amateur or professional.

12. According to the screenplay, the line is "you sully scumbags, up against that wall" (Van Sant 148).

13. In 1992, *The Economist* reported that some estimates pegged the spending at Rajneeshpuram at \$150 million ("Rattlesnake-heaven: cults"). In 1990, Carl Abbott observed that "investment capital for Rajneeshpuram . . . certainly totaled in the tens of millions of dollars" (92).

14. On the Bhagwan's followers in the Pacific Northwest see also Abbott 78, 92.

15. For assessments of Oregon's land-use policy, see Brown; Leeman; and Abbott, Howe, and Adler.

16. In the media, the Bhagwan's problems with local and state-wide planning authorities did not rate notice, overwhelmed as these problems were by far more sensational encounters with authorities, including the sect's attempts to accumulate weaponry; to intimidate followers and government officials; and to manipulate elections by importing several thousand homeless people to vote and by poisoning salad bars in several popular restaurants with salmonella, a maneuver that sent 750 people to the hospital (this was, until the recent anthrax poisonings, the most significant instance of biological terrorism in this country). As Abbott notes, "the idea of a high-tech utopia that equipped itself with Uzis and Rolls Royces as well as beads and that counted Ph.Ds. in political science and linguistics along with its graying guru was irresistible to the news media" (78). But the Rajneesh considered, and still consider, the litigation over land-use to be part of an American conspiracy to destroy Rajneeshpuram (see for instance the following websites: oz.sannyas.net/osho02.html, bx.db.dk/pe/twotales.htm, and oshoturk.com/osho-life/08-22-conspiracy.htm). And Abbott concludes that "the increasing ability and capacity of local and state regulators to actively limit the development of Rajneeshpuram was one of three major factors leading to the sudden collapse of the commune in September and October 1985. The others were growing internal disaffection and factionalism within the commune leadership and decline in the worldwide Rajneeshee

income that had helped to subsidize the growth of Rancho Rajneesh" (98).

17. Also compare discussions of the function of pastoralism by Schama, Patterson, Young, Marx, and Buell ("Pastoral").

18. Invoking the opening sequence, Richard Burt thinks the film initially offers up "a certain kind of aestheticizing, pastoral artifice" as partial compensation for the ills of society, only to reveal that compensation as empty as the film proceeds (340). But Burt offers as evidence only the images representing Mike's narcoleptic state, which include a shot of his mother reassuring him that "everything's going to be all right" and a shot of salmon swimming upstream; he does not refer to the scenes that precede Mike's falling into a narcoleptic state, which do not suggest an aestheticizing of nature. If the film offers up such compensation, it is thin compensation indeed, available only to the narcoleptic among us.

19. Frederick H. Buttell, a past president of the Rural Sociological Society, believes that environmentalism "will probably need to be tied to social justice in order to be enduring" (16). On the class and racial biases of the environmental movement, see Buell "Toxic," Cronon, Ferry, Luke, O'Dair, and White.

20. In the literature on Westerns, the consensus is that the post-World War II period saw "new inflections of the genre," specifically, the "'adult' or 'psychological' Western which was variously celebrated or criticised for bringing new social and psychological aspects to the old formula" (Pye "Fantasy" 168). In the Westerns of the 1950s and 1960s, the issue for the hero is not just civilization's "challenge to wilderness ways but the need to negotiate more specific social contexts in which differences in manners and mores, in class and social position become central to questions of identity" (Pye "Introduction" 19).

21. See for instance White, White and Cronon, Krech III, and Merchant.

22. Arthur and Liebler argue that Mike's fate "is at once an active choice and the unavoidable result of his lower-class origins" (29); likewise, Scott's freedom is circumscribed by his social position (36).

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