

# "An anagram of the body": Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*

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## Abstract

Appropriation of Shakespeare in postmodern film, as distinct from adaptation, presents a partially seen textual body, cut off by the frame of the cinematic screen. *My Own Private Idaho* (1992, USA) in particular is overtly dominated, both visually and thematically, by the fragmentation of textual and physical bodies — the Shakespearean body as well its own. This essay examines the use of *Henry IV*'s marginal characters and the echoic corporeal tropes of the play in the film's preoccupation with the body, using as a framework Barthesian critical ideas about the body-text (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 1975) and visual body tropes explored by Linda Nochlin (*The Body in Pieces*, 1994). Shakespeare's text becomes a body fragmented and commodified in *Idaho*, a film that presents both tragedy and rebellion via the manipulation of physical and textual bodies.

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*Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body. The pleasure of the text is irreducible to physiological need. (Roland Barthes)*

*The loss of the whole is more than tragedy. Out of this loss is constructed the Modern itself. (Linda Nochlin)*

The appropriation, as distinct from adaptation, of Shakespeare in postmodern film presents a partially seen textual body, cut off by the frame of the cinematic screen. *My Own Private Idaho* (1992, USA)<sup>1</sup> is permeated by the fragmentation of textual and physical bodies, both the Shakespearean body and its own. This essay examines the use of *Henry IV*'s marginal characters and the echoic corporeal tropes of the play paralleled in the film's preoccupation with the body, using as a framework Barthesian critical ideas about the body-text (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 1975) and visual body tropes explored by Linda Nochlin (*The Body in Pieces*, 1994). Shakespeare's text becomes a body fragmented and commodified in *Idaho*, a film that presents both tragedy and rebellion via the manipulation of physical and textual bodies.

Pauline Kiernan identifies "the primacy of the human body in [Shakespeare's] art" (Kiernan 1996, 10) as central to what she proposes to be a consistent "theory of drama" that can be traced through his texts. The *Henry IV* plays, with their recurrent and dominant corporeal conceits and representations, aptly demonstrate this theory. The first speech of *Henry IV, Part 1* establishes the centrality of the anatomical trope that will, in many forms, persist throughout the two plays. The repulsion of the monarchic body unsettled by the horror of an unstable and violent "mother" kingdom opens the play in a flurry of passion from the King, who uses the dangerous female body as a metaphor for disorder:

So shaken as we are, so wan with care,  
Find we a time for frightened peace to pant,  
And breathe short-winded accents of new broils  
To be commenc'd in strands afar remote:  
No more the thirsty entrance of this soil  
Shall daub her lips with her own children's blood.  
(*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.1-6; Shakespeare 1994)

The horrific image of a cannibalistic, infanticidal female kingdom in times of civil strife launches a scene riddled with body-"shock" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.12).<sup>2</sup> Moving away from a gendered corpus, dismembered body parts are itemized with anatomical precision — "eyes" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.9), "intestine" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.12), and "hands" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.41) — in what A. R. Humphreys notes as being "the first of the abundant references to bodily states and functions" (Shakespeare 1994, ed. Humphreys, 3). The soothing "womb" is reinvented in order to recuperate the familiar comfort of England as mother-land, as the King decides to lead a crusade to unite his forces against a foreign foe, using the term "womb" — in the singular — to portray his forces as brothers in arms once more:

Forthwith a power of English we shall levy,  
Whose arms were moulded in their mothers' womb  
Over whose acres walked those blessed feet. (*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.23-25)

The threatening figure of the "foreign" rebel or enemy is refashioned by Westmoreland to take the form of Welsh rebel Owen Glendower, who is described as "irregular and wild" and whose "rude hands" "butchered" the opposition, their "dead corpses" then being mutilated (*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.40-46). Fixing on a "rude," barbaric enemy neighbor turns the King once more toward home. Thus begins the horror of bodies that are dead, mutilated, fat, old, sick, weak, pregnant, or drunk

— and the Otherness of the uncontrolled body — that permeates the second *Henriad*. It is these elements of the *Henry IV* plays and the ways in which this fragmentation of the body relates to the Other, the rebel or the criminal threat, that is re-encoded, physically and metaphysically, in *Idaho*. This essay examines how the body is commodified and fragmented in *Idaho*, echoing and recoding the body tropes that dominate the *Henry IVs*. The "body" will be considered in two ways: literally, as physical form, and metaphorically, to figure the text as body.

*Idaho* is a journey movie that follows two young male prostitutes. Mike (River Phoenix) is a damaged, homeless drug addict searching for his mother, while Scott (Keanu Reeves), with whom Mike is in (unrequited) love, is a privileged youth rebelling against his father, the mayor of Portland. Then there is, as the film's writer and director Gus Van Sant puts it, "a bunch of Shakespeare in the middle of it" (Van Sant 1992, 37). Scott represents a version of Prince Hal, bantering with a belated Falstaff figure, Bob Pigeon, his "real father." He is frequently found rescuing (the generally non-"Shakespearean") Mike, as he moves through a life beleaguered by narcolepsy. *Idaho's* relationship with its embedded Shakespearean text is manifestly enacted through Mike and Scott and, as Thomas Cartelli writes, "makes Shakespeare function in the interests of its socially and sexually marginalized protagonists" (Cartelli 1999, 27). Mike is a marginal outcast from a background of uncertainty, isolated in a postmodern urban wilderness. Scott is a new Prince Hal, "slumming it" within the alternative family of the streets while planning to return to the comfort and power of his future hegemonic authority. Mike has very few Shakespearean lines and then only at times when Scott has initiated the exchange. His story frames the film's narrative, so that when Scott's Shakespearean elements emerge, the action resembles the play-within-a-play device; this shift is often signalled by a "Renaissance"-style musical accompaniment and costume style (figure 1).

Bodily incarnations of Shakespeare on the large and small screen have manifested themselves since the earliest moving pictures, playing on our fascination with this most mysterious and famous figure and imposing upon his physical person all manner of wonders and entertainments.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare is a body only known to the belated spectator/reader as definitively fragmented; as Barbara Hodgdon writes, "two memorials are all we know of Shakespeare's body. Indeed, we know him best only through parts, or through roles" (Hodgdon 1998, 191). Writing on *Shakespeare in Love* (1998, USA), Courtney Lehmann looks at this Hollywood film's literal authorial body and its commodification of the physical flesh:

*Shakespeare in Love* poses a theory of authorial production that is grounded in the conspicuous consumption of the *female* flesh, redefining the "dirty work" of the postmodern

auteur not in the spirit of Shakespeare's early modern legacy, but in the flesh of late capitalism's dirty deals to commodify the body itself, all the while disguising this mission as a labor of love. (Lehmann 2002, 213; emphasis in original)

In this way, Lehmann approaches *Shakespeare in Love* as an artifact representing the consumption of Shakespeare *in-the-flesh*, so to speak, as a physical object of desire in the form of its star, Joseph Fiennes. She continues:

In the wake of post-structuralist critiques of the Author, the Shakespearean "corpus" has been the locus of a particular kind of violence, born of the impetus to mutilate, maim, and un-name the authorial body in an effort to valorize the Text. While this exorcism of the Author in academic culture presents us with a striking image of the body-in-pain, popular culture — and Hollywood film in particular — has often stemmed this deconstructive tide by resurrecting Shakespeare in the form of a body-in-pleasure. (Lehmann 2002, 213-14)

While Lehmann specifies the consumption of "female flesh," the essay does not identify *Shakespeare in Love's* definitive heterosexualization of Shakespeare as not only a "man," but also a text through the film's feminization of the subject of his earlier devotional Sonnets.

One common factor often found in recent incarnations of the Shakespeare-Character is physical attractiveness and hyper-active sexual desires. In his embodiment of the "Shakespeare in the middle" of *Idaho*, Reeves's casting and performance can be read as relating to developing filmic notions of "desirable" Shakespeare. It took a new millennium to bring a de-heterosexualized Will to the mainstream in *Doctor Who: The Shakespeare Code* (BBC TV, UK, 2007), which features a Will Shakespeare openly attracted to The Doctor (David Tennant), who responds to Shakespeare's flirtatious advances with "fifty-seven academics just punched the air!" playfully reinforcing the previously controversial notion of Shakespeare's bisexuality.<sup>4</sup> Notions of a sexualized Shakespeare-Character should be differentiated from the figurative text-as-body approach to appropriation, and it is on the latter that this paper will focus. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of an embodied (rather than simply enacted) Shakespearean text (in the form of *Idaho's* Scott) is related to the cinematic resurrection of "Will Shakespeare" as a body upon which we can gaze directly. The bodies upon which we do gaze in *Idaho* are, like Shakespeare's text, themselves subject to fragmentation and commodification, both within the aesthetic fiction of the film and in the physical presences of the stars cast in the leading roles of Mike and Scott. The casting of two renownedly beautiful young stars has the effect (in the case of River Phoenix) of accenting visually the tragedy of his repetitive *morte et amore* conjunction of love and loss and (in

the case of Keanu Reeves as Scott) of portraying a paragon of desire and promise that will always be unrequited.<sup>5</sup>

### Mike, you're my best friend

In *Henry IV, Part 1*, Hotspur and Hal are aligned as youthful heirs and alter-egos, and while Hotspur does not physically appear in *Idaho*, Scott's father's disapproval of his "effeminate son" is still accompanied earlier by an unfavorable comparison to his successful "Northern" cousin. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, Hotspur and Hal become equivalents who cannot both survive, Hotspur's youthful fervor being Shakespeare's creative addition.<sup>6</sup> This character's youth invokes the tragedy of the fervent, energetic young man killed in his prime in a time before celluloid immortality. Hotspur, horrified that he has been disappointed in his mortal life, is literally cut off by death in mid-sentence, which is theatrically unusual: "No, Percy thou art dust, and food for —" (*1 Henry IV*, 5.4.84-85). Moreover, as Clayton G. MacKenzie asserts, Hotspur's greatest horror is that his fame will die with him: "Hotspur . . . implicitly acknowledges that he has lost eternity precisely because he has not dazzled in his time on earth, and that his reputation, in the manner of the English heroic myth, will not live beyond physical mortality" (MacKenzie 2000, 48).

*Idaho* subverts the two-male buddy movie format with its protagonists, Mike and Scott. Their transgressive sexualities and journeys work against the over-assertion of heterosexuality and much-analyzed latent homoeroticism of the Hollywood buddy movie, which, as Cynthia Fuchs notes, "typically collapses intramasculine difference by effecting an uncomfortable sameness" and represents "a transgression of boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, legitimate and illicit" (Fuchs 1993, 194). Conventional "buddies" must represent a binary: old and young,<sup>7</sup> black and white,<sup>8</sup> and so on — but never man and woman or, traditionally, overtly bi- or homosexual men despite, frequently, an arguable homoerotic charge to male pairings. *Idaho* retains features of the "buddy" movie, with sweeping motorcycle rides calling up images of *Easy Rider*-style (1969, USA) subcultural road movies and a campfire scene that visually invokes ultra-masculine Westerns. *Idaho*'s protagonists, in part, represent the "uncomfortable sameness" Fuchs identifies in conventional buddy movies but, in their complex and transgressive sexualities and fragmented narratives, Mike and Scott fundamentally contradict the stereotypes of the genre, in which homophobia was again reframed during the 1980s, as the buddy film developed more specific, less inflammatory narrative parameters and "gay characters . . . were named victims of familial, political, and social confusions" (Fuchs 1993, 196). While Mike is indeed a "victim" of "familial confusions," the homosexuality of the characters in *Idaho* is not represented as either the

root or result of their unhappiness, but rather as a natural state marginalized by an unwelcoming world, if anything creating a positive, binding affinity within the street family. In his influential treatise on early postmodern urban life, *Soft City* (1974), Jonathan Raban concludes that "stigma does carry a certain perverse privilege in itself, and the homosexual . . . is able to lead a collective life in the metropolis of a kind which many less readily identifiable isolates might envy" (Raban 1974, 141). In line with this hypothesis, Scott chooses homosexual behavior in order to form an identity as an outcast among the marginal family in the city — to avoid total isolation — just as the marginal characters of *Henry IV* form a sheltering family for the new characters of *Idaho*. Once removed from the urban setting into rural landscapes (in the forms of the mid-western open road and pastoral idyll of the Italian countryside), Scott inevitably reverts to firm assertions of his heterosexuality, as exemplified in his campfire scene declaration — "two guys can't love each other" — and his sexual relationship with beautiful farm girl, Carmella.

Mike and Scott together embody Barthes's "split subject":

Now the subject who keeps the two texts in his field and in his hands the reins of pleasure and bliss is an anachronic subject, for he simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture . . . and in the destruction of that culture: he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse. (Barthes 1975, 14)

Scott's "profound hedonism," his manipulation of "pleasure" in himself and others, creates an alluring and disturbing portrait of the intertextual fragment as a human being, a driven, purposeful source of pleasure. Mike, the other half of this binary partnership, is constantly portrayed as the point at which "loss" and "bliss" merge into one. Together, they are "anachronic": Scott/Hal is "timeless," repeating a past character in fragments; Mike embodies the repetitious past and the hopelessness for the future this effects. Scott is Barthes's "text of pleasure" and Mike his "text of bliss":

The text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (Barthes 1975, 14; emphasis in original)

The "comfortable" background from which Scott, ultimately, "does not break" is brought into line with the "*comfortable* practice of reading" Shakespeare. The awkward transience and intangibility of Shakespeare's text, once performed, becomes part of the spectator's altered relationship to the text, and the critical "reader" of film strives to relocate the text somehow in the belated time and space of recording, as opposed to the even more slippery time of live performance. Scott is born at this intersection of the "practice of reading" and the "practice of [viewing]" Shakespeare; he "comes from culture" and represents culture's lasting footprint on the subject. Mike, meanwhile, is impelled through the narrative by "loss," by his conscious acceptance of his Oedipal past and by the *in*-"consistency of his . . . memories" ("My mom's house was blue. No, it was green"). He creates the crisis that drives this representative narrative of the film: the journey to "bliss" and its associated "loss," the danger of falling in love with the "pleasure" of the "timeless" body-text that is Scott/Shakespeare. Unlike Scott's awkward relationship to the "written" text of Shakespeare, the notion of selfhood that Mike represents is definitively filmic; his "memories" are home movies, his trances time-lapse animation, clichés of the filmmaker's ability to cheat time and space.

Mike's journey in the film is a search for the mother who abandoned him in early childhood. We meet her during, or immediately before, his periods of narcoleptic trance-state, his memories embodying the "stress" that Scott explains is a trigger for these episodes. "Mom" appears as temporally and physically fragmented, captured in imagined dream images, regressions, and home-movie footage of Mike's babyhood; the only other link to her is a bloodstained postcard message to Mike's "brother and . . . father too" (2 *Henry IV*, 5.2.57), Richard. Despite the film's linear temporal realism, Mike's disorientation and displacement is shared by the audience. He frequently wakes up from a trance unaware of how much time he has lost or how far he has travelled while in a state of unconsciousness nor, indeed, to what his body has been subjected during his sleep, as he accusingly questions Scott, "How much do you make off me while I'm asleep?" The spectator of *Idaho* cheats time along with Mike, who embodies the temporal trickster, film, in opposition to the hereditary power of Shakespeare's written word, as represented by Scott.

Mike's visual landmarks are repeated along his journey, one that blurs temporal and spatial planes. The most obvious trope is the road on which he travels, where he both begins and ends the film:

I always know where I am by the way the road looks. Like I just know that I have been to this place before. Like I know that I've been stuck here, like this one fucking time before, you know that? There's not another road anywhere that looks like this road. I mean exactly like this road. It's one kind of place. One of a kind. Like someone's face. Like a fucked up face.

The monstrous disconnectedness of the "fucked-up face" paradoxically creates comforting familiarity — a "face" Mike can rely on returning to him time and time again, unlike his family or Scott. The road is a constant unifying element in Mike's disparate and fragmented meta-landscape, which clearly represents a postmodern disjointedness, as Raban writes: "Place, like a mild habitual pain, reminds one that one is; its familiar details and faces — even the parked cars which you recognize as having been there in that spot for months — assure us of a life of repetitions, of things that will endure and survive us" (Raban 1974, 179). As he ends his first speech, Mike falls into a narcoleptic fit in which his mother appears to him and, as he lays his head on her lap, comforts him: "Don't worry, everything's going to be all right. I know. It's OK. I know you're sorry. I know." Mike dreams of the comfort of his mother's arms, the irrelevance of time passing in his drifting state represented in time-lapse footage of fast flowing clouds and sunsets. When he awakes from these dreams, Mike orients himself with repetition of fragments from places or phrases from his unconscious journey, rather than consciously remembering the disturbing regressions of his past. For an audience, familiar intertextual landmarks such as Mike's road assure us of "a life of repetitions, of things that will endure and survive us," making Shakespeare one of the "familiar details and faces" that comfort us in moments of existential flux and fragmentation.

### Time itself is a fair hustler in black leather

Clayton G. MacKenzie identifies the "motifs of repeating monstrosity in *Henry IV*" as emblematic in function and expression (MacKenzie 2000, 59). Beauty and monstrosity, horror of bodily function and imperfection are central to the carnivalesque reversals often utilized as a means of resistant or transgressive expression. In the *Henry IV* plays, Hal's reaction to Falstaff's ample person dominates their interactions, as his physical form manifests all those imperfections and strengths that attract Hal to the underworld. The listing of sinful or ugly "items" subverts the sonneteer's blazon, which should list standard lyrical conceits for beautiful features and virtues — "a sonneteer's inventory of the beloved's attractions" (Berggren 1983, 21) — but instead dissects the body and soul into monstrous fragments. *Idaho* appropriates the Prince's first dissection of Falstaff, the anatomy of his sins, which informs the Prince's very first appearance in *Henry IV, Part 1*. Compare the two versions: first, Hal:

What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the sign of leaping houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-colored taffeta, I see no reason why thou should be so superfluous as to demand the time of day. (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.6-12)



And then, the same passage as appropriated through Scott:

What do you care? Why, you wouldn't even look at a clock, unless hours were like lines of coke, dials looked like the signs of gay bars or time itself was a fair hustler in black leather. Isn't that right, Bob? There's no reason to know the time. We are timeless.

In intertextual appropriation, it is when an allusion is most direct that the changes made are thrust to the fore, conspicuous as a commentary for the audience's direct consumption. Here, such a change lies in sexual orientation, where the "leaping houses" become "gay bars" and the "fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta" is transformed into a "fair hustler in black leather." This translates the language into what Raban harshly labels urban gay communities' connotative and denotative linguistic idiosyncrasy: "the thieves' slang of Gayspeak" (Raban 1974, 195). We lose the disembodied "tongues of bawds," but we gain the simple statement that "we are timeless": "we" as the subculture, "we" as Hal and Falstaff.

François Laroque identifies the emblematic significance of Hal's dissection of Falstaff's spiritual body:

In the prince's speech, time is seen from the point of view of various concrete manifestations (hours, minutes, clocks, and dials) and it is emblemized in a burlesque procession with Sir John's pet sins marching by: "cups of sack," "capons," "bawds," "leaping houses," and "hot wench" . . . Such concrete figuration of the abstract . . . comes from an anatomy or dissection of the body. (Laroque 1998, 84-85)

*Idaho* preserves this "burlesque procession," intensifying Scott's mockery of Bob/Falstaff's desires via Scott's quasi-sexual posture, leaning over Bob, who lies prostrate in bed (figure 2). The clock motif begins in one of the film's opening shots, its emblematic significance being signposted by the close-up, central framing (figure 3). The de-signification of the passing of time is unashamedly posited as central to the film's journey, too, via Mike's time-lapse dream imagery and the general lack of temporal cohesion despite the film's clear, linear temporal realism. The "time" as body commodified, "a fair hustler in black leather," is adjusted from the Shakespearean speech, where it is the "blessed sun himself" who becomes the "hot wench" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.6-12). Yet these two statements both identify Hal/Scott as an eroticized figure of time as power: the "sun/son" pun transvestizes Hal, who thus posits himself subtextually as Falstaff's body of desire. Scott, meanwhile, is styled as "a fair hustler in black leather," sometimes in a biker jacket, almost always to be found sporting a bondage-like wrist or neck collar of black leather (figure 4). It is also clear that the changes made to the Shakespearean fragment are not undertaken in order to mask the

temporal incongruity of the Shakespearean language. On the contrary, the anachronism has been deliberately highlighted: instead of directly appropriating the adjectives "fair hot," the film dialogue retains only the archaic word "fair," which pre-modifies the postmodern "hustler in black leather" in a jagged, anachronistic phrasing that serves to emphasize that here, in this text, "we are timeless." Rather than viewing this change as an impudent rewriting of Shakespeare's text, the anachronistic preoccupation it reveals re-enacts another element of Kiernan's proposed Shakespearean "Theory of Drama": "a highly developed sense of the humanist concept of anachronism" and "acute awareness that his present will become our past" (Kiernan 1996, 10) — the sense, perhaps, that we all are "timeless."

One of the most recognizable fragments of the *Henry IV* plays in *Idaho* is the film's appropriation and retelling of the Gadshill incident, in which the robbers, led by Falstaff, are double-crossed by the Prince and Poins in disguise who, in a second robbery, relieve them of their booty. The image of stealing from the thieves in *Idaho*, lifted directly out of *Henry IV, Part 1*, calls attention to the intertextual momentum created by a perpetual "theft" of ideas and concepts from one text to the next, both in its own theft from Shakespeare and in its action. These scenes in *Idaho* also reinforce the alignment of the marginal status of the film's characters with Shakespeare's portrayal of the petty criminal underworld. Harriet Hawkins identifies the significance of the sympathetic depiction of marginal groups in Shakespeare's work: "within the English dramatic tradition Shakespeare virtually initiated the comparatively compassionate, as opposed to the simply ludicrous or melodramatically villainous portrayals of aliens, outcasts, criminals, disreputable women, and other traditionally anathematized types" (Hawkins 1990, 122). It is unsurprising, then, that counter- and sub-cultural films have begun to select Shakespearean fragments as a part of their rebellious expressions.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Cartelli notes that *Idaho* "record[s] a shift of sympathetic identification from ruling class to underclass" (Cartelli 1999, 28). Moreover, *Idaho*'s marginal family is portrayed as far more positive than Scott and Mike's opposite — but equally loveless — biological families, a juxtaposition that is highlighted in the final scene of the film in which an earthy, musical, sexual, violent outburst of human emotion characterizes Bob Pigeon's funeral while, just yards away, Scott sits, silent, at the conventional interment of his distant father, Jack.

In the character of Scott, *Idaho* creates a more criminal "prince," which is reinforced when Hal and Poins are conflated in the planning of the Gadshill double-cross. In the play, Poins persuades Hal to be his accomplice in the criminal jest against Falstaff and the gang; in *Idaho*, Poins is occasionally absorbed into Mike, yet it is Scott who persuades Mike to join the scheme. This could create a rare moment in which Mike represents Hal, yet the moment is so fleeting as

to disallow this interpretation; rather, Poins's criminal and mischievous nature is combined with the Prince's rebellion to create Scott. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, the retelling of the incident pays the dividend of entertainment for which Poins and Hal have hoped, as Falstaff recounts the episode with epic exaggeration:

*Hal:* Pray God you have not murdered some of them.

*Falstaff:* Nay, that's past praying for, I have peppered two of them. Two I am sure I have paid, two rogues in buckram suits. I tell thee what, Hal, if I tell thee a lie, spit in my face, call me a horse . . . Four rogues in buckram let drive at me.

*Hal:* What, four? Thou saidst but two even now.

*Falstaff:* Four, Hal, I told thee four.

*Poins:* Ay, ay, he said four.

*Falstaff:* Seven, by these hilts, or I am a villain else. (*1 Henry IV*, 2.4.186-95)

This performance offers a pastiche of the inaccuracies of oral storytelling, but also interrogates the importance or otherwise of "truth" in retelling, as compared to the gratifying entertainment offered by such acts.

Falstaff's storytelling is re-enacted in *Idaho*:

*Scott:* Thank God you had not murdered some of them.

*Bob:* Murdered? Well, they are past praying for, I peppered two of them, two punks in leather jackets.

*Scott:* What?

*Bob:* I'll tell you son, these four came in close —

*Scott:* You said there were two.

*Bob:* Four! I said there were four, Scott.

*Scott:* Four.

*Bob:* Now, these four came from the front kicking at me, pulling their knives and I whipped out the blade and took all seven as a target, like this —

*Scott:* Seven? Just a second ago there were four!

*Bob:* In leather?

*Gary:* No, Bob, my friend, there was four of them and they all had leather on.

*Bob:* Seven, by my count!

Scott's dialogue with Bob Pigeon is arguably as close to a metaphrastic appropriation as *Idaho*'s demi-realism allows. However, the slight changes allude to a new marginal context for the

characters. "Rogues in buckram" have been transformed into "punks in leather," becoming a group of a different marginal culture ("punks" taken as a subcultural or stylistic group as well as its alternate U.S. meaning of "loser" or "troublemaker"), with no small allusion to leather's connotative meanings in gay communities, as in Scott's earlier reference to "fair hustlers in black leather." Like Hal, Scott maintains his superiority over Bob by drawing attention to his discrepancies not of moral conscience, but of veracity: Scott/Hal's challenge to Bob/Falstaff's Herculean pretensions is clearly amoral. The Gadshill appropriation in *Idaho* highlights the centrality of *Henry IV's* criminal characters in the film, where the sparse presence of the hegemonic characters (Jack Favor/Henry IV and his circle) serves to reverse the authorial order by marginalizing the "rulers" and foregrounding the underclass, a process the plays themselves innovatively began.

Scott, while more criminally inclined than Hal, lacks a degree of the Prince's original coldness. Unlike Hal, who self-servingly hopes for others' good attention, Scott is portrayed as hoping to impress his parents with his planned "reformation." Here is Hal's speech on the subject:

So when this loose behavior I throw off,  
 And pay the debt I never promised,  
 By how much better than my word I am,  
 By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;  
 And like bright metal on a sullen ground,  
 My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,  
 Shall show more goodly, and attract more eyes  
 Than that which hath no foil to set it off.  
 I'll so offend, to make offence a skill,  
 Redeeming time when men think least I will. (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.203-12)

Here, in contrast, is Scott's speech:

When I turn twenty-one, I don't want any more of this life. My mother and father will be surprised at the incredible change. It will impress them more when such a fuck-up like me turns good than if I had been a good son all along. All my bad behavior I am going to throw away to pay my debt. I will change when everybody expects it the least.

This may appear to be a "translation" of Hal's speech, yet in fact it is far from a repetition of Shakespeare's gist. Hal does not mention parental attention; rather, it would appear that it is in his public life he hopes to adapt and to gain notice. Moreover, Scott declares that it will impress more when he changes than if he had been "a good *son* all along" (my emphasis) as opposed to Hal's

general "reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault." This raises specifically familial anxieties not overtly present in the Shakespearean speech, even if they may be thematic in the play as a whole. However, Scott is a young man who, despite his moneyed background, has not merely chosen an unsavory group of friends (by his father's standards), but has gone so far as to choose a life of prostitution. While Scott seeks to "impress" his parents when a "fuck-up like me turns good," the transgression he has undertaken is more profound and the use to which he has put his body is ultimately irreversible. This rereading of Hal's criminality and his mode of rebellion challenge Stephen Greenblatt's assertion that Hal's redemption, within *Henry IV*, is "inescapable and inevitable." Greenblatt argues that "[Hal's] redemption is not something toward which the action moves but something that is happening at every moment of the theatrical representation" (Greenblatt 1988, 43). In *Idaho*, it is the destructiveness of Scott's behavior — and its irreversibility — that drives his narrative, not a journey to redemption. While Shakespeare's Hal does not sully his royal person with prostitution, his criminal associations are certainly dangerous to the body state. *Idaho* presents a reading of Hal's rebellion that isolates his relationship to marginality and argues that his redemption is not "inevitable," but impossible.

Prostitution is a quite literal manifestation of a commodified body; through Scott's occupation *Idaho* can show the film's Shakespearean "leader" prostituting himself in order to transgress social expectations and to give pecuniary purpose to his self-fragmentation. His conflation with Poin in the Gadshill appropriation amplifies Scott's mischievous, amoral, and nihilistic criminality. His fascination with the possibilities of his own body's lure is made more sinister by the contempt he shows for homosexuality. "I'll sell my ass," he states, from the lurid cover of *Male Call* on the shelf of a porn shop: "I'll do it on the street occasionally for cash" (see figure 14). The "ass" that Scott is willing to sell, when detached from the rest of his "self," facilitates a mercenary sexual attitude but more important, preserves the "whole" from the behavior of its parts. By commodifying a "bunch of Shakespeare[an]" fragments and reforming them, anachronistically, into a means of expression for a marginalized culture, *Idaho* may be "selling [Shakespeare's] ass," but it is also preserving the sanctity of the whole by leaving it untouched, just as Scott himself, although tantalizingly desirable, remains untouchable and aloof from his postmodern friends.

Nonetheless, Scott's paradoxically homophobic condescension ("It's when you start doing it for free that you start to grow wings . . . and become a fairy") sits uneasily with the enactments of homoeroticism for which his body is a site. He becomes removed from the pleasures of the flesh that he provides and experiences. Returning to Barthes, we find this disembodiment in the relationship of reader/body with text: "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas — for my body does not have the same ideas I do" (Barthes 1975, 17). There is a clear

dichotomy between the enactment of others' desires by Scott's body and Scott's own desires: his "body does not have the same ideas [he does]." Scott is, once again, embodying simultaneously a "practice of reading" and the Shakespeare text itself. Once his own hegemonic intentions are enacted (in having sex with the innocent, pastoral Carmella, ultimately entering into a heterosexual partnership with her and replacing his dead father in society), Scott's metamorphosis (from Hal into Henry V) can take place. This resolution enacts the spectator's moment of "pleasure of the text" since, by piecing together the fragments of the Shakespearean body in *Idaho*, the audience has grown to anticipate and desire the fragments to resolve and deliver *jouissance*, when some "wholeness" is glimpsed at the end. In other words, this fulfilment comes with the completion of the *other* text body that we have seen in "play" (Nochlin 1994, 38), fragmented and disembodied at the corners of the frame throughout the film.

Scott's persona in *Idaho* is fashioned as an arrogant and physically dominating presence; frequently he teases those who have been unfortunate enough to fall "fucking in love with me," though ultimately Mike's direct declaration of love is met with compassion. The stylization of Reeves's performance was met with mixed reviews<sup>10</sup> and yet his character, as the embodiment of the Shakespearean text-body, can only be untouchable, unreal, and fragmented. Reeves's casting as Scott (Hal) in *Idaho* may now appear surprising,<sup>11</sup> as his star status is more recently based on a series of mainstream action films.<sup>12</sup> However, Reeves's first professional performance was on stage, starring in the controversial cult play *Wolfboy* (1984), which, despite a mixed critical reception, gained a cult gay following for its portrayal of thinly veiled latent homoeroticism and for the two young male stars' beauty,<sup>13</sup> thus beginning Reeves's renown among the marginalized Canadian and U.S. gay communities during the 1980s and 90s, a less surprising prelude to his casting in *Idaho*.

Michael DeAngelis, who asserts that "many gay males have appropriated Reeves as a sexual ally" (DeAngelis 2001, 180), examines the impact of Reeves's casting as the unattainable Scott Favor:

Structured most literally as melodramatic fantasy, *My Own Private Idaho* situates Reeves as a figure who holds the promise of securing an intimate bond with his male companion, yet who also elects to close off the realization of this connection. For many gay spectators, however, the film permits the construction and stabilization of scenarios of homosexual desire in spite of their eventual disruption within the narrative. (DeAngelis 2001, 208-209)

If Reeves's casting in this role has such an impact, then the ramifications of adding Shakespeare into this mix of star appeal, "pansexual" (201) desire, and "melodrama" are likely to be explosive. The

figure who "also elects to close off the realization of this connection" is identified by DeAngelis as facilitating the male gay audience's "if only . . ." desires (228), regardless of the ultimate lack of actual consummation of these fantasies on screen. Transposed onto the figurative representation of Shakespeare in Scott and a fruitless search for family and unrequited love/desire in Mike, this possibility becomes deeply significant. The "if only . . ." notion played out in the bodily form of Reeves's screen image manifests the "if only . . ." possibility of Shakespeare's bisexuality that, if proved, would separate him (body and text) irreparably from the hegemonic persecution to which homosexuality has been subject for so many centuries.<sup>14</sup> The audience's desire for Barthes's "comfortable practice of reading" is also nurtured in *Idaho*, and the failure of Mike to realize his "bliss" through Scott/Shakespeare becomes irrelevant because "despite their eventual disruption," our tantalizing glimpses of the Shakespeare body/text, the possibility that it can in some way be attainable ("if only . . ."), have created a space for the "pleasure of the text" literally to be played out.

In contrast to Scott's intensely confident and healthy body, Mike's body is dysfunctional in its subjugation to narcolepsy, and his sexuality is riddled with an angst that is far removed from Scott's arrogant self-commodification. Mike's sleep "disease" has taken over his inner self as well as his physical being, just as Henry bemoans the "disease[d]" condition of the nation and royal person: "Then you perceive the body of our kingdom / How foul it is, what rank diseases grow" (2 *Henry IV*, 3.1.38-40). Mike's world represents a counter-pathetic fallacy, where his dreams show an outer past re-internalized as inner meta-landscapes, only to be spewed back out in dysfunctional or contrastingly nostalgic visions. Yet it is in Mike, through his journey and desires, that we confront "time itself." Scott finally abandons Mike in a foreign country, where he flounders, the foreign language isolating him further from his surroundings so that he turns once more to prostitution. Houses drop from the sky *en homage* to the surreal dream world of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, USA), embedding him in film history as opposed to life history. Clouds move rapidly across a silent sky, their detachment from time, space, and even self portraying a postmodern state of disconnectedness, as Raban had expressed as early as 1974: "It is out of [the] conviction that one has become logically, chronologically, syntactically, sexually, and socially disconnected that the deepest and most painful feelings of loneliness spring. It is dreadfully possible to be persuaded that one has, in effect, fallen out of the world, dropped through the wide and raggy mesh of the collective net" (1974, 139). Scott is the Shakespearean presence who provides a textual link to the past and offers a connection — "Mike, you're my best friend" — only ultimately to disconnect permanently. Mike ends the film on the same road on which he began, with another repetition: "I'm a connoisseur of roads. I've been travelling roads my whole life. This road will never bend. It

probably goes all around the world." The inevitability of Mike's journey-struggle ("this road will never bend") once more leads him to collapse into his dream world, which could be compared to the illusion a fictional text creates.

We first meet Mike on that same deserted road, just before a narcoleptic seizure and then experiencing orgasm with a client. His facial twitches of fit and climax are identical, a point exaggeratedly portrayed by lingering close-up shots. In between the two situations, cutaway shots present a screen filled with salmon leaping upstream, overtly emblemizing a self-destructive urge to journey home, with a playful as well as sinister link established between home/family and sex. As the salmon cut away to Mike's point of orgasm, suddenly, anaphorically, the salmon are assigned a new figurative meaning: an ejaculation, rather than a journey home. At the point of climax, another cutaway startles the viewer with a wooden building dropping from the sky to smash into the ground — beginning this clear intertextual signifier to the "no place like home" displacement of *The Wizard of Oz*. We then quickly discover that it is a middle-aged (father-aged) man performing oral stimulation on Mike, which highlights the hopelessness of this ejaculation/journey: there will be no conception/arrival. Mike appeals to the client for more money through a shut bathroom door, telling familial (fake) sob-stories and then elating like a teenaged son when a ten-dollar note is slipped under the door. This early scene establishes Mike's body as a site for commerce — a commodity — as money is thrown onto his naked torso, which is disembodied and anonymized by the decapitated framing of the shots (figure 5). This produces another unequivocal emblem of the narrative to come: the body commodified and fragmented.

### The Body in Pieces

While fragmentation of the body/subject is fundamental to postmodernism, early modern emblem books reveal that functional disembodiment is a specific feature, too, of Shakespeare's own time. Throughout such texts, the allegorically or actually functional part of the body is severed and appropriated to shock and to clarify the instant meaning of the emblem's moral or ideological message. Arms appear from the edges of the image, skeletons appear as torsos, arms and hearts are disembodied (figure 6), tongues can fly, and skulls are horribly bodiless. This emblemization of a single, functional element of a body is similarly fundamental to the postmodern mode of intertextuality exemplified in *Idaho*, echoing its fragmentary appropriations.

Linda Nochlin's *The Body in Pieces* presents the fragmented body as a fundamental "metaphor of modernity." While Nochlin seeks to distance herself from misplaced citation as "some grandiose, all-encompassing 'theory of the fragment in relation to the concept of modernity'" (Nochlin 1994, 56), her explorations form a cohesive approach to the fragmented body as a visual trope



in revolutionary and resistant art. Beginning with a literal interpretation of the fragment, the amputated limbs and heads of French Revolutionary art, Nochlin quickly moves on to examine fragments seen at the margins of a picture. "I must oppose the significance," she writes, "of the cutting or cropping of the pictorial *space* itself to that of the fragmented *bodies* created by such cropping" (1994, 37-38; emphasis in original). Nochlin categorizes subjects disembodied by the artist according to three capacities:

- a. Total contingency:* An equivalent of the meaningless flow of modern reality itself, a casual reality which has no narrative beginning, middle, or end . . . whatever happened to be caught by the lens at a particular time, whether or not a unified composition resulted, and whether or not human figures are oddly dissected by the photographic frame . . .
- b. Total determination:* The image is understood to be cropped, cut off, deliberately . . .
- c. Play:* . . . the cropped borders as a kind of designation of image-making as play, play with habitual boundaries of all sorts, an oscillation between contingency and determination. (Nochlin 1994, 37-38; my emphases)

Nochlin's taxonomy presents a means of analyzing the dual fragmentations of body and Shakespearean body-text in *Idaho*, both as an example of the text-as-body fragment and as a representation of fragmentation in the bodies-on-screen. The third option, "play," which combines "total contingency" with "total determination," provides us with a mechanism for untangling these fragmentations in *Idaho*, in which styles are disparate, dialogue broken, and images fleeting. Moreover, this places the film in a discourse not only of creative resistance, but also of fine art, situating *Idaho*'s relationship with Shakespeare within in a broader textual and visual environment.

In *Idaho*, this fragmentary "play" with the physical body is literally seen in the motif of cropped bodies, disembodied by the frame of the image. Just as Mike's body is fragmented in his first "trick" of the film (figure 5), other sexual activities in the film are framed as fragmentary, chiarascuro tableaux vivants (figures 7 and 8), styled on an undulating tangle of forms more associated with classical sculpture and bringing to mind the armless, faceless fragments of damaged ancient statues as well as the beauty of the complete stone figures that represent worship of the physical form. The image of the statue, "transcend[ing] time," is repeated throughout *Idaho*, reminding us once again of Van Sant's comment that "the reason Shakespeare is in the film is to transcend time, to show that those things have always happened, everywhere" (Van Sant 1993, xliii). So it becomes clear that Shakespeare's "timelessness" is not the same concept as a "universality" of themes; it is "time" that is the key, the relentless forward motion being curtailed by anachronistic fragments, in this case, by "a bunch of Shakespeare in the middle." The partially seen textual body of Shakespeare

— like Mike's and Scott's partially seen bodies disembodied by the frame — is cut into pieces that emerge, disembodied, at the margins of the cinematic text. This showcases fragmentation as a means of commodification and of emblemization: the body-text in pieces. It is the fragment's dichotomous potential as an emblem of both disconnectedness and, paradoxically, reconnection, that drives the counter-hegemonic fragmentation of the Shakespeare "body"-text and its subsequent reconstruction as a reclaimed commodity.

While the "pieces" of the Shakespearean body that emerge at the margins or in the center of the screen are significant in their deliberate selection from the whole (Nochlin's "total determination"), they act as synecdoches, bringing with them the spectre of that whole. The fragment of the body, glimpsed at the edges of the text, cannot escape the shadow of the rest of the body that lingers tantalizingly beyond sight. When Shakespeare's text is that body, it is a body known to us, familiar enough that one fragment — "Now is the winter of our discontent . . ." (*Richard III*, 1.1.1); "To be or not to be . . ." (*Hamlet*, 3.1.56); "I know thee not, old man . . ." (*2 Henry IV*, 5.5.47) — is necessarily a synecdoche, allowing us to recognize the whole, ensuring that the nature of that whole — themes, characters, plots — becomes an absent-presence in the new text. This is the interactivity of intertextuality, in the sense that the new text itself relies upon the audience "filling in" the rest of the text-body, Shakespeare, which lingers at the edges of the meta-frame. Nochlin, writing on the partially seen bodies of the French impressionists, describes this interaction: props suggesting hidden bodies "are connected only through the relation of specularly — and it is really our position of spectatorship, reiterating the original viewing position of the artist, that holds the elements together" (Nochlin 1994, 43-45). Just as the home-movie fragments of Mike's unreachable mother tantalize — her bottom half, the site of birth, often disembodied on the screen by an exaggeration of the inevitable dissection of subject by the untrained and unplanned framing of the "home-movie" gaze (figure 9) — Shakespeare's familiar text is reflected into the "specular" eyes of the audience to suggest an unreachable but achingly familiar spectral body.

Nochlin, in her final pages, examines the postmodern reinterpretation of the fragmented body, concluding that "in postmodernist production, the fragment assumes new, and differently transgressive forms" (Nochlin 1994, 54) and citing the self-conscious body-fragments of conceptual artists such as Cindy Sherman (figure 10) and Robert Mapplethorpe (figure 11). In these artists, we find an inextricable sexualization of the fragmented body, in which those fragments chosen (or amputated) are the sexual organs or popularly known erogenous areas of the body (the male torso, the female breasts, or vagina), and the incongruity of the fragments produces an uneasy image of broken or commodified sexuality, mass-produced and divorced from any emotional or physical "wholeness." *Idaho's* fragmentation, too, correlates with its intensely sexual moments, yet

that statuesque, classical magnificence recurs, producing an effect more of tragic beauty (figures 7-8) than the shocking body-horror of work such as Sherman's (figure 10). The commodification of the sublime, rather than horrific, body creates a more poignant irony of disconnectedness, in the form of beautiful young bodies tragically fragmented. Meanwhile, the bodies of Shakespeare's texts on stage are transposed onto the cover of a pornographic magazine, depicting a predatory older male and a vulnerable boy-actor (figure 12) and subverting fragments of Shakespearean language into rudimentary, playfully pornographic double-entendre ("King Lear," "Pleasure for Pleasure") on the cover of a magazine whose very title is that of a body fragment fetishized and commodified: *Torso*.

The "gallery" of pornographic magazines on which *Idaho's* cast of rent boys appears (figures 12-15) fragments and commodifies each male form in anachronistic and diverse pseudo-situations. Given that the purpose of pornography is fundamentally to sexually arouse, amuse, and stimulate fantasy, the choices of cowboy, Shakespeare, and Christ among the "boy" versus "butch" fetishism of the other magazines depicts the allure of homoerotic pornography as an audacious means by which to challenge the monoliths of Western heterosexual hegemony. Scott is a pastiche of the American Dream, a mercenary cowboy, asserting that "I'm trying to make a living" (figure 14), while Mike is Christ "Go[ing] Down on History," but sleeping through the whole process (figure 15). *Idaho's* iconic porn shop scene is overtly disassociated from the rest of the narrative, placing its characters in a public, mass consumption of their fragmented bodies. The scene playfully juxtaposes the disparate intertextual references of the film: "Renaissance" music (usually heralding the Bob Pigeon/Falstaff scenes) forms the soundtrack; an anonymous cowboy figure enters the lurid porn shop; Christ, Shakespeare, and the American cowboy meet together on the shelves.

The gallery of bodies depicted on the magazines signifies at once a postmodern merging and diverging of gallery and shop, drawing attention to the surrealism of *Idaho*. The fragmentation and commodification of bodies represented in fine art and pornography are brought together as well as contrasted. Fine-art influences on the film may be diverse, but they are neither obscure nor buried in the subtext. The whole visual schema of the film juxtaposes the classical and neo-classical statuesque with the bright, lurid colors of the city; the film bases its "the color scheme," Van Sant states, "on the pornographic bookshop storefronts, which are usually yellow, and neons . . . city colors" (Van Sant 1993, 36). Robert Mapplethorpe's influence is more overt here, with works such as *Mercury* (figure 16) reproducing the classical fragment alongside lurid, comic book blocks of bright color (in a landscape format notably similar in ratio to the cinematic screen), just as in *Idaho*, cutaway captions are juxtaposed to images of statuary (figure 17). The conspicuous juxtaposition of "high" art and popular formats is the most obvious motivation for the inclusion of the Shakespeare

fragments: *Idaho* is simply an unashamed intertext, a hydra in which every head, linked by a common body-text, can function independently.

The notion of the gallery as a space of reconnection and fantasy is reinforced by Mike's only bodily relative in the film, Richard, his "father and . . . brother too." Richard lives in a trailer filled with the painted family portraits he has been commissioned to complete, but for which these "families" have never paid him; they are unsold commodities, rendering them doubly vacant. Scott/Hal moves silently among the trappings of traditionalist fine art production, paint brushes, and canvases, examining the anachronistically 1950s to 1980s styles and images of family life depicted on Richard's partially-seen paintings (figure 18). Even within the paintings, the figures are cropped by composition, with "total determination," but they are then subject to further cropping by the cinematic frame, disembodied further in a manner like the home-movie disembodiment of "total contingency"; the interaction creates a state of "play" in which bodies are cropped in both deliberate and seemingly random ways. This imagery accompanies the revelatory meeting between Richard and Mike observed by Scott, in which the audience learns of Mike's Oedipal conception and subsequent abandonment. Shakespearean dialogue may seem far removed from this scene, but as Scott/Hal looks on, the spectre of this other disembodied fragment is ever-present.

Mike's monstrously incestuous conception is rendered ironic by his regular identification with Jesus Christ, a man immaculately conceived. In our belated DVD viewings of the film, this correlation is reinforced by the chapter title, "Immaculate Perfection," for the now iconic scenes in which Mike dresses as a "Little Dutch Boy" to clean the house of the disturbing cleanliness fetishist, Daddy Carroll. This sequence directly precedes the only episode of the film in which Mike is seen with a female client. Alena, old enough to be Mike's mother, is openly signified as a disturbingly sexualized mother figure to Mike: as they walk together through her house, the camera unambiguously lingers on a stained glass panel depicting the Madonna and Child. In the bedroom, Mike instinctively buttons up his coat, both to protect his body from her gaze and as an act of remembered child-like obedience. As we see Alena from Mike's close-up perspective, approaching lustfully toward him, he soon transposes images of his mother onto her and collapses into a narcoleptic sleep. The depiction of Mike as the Christ-Child is evident at several moments of the film, where he is held first on the lap of his mother (in a fantasy moment) and subsequently by Scott, in poses like that of Renaissance images of the Madonna and Child (figures 19-20).

A Christian allusion is apparent as well in the perpetual life-death-life cycle, as Mike becomes, at varying moments no longer the Christ Child, but the corpse of Christ in the *Pietà* (or *Lamentation*). In some shots, Mike can be reread as the dead Christ, mourned by Mary, the

grieving mother and, in Michelangelo's final *Pietà*, the male worshipper Joseph of Arimathea; in this latter work Christ is held from above, supported by Joseph under his arms, in the same position that Scott strikes while holding an unconscious Mike (figure 21). This dual reading is possible simply because the original imagery upon which it draws pointedly depicts the proximity of life and death and Christ's unique ability to transcend and re-order them. With Scott as Shakespeare and Mike as Jesus, *Idaho* bravely wades into the deepest part of the murky waters of intertextuality as well as displaying, quite openly, its audacity in the face of hegemonic expectations about those allusive parallels that "should" remain monolithically distant.

Mike's repeated enactment of death in narcoleptic sleep is juxtaposed against his repeated returns to babyhood and his hopeless ejaculations/journeys to create a perpetual series of life-death cycles. The dreams that come deliver him to a Heaven of "Home," to the gates of "H," from which he awakes back on Earth to repeat the cycle ad infinitum. This gateway to home is unashamedly reminiscent of *Citizen Kane's* (1941, USA) iconic "K" gate, but painfully poor and tiny in comparison. This reference also signposts, to the intertextually-aware spectator, the influence on the film of Welles's own *Henry IV/V* appropriation, *Chimes at Midnight* (1965, France/Spain/Switzerland). The central notion of repetition is therefore enacted both in the narrative and in the treatment of intertextual references within the film. It is also clearly represented in the film's returns to the road that goes "all around the World"<sup>15</sup> and its "fucked up face," framed by Mike with his own hand at three different moments in the film: beginning, middle, end. The association of sex with figurative death is reinforced in Mike's narrative, but the frustration caused by the superficiality, fragmentation, and truncation of these repetitive journeys highlights the lack of full love-death — *de morte et amore* — conjunctions. In a 1992 interview, itself fragmented into a series of smaller interviews in different, transient locations — "a Seattle sushi bar," "a van travelling to location" — River Phoenix questions Van Sant's central association between sex and death:

*Phoenix*: Why should sex even be rated as something as extreme as death, or something as negative?

*Van Sant*: No, it should be more positive. But it's the mystery . . . men are embarrassed by sex because they don't understand it. They can come to grips with death and use it as an icon. (Van Sant, 1993, 41-42)

While reticent to tread the thin line between analyzing auteur and text, it would be remiss not to note that both star and director examine the relationship between sex and death that is emblemized by the finished text. Indeed, in the film's penultimate scene, Bob's mourners engage in an fervent, orgiastic sexual expression of grief, as a seething mass of embracing bodies falls

upon his uninterred coffin. *Idaho's* funeral scene gives the audience the "death" needed, perhaps, to end such a fragmented text, yet Mike's subsequent rebirth and narcoleptic "death" bring us back to where we began.

In a fragmentation of bodies, selves, time, and culture, the Shakespearean presence in *My Own Private Idaho* could be read as a re-connection, or as a comfortingly familiar presence in a disconnected world. However, the fragmentation of the Shakespearean body text is seen only in snatched glimpses that are disembodied at the margins of the new cinematic text, which complicates this interpretation. It is essential, therefore, to make peace with the duality of Shakespearean appropriations in counter-hegemonic film contexts and to allow the multiplicity of their meanings to become a part of the intertextual artifact. Shakespeare, here, has been examined as a textual body that, in *Idaho*, is at some points neatly commodified and at others tantalizingly fragmented, but always reflects the preoccupying themes and forms portrayed in this new film-text.

### Filmography

- *Angelic Conversation, The*. 1985. Dir. Derek Jarman. UK; British Film Institute and Channel 4 Films.
- *Chimes at Midnight*. 1965. Dir. Orson Welles. France/Spain/Switzerland; Alpine Films.
- *Citizen Kane*. 1941. Dir. Orson Welles. USA; Mercury Productions.
- *Doctor Who: The Executioners*. 1965. Dir. Richard Martin. UK; British Broadcasting Corporation.
- *Doctor Who: The Shakespeare Code*. 2007. Dir. Charles Palmer. UK; British Broadcasting Corporation.
- *Easy Rider*. 1969. Dir. Dennis Hopper. USA; Columbia Pictures Corporation.
- *Filth and the Fury, The*. 2000. Dir. Julien Temple. UK; FilmFour.
- *Hamlet Liikemaaailmassa (or Hamlet Goes Business)*. 1987. Dir. Aki Kaurismaki. Finland; Villealfa Filmproduction Oy.
- *King is Alive, The*. 2000. Dir. Kristian Levring (uncredited). Sweden/Denmark/USA; Newmarket Capital Group.
- *Lethal Weapon*. 1987. Dir. Richard Donner. USA; Warner Bros. Pictures.
- *Life of Shakespeare, The*. 1914. Dir. Frank R. Growcott and J. B. McDowell. UK; British & Colonial Kinematograph Company.
- *Matrix, The*. 1999. Dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski. USA; Warner Bros. Pictures.
- *Matrix Reloaded, The*. 2003. Dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski. USA; Warner Bros. Pictures.

- *Matrix Revolutions*. 2003. Dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski. USA; Warner Bros. Pictures.
- *My Own Private Idaho*. 1991. Dir. Gus Van Sant. USA; New Line Cinema.
- *Much Ado About Nothing*. 1993. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. UK/USA; American Playhouse Theatrical Films.
- *Othello*. 1995. Dir. Oliver Parker. USA/UK; Castle Rock Entertainment.
- *Point Break*. 1991. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. USA; JVC Entertainment Networks.
- *Shakespeare in Love*. 1998. Dir. John Madden. USA; Universal Pictures.
- *Speed*. 1994. Dir. Jan de Bont. USA; Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.
- *Wizard of Oz, The*. 1939. Dir. Victor Fleming. USA; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

### Notes

1. *My Own Private Idaho* will forthwith be abbreviated as *Idaho*.
2. François Laroque also notes the presence of this mother-figure but interprets it more as mother earth, as opposed to the nation: "The earth is here personalized as in the pathetic fallacy of line 6, which turns it into an *infanticidal and cannibalistic mother*, a ghoulish that drinks fresh blood" (Laroque 1998, 91; my emphasis).
3. Examples range from the silent film *The Life of Shakespeare* (1914, UK) to *Doctor Who* (1965 and 2007, UK, TV). In fact, the Internet Movie Database lists no fewer than forty-nine different screen appearances for the character William Shakespeare, as well as one in a computer game.
4. Perhaps a playful allusion to David Tennant's Royal Shakespeare Company background; in fact, Tennant played Berowne in *Love's Labours Lost* with the RSC in 2008, which just so happens to be the play with which the episode begins its contact with Shakespeare, only to reveal an extraterrestrial malice that destroyed, for all posterity, the legendary missing play, *Love's Labours Won*.
5. The commodification of star-bodies is an area that has drawn an immense body of critical work, such as Richard Dyer's seminal *Stars* (1979).
6. The historical Hotspur was a contemporary of Hal's father and, at one time, also Hal's guardian (Earle 1972, 50).
7. For instance, in the rookie and experienced cop premise, exemplified in *Point Break* (1994, USA).
8. See, for instance, *Lethal Weapon* (1987, USA).
9. A cluster of counter-hegemonic films that appropriate Shakespeare emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century, such as *The Angelic Conversation* (1985, UK), *Hamlet Liikemaaailmassa*

- (1987, Finland), *The King is Alive* (2000, Sweden/Denmark/USA), and *The Filth and the Fury* (2000, UK). See Grant Ferguson 2009.
10. For example, in *Empire* (April 1992, UK), Philip Thomas reviews Reeves's performance as "squirminingly embarrassing stuff" (Thomas 1992).
  11. It should be noted, however, that after *Idaho*, Reeves went on to play other Shakespearean roles, including, according to Michael DeAngelis, "turn[ing] down a lucrative offer to co-star with Al Pacino and Robert DeNiro in *Heat*, preferring the opportunity to play the lead role in *Hamlet* for £2,000 in a theatre in Winnepeg" (DeAngelis 2001) and adding sex appeal to the archetypal villain Don John (more often cast as an older man) in Kenneth Branagh's film production of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1992, UK). Some viewed Reeves's casting, as well as the portrayal of Iago as overtly gay in Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1996, USA/UK) as a sign that Branagh portrays homosexuality as villainous.
  12. See, for instance, *Point Break* (1991, USA), *Speed* (1994, USA), and the blockbuster *Matrix* trilogy (1998-2003, USA).
  13. This is especially evident in its successful poster campaign, showing in close-up the sweaty actors in an erotically charged embrace.
  14. *The Angelic Conversation* (1985, UK) also enacts the non-heterosexual potential of Shakespearean text/body in portraying the Sonnets in tandem with erotic-romantic male homosexual imagery.
  15. Curtis Breight notes this repetition as a signifier that "history is circular" (Breight 1997, 312).

### Permissions

*Figure 6.* George Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes* (London, 1635). Book 1, illustration 8; Book 4, illustration 72. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

*Figure 10.* Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #258*, 1992; chromogenic print; 69 in. x 46 in. (175.26 cm x 116.84cm); Gift of Vicki and Kent Logan. © Cindy Sherman.

*Figure 11.* *Chest*, 1987 © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission.

*Figure 16.* *Mercury*, 1987 © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission.

*Figure 20.* Michelangelo, *Pietà* (St. Peter's, 1499). Image reproduced by kind permission of <http://www.stpetersbasilica.org>.



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