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*Wherever, Whatever, Have a Nice Day: Gus Van Sant's My Own Private Idaho and the Subtleties of the Queer Experience*

"I always know where I am by the way the road looks." That's the first line of one of my favorite movies, *My Own Private Idaho*. I constantly praise the movie for its surrealist depiction of the life of Mike, a narcoleptic hustler (played by River Phoenix), and his rich best friend Scott (played by Keanu Reeves), as they struggle to find Mike's mother. The movie is an experimental juggernaut of independent filmmaking, combining a drama, a romance, a comedy, and even aspects of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, into a bizarre and captivating tale of a purely human story. I adored this movie when I first watched it a little over two years ago, so it came as a surprise to me that GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), initially hated the movie for its "regressive" depiction of queer characters. I found this odd, because not only is it widely regarded as a classic in queer cinema, but I myself, found comfort in Mike's character, because even though he was gay, it didn't define him, and he was just allowed to... exist. When I think of a character I relate to, Mike Waters is the first image that comes to mind: A wayward, emotional guy with his head forever tied to the top of the sky, causing him to appear perpetually lost.

To hear that the movie was received so negatively made me consider what exactly makes up a "good" queer character, I started to think of why I related more to Mike, a hustler with a drug problem, than to more modern progressive characters, what

did that say about me? What makes up the monolith that is queer representation, does it always *have* to be “progressive”... to be good?

In an interview coinciding with the 30 year anniversary of the film, director Gus Van Sant had this to say about the media's reception: “...Critically it seemed to do quite well. However, *GLAAD* existed at the time as a newer organization. Their job was to point out things that were not progressive images for the gay community, and this was not. This was a regressive image...*GLAAD* thought they wanted images that made gay people look normal, as opposed to not normal. And this was not making them look normal, as far as it relates to straight society.” (Quoted in Indiana) I actually agree with *GLAAD* here, it *is* a regressive image.

Looking at the movie through the lens of someone who isn't queer, the movie seems to paint gay people as deviants who prey on young sex workers for cheap thrills. Mike's queerness has occasionally been described by Van Sant as supplementary to the affection he didn't have from his father, a Freudian trope which has long been used to demonize gay (and even effeminate) men. As stated by Van Sant in *The Village Voice*, “In that scene where he watches *The Simpsons*. He was supposed to hug the guy like it was something that he needed very badly... He didn't necessarily need to have sex, but he needed to be close. It was one of those reasons he liked being a hustler. [He needed] to be wanted, and he could be wanted by men who wanted him for slightly different reasons than he wanted them to want him. He was really after attention and affection. But still what he missed was basically from a man, and not from a woman. He didn't have a father.” (Quoted in Indiana) Scott is also seen engaging in such activities mostly to *spite* his father, because he believes that his so-called “rise” from the

streets of Portland will surprise his parents, stating in a lilted elegance, “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.” Scott sees hustling as a fun taboo to use as means to mystify his own image, not as a genuine way of living.

Bad representation has always been a topic of furious discussion within the queer community, simply due to the lack of *good* representation. Because it was illegal for the majority of movie history to portray any type of “inherent queerness” in movies, when queer individuals finally appeared in movies, they were usually portrayed negatively, heavily censored (also known as queer *coding*), or even worse, killed. A particular vein of this type of representation has been affectionately dubbed the “Bury Your Gays” trope, which follows as this:

1. Two individuals of the same gender will fall in love.
2. One of them will die tragically.
3. The other will eventually move on to a heterosexual partner.

In *Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context*, author Haley Hulan sheds some light on the background behind the trope, stating, “This trope was originally used as a way for gay authors to write about gay characters without coming under fire for breaking laws and social mandates against the “endorsement” of homosexuality.” (Hulan)

Hulan also asserts that the trope first reared its head in Victorian novellas, and also disproportionately affects lesbian relationships in fiction. I love Hulan’s usage of the phrase “metatextual villain” in describing the ways that media views lesbianism, and by

extension, queerness at large. It becoming exceedingly clear to me that the way in which cisgender (cisgender, heterosexual) individuals view my community, and how it directly informs their queerphobia.

In 1991, when *Idaho* first came out, America was still very much in the throes of the growing AIDS crisis, which of course meant more vilified portrayal of queer people. This rise of both blatant queerphobia, and its contrasting movement for social change (i.e. The Stonewall Riots, The White Night Riots, ACT UP) defined a new era of queer existence. In media, there emerged a new genre of cinema, *Queer New Wave*. Defined by films such as Gregg Araki's *The Living End*, or Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, *Queer New Wave*, also known as *New Queer Cinema*, was characterized by low budget filmmaking that centered openly LGBTQ+ protagonists, and usually contained plots that criticized the overarching heteronormative social commentary of the time - oh, and an intense hatred of Ronald Reagan.

Gregg Araki, one of the aforementioned directors, was extremely critical of the work of Gus Van Sant. He believed that Van Sant had made his work "palatable" for straight audiences, and had effectively watered down his work for the sake of accolades. Araki understood the importance of *Idaho* on a mainstream audience, but also felt like it lacked authenticity, telling an interviewer, "There's a real danger in following the Hollywood 'carrot': the worst thing in the world to me would be becoming one of those filmmakers who is perpetually 'in development.' I would rather make a cheap movie than talk to 'D-girls' and lawyers for three years. But I guess that's just my bad attitude... The freedom of [independent filmmaking] is that you can do whatever you want." (Quoted in Oliver) Around the same time that *Idaho* was released, Araki had

also made a movie, called *The Living End*, an extremely unabashed look into what it meant to be queer in the 90's. Casually known as the "gay *Thelma and Louise*" the movie centers around two men as they engage in a crime spree across America. But, here's the kicker: Both men are HIV-positive.

The tragic romance of Luke and Jon has the intensely hedonistic draw of the classic "we're damned if we do, we're damned if we don't" trope. There is the firm belief that they will both be dead by the end of the movie, so the stakes suddenly appear a lot lower. It's also even more shocking when they *don't die* by the end of the movie, opting for a hard cut to them embracing in the middle of a beach, with only the sound of the waves behind them. This cuts to an even more harsh black screen, accompanied with a paragraph that reads:

"dedicated to craig lee (1954-1991) and the hundreds of thousands who've died and the hundreds of thousands more who will die because of a big white house full of republican fuckheads."

I adore this direct subversion of the classic "AIDS movie" trope and how it still holds up even now. As put by Katie Mills in *Revitalizing the Road Genre* "Araki sets us up by using genre and these red-herring details in order to question the fate of contemporary film-making alongside that of his HIV-positive characters." (Mills). It's clear what Araki was trying to say with this movie, and what he was trying to tell Van Sant. America does not care about queer people. America didn't care when gay men were dying en masse from AIDS, didn't care when gays and lesbians were being fired without probable cause during the McCarthy Era, and *still* doesn't care when trans people are murdered just for having the *audacity* to leave their homes. They *especially*

don't care when those murderers are set free because they felt like they were "trapped" and "in an emotionally volatile state". This was Gregg Araki's message, when in *The Living End*, Luke shoots a homophobe wearing a *Drugstore Cowboy* shirt, another movie made by Van Sant, during an attempted gay-bashing. This is the message of *Queer New Wave*.

Though not necessarily part of that genre, *Idaho* was considered one of the first queer movies to really break out into the mainstream public, in no small part due to big names such as River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves as leads. It seemed like queer people were finally getting a chance to be something other than a sadistic villain or dead. So then why the divide between audience reception and critical review? Well, I think that while *Idaho* may not be up to historical standards as far as depicting the roots of queerness, its expression of said themes are something that strengthens the movie enough to give it the cult status it has reached. And at the center of it all, Mike Waters.

When we first see Mikey, he is a lone cowboy, standing in the middle of some vaguely midwestern-looking road in Idaho, eyebrows furrowed, frowning at the horizon, bathed in tropical-sounding slide guitars. He monologues about having a connection to the road and then passes out, shaking, because as we learn from the first shot of the movie, Mike has narcolepsy. In an odd way, Mike's lapses of consciousness in the movie almost serve to connect you more with Mike, as both him and the viewer feel disoriented and confused as soon as we are thrust into the next scene. It makes the movie that much more immersive, even in extremely explicit or intimate moments.

I think the nature of intimacy, and by association, promiscuity in *My Own Private Idaho* is interesting because this movie about two male prostitutes is, in reality, not that

sexual. The movie itself doesn't revolve around sex, or create motivations based on sex. Even scenes including sex are shot in a manner that seems almost awkward, or uninterested. According to Van Sant himself, "The character of Mike was originally kind of asexual. Sex was something that he traded in, so he had no real sexual identity." (Quoted in Collins) Mike uses sex as a means to an end, which is a far cry from the romantically progressive films that we view as staples in the queer community. *My Own Private Idaho* would've been a melancholic look at how loveless the lives of such sex workers are, well that is, if it wasn't for one scene that changes the whole movie.

Around the halfway point of the film, Mike and Scott have stolen a bike and are driving to Idaho from Portland, to visit his brother/dad (it's confusing). Long story short, the bike won't turn over, and they are forced to camp out for the night. The movie shifts themes entirely. Surrounded by an ink black sky, Mike pokes at a fire while Scott talks about his lavish childhood of mansions and maids. Mike replies thoughtfully, "If I had a normal family...and a good upbringing, then I would've been... a well adjusted person." Scott continues to pester Mike about a subject that he is clearly avoiding, one that both Scott and the viewer are oblivious to, until Mike blurts out:

*"What do I mean to you?"*

Scott, realizing what Mike is implying, backtracks, telling Mike that "Y'know, two guys can't love each other." At this point the viewer realizes that Mike is in love with Scott, and it's tragic because Mike seems to be the only one in the movie Scott actually cares about, though not in the romantic sense. Thus ensues a longer exchange in which Mike tries to describe or explain himself. The scene eventually ends with Scott giving Mike a hug, a gesture which doesn't feel awkward, but comforting. The scene wasn't

initially in the movie, River Phoenix decided to add it in toward the end of filming. To many queer people, this scene was blaringly realistic, trying to tell someone how you feel, but trying to tiptoe around describing yourself or your inherent queerness. I personally remember coming out to my dad going almost 80 miles per hour on the freeway at night, scared out of my mind until I finally mustered up the courage to just *do* it. This brings me to what *Idaho* gets right.

There is a distinct difference between an LGBTQ+ character, and a *queer* character. To be *queer* is to exist outside the lines of what is considered traditional, in regards to gender and sexuality. While being LGBTQ+ checks everyone into a neat little box, queerness is the “prefer not to say” category, better yet, is the option to tear up the paper and walk away. Cishet society, which is largely informed by white colonialism by the way, aims to assimilate our identities alone, and not our *experience*. That is why many mainstream LGBTQ+ characters feel as though they don’t belong to us. A lot of the time we don’t get a ferris wheel ride with our significant other, or looking at ourselves in the mirror and feeling right. Queer people are one of the few populations of people that has to wonder if our parents still love us.

Mike doesn’t exist to be “the gay guy”, infact the word “gay” is only used once in the entire movie. Mike doesn’t stand on a milk crate with a megaphone announcing how gay he is, Mike stumbles over his words and avoids his friend’s eyes as he tells him how much he loves him. As said by Robert Lang in *Idaho and the New Queer Road Movies*, “...I prefer to read the endings of both the published screenplay and the film itself as being radical, in that they refuse to offer an identity politics. This is what makes the film *queer* (as opposed to gay.)” (Lang).



So I suppose you're wondering what the answer to my initial question is. What makes up the monolith that is queer representation? Well to say so many words, I was wrong from the start. Queer people are not a monolith. We exist as a vacuous cloud of a collective history, a collective experience. What I *have* discovered is my own place in the queer community. I have been looking for selective acceptance, assimilation into a society formed to oppress my expression. I don't want assimilation, I don't want LGBTQ+ Hallmark movies, or "his & his" towel racks. I want to be myself. Until then I'll have to be content with Mike Waters, which is fine because I've become accustomed to the idea of being "in progress towards", of traveling to somewhere. As Mike says in his final lines, "I'm a connoisseur of roads. I've been tasting roads my whole life."

have a nice day.

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Index of Films:

*My Own Private Idaho* and *Drugstore Cowboy* (Gus Van Sant)

*The Living End* (Gregg Araki)

*Paris Is Burning* (Jenny Livingston)

*Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott)