

Language and Liminality in the Italian Section of Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*

Ian McHugh

University of Sussex

Abstract

This paper looks at systems of language (linguistic and filmic) in the twelve-minute Italian section of Gus Van Sant's My Own Private Idaho (1993), a short but notable interlude to the narrative, which serves as a liminal space through which the two central characters pass, to different ends. The paper employs poststructuralist theory, psychoanalysis, and film theory to develop a reading of this liminality as subject to an economy of inclusive and exclusive systems of meaning. It describes the constitution of this liminal space through the gaps and fissures between these parallel systems, and suggests that a successful negotiation of these systems appears to allow a transition across the liminal space, whereas an unsuccessful transition effects a displacement. The film's two central characters offer contrasting views of such successful and unsuccessful transitions. The character of Scott actively seeks displacement and achieves effortless transitions across systems of meaning. In contrast, the character of Mike (who suffers from narcolepsy, which impacts upon his subjectivity) desperately searches for a fixed status and suffers perpetual displacement. This paper draws on a chapter from my doctoral thesis, which looks at representations of liminal states of consciousness and presupposes radical shifts in subjectivity in proximity to the sites of sleeping and waking, with ramifications for identity and the perception of reality.

The latter half of Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1993) features a twelve-minute section in which the two central characters, Mike and Scott, travel to Italy in search of Mike's mother, Sharon.¹ This is notable as the only part of the film located away from the Pacific

¹ *My Own Private Idaho*. Dir. Gus Van Sant (New Line Cinema, 1993).

Northwest – the triad of Idaho, Seattle, and Portland identified with brightly coloured title cards – and because it is so geographically and tonally distant from the rest of the film. Something of this distance, and difference, engenders a liminal space for both characters, and acts as a catalyst for change in their relationship.

Much has been written of Van Sant's appropriation of Shakespeare in the structure and language of the film, and of the film's considerable influence in Queer cinema.² Fewer critics have focused on the protagonist's narcolepsy or the theme of liminality.³ This paper is part of a larger project considering representation of liminal states of consciousness in film and literature and as such *My Own Private Idaho* is a vital text, for the narcolepsy of its protagonist Mike Waters and for Van Sant's kaleidoscopic assemblage of filmic grammar. While neither this paper, nor the project as a whole, aims to take into account the considerable breadth of Van Sant's work or site it within a larger analysis of either Shakespeare or Queer cinema, it is of note that the opposing concepts of transience and home, key to an analysis of liminality, are prominent in much of Van Sant's work. In *My Own Private Idaho*, Mike is transient and yearns for home (the 'Private Idaho' of the title), while his quest to find his mother is one of the film's central, if slender, narrative threads. *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (an adaptation of Tom Robbins' 1976 novel) offers a happier counterpart to Mike: blessed with abnormally large thumbs, protagonist Sissy Hankshaw is a perpetual hitchhiker who finds contentment in transience.⁴ In *Gerry*, two friends get lost while hiking and are driven mad, stranded in the wilderness, unable to find their way home.⁵ Blake, the Kurt Cobain-like protagonist of *Last Days*, remains in his mansion for most of the film, though this is a corrupted version of home, lacking peace, intruded upon by hangers-on and visitors.⁶ Ultimately, he commits suicide in an outhouse, a threshold space, both inside and out.

For Mike in *My Own Private Idaho*, it is the desire to find his mother – and thus his roots and a home – which motivates his transit. He tracks her first to an Idaho hotel, and then

² For discussion of the film and Shakespeare, see Hugh H. Davis, 'Shakespeare, He's in the Alley: *My Own Private Idaho* and Shakespeare in the Streets', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 29.2 (2001), 116-21; Linda Charnes, 'Henry IV', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 48.5 (1997), 647; Lisa S. Starks, and Courtney Lehmann, *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002). For discussion of the film and Queer cinema, see Patrick Crowe, 'No Place Like Home: Homelessness, Identity and Sexuality in American Queer Cinema', *Cineaction*, 35 (1994), 66-72; James Morrison, 'Still New, Still Queer, Still Cinema?', *GLQ*, 12.1 (2006), 135-146; David Roman, 'Shakespeare in Portland: Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, Homoneurotics, and Boy Actors', *Genders*, 20 (1994), 311-33.

³ Caroline Benjo, 'Narcolepsie', *Vertigo*, 11.12 (1994), 146; Paul Arthur, and Naomi C. Liebler, 'Kings of the Road: *My Own Private Idaho* and the Traversal of Welles, Shakespeare, and Liminality', *Post Script*, 17.2 (1998), 26-38.

⁴ *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Dir. Gus Van Sant (New Line Cinema, 1993).

⁵ *Gerry*. Dir. Gus Van Sant (Altera Films, 2002).

⁶ *Last Days*. Dir. Gus Van Sant (HBO Films, 2005).

on to a rural Italian smallholding. Here Scott meets a young woman, the farmer's niece Carmella, who informs him Sharon left the farm long ago. Mike is distraught and keen to return to America as soon as possible; Scott, however, begins a relationship with Carmella, and they return to America together, while Mike returns to Rome. As in Portland, he works the streets as a prostitute, and some time later returns to America.

For both Scott and Mike, Italy is a transitional place. Van Sant's screenplay draws strongly on *Henry IV*, with Scott as Prince Hal, for whom the trip might be seen as a rite of passage: he departs as Hal and returns as Henry. Mike's transition is marked by an increment of absence: when he returns he is homeless, as before, though now he is also without Scott, his protector and love object. Moreover, his quest to find his mother has reached an inconclusive end: he is rootless and will remain so, achieving a perpetual, unhappy, liminality.

Language is key to the liminality that both characters experience, and to the change it effects, both in the linguistic space between English and Italian, and in the diverse assemblage of filmic language Van Sant employs. This includes documentary (to-camera interviews with real street hustlers), Super-8mm film, time-lapse landscape shots, title cards, and sex scenes consisting of self-consciously faked stills. The polyphony of styles unsettles the centred stability of the film as a coherent whole, and a jagged, transient rhythm emerges – form mimicking content, and vice versa.

As an English speaker with no Italian, my way into this section of the film is through identification with English speakers Mike and Scott, two characters confronted with a language initially unintelligible to them. Scott has an aptitude for effortless transition: the son of the mayor of Portland, he has spent the last few years living on the streets, an environment in stark contrast to his upbringing. He approaches Italian with greater ease than Mike, whose reluctance to engage with the language is indicative of a more general, innate passivity.

The English print of the film contains no subtitles for the Italian dialogue, which leaves an English-speaking viewer somewhat alienated from the Italian characters. The language is rendered an external object and I, like Mike and Scott, struggle to enter into a negotiation with it. The title card carries the first hint that immersion in the language will be total. The viewer is by now familiar with the cards that preface previous sections of the film, reading 'Seattle,' 'Portland,' and 'Idaho'. Rather than 'Rome,' as might be expected of an American, English-language film, the title card reads, 'Roma.' A clear reference to Fellini, this choice proffers two readings. The first places it as a refusal to capitulate to the English language, prefacing the alienation the characters and viewer will face. The second suggests a

self-conscious exoticism, a fetishized Europeaness, which invites a reductive reading of Carmella as a cipher of exotic otherness. It is also of note that the Italian 'Roma' provides an anagram of 'roam' in English, intersecting the translation with a pun, and underscoring the transient nature of the characters and filmic grammar.

The film's first view of Rome is a close-up of Mike waking, followed by shots of the Roman street hustlers from Mike's point of view. These men closely resemble his acquaintances in Portland – one even wears a salmon coloured jacket much like Mike's own, recalling the image of jumping salmon used at the opening and close of the film, again drawing a distinction between the desire to return home and the condition of perpetual transience. They speak to him in what is to Mike an entirely indecipherable language. A reverse shot of Mike shows his panic and confusion, and as he stumbles across the Piazza del Popolo he pulls his jacket up around his throat, like an animal out of its natural environment seeking to protect itself.

Waking in an unfamiliar location is a recurring problem for Mike. He suffers from narcolepsy and repeatedly wakes with no knowledge of how he came to be where he is. Narcoleptic hallucinations appear to depend on the REM sleep process, and it has been suggested by sleep researcher J. Allen Hobson that the REM process operates during sleep *and* wakefulness in those suffering from narcolepsy.⁷ This causes confusion in the cognizance of dream images and waking reality – and presents another opposition of two exclusive systems of meaning.

This has profound ramifications for a psychoanalytic view of narcolepsy and subjectivity. It follows that the narcoleptic's ego will endeavour to integrate and rationalize these experiences, engendering a dislocated and precarious subjectivity, comparable to a psychoanalytic view of schizophrenia in which the reality principle is overthrown and ego boundaries are loosened. Here, identity and subjectivity become mutable. This is elucidated in a line from Van Sant's screenplay, cut from the film: 'It's kind of like time travel. It's kind of good.'⁸ This was to appear as an on-screen subtitle – another addition to Van Sant's conglomeration of filmic grammar. The sequence was to have formed a monologue from Mike's perspective, segueing from diegetic monologue to voiceover to subtitle, a fast and disorientating movement between modes of communication, suggesting differing or gradated states of consciousness.

⁷ J. Allen Hobson, *Sleep* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1989), p. 176.

⁸ Gus Van Sant, *My Own Private Idaho and Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 111.

Given Mike's mutable subjectivity and particular relationship to consciousness, it follows that he is likely to be adept at familiarising himself with new environments quickly: usually he is able to glean his location by finding something familiar in his surroundings. Thus it seems contradictory that in Italy he remains disengaged from his surroundings and makes no attempt to decipher the language. He shirks the attention of the hustlers and stumbles away across the piazza; Van Sant shoots his point of view directly into harsh sunlight, which creates a lens flare. Mike stares into something which blinds him; any reference point he might grasp for is obfuscated. This device, which manifests itself as scattered light in rings and circles across the lens, draws attention to the lens itself, to the subjectivity of the camera and consequently the protagonist.

Mike's subjectivity is confounded in a field of alien objects: the spires of Santa Maria in Montesanto and Santa Maria dei Miracoli, the Italian language and unfamiliar faces. He is unable to comprehend or interact with any of these things and they remain external as objects. His subjectivity is not encroached upon but is rendered redundant; it requires discernable objects to interpret and interact with but finds instead a vacuum. This scenario is reminiscent of dream: a tableau of images which may correspond abstractly to each other yet to the subject remains cryptographic. The proximity of this to sleep – Mike having just woken – is suggestive of hypnopompia, the process in which the subject's credulous dreaming mind attempts to assimilate objects from waking life, though by definition he is always in proximity to sleep, his narcolepsy prompting REM processes during periods of wakefulness.

As we have seen, Mike does not speak Italian, his love for Scott is not reciprocated, and he fails to find his mother, a family, or home. He seems unable to access the systems of meaning that seem effortless to others. While some discourses remain unavailable, he stubbornly refuses to negotiate with available systems, such as the Italian language, which, were it not for his passivity, he could engage with. His narcolepsy leaves him repeatedly dislocated from his sense of self, suggesting that his subjectivity is not so much decentred as completely undermined: his perpetual liminality is due to a perpetual inability to locate himself psychically. Since this displacement is Mike's primary state of being, he has no fixed status to be displaced from.

By contrast, Scott has actively sought a displacement in forsaking his life of privilege and taking to the streets. It may be this deliberate displacement that lends him the agency to negotiate with otherness. In contrast to Mike, he enters into a negotiation with the Italian language, a necessity if he is to communicate with his new lover. On arriving at the farm, he is approached by Carmella. Their conversation is hesitant, since each has only a shaky grasp

of the other's language, but their communication is effective, and Scott learns that Sharon has already returned to America.

Simultaneously, Mike scours the property for his mother: Scott and Carmella's dialogue is inter-cut with two shots of Mike entering a dark room as he looks for his mother. In both shots the camera is positioned deep in the room looking out, an external doorway centre-frame the only source of light. In the first shot Mike is seen entering the room, silhouetted against the doorway. In the second shot he is deep in the room, passing the camera and moving further into darkness as he calls out to his mother.

The juxtaposition of Scott's conversation with Carmella, as he speaks hesitantly in a new language, with Mike's desperate, impatient search for his mother leading him into a dark, womb-like room, presents a binary of progression and regression. Mike's regression has a limited distance to run: on discovering his mother is no longer in Italy, he breaks down and recalls his childhood memories to Scott, before expressing a desire to return to America soon. He recounts his memories of childhood over shaky Super-8 shots of Sharon with her two young sons at a bleak Idaho homestead: 'My mom's house was blue. No, it was green. It was green. How could I forget that?'

The Super-8 footage is endowed with an agency that takes hold of Mike, recalling the difficulty his narcoleptic subjectivity has in distinguishing between reality and hallucination. He responds with tears or panic, and on two earlier occasions the use of Super-8 precipitates a narcoleptic episode. This footage is comparatively naïve and can be read as an embodiment of Mike's skewed subjectivity. Here, it is edited into short, searing images, shaky, improvisational, and shot in a bleached, indistinct palette, the film-stock deliberately distressed to suggest age, the passing of time, and memory. It constitutes one of the most notable disruptions to the film's aesthetic continuity, and contrasts with the other modes of grammar Van Sant employs – documentary, time-lapse, the faked stills – which retain the standard use of thirty-five millimetre film. These shifts between modes are aesthetic only, unsettling the surface of the film and disallowing a unity to the filmic language, whereas the Super-8 footage intervenes in the psychological state of a character, provoking in Mike a visceral response.

As I have suggested, Van Sant uses these shifts in form to imply gradations or differing states of consciousness. The Super-8 images are constructed to be viewed as Mike's childhood memories, accessible to Mike and the viewer, excluding Scott and all other characters. This institutes a complicity between Mike and the viewer, which finds an

opposition in the complicity that develops in the exchange of English and Italian between Scott and Carmella, a device which serves to exclude Mike. After his initial search of the farm building fails to find his mother, Carmella attempts to tell him that Sharon has left, but her words are misconstrued. In this instance Scott is aware of the misunderstanding but complicit with Carmella. This inhibits him from correcting Mike immediately, and Mike heads off in search of his mother again, leaving Scott once again alone with Carmella.

Whereas Mike's exclusion from the street hustlers' conversation in Rome is through his incomprehension of Italian, his exclusion here is more pointed. At the dinner table Carmella teaches Scott Italian words as lovers' play; Mike is present but excluded. Prior to Carmella's appearance Mike and Scott are depicted as a unit; together they double-cross Bob (the Falstaff figure), steal a motorcycle, and travel first to Idaho, then to Italy. Mike's motivation is made clear in a scene in which he declares his love for Scott, whereas Scott's motivation in the partnership is less clear. He accompanies Mike on this long trip, and acts as protector on many occasions, yet abandons Mike readily. His attachment shifts with ease to Carmella. As he learns a new language, Scott transforms from Hal into Henry, suggesting that this new language in some way represents the discourse to which he gains access (that of privilege, responsibility, and stability).

Mike remains outside of this discourse. There is only one instance in which he learns an Italian word, and rather than allowing him access to this new discourse, it serves as an acknowledgement that he is excluded. He finds Carmella crying; she holds a chestnut, and teaches Mike the Italian word for it: *la castagna*.

CARMELLA: If it was bigger, you could eat.

MIKE: I understand.

She then confesses she has fallen in love with Scott. The chestnut, not yet ready to be eaten, might be read as representing Scott, still in his liminal phase, not quite yet a man, not yet ready for the relationship Carmella represents. However, the inevitability that the chestnut will ripen implies that he will complete his transition and reciprocate Carmella's love, in turn forever excluding Mike.

The closing scene in Italy sees Mike further excluded. As an Italian client attempts but fails to communicate his requests, Mike falls victim to a particularly intense – even violent – narcoleptic episode. He is disorientated and frustrated, and we might infer that his narcoleptic

collapse is brought about by this communication impasse, that his frustration at his exclusion from the language leads to an exclusion from consciousness itself as he succumbs to sleep.

For Scott, the Italian trip becomes a rite of passage: in Italy his identity is in flux, and his return to America signifies a new stability and fixed identity. He has left behind the slums of Portland, having already declared that when he turns twenty-one, he ‘wants no more of this.’ It is only when he leaves the liminal space of Italy that his transformation becomes complete. En route he learns of the death of his father – Prince becomes King – and in every subsequent scene he wears an immaculate suit and is accompanied by Carmella, who from this point on *is* reduced to a cipher, a public symbol of Scott’s heterosexuality and rejection of his previous life. The catalyst for this shift in Scott remains invisible, and presents a kind of narrative aporia. He falls for Carmella, acquiring a love object which displaces his identity away from the queer street-culture he previously inhabited, yet this does not explain, in terms of pure character motivation, why he so quickly abandons Mike. It could be read as the necessary outcome of the liminal excursion to Italy: once the liminal state is entered into, it must be exited – its nature insists upon a transition.

This economy of inclusion and exclusion from systems of meaning problematizes subjectivity and the subject’s engagement with these systems. The gaps between systems engender liminality, and successful negotiation of these gaps (Scott) appears to allow a transition across the liminal space, whereas unsuccessful transition (Mike) results in a failure to achieve a fixed position, and permanent displacement. This economy of language also resonates with Lacan’s theory of the Symbolic order, the order structured upon the recognition of difference and the symbolic function. Mike, unable to comprehend the Italian language, recognizes that the language invokes the symbolic function but remains oblivious to its content.

Similarly, Van Sant’s polyphony of filmic language functions as systems which contrast yet never overlap, combatting a tendency to naturalize the language or to provide a coherent continuity. The ramifications here are manifold. If these structures are comparable to the Symbolic order, then what of Lacan’s orders of the Real and the Imaginary? Given that the Oedipal process permits the subject entrance to the Symbolic, what is to be made of the literal Oedipus that bore Mike, the result of an incestuous liaison between his mother and brother? This correlation has far-reaching implications for the subjectivity of both Mike and Scott as they pass through or flounder in the liminal space.