

## Imitation as Originality in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*

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Take care that what you have gathered does not long remain in  
its original form inside of you: the bees would not be glorious  
if they did not convert what they found into something different  
and something better.

— Petrarch

The opening scene of Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1993) shows Mike Waters—a homeless, narcoleptic drifter-prostitute—abandoned on a deserted stretch of highway somewhere between Portland and “Idaho” (at once a state and a state of mind). The sense of *déjà vu* that Mike claims to be experiencing will, over the course of the film, call our attention to his inability to escape from the dreary, dispiriting repetitiveness of his days and nights: struggling to feed himself, to find a place to sleep, to achieve the normalcy he longs for. The film's opening words are spoken by Mike to himself, or to no one in particular, as he stands in the middle of nowhere on that seemingly endless road:

I always know where I am by the way the road looks. Like I just know that I've been here before. I just know that I've been stuck here, like this one fucking time before, you know that? Yeah. 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. [Yelling at a rabbit that bolts from the brush.] Where do you think you're running, man? We're stuck here together, you shit!

At the figurative level, this announcement of repetition might also be said to be a marker of the film's narrative memory; that is, Mike's *déjà vu* stands

as a kind of allegory of the trope of “having been here before”: allusion or metalepsis. Mike’s déjà vu thus marks Van Sant’s own self-consciousness that he is returning us to where we have already been: to Shakespeare’s stories of Prince Hal and Falstaff and to Orson Welles’ own repetition of those stories in his 1966 *Chimes at Midnight*.

Commenting on this creative borrowing (from Shakespeare if not from Welles), Van Sant himself remarked, “The Shakespearean passages make the point that what happens to these two people has been happening for centuries. I find it comforting that the same stories repeat themselves over and over, and I wanted to underscore the timelessness of the story Scott and Mike are enmeshed in.”<sup>2</sup> Van Sant suggests here both that the essence of his story—“what happens to these two people” (Mike and Scott)—is merely being repeated from Shakespeare’s original telling and that the very repeatability of this essence is comforting because it underscores the timelessness of something. But Van Sant does not say if this is the timelessness of the stories themselves or of certain human experiences; nor does he tell us if the comfort he feels is artistic or moral or something else entirely.

It is hard to know what Van Sant really means when he says that he feels comforted by what he perceives as the timelessness inhering in his



Mike Waters (River Phoenix) and Scott Favor (Keanu Reeves) in Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho* (New Line Cinema, 1991).

repetitions, but he is not the only one to make this point. The former editor of *Film Comment*, Richard Jameson, similarly remarked in a blurb for the film's 1993 laser disc release that "the Shakespearean framework foregrounds the timelessness of the recurring themes of fathers and sons, masked motives, and the sociopolitical callousness of intimate betrayal. Van Sant also pays passionate homage to Welles' *Chimes at Midnight*." It is difficult to assess what advantage any filmmaker might get from his or her audience being specifically aware that the situations depicted in the film have happened before, and, even more, that these forms of human conduct or interaction are so typical that they could have been powerfully represented in literary form as much as four centuries earlier. In the case of *My Own Private Idaho*, Van Sant's story does not need the echo of Shakespeare to remind us because his own story — the very film we are watching — clearly includes "masked motives ... and the sociopolitical callousness of intimate betrayal." And yet Jameson apparently believes that it is aesthetically noteworthy that Van Sant "foregrounds the timelessness" of these themes, a phrase I emphasize because it seems so strangely paradoxical (can timelessness be "foregrounded"?). Surely to place in the foreground not only what has happened before, but also what has been previously represented in literary form, calls attention not to the timelessness of the work's themes but to the very belatedness of the derivative artist. And if Shakespeare already made all this known, why should we pay attention to Van Sant's film, which merely says again what Shakespeare already said so majestically? Moreover, we have the added problem that Van Sant is being doubly derivative. For, as Jameson is certainly correct to remind us, *My Own Private Idaho* "also pays passionate homage to Welles' *Chimes at Midnight*." How, then, are we to make sense of Van Sant's work here as anything other than a work of startling unoriginality?<sup>3</sup>

Of course Van Sant's bringing to the fore of his film's relation to the work of earlier artists allows us to examine another angle altogether, an angle that brings us closer to the real creative premise of revisionary art: when done well, it does not repeat the earlier story but rather brings to the surface precisely what in the original story was not fully developed. Making one's debt clear may force the audience or reader to understand the derivative text precisely as a revision or re-reading (or, as Harold Bloom might call it, a misprision or creative misreading). Repeatability is necessary in this context as a way of marking the site of inspiration, where the muse we should call reading begins to do its work. At times, it becomes necessary to bring the original text to the foreground in order to mark how creativity can operate by canceling an inspiring earlier work as a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the material. In these cases, the revisionary process comes into

view most clearly when the fundamentals of the story are presented from a different perspective or from a new historical vantage or context that becomes meaningful through the interpretive shell of an earlier work, even where the meaning of that earlier work is not repeated but radically altered.

In a brief accounting of Van Sant's process of adaptation (revising Welles as much as Shakespeare), this essay will attempt to demonstrate that, like other artists who borrow, Van Sant is probably less comforted by his ability to repeat the work of an earlier artist than he is inspired to create something new precisely because of what, to him, is not fully or properly expressed in the source text(s). Just as important, what the derivative artist typically attempts to express is related to very topical concerns, to precisely what is not timeless and what would have special relevance and resonance only in his or her own culture. Creative adaptation works, in short, by repeating not for the sake of universality but as a means of giving voice to what is historically specific, either in cultural or personal terms or both.

In what follows, I will focus less on the theory of adaptation and more on what we might learn from close textual comparisons of individual instances of adaptation. Given space limitations, I will be more suggestive than exhaustive. I will make these comparisons by first commenting on how Welles adapts Shakespeare's plays and then conclude by describing how Van Sant adapts Welles' adaptation (visually and thematically) to produce his most compelling insight — which is itself a revision of the meaning Welles ascribes to the beautiful Shakespearean phrase "chimes at midnight." This interpretive trajectory will allow us to see all the more clearly why and how borrowing is original, why repetition — when it is truly artistic — is never repetitive, and why timelessness is moot where derivative artists succeed in revealing what their predecessors could not have grasped in the later work's formulations. I shall try to demonstrate this idea — repetition as creative reworking — by detailing how the meaning Van Sant creates by borrowing has everything to do with a quintessentially late-twentieth-century American cultural experience: the lost children of our inner cities.

## I

Precisely what prompts subsequent reworkings and re-contextualizations of the phrase "chimes at midnight" can best be understood by considering the implications of the original Shakespearean material. The full line in which the phrase appears, "We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow," is delivered by Falstaff in *2 Henry IV* as part of the following exchange:

SHALLOW: O Sir John, do you remember since we lay all night in the Windmill in Saint George's Field?

FALSTAFF: No more of that, Master Shallow, no more of that.

SHALLOW: Ha, 'twas a merry night. And is Jane Nightwork alive.

FALSTAFF: She lives, Master Shallow.

SHALLOW: She never could away with me.

FALSTAFF: Never, never, she would always say she could not abide Master Shallow.

SHALLOW: By the mass, I could anger her to th' heart. She was then a bona roba. Doth she hold her own well?

FALSTAFF: Old, old, Master Shallow.

SHALLOW: Nay, she must be old, she cannot choose but be old, certain she's old, and had Robin Nightwork by old Nightwork before I came to Clement's Inn.

FALSTAFF: That's fifty-five year ago.

SHALLOW: Ha, cousin Silence, that thou hadst seen what this knight and I have seen! Ha, Sir John, said I well?

FALSTAFF: We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow.

SHALLOW: That we have, that we have, that we have, in faith, Sir John, we have.... Jesus, the days that we have seen!

[2 *Henry IV*, III.ii.194-219]<sup>4</sup>

The most immediate meaning of the line is that Falstaff and Shallow (and perhaps more broadly Falstaff's companions, Bardolph, Peto, etc.) have lived life fully, that they have been awake, literally and figuratively, when others were asleep. But the lyricism of the line conveys richer, more haunting possibilities as well, possibilities imaginatively at work because the line works within the context of the passage as a whole. For example, the past tense of "we have heard" is linked to the past tense of Shallow's "the days that we have seen" and both are linked to the preceding time reference, "fifty-five year ago," which suggests that the celebration of this life of madness and wonder is at the same time a lamentation for just how much it belongs to the past. The brief mention of Jane Nightwork's antiquity, moreover, seems not only to mark Falstaff himself as "old, old," but also to suggest that, like her, Falstaff may be overdue for death (the midnight chimes now sounding more like Donne's bells tolling their intimation of mortality).

Whatever special glory is reserved for those who have heard the chimes is now replaced by nostalgia for what can never be restored (love

as well as youth) and anxiety over losses still to come. Indeed, Falstaff's lament in III.ii is linked to his subsequent rejection at the hands of Prince Hal (now King Harry) in V.v. The link is so strong that it is virtually impossible to separate the elegiac tone of III.ii from events of that final scene (V.v. 41–73; and it is worth noting that Falstaff here is again in Master Shallow's company). Although this version of the "chimes at midnight" line is more muted than what subsequent adaptors will do with it, Shakespeare himself seems to have registered its deeper, if sadder implications: it is a death knell of sorts for one of his greatest dramatic creations. The line, in short, manages to evoke a sense of Falstaff's impending loss even though, at the moment he delivers it, he still holds out the deluded hope that he will share in the new king's inheritance. Moreover, the line stimulates our awareness of how that loss is paired with Hal's coming to the throne, to power certainly, and perhaps to royal maturity.

V.v of *2 Henry IV* seems also to reveal Shakespeare — himself no stranger to the art of revision — adapting material from, or at least building on, his own earlier work. Specifically, the final rejection of Falstaff in *2 Henry IV* harkens back to II.iv of *1 Henry IV*, the scene in which Hal mysteriously reveals his intention to banish Falstaff at some point in the future (II.iv.460–81). The image of what people actually experience when they hear the "chimes at midnight" is provided in I.ii of *1 Henry IV* as part of the very first conversation between Hal and Falstaff. But there the image of "Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon" (I.ii.25–26) expresses Falstaff's continuing vitality, his excess and exuberance. Even in that earlier scene, however, Falstaff's and Hal's midnight carousings are already threatened by Hal's announcement to the audience that he will betray his current companions. Hal's soliloquy at the end of that scene (I.ii.195–217) foreshadows the playacted betrayal of II.iv which, in turn, at once symbolizes and predicts the final rejection of Falstaff in V.v of *2 Henry IV*.

## II

Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* conflates the story lines of both parts of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Just as in Shakespeare's plays, the main story line here reaches its climax in Prince Hal/King Harry's rejection of Falstaff (material taken from V.v of *2 Henry IV*). The film then adds final material from II.i and II.iii of *Henry V* to reveal the consequences of that rejection: spiritually broken, Falstaff dies shortly thereafter. Falstaff does not actually appear in Shakespeare's *Henry V*; rather, he dies offstage and his death is recounted by Hostess Quickly (II.iii.10–26). Welles is faithful to



Falstaff (Orson Welles) lives the high life at the Boar's Head Tavern in Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* (International Films Espanola, 1966).

this fact, choosing to represent the death simply by having an immense coffin carried off on a wagon to some unknown burial plot.

Although Welles follows the main action of Shakespeare's play, the film's point of view is shifted so that it is Falstaff's experience of events that dominates the viewer's perspective. Welles pointedly chooses not to employ voice-over narration where that might suggest a firsthand account; he limits the use of voice-overs to narrative segments of historical background, which he takes from Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare's primary source for the plays. But Welles' opening scene reworks several lines from III.ii of *2 Henry IV* to frame the subsequent story line as the retrospective ruminations of an old man, one whose life was indelibly marked by his earlier dealings with the prince:

SHALLOW: Jesus, the days that we have seen! [Falstaff laughs; Shallow laughs.] Do you remember since we lay all night in the Windmill in Saint George's Field?

FALSTAFF: No more of that, Master Shallow.

SHALLOW: [Laughs.] 'Twas a merry night. Is Jane Nightwork alive.

FALSTAFF : She lives, Master Shallow.

SHALLOW: Doth she hold her own well?

FALSTAFF : Old, old, Master Shallow.

SHALLOW: Nay, she must be old, she cannot choose but be old, certain she's old, and had Robin Nightwork by old Nightwork before I came to Clement's Inn. Jesus, the days that we have seen. Ha, Sir John, said I well?

FALSTAFF : We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Robert Shallow.

SHALLOW: That we have, that we have, that we have, in faith, Sir John, we have. Jesus, the days that we have seen.

(Welles' revised dialogue for the opening scene of *Chimes at Midnight*)

The most obvious change here is that Welles transforms the line "the days that we have seen" into a lyrical refrain for the passage as a whole. And that refrain focuses attention on Welles' deletions so that we see only two old men reflecting on the passage of their best days, even if, for Shallow, there seems to be some satisfaction in recognizing just how full their lives have been. This is less obviously so for Falstaff, however, who, even as the film begins, seems to have suffered emotionally from Hal's rejection, an act that at once empties Falstaff's life of meaning and tinges the audience's own perspective with an awareness of lost vitality. Indeed, in *Chimes at Midnight*, Welles reimagines Shakespeare's Henry-plays as an elegy to Falstaff.

The film's opening expression of loss—lost youth and the awareness of mortality—becomes an important thematic motif for the film as a whole. This fact is borne out in Welles' use of the Shakespearean phrase "chimes at midnight" as the film's subtitle: the film is actually entitled *Falstaff*, although almost everyone remembers the film as *Chimes at Midnight* precisely because of the phrase's deeply elegiac qualities. The narrative framework of Welles' film is that of an old man remembering, and the shadow of his loss is the heart of the new story. Welles sees the story from the perspective of the old man who is rejected rather than from that of a young man who discovers just what he must reject in order to grow up. And if Shakespeare's sequence of Henry-plays, from *1 Henry IV* to *Henry V*, is centrally concerned with Hal's growing up, Welles' film is clearly about growing old.

### III

Intriguingly, changes in perspective can be effected even when the adapting artist is being faithful to the source material. To see another example of this process, we might briefly consider a more traditional kind



of film adaptation, but one that still reveals the borrowing of source material as an act of creative reworking.

While recognizing that Kenneth Branagh claimed that his 1989 film version of *Henry V* was an antiwar film, it is important to acknowledge that the film is a powerful testament to just how much Shakespeare's story belongs to Prince Hal/King Harry and represents him in a heroic light.<sup>5</sup> And we should note again that Falstaff does not even appear in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. At the same time, Branagh's film periodically invokes Falstaff's presence — visually and verbally — because he wants to pay homage to what Shakespeare's character has meant to Hal's story. At a minimum, Branagh wants to sustain an awareness of what Hal must sacrifice in order to become a worthy ruler.

To help generate this awareness, Branagh incorporates material from both parts of *Henry IV* by splicing a flashback scene into II.i of *Henry V*. The major portion of this inserted material comes from the tavern scene of *1 Henry IV* (II.iv), a scene in which, as we have already noted, Hal play-acts his future rejection of Falstaff. Branagh (re)presents this material as a memory trace in the minds of the aging soldiers, Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol, as they await word of Falstaff's death.<sup>6</sup> The film thus memorializes Falstaff by putting on display scenes from the earlier plays. Falstaff is remembered by filmic re-remembering, which is also, in key aspects, a misremembering. That misremembering is marked particularly in Branagh's embedding of the line "we have heard the chimes at midnight" (from III.ii of *2 Henry IV*) in the flashback to *1 Henry IV*'s tavern scenes (II.iv).

Neither version of *Henry V*'s II.i — Shakespeare's original or Branagh's adaptation — is centrally concerned with Falstaff. Each in its way is more interested in the other aging characters (Nym, Bardolph, and Pistol). More specifically, the two versions of the scene explore the sense of loss these characters feel over Falstaff's death in the context of their impending departure for war in France. Both Shakespeare and Branagh, in short, link lost youth to the threat of death and, through other aspects of the scene, to the loss of love as well: Nym experiences this loss because Mistress Quickly (Nell) has married his rival, Pistol, and Pistol's own parting from Nell at the ending of II.iii poignantly reminds us of just what is put at risk by King Harry's war.

The real possibility of loss with which King Harry's war now threatens these old men is powerfully reinforced in Branagh's version of the scene by his recontextualization of the key line. In Branagh's flashback scene, the line is said by Falstaff to Hal: "We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Harry." This substitution of Hal for Shallow and the new placement of the line in what should be the tavern scene — a scene

that both anticipates and symbolically embodies the newly crowned King Harry's final betrayal of Falstaff in V.v of *2 Henry IV*— transforms Falstaff's comment into a simultaneous lament and accusation: even as Branagh includes Hal in Falstaff's "we" (indeed, all the other companions melt away), he shows Falstaff's recognition that Hal will betray him, a betrayal that Falstaff seems to register already as a fatal blow. One of the effects of this change is to make explicit what is only implicit in Shakespeare's treatment, and even Welles', by establishing a direct causal link between Hal's conduct (his earlier playacted betrayal foreshadowing the later real one) and the sense of loss that Falstaff so acutely feels and that is so delicately balanced in the phrase "chimes at midnight." Indeed, the conflation of material from these different scenes reveals that moment at which the phrase "chimes at midnight" shifts from marking a positive experience (a shared, privileged experience of a way of life most people will never know) to a negative one, an awareness that even in the midst of life we are never far from irreversible loss. And the sense of the inevitability of such loss is made even worse by the recognition that it is hastened by a friend's betrayal. Hal is not responsible for Falstaff's age, of course, but his betrayal saps Falstaff's vitality; indeed, as presented by Branagh, Hal's act transforms a zest for life into a surrender to the destructive forces (age and time) that Falstaff can no longer resist. The flashback material helps clarify Mistress Quickly's claim that "the king hath kill'd [Falstaff's] heart" (*Henry V*, II.i.88) and Nym's that "the king hath run bad humors on the knight" (II.i.121–22). But it does this while revising the end of *2 Henry IV* in its suggestion that Falstaff must have anticipated Hal's betrayal: at a minimum, Branagh seems to hint that Falstaff could not have been so naive as to place his full trust in his "when thou art king" fantasy. Falstaff must have known he was being used, a notion that is more in keeping with what we know and love about him: his ability to pierce the pretensions and deceits of the nobility (most famously on display in his critique of honor in V.i.127–41 of *1 Henry IV*).

Moreover, Branagh's resuscitating of Falstaff within Nym, Bardolph and Pistol's flashback allows the audience to imagine that Falstaff's capacity to see through Prince Hal's designs might have rubbed off on his less intelligent companions. Certainly for the viewer, Branagh's connotations hint at an otherwise unstated proposition that King Harry's war is itself just another act of deceit against old men, men whom the king regards as useless despite the intimacy he once shared with them. But we are also encouraged to hope that Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol can grasp Hal/Harry's real motives and the real threat they now face. In Branagh's revision, Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol come to recognize that Falstaff's chimes are tolling

for them as well precisely because the king has no qualms about lying to them or to anyone else when it serves his purpose. Through the continuing presence of Falstaff, they see that the king has no moral conscience and that even his friends are merely pawns in his grand scheme of self-aggrandizement. The flashback material also suggests, in very broad terms, the wastefulness of war and the callousness of rulers: doom might be inevitable, but that is all the more reason to savor the sweetness of life and to despise those who see the fates of others as an opportunity for personal advantage.

In sum, even as the film follows the basic logic of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Branagh's attentiveness to the implications of the phrase "chimes at midnight" allows him to deflect the story away from King Harry, thus giving Falstaff one last moment. In so doing, he emphasizes Falstaff's perspective on Harry's maturation, career, and triumphs as well as their effects on Falstaff's life. Branagh seems not only to be following Welles' lead here, but also to be doing homage to Welles' film by making a space for it within



Politicized courtship: Henry V (Kenneth Branagh) woos Katherine, the princess of France (Emma Thompson), in Branagh's *Henry V* (the Samuel Goldwyn Company and Renaissance Films, 1990).

his own narrative. For in both Welles' and Branagh's films, the losses Falstaff must endure and our sense of his wasted life shadow — perhaps even critique — the story of King Harry, Shakespeare's hero and, paradoxically, Branagh's as well.

#### IV

Turning finally to Van Sant's adaptation, we might start by noting that he positions his version of the "chimes at midnight" in a different place entirely, even before his revision of *1 Henry IV's* tavern-scene. The phrase is now spoken by Bob (Van Sant's Falstaff) to Budd (a crazed Master Shallow) as the two return to Portland from their debauched journeys:

BUDD: Jesus, the things we've seen. Do you remember a thing since we moved from graffiti bridge?

BOB: No more of that, Bud....

BUDD: Is Jane Nightwork alive, Bob?

BOB: She's alive, Budd.

BUDD: Is she holding on?

BOB: Old, old.

BUDD: She must be old. She has no choice.... Jesus, the things we've seen. Aren't I right, Bob, aren't I right?

BOB: We have heard the chimes at midnight.

BUDD: That we have, that we have. In fact, Bob, we have. Jesus, the things we've seen.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the new position of the Falstaff–Master Shallow exchange within the story line, Van Sant's adaptation shares some features with Welles' and Branagh's versions. Like Welles, for example, Van Sant uses the exchange to introduce his Falstaff, although unlike Welles, Van Sant does not position this material at the start of the film because, in the main, *My Own Private Idaho* is not Bob's story (it is really Mike's story).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, much as in Branagh's film, the exchange allows Van Sant to put his Falstaff center stage for a moment before the scene shifts back to younger characters. And each of the three films uses the Shakespearean material in its own distinct way to portray its particular view of Falstaff's strange combination of worldliness and world-weariness (a life at once rich and depleted).

Just at the level of plot, however, Van Sant's repositioning of the Falstaff–Master Shallow exchange is closer to Shakespeare's original in that he places it where his Falstaff, Bob, still hopes to cash in on his friendship

with the new Hal, Scott. Indeed, that is precisely the reason Bob has returned to Portland: because Scott is about to turn 21 and come into his inheritance. In Van Sant's version, as in Shakespeare's, then, the line loses at least some of the elegiac luster it acquires in Welles' and Branagh's versions. Nevertheless, even as Van Sant weakens the association between the "chimes at midnight" line and Falstaff-Bob's sense of lost prospects, a feeling of lost youth and of a life wasted — everything that belongs to the phrase "chimes at midnight" — still pervades this version of the story. The elegiac quality of the phrase is retained by Van Sant, however, even as the feeling of loss it symbolizes takes on a decidedly new connotation in relation to a series of social ills on display in the film: stealing, prostitution, drugs, and homelessness. The phrase stands in for all the experiences of the film's young people who have nowhere to go at night and so only reluctantly hear the "chimes at midnight"; they would prefer just about anything else. For them as for Shakespeare's Falstaff, hearing the "chimes" is a kind of death knell.

In short, while Van Sant's story is still very much about lost youth and lost love (both Bob and Mike lose their love, Scott), the sense of loss — both actual and potential — shifts toward a much broader sociological concern, that of the lost youth of America's "lost youths," a concept that, symbolically relocated within Van Sant's story, now only partly suggests a progressive awareness of one's limits or one's mortality as one ages (a point Branagh effectively makes in the portrayal of his aging soldiers). For Van Sant, the lament for what is lost is expanded to create a symbolic equation between Bob's sense that life's possibilities are slipping away and the young people's (especially Mike's) awareness that the chance for the "good life," or even simply a normal life, is disappearing all too quickly.<sup>9</sup> Youth is lost, however, not because time is the enemy (as it is for Falstaff and Bob and for Branagh's Nym, Bardolph, and Pistol), but because society is the enemy. And not possessing what society understands as normal (as Mike says, "like a mom and a dad and a dog and shit like that") leaves one exposed to being left behind, buried in a wasted life if not actually dead. In Van Sant's creative misreading, Falstaff's sense of loss — being rejected or abandoned by someone more powerful than he — represents the marginalization that comes when one has no cultural status at all: impoverished, abused, homosexual, homeless, and hopeless. In this version, in other words, youth is lost or wasted when a young person has no future and nowhere to go, doomed to hear the chimes at midnight when most people are at home with their families, asleep in their beds.

## V

Van Sant's adaptation is a very deliberate effort to do something new with the source material — something culturally specific — and not just repeat the work of his predecessors. To get a clearer understanding of this revisionary process, we might consider one of Van Sant's visual echoings of Welles' film, echoings that — paradoxically, from the perspective of originality — bear out Jameson's observation that *My Own Private Idaho* is influenced as much by *Chimes at Midnight* as by Shakespeare's plays.

Material that both Welles and Van Sant take from II.iv.482–523 of *Henry IV* offers a simple visualization of this influence. Welles and Van Sant both present the tavern scene after the announcement that there are law-enforcement agents at the door looking for suspects in the previous night's robbery (the sheriff in Welles, looking for Falstaff; Portland police officers in Van Sant, looking for Bob). Van Sant clearly borrows from Welles a series of details, including the increased number of extras in the scene and the mad scramble for hiding places after the announcement that the sheriff and his men have come to search the premises. However, Van Sant's most important borrowing follows an addition that Welles first makes to the original material: during his search of Hostess Quickly's inn, Welles' sheriff discovers Hal in bed with an unnamed woman (who may or may not be a prostitute). This detail is echoed by Van Sant who has his Portland police officers discover Scott in bed with Mike (who is definitely a prostitute).<sup>10</sup> This particular adaptation is crucial for understanding the germinal idea of Van Sant's creative misreading of Shakespeare: Van Sant takes Welles' unnamed woman/prostitute, transforms her into a "him" (Mike), makes it clear that he is in love with this soon-to-be rich, powerful person, and then gives him the opportunity to tell his side of the story.

Van Sant said in an interview that, although *Chimes at Midnight* had "given [him] the idea," he "tried to forget" it in the making of *My Own Private Idaho* because he "didn't want to be plagiaristic or stylistically influenced by it" (Fuller xxxvii). But here is precisely where we might view influence or even plagiarism as a form of creativity. To understand this creative process, we might connect that image of the (male) prostitute in bed with the rich young man he loves (at once a borrowing from and a revision of Welles tavern scene) to an experience Van Sant claims to have actually had (one can almost imagine Van Sant's first viewing of Welles' film as the point of origin for his retelling).<sup>11</sup> Van Sant observes that he "started working on this story in 1978. It's based on kids I used to see on Hollywood Boulevard."<sup>12</sup> Van Sant no doubt connected his image of street hustlers (adolescent girls and boys selling their bodies in order to feed

themselves) with other social realities: some of these kids had run away from home; some were drug dealers or drug abusers; all were terrified; none had a home except whatever shelter they could find for that night; many had no family except for their fellow street dwellers; and none had a steady job or health insurance.

Van Sant, like Shakespeare and Welles, still tells the story of “masked motives and the sociopolitical callousness of intimate betrayal,” although now it is Scott’s betrayal of Mike rather than of Bob that is emphasized. And that betrayal becomes more important in this version because, in a wonderful revision, Van Sant transforms Shakespeare’s character Poins, Prince Hal’s fellow conspirator in the mockery of Falstaff and his confidante elsewhere in the Henry IV plays, into Welles’ prostitute.<sup>13</sup> Van Sant reimagines Poins as a special character, his unexplained intimacy with Hal now taking on the homoerotic overtones of Mike’s love for Scott. And it is Scott’s cruel or callous betrayal of this intimacy (not for social gain precisely but in that context) that is the heart of the story. At the same time, Van Sant reminds us that in Shakespeare’s original, Falstaff is the one who is betrayed, not Poins. Van Sant keeps this memory alive not only by including Bob’s death scene, but also by linking Bob and Mike in the film:



**Intimacy betrayed: Mike (River Phoenix) as Van Sant’s new Poins and Scott (Keanu Reeves) as the new Hal.**

when the film opens, Mike is wearing an old gas-station attendant shirt with the name "Bob" above the pocket.<sup>14</sup>

In his filmic blending of borrowed story lines, visual images, and dialogue along with that real lived experience from Hollywood Boulevard, Van Sant reimagines the story so that it is not simply a repetition of something timeless in Shakespeare's art. Rather, it is an artistic vision meaningful in a modern historical and social context. The jacket cover of the 1993 laser disc observes that this is "a fable of love and belonging," "a story of innocence and desire," and "a parable of friendship and betrayal." But it is really a story of loss. Indeed, Van Sant recognizes that it might make sense, dramatically and conceptually, to re-present Falstaff as the main character of Shakespeare's plays (something Welles had also seen) but that to make him the main character would require the reinvention of the story. In a complicated way, Van Sant creates this new version by combining Falstaff and Poin in Mike even as he doubles Falstaff with Mike and Bob. By means of this transformation, Van Sant increases Hal's culpability in the betrayal of his friends because in the Henry IV plays, Poin is actually closer to Hal than Falstaff is.

But, in the end, why does it matter to the story that Van Sant revises Shakespeare in this way? And why is that other "ton of man," Welles, so important in the revisionary history, or creativity by (mis)interpretation? Van Sant follows Welles on these points:

1. Although Hal (now Scott) is no longer the main character in this story, his actions are the condition of the story by providing the context.
2. The main story concerns the learning process undergone by Falstaff or his surrogate (more Mike than Bob), whose life is shaped by his experiences with Hal (Scott). Of course, to the extent that Van Sant keeps it a story about growing up whereas Welles tells a story of growing old, Van Sant is actually closer to the Shakespearean original.
3. Both films position the "chimes at midnight" line early on (Welles at the very beginning) so as to frame the story with the Falstaff character looking back on things, reflecting precisely on what Hal/Scott has meant to him. (One wonders if Van Sant ever considered giving this line to Mike in his opening soliloquy.)
4. Van Sant wants to stress Welles' essential correctness in presenting the protagonist's perspective as his gained understanding of how his life has been shaped by loss: of intimacy, love, friendship, youth.

Van Sant could have told a modern day Falstaff-story, but perhaps he felt that this would be too close to Welles' story. Thus he reinvents Shake-



speare's Poins (Mike) as a character who suffers a similar fate (rejected or betrayed by Hal/Scott) but now in a more intimate context: Mike is in love with Scott. At the same time, Van Sant also reworks the basic material by transforming Falstaff's lovable excess (thieving, eating, drinking, whoring) into something much more sinister or disheartening. This is important, as it is at once difficult and necessary to distinguish the excesses of the marginalized from the excesses of the privileged. Van Sant resituates his new understanding of his predecessors' work within a distinctively modern American context: urban youth culture and a series of broader cultural contexts—the disenfranchised within the capitalist system; institutional abuse, the corruptive power of money (which can buy pleasure and privilege), and even the exploitation of sexuality (used by Scott as a way of constructing his identity for public consumption). In essence, Van Sant misreads Shakespeare's and Welles' stories as a dark fable of the American dream.

Confirmation of the preceding argument is provided by Van Sant's re-contextualization of the Gadshill robbery (II.iii of *1 Henry IV*), a revision that clarifies a motive left somewhat obscure in the Shakespearean original. Why exactly does Shakespeare's Falstaff need to steal? In the most obvious sense, he is simply too lazy to work, but good historicists would have much to tell us about the late-Elizabethan crisis of the aristocracy and what this might have meant in Shakespeare's Henry plays, which in the main are concerned with responsible rule (especially in the context of militarist expansion). *My Own Private Idaho* suggests that there is an American aristocracy, but historically speaking, of course, that is not the same thing as the Elizabethan aristocracy. Made at the end of the Reagan-Bush era (when the downturn in the economy was starting to become a sociopolitical issue, one that would influence the 1992 presidential campaign), *My Own Private Idaho* is clearly a story about those people left behind, left out, or simply forgotten even during the years of economic expansion. In this sense, its tone is closer to the scene from Branagh's *Henry V* where the old men at the tavern see that the world is leaving them behind. But clearly, in Van Sant's version, this feeling of impending loss (along with the "masked motives ... and the sociopolitical callousness of intimate betrayal" to which Jameson refers—both of which are also part of Welles' story) gets developed in terms specific to the cultural situation of America in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In *My Own Private Idaho*, the division between Scott and the homeless drifters marks the gap in American class structure itself. In other words, as presented by Van Sant at least, the power-differential between Scott and his companions is caused by the discrepancy between those who

are culturally advantaged and those who are disenfranchised or marginalized. Here, some privileged few lord it over those who cannot defend themselves, a situation symbolized by the plight of the young prostitutes in the film (especially those with abusive clients): they get fucked. And those with power expect service without any obligation to reciprocate. Van Sant provides a final image of the redeemed Scott, riding in a limousine, looking out at a homeless person, and feeling no sense of shared experience; the image leaves little hope that, now that he is close to power, he will do anything for these people, his former companions on the street. Of course, this may be Shakespeare's point as well. As king, will Harry do anything useful for the lower classes of England other than lead them into a war they do not want, one that serves only his interests? Does Van Sant see Shakespeare's hero as something less than heroic, something closer to the callousness of Scott, and would his "misreading" be a good interpretation of Shakespeare's Hal?

If Hal and Falstaff compete for the moral center of Shakespeare's plays, Mike is unquestionably the moral center of Van Sant's film. He is looking for a life, for what has been denied him because he is not "normal." And Van Sant's retelling provides a motivation for Mike's attraction to Scott, whereas Falstaff's desire for what Hal can give him has a different motive, or at least a different historical context. This element in Van Sant's version certainly complicates Falstaff's character psychologically. The key difference is in the representation of need: as material necessity or as hedonistic desire. In effect, Van Sant changes Falstaff's playful hedonism into a form of cultural desperation and Hal's slumming into a political hedonism, the site of which Van Sant also shifts more definitively to the privileged class (though Branagh's version suggests something of this as well): the political self-interest pursued by the powerful, the monied, the well-connected, the corrupt. Van Sant's Bob is certainly no role model (Mike is only marginally better), but, as the film presents it, material need organizes the world, and this desire subjugates others. Reading Van Sant's film as an act of misreading, we also see that creative adaptation typically works by repeating not to reveal a story's timelessness, but rather to give voice to what might otherwise go unsaid.

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## Notes

1. Except where noted, throughout the essay I will quote directly from the film rather than from the published screenplay.
2. I quote here from the jacket of the 1993 laser disc. In an interview with Graham Fuller, Van Sant puts it this way: "The reason Scott's like he is is because of the Shakespeare, and the reason the Shakespeare is in the film is to transcend time, to show that those things have always happened, everywhere" (Fuller xlii-xliii).
3. Fuller asks in the interview, "When you wrote the *Henry IV* scenes for *Idaho*, did you actually go back to the text of the plays or was your reference point *Chimes at Midnight*?" Van Sant responds: "I tried to forget the Welles film because I didn't want to be plagiaristic or stylistically influenced by it, even though it had given me the idea. So I referred to the original Shakespeare." He claims, moreover, that even as the film "toned the Shakespeare down" (especially in terms of language) "it was literally, from beginning to end, a restructuring of the *Henry IV* plays"; later he goes so far as to call the Shakespeare scenes in the film "an editing job," one that "didn't involve too much creation" (Fuller xxxvii, xxv, xlvi). The central issue of this essay is that even an editing job may require real creativity, though the nature of that creativity is complex.
4. Citations from Shakespeare's plays are by act, scene, and line number.
5. For differing views on whether or how Branagh's film demystifies warfare and military ideology more generally, see Donaldson and Hedrick.
6. From Branagh's revision of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, II.i.117-28:

HOSTESS: If ever you come of women, come in quickly to Sir John. He is so shaken of a burning contagion fever, that it is most lamentable to behold. Sweet men, come to him.

PISTOL: Poor Sir John. A good portly man, i' faith.

[Flashback, which concludes with:]

FALSTAFF: If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked. If to be old and merry is a sin, if to be fat is to be hated. But no, my good lord, when thou art king, banish Pistol, banish Bardolph, banish Nym, but sweet Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry's company. Banish plump Jack and banish all the world.

PRINCE: I do, I will. [from 1 *Henry IV*, II.iv.470-81]

FALSTAFF: But we have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Harry. Jesu, (the) days that we have seen. [from 2 *Henry IV*, III.ii.214-15, 219]

PRINCE: I know thee not, old man. [from 2 *Henry IV*, V.v.47]

[End of flashback]

NYM: The King hath run bad humors on the knight.

PISTOL: Nym, thou hast spoke the right.

His heart is fractured, and corroborate.

NYM: The King is a good king, but it must be as it may. He passes some humors and careers.

PISTOL: Let us condole the knight, for, lambkins, we will live.

7. It is noteworthy that the line "we have heard the chimes at midnight" does not even appear in the published screenplay; the line there reads: "We have seen the light at the end of the tunnel" (Van Sant 133).

8. For elaboration of this point, see Lyons 8–12 and Wiseman 234–35, 237.

9. Mike's longing for normalcy is most explicitly articulated in the film's most poignant scene, where he dares to speak love's name to Scott as part of a longer revelation of his wish to have a normal life: "normal, you know, like a mom and a dad and a dog and shit like that ... normal"; to which Scott responds, in his typically skeptical-cool-non-committal manner, "You didn't have a normal dog?"

10. Van Sant's revision of Welles is more graphic: the police come upon Scott humping Mike (or at least pretending to hump him). Mike would actually prefer the real thing.

11. It is worth noting that, in the context of recounting his work on the original script, Van Sant claims that he "didn't fully know who [Scott] was until" he had seen "Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*" (Fuller xxiii).

12. I quote this line from the jacket of the 1993 laser disc. In the interview with Fuller, Van Sant puts it a bit differently: "[I]n *My Own Private Idaho*, I was fashioning those characters after people that I had met in Portland who are street hustlers.... The original script was written in the seventies when I was living in Hollywood. It was actually set on Hollywood Boulevard.... Meanwhile I had shot *Mala Noche* and eight years went by. Then I started writing again about these same street characters" (Fuller xxiii).

13. Van Sant himself recognizes at least part of this adaptation: "I realized that Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays had this gritty quality about them. They had the young Henry, Prince Hal, who is about to become king, slumming on the streets with his sidekick. The young Henry seemed to be Scott and the sidekick seemed to be Mike, so I adapted the Shakespeare story to modern Portland" (Fuller xxv).

14. This marks yet another intriguing change from the published screenplay, which contains the following direction: "Mike enters the frame ... He has a Texaco gas station attendant's shirt on with a name tag that reads: BILL (not Mike, his name)" (Van Sant 109).

# Almost Shakespeare

*Reinventing His Works for  
Cinema and Television*

Edited by James R. Keller  
and Leslie Stratyner



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