



Gord Jackson

VIDEOFILE

My *Own Private Idaho* deals with the loneliness, isolation and alienation experienced by gays about as effectively as any film I have ever seen. Like *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), it challenges both straights and gays to come to grips with complexities beyond our own individual lives.

Idaho is also, however, a very unsettling, bizarre movie whose cynicism is so overwhelming that it could, without some serious reflection by the viewer, leave one as jaded about the state of the human race as its author, Gus Van Sant. Eschewing conventional storytelling, Van Sant combines stylized fantasy with documentary technique. Constantly introducing images of floating clouds, an ice-capped glacier and a long road to Nowheresville, the filmmaker layers his work in metaphor and symbolism without shame. And although Van Sant is a member of the gay community, his film is not an exclusively gay movie; even though its main characters are gay and bi, it will undoubtedly resonate within the ghettoized periphery. The themes and scope of *Idaho* simply use the gay subculture, and the vapid existence of two male hustlers, as a tool through which to communicate a nihilistic polemic.

The story, the least important aspect of this unconventional photoplay, deals with the very unexcellent adventures of Mike and Scott (River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves). They satirize gay magazine covers in a porn store, kibbitz with mutual friend Bob (William Richert) and visit what is left of Mike's family. But while the lifestyle of a vagabond in the subculture may be the narcoleptic Mike's *raison d'être*, it is not a

long-term goal of the ethically bankrupt Scott. We are always aware, no matter what assent Scott may give to the quirky activities in which he participates, that he is an outsider, a spoiled effete more interested in making his upper-class family uncomfortable with his so-called radical behaviour, than he is committed to it. As he says early on, "It will impress them more when such a fuckup as me turns good than if I'd been a good son all along."

The implementation of this transformation takes place a little past the halfway point, when Scott and Mike are visiting Italy. While there, Scott ostensible falls for a peasant girl with no hope for a brighter future. Pouncing upon this unexpected gift of fate, he magnanimously decides to marry the vulnerable waif and then transplant her from a desolate existence at home to the solitary confinement of marriage to a neo-conservative corporate climber's world.

Although he gets top billing, the courageous River Phoenix's Mike is not the focus of the movie; the spotlight is always on Keanu Reeves's cold-blooded Scott. A heartless dilettante bereft of socially-redeeming value, his attitude towards all is signalled near the beginning when he reveals his true thoughts to Bob, the one person who he claims, like Judas with Jesus, to love.

Van Sant's upscale Yuppie represents a synthetic society as totally stripped of human feelings or sentiments as an airhead in a singles bar. Scott becomes the conduit for a savage assault upon the vacuous life of the upwardly mobile shard; Van Sant brutally juxtaposing the well-fed, -dressed, and -coiffed respectable elite with the great unwashed. Indeed, by setting Bob's final annihilation in a five-star restaurant, complete with its superficial sophistication and admiring gallery of like-minded predators, the author, through

Scott, accuses unctuous authoritarians like politicians, fundamentalist clergy and the movers and shakers in the board rooms of bludgeoning trust and raping fragile dignity and self-respect.

However, if Scott is the apotheosis of what Van Sant finds reprehensible, then Mike and Bob are his romanticized antithesis. This becomes poignantly clear in another telling moment earlier on in the film when we get a cosy little campfire chat between the love-starved Mike and the desensitized Scott. In a setting reminiscent of 1969's equally unconventional *Easy Rider*, Mike bares his soul — nervous, hesitant and barely audible. Scott, on the other hand, might just as well be disembodied, because he is no more capable of comprehending what is taking place than will the pathetic Bob in the artificial atmosphere of the plush eatery. It is obvious that during Mike's tortured self-revelations, Scott's heart and mind are not where he is physically because for him, the whole of his unconventional lifestyle is transitory at best.

There are two funerals at the end of the film: one for Scott's father, the other for the heartbroken Bob. As different as chalk and cheese, the former is an empty ritual devoid of sensibility or emotion, the latter an unconventional outpouring of grief and celebration, deeply rooted in love and affection. Scott had no love for his father; Bob's followers worshipped him. It's a summation in which the author seems to be saying that the romantic will inherit the grief, while the coldly callous harvest the material spoils and empty form. It is the single most cynical scene in the movie, even eclipsing Van Sant's *America the Beautiful* mantra, used in counterpoint to the moral and spiritual decay that are this movie's heart and soul.

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Publisher's Note: *CLUE! Magazine* would like to welcome Gord Jackson to its team of columnists. Jackson, who lives in Winnipeg, has extensive journalism experience and was recently writing for the *Chatham Weekly*. He will be providing a monthly video review, focusing on videos that pertain specifically to the gay and lesbian community.

My Own Private Idaho Alliance, 1991 - 105 minutes