

The Reflexivity of the Road Film

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Genre study can detour film study by forcing a return to arbitrary distinctions—a situation that can lead to getting stuck. The impossibility of rigorously identifying genre-traits and the market's drive toward ever-more-refined niche-genres led Rick Altman to conclude that genre definitions must be continually modified in the light of practice.¹ Controversy also marks discussions of the ideological character of genre. Barbara Klinger questioned the increasing critical practice of contrasting “classical” instances of a genre with revisionist or “progressive” variations on it by emphasizing the industry's capacity—long recognized by the Frankfurt School—to assimilate and neutralize even radical adaptations of generic formulas.² In this situation it is useful to recall Derrida's warning in “The Law of Genre” that texts can never truly “belong” to a genre—not because they are unclassifiable but because a genre sign is never a referent.³ From the standpoint of deconstruction, defining a genre creates an illusion of referentiality that example films sooner or later expose. Analysis of genre may be necessary but will end in fiction. Still, through their reflexivity films may at least *narrate* this critical dilemma of becoming bogged down in illusory reference, and it is that allegory that this paper investigates.⁴

The genre “road film” may suffer more than others from these difficulties: some writers doubt its existence, and no one defines it.⁵ Commentators concede that the genre is a hybrid: its typical structures have been studied in the western, film noir, and even musicals.⁶ The merger of road and gangster genres evident in *Gun Crazy* (1949) and

Bonnie and Clyde (1967) spawned the sub-genre of the “outlaw couples” road film exemplified in *Badlands* (1973) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Road comedies range from *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941) to *Lost in America* (1985). The film that many consider the genre’s starting-point, *It Happened One Night* (1934), also initiates the separate group Cavell named the Hollywood comedy of remarriage. From these examples it is easy to see the difficulty of sustaining a definition of the road genre: is the primary genre really “road” after all and the “sub-genre” something else? Is the sub-genre really the genre? How much road travel makes a road film?

Taxonomic difficulties are multiplied when the road film is considered an instance of the journey narrative, whose western paradigms are established in *Exodus* and *The Odyssey*.⁷ Students of Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) must take account of the former; of the Coen brothers’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), the latter. Some genre critics find these contextualizations useful, though situating any American road film within such super-genres necessitates new comparisons—with *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, or *The African Queen* (1951)—again threatening to balloon the object of study uncontrollably. In keeping with Derrida’s warning, a definition of the road film genre and a list of traits that would police its boundaries will not be attempted here; instead, I accept as road films all those that have been so designated, de facto, by critical practice and study what they have in common—the figure of the road—as a reflexive image of continuity and linearity that may suggest, among other meanings, the act of reading.⁸

Most interpreters of the road film begin with history and ideology rather than reflexivity, though their interpretations of ideological shifts vary considerably.⁹ For Timothy Corrigan and Bennet Schaber, road films have become regressive: *Easy Rider* depicts not “the people” but only a nostalgic memory of the people. On the other hand, Shari Roberts claims road films have become progressive by depicting the search for new personal and national identities. Continuing controversy over *Easy Rider* suggests that such ideological stalemates are common and may be influenced by the choice of where to pinpoint the origin of the genre;¹⁰ competing narratives of genre history may be inherent in the assumption that films make univocal ideological statements.¹¹ In this essay, the reflexivity of road films is shown to anticipate this critical impasse by dramatizing paralysis and

redundancy in reading. The quests of the characters of road films—for cultural or gender autonomy, for example—are not only futile but repetitive. The reflexivity of the road film may suggest in an abstract way the illusions of the simulacrum (Baudrillard), the postal (Derrida), or irony (de Man); however, the genius of film is to allegorize these failures concretely, in Beckett-like moments of dramatic action, in intertextuality, and in the figure of the road itself.¹²

I

It is a commonplace of criticism that the road is not to be taken literally. Baudrillard identifies the familiar “vanishing point” of the road with American culture as simulacrum (1). Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark equate road movies with American culture. For Devin Orgeron, the image of the road is a “mythological space” for “working out American problems” (v). For other critics, the road “is the Moebius strip of American capitalism [that] takes you right back where you started.”¹³ The road teaches that the figural precedes the literal, that there can *be* no uninterpreted road. No study of the road film, including the present essay, understands the road as indicating nothing beyond itself; indeed, roads are usually figures for something of the utmost importance—for example, “self-discovery” or “national identity” or “the Moebius strip of American capitalism.” Independently of any political or gender themes, and independently of history, then, roads may be understood first of all as figures for figuration and for reading itself.

The figure of the road suggests reading in its necessary parallel “lines” that end in the ubiquitous image of the vanishing point. The shot Baudrillard found so expressive of America the vacant and hyperreal is everywhere—in *L'Arrivée d'un Train*, in *The General* (1927), in *High Noon* (1952), in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). Its origins go back to the daguerreotype and the Renaissance “discovery” of perspective, and its reflexive valences are problematic: roads must end somewhere but perhaps only seem to end; they seem to have a “point” but may not. To these pictorial doubts about the ultimate purpose of reading, common to tracks and highways, the road film sometimes adds the contrast between broken and continuous lines—like those that begin and end David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997)—through which viewers can see how apparent continuity can be an optical illusion created by the acceleration of discrete, arbitrary units: broken lines

that make passing legal are like phonemes, photographs, or stills—arbitrary units from which narrative meaning appears to emerge as their artificial construction is forgotten.¹⁴ It is tempting to see the reflexivity of such lines as the twentieth century's flattened-out equivalent of more portentous literary antecedents, including those "lines" used to make content seem to emerge from the depths in the work of writers like Melville or Hemingway. Highway lines figure movies and their dialogue, in this parallel, as the banal dregs of an obsolete literary aspiration to Kantian, transcendent knowledge, so the figure of the road anticipates the redundancy of film criticism, too.

Redundancy in the two senses of narrative circularity and futility of quest has always been a feature of road films. In *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), the director John L. Sullivan sets out to make a film with a social conscience based on his experiences masquerading as a bum; he soon acknowledges, "No matter where I start out, I end up in Hollywood," and endorses the escapist values of Disney cartoons. In the contemporary film named after the one Sullivan thought he would make, *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, the purpose of the quest along the road was always a fiction. In *Lolita* (1962), an obsessed reader must acquiesce in the loss of the object of his quest on the road; in *Badlands* (1974), the road disappears into the emptiness of desert and sky; in *Lost in America* (1985), the illusion of authenticity thematized in *Sullivan's Travels* is reiterated by feckless yuppies; in *Lost Highway* (1997), phantasmagorical and circular action results only in the repeated delivery of an ambiguous message. In these examples, the road journey repudiates the idea of arrival at something worthwhile; redundant endings retroactively vitiate beginnings. In a variation of de Man's thesis, they suggest that ideological interpretation is made possible by prior blindness to warnings in the story that there never was an authentic destination for reading.¹⁵

Of course, some road movies end in supposedly normative constructed couples, but even happy ending films depict these resolutions reflexively. In *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More* (1974), Alice's road journey ends when she decides she loves Dave, after all, but the reconciliation of these characters, both of whom are performers, is depicted as a brief argument settled by a kiss in front of the observing customers of Mel's Diner. Their applause pre-empts our response and discloses their roles as customers who have paid, just as we have, to watch performers simulate love. In *Something Wild* (1986), the road

journey of Charles and Audrey ends at the same New York delicatessen seen in the film's opening. The characters' seeming-love appears after audiences learn that each has dissimulated an identity to the other. Through the insertion of a wholly new character into the ending—a black woman rapper who sings directly at the camera—*Something Wild*, too, figures the closing embrace as reflexive performance. In these and other examples¹⁶ the circularity of the road film is apparent even in Hollywood endings.

Film criticism must subordinate reflexivity in efforts to establish political allegory. In "Race on the Road," Sharon Willis argued that *To Wong Foo* (1995) attempted to "dream a different community" free from hegemonic discourses of gender; she sees this liberatory potential when the characters exuberantly try on costumes from the sixties saved in an attic trunk. By this means, everyone comes to share in the fluid identity of the film's trio of sympathetic, flamboyant drag queens. Willis acknowledges that the scene raises the contradiction "that all issues are transformed into costuming" and tries to resolve it by allegorizing the film's camera technique. Whatever one makes of that solution, it is clear that the film's scene of joyful liberation is ineradicably reflexive, since the idea that sexual identity may be constructed is itself a construction of film—dependent, here, on numerous prior readings of costumed, cinematic figures. Similarly, Katie Mills argues that Gregg Araki's road film *The Living End* (1992) favors an "outlaw" (rather than victim-centered) response to AIDS among gays. Her analysis of the film's walk-on-the-beach-at-sunset ending notes its multiple allusions (to gay and French New Wave films) but subordinates them to the supposed norm. But to the extent that the hero's seeming renunciation of nihilism echoes the famous freeze-frame of Antoine Doinel in *The 400 Blows* (1959), Araki's attempt to espouse "a new attitude of love" cannot shake either the undecidability of Truffaut's agonized figure or its reflexivity: the freeze-frame calls attention to the arbitrary sense-unit from which the ideology of a film (as of a sentence) must be constructed. In other words, the political analyses of Willis and Mills—efforts to establish the "progressive genre" Klinger warned against—are established by eliding reflexivity.

II

But if the sense of going-nowhere conveyed by the road film's reflexivity stalls ideological approaches to the genre, this potential for

paralysis has already been allegorized by the stories themselves, in numerous scenes of arrested motion. These enunciative signs encountered when reading pauses, as it were, function like punctuation marks. They reveal the burden of film-viewing in general—the derivation of sense from arbitrary frames that acquire meaning only in montage, meaning which is later exposed as illusory.¹⁷

The hiatus in the road journey—whether a police arrest, an interpolated story, or a way-station—literalizes the necessity for pauses, gaps, or what Derrida calls *spacing* in the course of reading that puts in jeopardy its ongoing project of meaning-making.¹⁸ An illustrative way-station in *It Happened One Night* (1934) is the famous shot in which Warne (Gable) and Andrews (Colbert) are separated by the blanket—one of the many stages in their supposed maturation into love. But as Cavell has shown, the hanging blanket that supposedly confers privacy on the woman is also a metaphor for the Hollywood screen and for the adoption in 1934 of the motion picture Production Code: by depicting Gable watching Colbert's undulating form ripple the blanket, Capra defies the Code even as he adheres to it (82-83). This reflexive pause in the progress along the road in *It Happened One Night* forces the viewer to see an ostensible moment in the achievement of love as a very literally constructed or "put up" sign, the radicle of the motion picture, a moment that refers not to love but to the constructed nature of the journey toward love.

An equally famous reflexive pause in a road film is the scene in Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) when the Ringo Kid suddenly appears in the desert, causing the stagecoach to stop and inducing his own arrest by the marshal, Curly. Critics have commented on the way this famous studio shot, inserted into the location shots from Monument Valley, breaks the narrative continuity.¹⁹ The halt is dramatized in the scene's odd "mutual arrest": the Ringo Kid stops the stage and Curly arrests him—each is temporarily "made still," like the still frames of the film. The moment reminds viewers that both stagecoach and hero are cinematic constructs and suggests the wider meanings of the idea of a "stage." The "studio desert" setting reinforces the sense that cinematic aspirations to represent are fashioned from empty visual signs.

In dramatic films these moments pass quickly, but in road-comedies and road-musicals, fully staged reflexive halts in narrative are often exaggerated, lending a temporary, retroactive, and spurious sense of reality to the already artificial progress of the plot. Jane Feuer

points out that backstage musicals are always self-referential, a generalization that applies to the road-musical, too. The pauses during Hope and Crosby's *The Road To...* series are even more artificial than their heavily stylized action. In *The Road to Morocco* (1942), Jeff (Bing Crosby) and Orville (Bob Hope) journey across the desert and see a mirage of a drive-in theatre; when this mirage fades, it is replaced by an apparently real Dorothy Lamour, costumed as a princess, who helps Hope and Crosby lip-synch parts of "Moonlight Becomes You" in which the voices never correspond to the correct bodies; afterwards, Lamour's image itself disappears. Here one reflexive scene is exposed as a mirage only to be succeeded by another that seems more natural but, after all, self-destructs. Although these juxtapositions jeopardize the diegesis, each new self-parody retroactively legitimizes its predecessor, such that the film as a whole insulates itself against doubt until its conclusion. Accelerating reflexivity is also encountered in *Hollywood or Bust* (1956). While camping out by the roadside, Malcolm Smith (Jerry Lewis) tries to start a fire by rubbing sticks together and tells Steve Wylie (Dean Martin) that he learned the trick from a Gregory Peck film. Martin scoffs, "Yeah, but this isn't the movies," whereupon Lewis—using a concealed mechanical device—starts the fire immediately. The scene raises the imponderable issue of whether the characters Smith and Wylie are or are not "in the movies." Later as their car approaches Las Vegas, the ontological slippage in the diegesis continues as Smith and Wylie see a sign advertising Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis appearing together at a casino. The assumption of narrative verisimilitude in the journeys of *The Road to Morocco* and *Hollywood or Bust* is subverted but not destroyed by these reflexive moments; the vertiginous effect de Man called "dissolving irony" must be temporarily suppressed as the price of reading.²⁰

The effect of the last examples of halting is also ironic in de Man's sense of "parabasis," the textual moment with the capacity to challenge the rationality of discourse.²¹ Reminders of the Motion Picture Production Code inserted into the narration of *It Happened One Night*, of the editing of *Stagecoach*, or of the real Hope/Crosby or Martin/Lewis inserted into their fictional stories temporarily interrupt our confidence that visual images refer to real referents; however, in the end these doubts may broaden to include not just road films or film in general but any signs. Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1974) portrays an affectless outlaw couple fascinated by their notoriety stopping at several

points along a road that eventually becomes pure desert. While holding a rich man hostage in his own house, Kit makes a dictaphone recording addressed to the general public in which he moralistically cautions them to "consider the minority." His effort here to create an artifact that conveys a "message" is just as ludicrous as the "suicide record" he leaves in the blaze that consumes Holly's house. Reflexive images of artistic dysfunction are also conveyed along the road in *Delusion* (1991), when an outlaw couple (Chevy and Patti) kidnap a yuppie (George), who is skipping town with money embezzled from his software firm; they leave the road to take him to a rendezvous in the desert with Chevy's partner-in-crime Larry, whom Chevy has been told to assassinate. Outside his trailer, Larry tells George that this was the location where John Wayne movies were shot. The allusion reinforces the halting-effect already created by the slowing-down or making-still of the travelers' apparent motion: in reoccupying traditional (if not canonical) cinematic space, Larry's desert trailer—itsself an inherently reflexive image and word—becomes reimaginable as the film *Delusion* or any film—a mobile site in a wasteland to which deluded questers are condemned to return. The emptiness of the image is heard in the angry dialogue:

George: What exactly do you have in mind? Answer me, damn it! Are you going to get to the fucking point?

Chevy: Does the desert have a point? Points are meaningless.

The "meaningless points"—already anticipated in the road film's "vanishing" point—become obvious whenever travel is stopped or halted, when unavoidable reflexivity discloses the arbitrary signs of film. Stopping along the road is like slowing down in mid-sentence to reflect on the meaning of a particular sound or letter. Or like the interruption of a Roman numeral in the midst of an essay. Such moments induce a form of Nietzsche's "slow reading," suspicious of every word.²² Ideological interpretation of the road film must try to assimilate this reflexive halting into a political or historical narrative. It may be that in the figure of a road traversing the desert is discernible an invitation to denial, elision or forgetting on the part of the car/vehicle/camera/viewer—a speeding past vacancy that constitutes the deluded dyad of the cinematic spectacle and its audience.

III

When stopovers in road films depict films or television, the reflexive "Chinese box effect" may lead audiences to experience their

own implication in what Baudrillard calls America as simulacrum or hyperreality. Mass media are both the *Kulturindustrie*'s mesmerizing opiate and an autonomous discourse cut off from origin, referent, and recipient. Film audiences temporarily assume a position of perspecuity when they "see through" the delusions of characters victimized by the *Kulturindustrie*; nevertheless, the scenes' reflexivity ensures that both viewers and characters inhabit the same derealized worlds. One of Baudrillard's many images of America as simulacrum is the television set turned on without viewers:

There is nothing more mysterious than a TV set left on in an empty room. It is even stranger than a man talking to himself or a woman standing dreaming at her stove. It is as if another planet is communicating with you. Suddenly the TV reveals itself for what it really is: a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages (you can easily imagine it still functioning after humanity has disappeared). (50)

Baudrillard's America bears many resemblances to Derrida's postal, to a world made up of circulating signs with arbitrary referents; stopovers featuring films or television illuminate this condition.²³ When in *Delusion* we first see Larry's trailer, we also overhear a television program in progress that becomes addressed to no one when Larry walks out; the voiceover of this exercise show or video repeats, "Inhale/exhale," as if in some redundant, lowest-common-denominator, postmodern definition of the human. The disconnected voice in the desert mocks the characters' exertions on behalf of money, cars, love, authenticity. At the same time, lest the spell be broken, the reflexive suggestion of the audience's participation in America the simulacrum must be as fleeting as a pit stop.²⁴

Film criticism's collusion in the arbitrary discourse it seeks to clarify is evident in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), when the gang stops at a movie theater showing Busby Berkeley's *Gold Diggers of 1934*. Here the characters seem to validate the insight of the Frankfurt School—that the discourses of the *Kulturindustrie* mesmerized and pacified Depression-era audiences with cinematic depictions of wealth: in the next scene, Bonnie sings "We're in the Money" as she straightens her hair in front of a mirror. To the extent that audiences of *Bonnie and Clyde* distance themselves from the gang's identification with such

arbitrary images, they must forget their own prior act of construction that generated this supposedly superior perspective. Bonnie blithely looking at a mystified Bonnie suggests the viewer of *Bonnie and Clyde*, too, who looks in ignorance at arbitrary images that appear to be "Bonnie-in-ignorance." The prospect of infinite regress, of de Man's "dissolving irony," again opens up here, providing support for the hypothesis of its inherence in any discourse, including the one now in progress.

In *Rain Man* (1988) the seemingly necessary misinterpretations of language are revealed through the television-watching of the idiot-savant Raymond, the film's innocent foil for the skewed social values of his yuppie brother Charles, whose apparent humanization the film ostensibly narrates. At the outset, Raymond's animated interaction with game shows like *Jeopardy* seems to contrast favorably with the Baudrillardian television set left on, addressing no one, in the motel room of his emotionally numb brother. But Raymond's addiction to television is also compulsive behavior, a psychic defense against exaggerated fears of imminent danger; from this perspective Raymond is only an intensified version of his brother, whose main motivation is fear of business-loss. From this perspective, Raymond's response to television is readable as a satiric, Foucauldian commentary on "normal" social and psychiatric discourse. But Raymond's status as a political alternative to his brother is neutralized by his admiration for Abbott and Costello's tautological question-and-answer routine, *Who's on First?*, which has the Beckett-like effect of reducing even "right answers" to absurdity, including the answer to the film's most serious question—which custodial authority he prefers. Raymond's obliviousness to the referential "applications" of sounds and visual images makes him the Baudrillardian lowest-common-denominator of the American simulacrum; as a kind of human television, he indicates the condition to which the mystifications of "normal" speech are reducible. At one point, he is as content to watch a load of wash circulating in a laundromat as he is to watch his portable TV. Like the dialogue between Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon or Hamm and Clov, Raymond's dramatization of the emptiness of questions-and-answers exposes the absent referentiality of ordinary discourse. Charles's frantic phone calls pacifying buyers of Lambourghinis or banks are the equivalents in the postal world of repeated games of blackjack or *Who's on First?*. That Raymond answers "yes" each time when asked if he

would like to live with his brother or with Dr. Brunner indicates both the similarity between these particular “authorities” (whose motives for helping Raymond remain hopelessly compromised) and his Bartleby-like embodiment of the absurdity of human choice. Raymond’s television-watching, which began in Wellbrook, deconstructs both institutional authority, in Dr. Brunner, and the humanist possibility of learning, in Charles. The closing sequence showing Charles gazing at Raymond—who is on a train, behind a window—allegorizes the viewer’s position watching the disappearance of the permanently inaccessible object of interpretation in film.

The yuppie’s and audience’s false self-knowledge is also satirized in *Lost in America* (1985). Advertising executive David Howard finally wises up and renounces his desire to drop out but never acknowledges the obvious, that his “learning process” was caused by his belief that *Easy Rider* dramatized authenticity as possible for those who quit the rat race. That *Easy Rider*’s meaning is hardly univocal is conveyed later when a highway patrolman tells David he enjoyed the film because the cyclists “got what they deserved.” The road trip with its deus ex machina ending, when David luckily gets his old job back, is made necessary by his assumption that cinematic fictions have real-world applications discoverable by hermeneutics. The film plays with the possibility that this illusion might have been avoided if David had only been awake during the opening credits, when his bedside radio broadcasts an interview with Rex Reed advocating independent interpretation; however, David’s acting on that suggestion would have ended the film before it began. Of course, the irony is that Reed’s warning is itself conveyed through the *Kulturindustrie*, which throughout the film continues to dominate David’s life; thus misinterpretation is figured, after all, as inescapable in the “postal” world.²⁵ It is the unstoppable hermeneutic drive that prompts his redundant road trip with its illusion of learning.

Critics have read the apparent learning in *Thelma and Louise* (1991) as grounds for seeing it a “progressive” road film that revitalizes or transvalues genre conventions: thus Thelma’s emancipation from her husband’s chauvinism and Louise’s willingness to avenge her friend’s assault indicate newfound autonomy, culminating in the lesson they teach the vulgar truck driver. At the same time, as in the case of *Easy Rider* or *Bonnie and Clyde*, two of this film’s progenitors, critical debate over the outlaw couple’s achievement of authentic identity has

persisted.²⁶ But study of the reflexive scenes that punctuate the trip indicate that whatever their desire for autonomy, Thelma and Louise continue to be defined by the arbitrary signs of the media.

Thelma's association with the Baudrillardian television speaking to no one is established at the outset, when a game show drones on in the kitchen as she plans her escape with Louise on the phone: as in *Rain Man*, self-representations are figured as possible only inside this larger, Derridean network of vacant signs. Questions about Thelma's true identity begin as she dissimulates with Darryl: from the outset, we never see a "non-performing" Thelma.²⁷ An image predicting the futility of the quest appears as she bends to kiss the glass wall of the fish tank—as if the object of desire is sealed off and unavailable, somewhere outside the artificial world to which she, like the fish, is condemned. The scene also anticipates the undecidability of communion with "the other" in a kiss, evident first in Louise's "passionate" kiss with Jimmy in the motel restaurant—a deliberate performance—and later in her pre-suicide kiss with Thelma: in each case the assumption that kisses mutually reveal true subjectivities is questioned by its recollection of the kiss of the glass wall that, like the television, isolates selfhood in a simulacrum.²⁸

The inescapability of the televisual network of signs is clear when Thelma calls Darryl, who puts her on hold while he watches the completion of a play in a pro football game; later Darryl and the police watch a televised movie as they await further phone calls. Without any motivation in the diegesis, Thelma and Louise's quest somehow requires them to stay in telephone contact. Though the women strive for independence from the postal and surveillance worlds, their calls dramatize the illusion of escape.²⁹ For example, despite Louise's foreknowledge that Darryl's phone would be tapped, she talks longer than she should—perhaps because Slocum, the Arkansas state policeman tracking them, claims to have knowledge of her traumatic experience in Texas. The scene dramatizes a seduction through the televisual and electronic system and its banal master narrative that selfhood can be affirmed in some communion with the other. Thelma and Louise may keep calling their persecutors for the same reason viewers attend movies and critics keep writing about them, despite their warning allegories: without representations in the postal, there is no hope for a self.³⁰

The persistence of the couple's illusion that they are establishing identities free from the postal and televisual is figured in Louise's defiant claim to Thelma, "We don't wanta end up on the damn Geraldo show." Her illusion continues to the very end of the road, when a helicopter revealing the police and FBI in a glass, eye-like cockpit looms up from the depths of the Grand Canyon, conveying the way even aboriginal nature is inconceivable without some representational apparatus. In addition to its reflection of the Foucauldian panopticon, the helicopter might well be read as a surrogate for the glass wall of the fish bowl, for Ridley Scott's camera, for film, and for the menace of the always-hovering, policing *Kulturindustrie*.

The lure and impossibility of establishing a self in and through such systems is a lesson that Thelma and Louise might have learned earlier, at their own teaching-and-learning site. In their journey's last hiatus, they correct the lewd truck-driver by interrupting his journey, explain the offense of sexism, and stall with their guns his further movement. Some critics have read in this scene the culmination of the characters' education and newfound autonomy, an enlightenment that expresses some univocal truth or knowledge independent of the misrepresentations of the media. But the opposite is just as plausible. Driving away from their victory over the sexist trucker, Thelma asks Louise where she learned to shoot, and Louise exclaims, "From TV!" Thus the scene of enlightenment is a derivative of the postal, not an escape from it. From this perspective, it is instructive that the smoking ruins of the truck attract the helicopter that greets the couple at the end of their road: the illusion of victorious subjectivity only accelerates its total erasure. Louise's comment illuminates the miserable delusion also evident in her exchange of jewelry for a cowboy hat: her hoped-for acquisition of more authentic identity is merely the exchange of one media-invented gimcrack for another. Thelma and Louise end their film not as emancipated selves but as ignorant performers playing parts created by the media, parts as banal as the conventions of the western or the monotonous voice of the unwatched television in the desert.

V

My Own Private Idaho synthesizes and theorizes the road film's reflexivity, beginning with the question of whether it is a road film at all.³¹ The film never depicts its main characters *traveling* on a road, though the figure of a road appears at the beginning, at the end, and a

few times in the middle: perhaps the sense of narrative travel *framed* by and returning to the image explains why some critics assign it to the genre. At the outset, then, *My Own Private Idaho* challenges generic classifications: it makes an appeal to a genre without true membership in it—the essence of Derrida’s deconstruction of genre but also a good metaphor for its hero Mike’s unestablishable identity and impossible relation to the supposed “natural genres” of family or society.

The idea of identity as a fiction created by arbitrary signs is clear from the first scene, when Mike wears a gas station attendant’s shirt emblazoned with the name “Bob.” That subjectivity is a myth is implied by the redundancy of the title’s first three words, which hyperinsist on the notion of subjective ownership of something—but it turns out that the “subject” is as arbitrary and unpossessable as Idaho. But the redundancy of human attempts to establish identity, willy-nilly, emerges in the voiceover that accompanies the road’s Baudrillardian vanishing point, when Mike tells us “I’ve been here before” and “There’s not another road that looks like this.” His first sentence announces not only the plot structure of the film as flashback or dream—Mike suffers from narcolepsy and falls down after his opening monologue—but also the reflexivity of all road films: Mike and his viewers have “been here before,” have long understood the analogy between film and road. What is more, we have “been here before” in the sense that *My Own Private Idaho*, like other road films, helplessly re-tracks prior narratives—the most important of which are Freudian case histories and Shakespeare’s *Henriad*.³² The sentence “There’s not another road that looks like this” must be hyperbole, given this one’s ordinary appearance, but also an evasive wish: as a figure for the film now beginning, Mike’s sentence may hope that *My Own Private Idaho* will somehow be different from its predecessors, that art may after all narrate some achievement of genuine knowledge. But *Idaho* will prove to be no exception to the road film’s failures: Mike’s quests—for mother and lover, for origin and destination—all end disastrously.

Interpreting roads compounds the error: Mike and film viewers are stuck in the vertiginous prospect of dissolving irony. A natural impulse is to flee. Mike sees a rabbit and screams as it disappears, “Where do you think you’re running, man, we’re stuck here together, you shit.” Bergbusch suggests viewers take the line as direct address (222). If so, the film starts by *acknowledging* that both sender and recipient of the signs of film are “stuck.” It voices the oxymoron of art

understood as repetitious, doomed attempts to do the impossible, to make the figure of the road—and all of the visual signs that follow—signify a referent beyond themselves. That Mike's voiceover ends with the facial tic signaling the onset of his narcolepsy aligns his being stuck with the entropy of organisms: from this perspective, any supposedly new departure in a road film is only a futile, short-lived postponement of inevitable collapse, like the "stancher" that "remains," at the end of Beckett's *Endgame*. The completion of Mike's collapse occurs at the end of the film and frames his story. Such a frame figures the "life" in between as a delusion temporarily interrupting the road film's inherent circularity and entropy.

Mike's delusion about Scott—that signs of seduction refer to something authentic, like a genuine intent—persists even after he has been rejected; on the other hand, he might have anticipated eventual disillusionment to the extent that his hustler's expertise in giving pleasure to johns has always exploited *their* belief in signs—exemplified first in the man who fetishizes Mike as a little Dutch boy.³³ The delusions of love are implied through the film's rewriting of Freudian narrative. Susan Wiseman argued that *Idaho* invoked the Oedipal narrative without irony, as a "case study," through which Mike's search for identity tracks the familiar incest-wish apparently acted upon by his father-brother, the totemically-named Dick.³⁴ Mike's longing for his mother Sharon, or for the womb, incites his narcoleptic episodes and draws him into Oedipal conflict with his brother, not to say with his Dick.³⁵ But Wiseman's idea that the film simply endorses this Freudian intertext must be modified because van Sant represents Freud ironically, through Derrida: Mike's search for Sharon is figured as the quest for the absent referent of a postcard—a sign that leads him not to anything real but to the metaphor of a metaphor, the Family Tree Motel, where his search then becomes deflected onto the even more estranging signs of Italy.³⁶ Figuring Mike's road journey as a search for natural origins forever supplanted by signs has the effect of making Dick's version of Mike's birth—he is the offspring of a cardshark Sharon shot dead at a drive-in showing of *Rio Bravo*—equally plausible since equally unconfirmable. *Idaho* implies that, given life in the Baudrillardian simulacrum or Derridean postal, Americans may as well begin to think of themselves as the derivatives of their abysmal pop culture: Mike's identity is fabricated cultural junk; his futile dream of establishing some authentic, extra-linguistic self outside

this world is the continuing delusion he shares with his audience.

In fact, an equation between identity and role is the import of *Idaho*'s revision of Freud's story of "Little Hans."³⁷ Just before leaving the motel, Mike and Scott encounter for the second time Hans Klein, whose name translates the subject of Freud's "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five Year Old Boy." Unlike the subject of Freud's successful treatment, *Idaho*'s Hans remains enslaved to the need to act-out, as is evident in the use of handcuffs, metal tools, and even guns during his three-way grope with Mike and Scott. This Hans is above all a performer—his occupation before becoming a salesman—a role he reprises when dancing and using a table-lamp to transform the appearance of his face, though these reflexive gestures are obviously present in all of the films' characters, all performers. In *Idaho* van Sant rewrites Freud to show that "successful" assimilation into the social order—as is the fate of Scott, at the end—should be seen for what it is, just another performance.

Cultural critics have objected to the way the Shakespearean intertext may stifle the emancipatory potential of the film's depiction of counter-cultural and gay life: the heterosexual bourgeois Scott as Hal repudiates Mike as lover and Bob as Falstaffian principle, though the rejected continues to admire the rejecter.³⁸ However, to read intertextuality by weighing a conservative Shakespearean tradition against a depiction of the contemporary carnivalesque assumes referents for the signs of *Idaho* that are challenged throughout, but especially in its climactic parallel funerals. Intertextuality makes it difficult to see the identity of either the deceased Mayor Jack Favor or Bob Pigeon as intrinsic. Like the figure of the road, each character is readable as a sign pointing only to predecessor signs. The Shakespearean parallel figures Mayor Favor as the personification of illegitimate state power (Henry IV, who came to power through usurpation) that is passed on to the son (Scott/Hal); it figures the homeless Bob as a modern incarnation of Falstaff. Each "referent" of *Idaho*'s characters is thus a fictional sign of lawlessness, of a refusal to be grounded in anything. *Idaho*'s parallel funerals—acts of literal "grounding"—make it impossible to decide which tradition of the *Henriad* should be given greater weight. Which coffin generates authentic discourse? The priest's paraphrase of the gospel of John is echoed in the commentary by Bob's friends, who paraphrase Shakespeare by noting that Bob died saying "God" and that "he's either in heaven or hell." John and Shakespeare,

prominent religious and secular authors, are supplanted by their signs, by narratives that gesture toward absent referents and hang suspended over collapsed organisms. That death may be the ultimate narcolepsy—one that will soon overcome Mike, too—is presaged in the film's final frames.

VI

Debate over the emancipatory potential of *Idaho*'s use of Shakespeare or Freud points to the way reading road films' intertextuality for hermeneutic purposes ends in the same undecidability—the state of being stuck—that the film began by satirizing in Mike. *Idaho*'s invocation of its predecessors reveals the illusion of seeking freedom or authentic identity in Shakespeare or Freud, in Falstaff or Hal, Oedipus or “Little Hans,” Mike or Scott. The road Mike ends on is the road he began on. To ask the purpose of the redundant road journey for character, film-maker, or audience is to stay stuck—to posit once more some ground or cause behind what each road film exposes as groundless and causeless. It is to assume that criticism is somehow privileged and not already in the middle of its own redundant road.

Idaho's allegory of being stuck has implications for the study of film genre. This essay has argued that the reflexivity of the road film is inherent in the figure of the road, the track of reading, and in its concomitants—its beginning, its looking for an “end” (destination or purpose), its stopping along the way. But of course reflexivity is not restricted to such road moments or to road films. Other images—doorways and thresholds, windows and mirrors, beds and chairs, weapons and wounds—may well convey similar reflexivity, rendering the film genres that use them very much alike, or, put another way, making the term “genre” unnecessary. From this perspective, generic taxonomies might be replaced by classifications constructed from visual images, though of course any such “construction from” fictional foundations will sooner or later leave criticism stuck all over again, in the assumption that a visual sign can provide a valid basis for discourse in a foundationless world.

An alternative critical response is to read *Idaho* for guidance in how to become unstuck from the oppressiveness of referent and hermeneutics. Mike's story becomes unstuck when he yields to the call of narcolepsy, to the oneiric, to a secondary dream-state within the

already-acknowledged dream-state of film, a move that renounces the search for hermeneutic templates that might measure characters' achievement of autonomy, subjectivity, or integrity or the extent of a film's deviation from generic or ideological norms. For film criticism to become oneiric in this sense would mean to replace hermeneutic studies with acts of letting-go or creative drift, like Mike's, to acknowledge the fictional bases of "road film" or "genre" or "film," and to welcome, not resist, every eternal return, detour, or retracing, no matter how redundant, of the marvelous signs, cinematic and verbal, that continue to mislead human travel on the road.

Notes

¹ In "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," Altman argues that synchronic or "syntactic" definitions of genre are necessary but never stable; he amplifies the argument in "Reusable Packaging."

² Klinger makes this case in "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited."

³ In "The Law of Genre," Derrida claims that "there is no genre-less text" but that no genre sign can ever be a "law" to its examples. Through his "expansion of the concept of the text" Derrida suggests the parallel between visual and verbal art: even "the most overwhelmingly silent" works, he writes, "cannot help but be caught within a network of differences and references that give them a textual structure" (Brunette and Wills, 15). See also his discussion of Van Gogh in *The Truth in Painting*.

⁴ Stam's *Reflexivity in Film and Literature* is an excellent introduction to the subject of reflexivity. Recent critical commentary on reflexivity in the work of specific directors includes my book, *The Hanging Figure*, and studies by Pogel, Cohen, Michaels; Feuer analyzes reflexivity in musicals. In this essay reflexivity is understood broadly, in line with Derrida's "expansion of the concept of the text," to include print and electronic texts and all details construable as "enunciatory" or as matters of "discours," in the terminology of Emile Benveniste.

⁵ Grant's survey of genres and Gehring's *Handbook* omit the genre. Eyerman and Lofgren's study proceeds without a working definition. The contributors to Cohan and Hark's *The Road Movie Book* neither define the genre nor address the questions of boundaries raised by

Altman or Derrida. Laderman (13-16) notes typical features of road films but doesn't argue for their uniqueness to the genre.

⁶ As predecessors to the road film Laderman discusses the western (23), Depression-era social conscience films (24-26), and film noir (26-34). Orgeron also cites the western and film noir. Roberts contends that the road film inherited the masculinist structure of the western but did not actually begin until *Easy Rider*. Creekmur found the road film and the musical deeply if inversely related. Feuer's thesis is that musicals are inherently "self-reflexive."

⁷ Laderman's discussion of the influence of literary journal narratives on the road film focuses on their cultural critique and the way American examples "devote more romantic attention to the highway and the automobile" (9). He uses this point in support of his broader thesis that, despite Klinger's critique (note 2), the American road film is "more authentically progressive" than other film genres (37).

⁸ The broad working definition adopted here reflects actual critical practice, which cites as "road films" even works with only the sketchiest depictions of roads, like *My Own Private Idaho* (1992) or *Lost Highway* (1997). All of the films discussed in this essay have been called road films by Eyerman and Lofgren, Laderman, Orgeron, or the contributors to *The Road Movie Book*. If road films include all films that depict roads, the number excluded will be very small: even Hitchcock's all-interior *Rope* (1948) begins with a shot of a street; by this measure only works like Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964) are certainly not road films. For students of genre, the situation lends support to Altman's impatience with synchronic definitions, since the genre "road film" now seems tantamount to "film." Celeste draws just this inference, in her discussion of the analogy between film and the highway's yellow dotted line: "It is in this metaphor that all films become road films" (33). Further implications of Celeste's observations for the study of genre are taken up in the conclusion to this essay.

⁹ Corrigan argued that the evolution of road films through the seventies and eighties illustrated an exacerbation of male hysteria for an audience that can "no longer imagine a naturalized history" (152). Schaber found that pre-war road films presented to mass audiences images of "the people," but their post-war counterparts became "hymns to marginality" that exchanged depictions of national identity for apocalyptic or visionary imagery (34). Roberts examined the way road films modified

the masculinist values of westerns; she concluded that “the road film concerns not just journeys and searches, but notably alternative paths and choices” and reads *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Leaving Normal* (1992) as examples of alternative ideologies (61).

¹⁰ Enthusiastic reviewers of *Easy Rider* thought the film valorized its countercultural heroes, but later critics were not so sure. In their “Introduction” to *The Road Movie Book*, Cohan and Hark say the protagonists of *Easy Rider* “represent an incoherent conjunction of modernity and tradition” (3). In “The Road to Dystopia,” Klinger argues that the conflict in the film between social criticism and a photographic celebration of the landscape render its ultimate message ambiguous. Burns condemned the film’s stereotyped Southerners as the substitution of a “crude metonymic chain” for “logic.” Leibman read the deaths of Wyatt and Captain America as “punishment for the parasitic nature of the drug trade” (84).

¹¹ In literary criticism, the word “hermeneutics” has both a narrow and broad definition. The narrow definition refers to a specifically German tradition of interpretation originating with the theorists Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Friedrich Schleiermacher, influenced in part by controversies over Biblical exegesis. This tradition extends through the work of Wilhelm Dilthey to that of Hans-Georg Gadamer. For a discussion of hermeneutics in this sense, see Hoilub. By contrast, the broad definition of hermeneutics used in this paper refers to the conviction that a determinable meaning of a text may be derived from its analysis. The contrast I develop between this sense of the word “hermeneutics” and deconstruction is discussed by Shapiro and Sica and by Caputo.

¹² Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacrum is set forth in his *America*. For Derrida’s idea of the postal, see *The Post-Card*. De Man’s view of irony is developed in the second part of his essay, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight*.

¹³ Leong et al., 72.

¹⁴ For the analogy between the accelerating yellow line and film, see the article by Celeste, note 9.

¹⁵ This is the general thesis of Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight*.¹⁶ In *Bonnie and Clyde* (1972), the consummation of the love of Bonnie and Clyde is depicted as possible only after Bonnie has published and

read to Clyde her poem, "The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde." It is as if their existence as poetic figures must precede and initiate their apparent happiness. In *Rain Man* (1988) the apparently renewed love of Charles Babbitt and Suzannah may be contextualized by the film's ending, in which the potential incapacity of two people ever to know each other is figured, first, by the undecidability of the custody hearing and, second, in Raymond's departure on a train that will return him to his diegetic beginning—the sanatorium Wellbrook. His final gesture toward Charles, from the train, behind glass, betokens both the permanent, mutual exclusion of consciousnesses from each other and the cinematic figure for this condition. In *Leaving Normal* (1992) the conventional happy ending is parodied by the grotesque interpolated story of "Number 66," a restaurant waitress, who by miraculous chance is affianced by Dan Earl Spicy Jones, a magnate of spice farms. The utopian image of the multi-ethnic family led by two women is revealed to be itself a literal construct, through the time-lapse photography that shows the house being built prior to the toast that blesses it.

¹⁷ Discussions of the arbitrary nature of visual representation can be found in Derrida's theory of the frame in *The Truth in Painting*. This book elaborates his earlier concept of the *parergon* in the essay "Tympan," ix-xxix. Another contribution to this subject is Wittgenstein's strained defense of the distinction between "seeing" and "seeing as" in *Philosophical Investigations*, 193-229. For an exposition of Wittgenstein's challenge to the self-identity of visual signs and its relationship with Derrida, see Staten.

¹⁸ Derrida discusses spacing as a condition of legibility in *Speech and Phenomena*, 129-30 and 136-37.

¹⁹ Wills notes the intrusiveness and cites Edward Buscombe's remark, that this is "one of the most stunning entrances in all of cinema" (90).

²⁰ De Man discusses the tendency of irony to lead to infinite doubt and to "dissolve everything" in "The Concept of Irony," 166. By contrast, hermeneutic criticism interprets these moments as reflecting truths about history. For example, Cohan interprets the diegetic disruptions in forties and fifties road musicals as indicators of the way these films constituted a "utopian adventure" through which "the nation [cohered] around its popular entertainment as exemplified by Hope and Crosby" ("Almost Like Being at Home," 121). But this may be the same as saying that the audiences of these road musicals read the visual signs

as mimetic rather than arbitrary.

²¹ Paul de Man discusses “parabasis” in *Blindness and Insight*, 218-22. For elaboration of its function in literature, see J. Hillis Miller, *Reading Narrative* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 37.

²² Nietzsche develops the idea of “slow reading” in *Daybreak*. For a discussion of the way slow reading turns back on itself to question the foundations of reading, see J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature*, 122-24.

²³ For discussions of the way Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality describes a cinematic world in which signs seem to supplant referents, see Denzin, 137-46, and Friedberg, 178. Derrida’s account of the postal is in *The Post-Card*.

²⁴ Some road films go to great lengths to assist viewers in the repression of their knowledge of their own implication in simulacrum. *Hollywood or Bust* accomplishes this disingenuous task in a pre-credits reflexive sequence where Dean Martin, “out of character,” salutes film viewers all over the world, whom he praises as “refugees from television.” We then watch Jerry Lewis performing caricatures of addicted American, British, French, and Japanese film viewers dressed in national styles, gesticulating childishly, stuffing popcorn in their mouths, etc. By flattering film viewers at the expense of television viewers and by mocking extremes of visual addiction through caricature, Lewis reassures the theatre audience that *their* viewing is *not* compulsive. The story allegorizes the harmonious integration of an obsessed viewer, Malcolm Smith (Jerry Lewis) into a happy Hollywood ending that includes proximity to the romantic couple (Dean Martin and Pat Crowley) and to the star of his dreams, Anita Ekberg.

²⁵ Interviewed by Larry King, Reed says that he hates opening nights and prefers to watch films at 10:00 AM; when asked if his preference extends to comedies, he replies, “If it’s funny, I’ll laugh.” That Reed’s plea for independence from the *Kulturindustrie* is broadcast through the popular Larry King format to the sleeping yuppie couple points up the inescapability that the film subsequently narrates. For example, as he enters the casino to rescue his wife Linda from her compulsive gambling, David says he saw a similar scene on *The Electric Horseman*; he interprets Linda’s loss of their nest egg as being like *The Twilight Zone*. The lame “solution” David proposes to the casino manager is an advertising campaign, the spirit of which he likens to *Miracle on 34th*

Street. The couple's return to New York is narrated to Sinatra's "New York, New York," to which his own advertising agency has purchased the rights. *Lost in America*'s cynicism about finding authenticity outside the *Kulturindustrie* is an eighties restatement of the theme of *Sullivan's Travels*.

²⁶ For the argument that *Thelma and Louise* narrates "the liberated body . . . the body of empathetic connection" and "sisterhood," see Dargis, 92; for an overview of reactions to *Thelma and Louise* that include "antifeminist" as well as "postfeminist" readings, see Frost.

²⁷ *Thelma and Louise* both imitate performers when they sing along with rock music played over their car radio. Perhaps most abjectly, during her robbery of the convenience store *Thelma* performs in the manner recommended by JD in his account of his own hold-up techniques. The seductive power of JD's narratives furthers the film's analogy between the credulity of *Thelma* and the audience. For further discussion of the characters "posturing," see Willis, "Hardware and Hardbodies."

²⁸ The inability of *Thelma and Louise* to escape self-definition in the representational system of the Derridean postal is acknowledged even by critics making the case for *Thelma and Louise* as feminist heroes. Cooper writes of their final moments: "the intimate gaze the women share when they clasp hands and kiss each other fully on the lips before driving over the cliff mirrors the gaze they shared in the self-portrait snapshot they took as they began their journey" (297).

²⁹ In "Hardware and Hardbodies" Willis says that the film "continually highlights the shakiness" of the plot-motivation for the women's flight and thinks this is done to reinforce "the film's demand to be read as fantasy" (125).

³⁰ The idea that an illusion of subjectivity is conferred by the reading of arbitrary signs is part of the argument of Derrida's *The Post-Card*. Lacanian film theorists from Metz to Žižek consider film viewing an analogue for the "mirror stage" of ego-formation in Lacan's work; however, Lacanians never consider such signs arbitrary, since they ultimately refer to the metaphysical presence of the "Real," Lacan's version of Freud's id.

³¹ Two generic accounts are the articles by Lang and by Aitken and Lukinbeal. In Mike's remaining on the road, Lang reads the prospect

of his valorizing homosexuality as a “sexualizing of the body,” as understood by Felix Guattari. Aitken and Lukinbeal see Mike at the end as a rebel “against the norms of sedentarism and patriarchal logic.”

³² *Idaho* also rewrites *The Wizard of Oz*. For an analysis of the intertextual relation, see Lang, 339-43.

³³ Bergbusch astutely observes that in this scene Mike the Dutch boy may be taken as a figure for the Dutch-American director Gus Van Sant, who undertakes the “difficult” project of constructing (of “putting his own cultural house in order”), in *Idaho*, a home for his gay American subjectivity. Bergbusch attributes the difficulty of such a project to the “current cultural context”; this paper’s thesis is that any such “subjectivity” is a misinterpretation of arbitrary visual and verbal signs. As Dutch boy, the director fulfills the fantasies of the doubly deluded: those who pay for the privilege of being seduced by his fictional construction.

³⁴ “Apparently” must be retained since the matter is never unequivocally resolved by the diegesis. Dick’s denial of paternity seems dubious on two counts. First, in answer to Mike’s accusation, he says, “You know too much.” Second, in some of Mike’s visions of his mother, she appears to be flirting with Dick. But Dick’s reply is a good example of dissolving irony: the referent of the words and whether they should be understood truthfully or sarcastically cannot be determined. And there is no way to independently validate the authenticity of Mike’s visions. The diegetic crux—to be “solved” only by the Derridean postcard—exemplifies the way verbal and visual signs supplant putative referents, in this case the traditionally significant referent of paternity, the “author of one’s identity,” etc.

³⁵ For a critique of the initial response to *Idaho* in the gay community, see Signorile, who argues that the appeal of the film in the gay community has obscured its superficial treatment of politics. For the thesis that Mike’s narcolepsy should be read as a displacement of AIDS, see Arroyo.

³⁶ Derrida’s metaphor of the postcard for the circulation of signs in philosophy and psychoanalysis is developed in *The Post-Card*.

³⁷ Wiseman was the first to note the allusion. Freud’s “Little Hans” was treated for a phobia about horses, symptoms that originated in his being lied-to about reproductive biology and the anatomical difference

between boys and girls. Freud regarded the grown-up Hans as a model of the cure, who eventually “forgot” the primal scenes that had engendered his phobia. Wiseman discusses the allusion as further evidence of the film’s endorsement of the Freudian model, though her conclusion is equivocal: “the film jokily, and apparently seriously, advertises its commitment to the ‘family metaphor’ or Freudian narratives” (229).

³⁸ Roman thought that *Idaho*’s parallel between Hal and Scott worked regressively, to foreclose any endorsement of the homoeroticism it at first seemed to celebrate in the campfire exchanges between Mike and Scott. Similarly, Bob’s role as the rejected but plaintive, needy Falstaff implies a kind of masochism also discernible in Mike’s continuing need for the heterosexual man who scorned him. Wiseman also saw the Shakespearean dimension as lending cultural authority to Scott/Hal’s ascension to bourgeois life and neutralizing the anti-authoritarian potential depicted in Bob and Mike. Bergbusch concurs, insofar as the film establishes Shakespeare as “the Tradition,” though he suggests that the weight of cultural tradition figured in Shakespeare can be “gone beyond” by “playing with(in) and upon tradition” (218). As an example of this emancipatory potential, he cites the film’s puns, subversive details, and open ending on the highway which is “the image of the defining, transient, yet never wholly original trajectory each life traces” (223). Of course, the phrase “never wholly” begs many questions; more crucially, to formulate the self as defined by an *image* of a trajectory is to open a discussion of the film’s depiction of arbitrary verbal and visual images.

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