“Everyone has their own Brokeback Mountain”: Negotiating the Radical and the Mainstream

On February 13, 2006, Heath Ledger appeared on the Ellen DeGeneres Show in the wake of his Oscar nomination for Brokeback Mountain. If a viewer of the program knew anything about the film Ledger was promoting and DeGeneres’ personal identity, that viewer would not have been unreasonable in expecting some sort of discussion of homosexuality to take place. After all, Brokeback Mountain had been lauded by the mass media as a triumph, an innovation, a “landmark in the troubled history of America’s relationship to homosexuality” (Rich par. 4) as New York Times columnist Frank Rich opined. And as DeGeneres had certainly established herself as a lesbian and an advocate for gay rights by 2005, one would think she would love to weigh in on the apparent progress Brokeback was inspiring in both its gay and straight audiences. A viewer would not have been unreasonable, but a viewer would have been incorrect. In fact, DeGeneres completely avoided a conversation about the film’s sexual politics, instead turning her segment with Ledger into an odd celebration of heterosexual norms.

DeGeneres was sure to proclaim Brokeback Mountain “one of the year’s best films” and described it as “such a beautiful story,” but any further adoration she expressed on her show was reserved for Ledger’s heterosexual identity—not for, say, his daring portrayal of a gay man. For one, the clip from Brokeback that was shown on Ellen featured Ledger’s closeted gay character, Ennis Del Mar, passing off his two daughters to his wife at work—taken out of context, this scene suggests nothing near homosexuality. Then, DeGeneres inquired as to how Ledger learned of his Oscar nomination. When the actor confessed that he only “had a little cuddle” with his wife in bed after a restless night spent soothing their newborn baby, DeGeneres shared a chuckle with Ledger and congratulated him and Michelle Williams on their new blessing. DeGeneres
then explained that she was trying to get audiences more invested in the Oscars—a much more temperate cause than gay rights—and do so, she was acting out scenes from nominated films. She showed a clip of herself playing the role of Ennis, and again, instead of accentuating his gayness, she merely parodied the character’s manner of speech, forcing gruff mumbles from clenched lips as her audience laughed and applauded. Finally, in perhaps the strangest part of the segment, Degeneres presented Ledger with a tiny cowgirl outfit that was designed after his costume in *Brokeback Mountain*. It was intended for his daughter, Matilda, so that she might look like her daddy when he was a cowboy in a movie in which he also just happened to be gay ("Heath Ledger on Ellen").

This type of generic response to *Brokeback* as a “beautiful story”—or an epic romance, or a universal tragedy—is what many critics have cited when arguing against the film’s supposed revolutionary achievements. If a self-identified lesbian celebrity managed to evade discussion about its depictions of gayness and applaud successful heterosexual couplings instead, then *Brokeback Mountain* must offer next to nothing in terms of a radical agenda, such critics might have claimed. Kathleen Chamberlain and Victoria Somogyi sum up the case against *Brokeback* very bluntly: “Brokeback Mountain should not be called a gay cowboy movie because it’s not a gay cowboy movie. Not only are there virtually no cows, but no one is gay” (Chamberlain par. 5).

Dismissive criticisms like theirs are problematic, however. While *Brokeback Mountain* may not be considered extreme in its sexual politics or its narrative form, it certainly does not fail to be progressive on all accounts. The film is not “not-gay” because it is not completely “gay”. *Brokeback Mountain* is, rather, a negotiation—between radical content and mainstream form, between the disparate genres of the Western and the melodrama, and, most importantly, between
the aggression and tenderness of gay male desire. In its refusal to suggest that one dominating message or reading of the film exists, *Brokeback* then allows for a diverse reception. Whether deemed gay, straight, or universal, it allows for multiple interpretations through the compromises in its elements.

*Brokeback Mountain*’s conventional narrative form is likely the aspect of the film most responsible for evoking claims to its universal appeal. It is also likely most responsible for evoking claims to the film’s mild or moderate effect. Because the general plotline is so familiar to audiences—lovers meet, lovers separate, lovers reunite and face conflicts, lovers lose each other—it is difficult for some to believe that *Brokeback* introduces anything new. In many ways, the film employs a classical Hollywood narrative, whose ultimate goal is to tell a story clearly, efficiently, and seamlessly. Its characters are goal-oriented, for example, and their behavior is motivated by their psychological past and their present conditions. After spending one fateful summer on the majestic Brokeback Mountain, herdsmen Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist are desperately passionate about each other, so they invent excuses like fishing trips to steal away from their wives and children. While they willingly make sacrifices to make romantic getaways together—drawing skepticism from wives, driving from Texas to Wyoming—they can never build a life as partners, for Ennis’ childhood memories and their society’s general ostracism prevent their relationship from being remotely possible. Enigmas in the classical narrative are introduced, developed, and resolved. *Brokeback Mountain* makes us wonder, “Will Ennis and Jack end up together? Will their wives find out about their affair?” and it ultimately provides us with the answers: “no” and “yes,” respectively. Classical narratives are concise; they tell us little else besides what is absolutely necessarily to understand the story. For how long *Brokeback Mountain* runs (134 minutes), the plot is remarkably economical. Its short scenes give snapshots
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of the story’s progression and the characters’ emotional statuses. They rarely linger on, say, Ennis and Jack skinny dipping in a lake or Jack stewing over his father-in-law calling him “Rodeo.” They present what audiences need to know, and they move on—clearly, directly, and in a linear fashion.

_Brokeback_’s classical narrative, then, seems to qualify the film as mainstream. Many movie critics for large city newspapers found its basic plot interchangeable, so familiar was it to other popular tales of doomed love. Roger Ebert called the tag “gay cowboy movie” a “cruel simplification” (Ebert par. 3) of what _Brokeback_ really was, a universal tragedy. That he believed “it could be about two women, or lovers from different religious or ethnic groups” (par. 3) or that a viewer could identify with it “because he always wanted to stay in the Marines, or be an artist or a cabinetmaker” (par. 9) testifies to how recognizable its narrative patterns are. Mick LaSalle of _The San Francisco Chronicle_ made a more concrete analogy: “we see [Jack and Ennis] as irreplaceable to each other—like Romeo and Juliet” (LaSalle par. 4). And Majorie Baumgarten of _The Austin Chronicle_ said, “the film is no more – or less – a gay cowboy movie than _Casablanca_ is a hetero émigré romance or _King Kong_ is a love story between human and simian” (Baumgarten). As mainstream critics like these continually downplayed the gay content of _Brokeback Mountain_, it is not hard to believe that some doubt it is “gay” at all. If _Brokeback_ is likened to a series of hetero tragedies, then how can it be queer?

While Jack and Ennis may follow the same basic paths of Romeo and Juliet, Rick and Ilsa, and Jack and Rose, they diverge from those couples in an important regard: they’re not straight. In short, the gay content of _Brokeback Mountain_ is not negligible. The film may adhere to the rules of a narrative form that has typically privileged representations of heterosexual love, but its replacement of the male-female pair with a male-male pair marks an important switching
of signs. Robin Wood considers the wide reception of the film by mainstream audiences a huge advancement for gay visibility:

“Here we have a film that twenty years ago would have been treated with abhorrence, a film in which, less than a half-hour in, two handsome young men, both familiar to the youth audience, go far beyond the exchange of a carefully prepared and tasteful kiss, having violent and passionate anal sex, and it is greeted by large mixed audiences with almost universal enthusiasm.” (Wood par. 6)

Jack are Ennis are not merely “coded” queer, as many gay figures in Hollywood movies had been in the past. The film adaptation of Vito Russo’s book *The Celluloid Closet* chronicles the various “types” that signified gayness in the movies before representations of homosexuals moved beyond clichés. The sexually neutral sissy and the perverted demon were often equated with homosexuality, implicitly if not explicitly. Jack and Ennis are hardly sissies or demons, they certainly demonstrate sexual drive, and they remain sympathetic above all else. By placing them at the center of a classical Hollywood narrative, treating them with depth and nuance, and allowing them to overtly pursue their erotic passions before the film viewer, Ang Lee humanizes gay characters as they arguably had never been before in a mainstream film. Far from “containing the radicalism of [his] subject matter” (Osterweil par. 1) by muffling it with a popular form, Lee performs a kind of revolution from the inside by marrying queer concerns with a conventional narrative. Instead of adopting an avant-garde, campy, Brechtian, or otherwise radical method of telling his story, Lee makes gayness traditional, and thus engaging for diverse audiences.

*Brokeback* also challenges generic conventions, negotiating the Western with the melodrama to complement its innovative gay classical narrative. On the one hand, Western icons
and themes are evident throughout the film, “shap[ing] its lament for a broken America,” as Jim Kitses explains in his essay, “All That Brokeback Allows” (par. 5). The seemingly endless establishing shots of the lush mountainside make it appear like the open range. Though its primitiveness is now jeopardized by government control, it presents itself as land to be traversed and protected by the cowboys. At many points, Jack and Ennis are the very embodiment of the Western hero, defending the family and community from those who threaten its virtues. Kitses provides a prime example of Ennis’ very Western sense of duty and pride: when he pounds leather-clad, foul-mouthed thugs at a Fourth of July celebration for cussing in front of his daughters, after which we see him in an extreme low angle shot with his “imposing stature” set against red, white, and blue fireworks (par. 5). Jack proves loyal to family values as well, most notably when he erupts over his father-in-law’s disregard for his wife’s authority at the dinner table. He even promises to “knock [his] ignorant ass into next week” if he does not play nice at their Thanksgiving meal. Jack and Ennis’ rugged masculinity aligns with Western codes, too. They eat canned beans, drink whiskey over the fire, shoot and skin elk, shave in the car’s sideview mirror, the list goes on. They are resourceful and hard-working, reticent and strong, facing challenges to the wild terrain and the community with honor, toughness, and no small dose of courage.

Yet *Brokeback Mountain* does not subscribe to all of the Western’s conventions and motifs. Ennis certainly does not pull out his pistol when he sees that Jack wears a black cowboy hat. For one, as rough and masculine as Jack and Ennis appear, they herd sheep instead of cattle, which softens their grit if it does not feminize them. *Brokeback* was supposedly marketed toward “the fourth quadrant” of movie-going audiences—older women—which a predominantly macho film could never do (Clover par. 2). Focus Features even granted that they modeled
Brokeback’s poster design after that of Titanic’s (Rich par. 12)—Jack Twist’s chin appears to rest on Ennis’ shoulder in the same affectionate manner that Jack Dawson’s rests on Rose’s. Focus did not evoke such a comparison superficially; Brokeback appealed to female audiences because it draws on another genre that has been traditionally geared toward women—the melodrama. Like the Western, the melodrama is largely concerned with the tensions involved amongst the individual, the family, and the community. Unlike the Western, though, the melodrama tends to explore the individual’s deepest yearnings, which inevitably conflict with the expectations of family and community. And, more often than not, those yearnings are sources of tension, suffering, and in many cases, tragedy. Any tears shed at the end of Brokeback Mountain probably do not spring from its Western elements; the melodrama produces its heartrending effect.

Jim Kitses sharply notes that after Jack and Ennis leave Brokeback for the first time, they become trapped in lives of domestic responsibility at the expense of their most profound desires, much like many heroines of melodrama. They are “cabined, cribbed, confined” (Kitses par. 23) in their shabby apartments and tacky homes, suffocating under their children’s cries and their wives’ cigarette smoke. Struggling to break away from the pressures of their families and the norms of a place and time that could never embrace homosexuality, they make sacrifices for themselves that are far from painless. Ennis, for example, undergoes a divorce for pursuing his affair with Jack, and even then he cannot love him freely. One of the key melodramatic moments in the film comes when Jack flies to Ennis’ side after learning of his split from Alma. Jack is practically giddy at the fact that Ennis is single again, smiling and whistling to “King of the Road” as his truck enters Wyoming. He beeps his horn in delight as Ennis comes into view, jumps out of his truck and gives him a big hug, and starts to stroke his cheek, saying, “I got your
message about the divorce.” Ennis immediately pulls away and leads Jack to his own truck, where his “little girls” sit, quietly reminding Ennis of his inhibitions. “I thought this means you…” Jack starts, half-expressing his hope that they can finally be together. In extreme close-up, Ennis’ averted eyes suggest otherwise. Because he is taking his daughters for the weekend, and because his job limits his time with them, Ennis explains, he cannot spend time with the crestfallen Jack. An eyeline match following Ennis’ distracted gaze shows a passing truck—a symbol of what Ennis’ perceives to be the threatening disapproval of his community. After the scene closes and Jack bitterly promises to be back “next month,” we see him driving away, weeping, frustrated at the impossibility of his circumstances.

This frustration comes to blows the final time Jack and Ennis meet, when Jack famously proclaims “I wish I knew how to quit you” before Ennis’ strained sobs. The “goddamn bitch of [their] unsatisfactory situation,” must be sacrificed altogether, so intense are the pressures of job, family, and societal discrimination. Jack’s death, one might argue, punctuates the tragedy of Brokeback’s melodrama, for he must pay the ultimate sacrifice for defying the mandates of his context. As one of the film’s longest scenes features a broken Ennis clinging to his deceased lover’s shirt, there is no doubt that Brokeback plays out like a “woman’s weepy” (Clover par. 2).

Lee does not strictly adhere to the melodrama’s conventions, though, and his blurring and blending of genres creates a compromise in the text not unlike its compromise between form and content. Even beyond the Western-melodrama hybrid, Chris Berry proposes that Brokeback aligns with Chinese tradition, looking very much like a “family-ethics” film in the way Ennis remains dutiful to his family above his personal desires (Berry par. 10). In its refusal to attach itself to one coherent system of themes, motifs, and icons, Brokeback further succeeds in challenging categorical boundaries and attracting diverse viewers. It is progressive in its
negotiation of genres, defying the type of fixed codes that so stultified Ennis and Jack in the film’s diegesis. With Western meeting melodrama in the form of weeping cowboys, *Brokeback Mountain* allows for multiple meanings and multiple interpretations, opening itself up beyond rigid conventions.

Perhaps the most innovative of all of Lee’s negotiations, though, is his depiction of male-male desire as aggressive yet tender. *Brokeback Mountain* received a fair amount of criticism for how it represented—or how it failed to represent—attraction between two gay men. Some viewed Jack’s persistent pursuit of Ennis and Ennis’ apparent reluctance to be with him as an enactment of the “contagion” theory, which holds that one homosexual can “turn” another person homosexual, if only the former is earnest and cunning enough (Wood par. 8). Others had difficulty believing that either cowboy was gay at all, and instead thought that Jack and Ennis were merely portrayed as bored, cold, and “starved for company and sex” (Wood par. 8). Kathleen Chamberlain and Victoria Somogyi argue that *Brokeback* completely erases cultural markers of gay identity in Jack and Ennis, reducing gayness to “the occasional sex act” (Chamberlain par. 5). Starring actors with decidedly heterosexual offscreen personas, featuring characters who consistently concede to heteronormativity, and presenting Jack and Ennis as weak, tragic figures, the film, they believe, achieves nothing for gay visibility at all (Chamberlain et al).

True, Jack and Ennis are no “flaming creatures” (Osterweil par. 12), as critic Ara Osterweil wishes they were. They take their cowboyhood seriously, not like members of the Village People. But just because *Brokeback* does not represent gay men as clichés does not mean that no gay men are there to be represented in the first place. The attraction between Jack and Ennis is manifest and unique to audiences that are used watching the kisses and hugs of
heterosexual couples. While Chamberlain and Somogyi dismiss Jack and Ennis’ penchant for “horsing around” (Chamberlain par. 7) as a feeble substitute for real fondness, their roughhousing truly marks their mutual desire as strong, masculine, and intense.

Take, for example, a scene that comes at the end of Jack and Ennis’ first trip up Brokeback, when both of the men are frustrated and dismayed at the thought of separating. Jack throws a lasso around Ennis’ feet in a playful gesture, and while the two begin to wrestle lightheartedly, they grow increasingly violent with each other. They buck and grunt like agitated animals, gripping each other by the collars and tussling in the grass. We follow their tangled bodies in close-up and through the perspective of a moving camera, which only adds to the sense of angry confusion that is forced through the cowboys’ gritted teeth. Finally, Jack punches Ennis in the nose and moves to caress his bloody face before Ennis strikes back, leaving an aching Jack to hold his head in pain. The struggle that takes place here is clearly not of the same nature as that of two brothers wrestling in the living room. Instead, it is a fierce expression of their passion for each other, one that envisions force and virility as central elements of love between two men.

Another instance of Jack and Ennis’ “horsing around” is presented in long shot, but it is no less unique in its depiction of male-male desire. Following a scene in which Jack and Ennis share a deep and passionate kiss, they run shirtless around the campground before shoving each other and falling to the ground in another affectionate tangle. Their boss is then shown in extreme close-up; he holds a pair of binoculars to his eyes and lowers them, revealing a disgusted look on his face. Here, the boss becomes the sadistic male voyeur who will take pleasure in an attempt to destroy the object of his gaze—the reciprocal love of Jack and Ennis. Instead of depicting Jack or Ennis looking at each other in the controlling, scopophilic way that
Laura Mulvey so condemned, Lee sets the two of them against such a cruel tradition to suggest that their desire is fundamentally different. They are masculine in form and masculine in practice, as their bare torsos and their aggressive grappling make clear. Yet they do not try to use their maleness to overpower or subjugate each other; rather, they engage each other’s strength to convey mutual respect and desire.

The aggressiveness of their love is often tempered by profound expressions of tenderness, though, which colors their devotion as nurturing and genuine. In both of the scenes mentioned above, signs of gentleness seep through Jack and Ennis’ wrestling matches. In the first scene, Jack reaches to brush Ennis’ cheek after he punches him, and in the second scene, Ennis holds his hat over Jack’s face after he tackles him, presumably to give him a kiss. Much later in the film, when Jack and Ennis go up Brokeback for the last time, they explode with frustration at their “unsatisfactory situation,” but end their quarrel in a sweet embrace. Ennis threatens to kill Jack if he learns more about him sleeping with other men; Jack calls Ennis a “son of a horsin’ bitch,” yet they both cling to each other as they sink to the ground. Tears fall down Ennis’ face as Jack assures him, “it’s alright, it’s alright.”

In the following scene, Jack stands dozing over the embers of a campfire in the early morning light. Ennis walks up behind him and wraps his arms around his chest, rocking him back and forth as he hums a lullaby that his mother used to sing. A full shot of the pair sets their locked frames against the evergreens, casting them in the romance of the forest. An extreme close-up of their faces then heightens their intimacy, their nestling heads suggestive of the warmth felt between them. The affection that seems to radiate from these images makes it very unlikely that Jack and Ennis are only interested in the “occasional sex act” (Chamberlain par. 5). On the contrary, Lee depicts them as strong, masculine cowboys who treat each other with
softness to suggest that they share a very profound and true love. Thus, the desire represented in *Brokeback Mountain* is one that emerges from the roughness and readiness of impassioned men, but it does not seek to control. Instead, the aggression of masculinity is negotiated with tenderness, offering viewers a model of love that depends on sensitivity and compromise.

*Brokeback*’s essential compromises, in turn, create a very complicated text. Mainstream in form and radical in content; Western in some cases and melodramatic in others; representing men who are both masculine and feminine in the way that they love, the film is certainly difficult to categorize. The fact that critics and viewers have situated *Brokeback* in such different categories—“not gay,” “universal,” “beautiful,” Chinese, even—does not mean that film is a failure, however. Chamberlain and Somogyi argue that *Brokeback Mountain* achieved widespread praise from the mainstream because it was not progressive in its approach—“it succeeds because it fails” to be anything radical (Chamberlain par. 33). But while Roger Ebert said *Brokeback* could have been about cabinetmakers, and while Ellen DeGeneres ignored its gay content to talk about baby clothes, a look at the film’s official website proves that it very much succeeded for refusing to be any one thing. Gay audiences celebrated the film alongside “mainstream” ones, proving that *Brokeback* did not need to be avant-garde to be revolutionary.

Evidence to *Brokeback Mountain*’s profound impact on gay and lesbian viewers is published in the “Share Your Story” section of the film’s website. When visitors click on the “Share Your Story” link on the site’s homepage, a pop-up appears and prompts them to write about “[their] feelings on the film, the connections [they] felt, and...how watching it might have brought back memories of [their] own.” “After all,” the pop-up says, “everyone has their own ‘Brokeback Mountain.’” And many of those who posted agreed. They discussed how the film
made gay love visible, and how it resonated with their own personal experiences. Joe from Florida, for example, viewed the aggression of Jack and Ennis’ desire as authentic:

“After 20 years the thoughts of him keeps [sic] haunting me. I couldn’t live my life for me…I was 13 and he was 15. The neighborhood [sic] kids would play together in the afternoon. That day was different. I was setting [sic] in his family living room watching TV when all of a sudden Horace hit me…I hit him back, we struggled for a moment. This was the beginning of a hidden relationship between Horace and myself throughout High School [sic].”

Estella from Singapore identified with Brokeback’s characters as well, relating the love and loss surrounding Jack and Ennis to her own relationship with a woman:

“…It hit me so powerfully. It just reminded me of my ex of 3 years. Both of us moved on in our own lives, but a part of me still lingers with her. I guess I [sic] felt exactly like Jack Twist felt, that he just wanted to know “how to quit…”

Larry from Washington was moved by the tenderness of Jack and Ennis’ relationship; it reminded him of times when he and another man share affections:

“Early on, I felt an attraction to Chris physically…As life progressed, our friendship grew stronger. We both started families and had children. All through the years, my attraction to him was constant. Though we live in different states, we see each other a couple of times a year. When we get together we hold hands, he kisses me on the cheek, we hug and I feel this ancient, lurking passion…Laying in bed I ache for the time when I can lay down with Chris. To feel his breath on my neck, to feel his smooth arms around my chest. It’s a feeling that never goes away…”
These diverse responses to Brokeback Mountain attest to the multiple meanings at work in the film. Comments like Joe’s, Estella’s, and Larry’s are illustrative examples of how Brokeback’s viewers can approach the various negotiations of its elements and produce their own interpretations of its significance. To declare that the film is “not gay,” “too gay,” or anything else in between is to completely ignore Brokeback’s work against firm and fixed categories. By blending conventional form with an unconventional subject, mixing the generic codes of the Western and the melodrama, and uniting the aggressiveness and tenderness of gay male desire, Ang Lee is able make a progressive case without isolating any audience. Straight women can weep over Brokeback like they did over Titanic. Lesbian women can relate it to their own experiences. Straight men can identify with the cowboys’ rough masculinity. Gay men can identify with the intensity of Jack and Ennis’ love. Brokeback speaks to universal themes; Brokeback speaks to more specific struggles. In its resistance to being any one thing, it becomes many different things for many different viewers. The mainstream does not own Brokeback, for “everyone has their own.”
Works Cited


Chamberlain, Kathleen, and Victoria Somogyi. "'You Know I Ain't Queer': Brokeback Mountain as the Not-Gay Cowboy movie." Intertexts 10.2 (Fall 2006): 129-44.


