

“John Wayne wouldn’t like gay cowboys”: Ang Lee’s Western *Brokeback Mountain* and the genre tradition

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Although an early favorite to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, Ang Lee’s Western *Brokeback Mountain* failed to do so in March of 2006. However, at least the director was awarded an Oscar for his achievement. Ang Lee has not been an unknown entity in the film industry for quite some time, as two of his films already managed to win the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. And ever since 1995 the Taiwanese director has been making films within the context of the American Independent Cinema as well as the Hollywood Cinema. These films appear quite distinctive at first sight, their stupendous range veering from the Jane Austen adaptation *Sense and Sensibility* to an international co-production like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (which became the most successful US release of a foreign film up to then) to the comic adaptation *Hulk*. However, despite these differences there are also similarities to be found, as the topics *Brokeback Mountain* deals with are already to be found in previous Ang Lee films. For instance, his second film *The Wedding Banquet*, made back in 1993, deals with a gay subject matter in the story of a homosexual Taiwanese man who agrees to a marriage of convenience due to the pressure of his parents. And the Western film genre has also already been covered by Ang Lee in *Ride with the Devil*, focusing on the negotiations of race and gender issues therein.

As already noted, *Brokeback Mountain* did not win the Oscar for Best Picture in early 2006, having been beaten by Paul Haggis’ episodic drama *Crash*. A decision that was also heavily discussed in the American Press, for the Oscar was not awarded to the fearlessly told gay love-story, but to the dark kaleidoscope about racism in Los Angeles. Ty Burr, film critic of the Boston Globe, called the defeat of *Brokeback Mountain* “one of the most stunning upsets in Oscar history”. His colleague Wesley Morris even concluded: “The memo from Hollywood seems clear enough. Better to reward the movie about people who clean our closets than the one about the men who live in them”. And Kenneth Turan surmised in the Los Angeles Times:

You could not take the pulse of the industry without realizing that this film made a number of people distinctly uncomfortable. [...] In the privacy of the voting booth, as many political candidates who’ve led in polls only to lose elections have found out, people are free to act out

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the unspoken fears and unconscious prejudices that they would never breathe to another soul, or, likely, acknowledge to themselves. And at least this year, that acting out doomed *Brokeback Mountain*.

The gist of most of these articles was that *Crash* may undoubtedly be an important and quite good film; however, the Academy may have made the safe, non-controversial decision in choosing *Crash* over *Brokeback Mountain*.

An entire string of theories was put up as to why *Brokeback Mountain* as an early favorite to win the Oscar for Best Picture was overtaken by *Crash* in the final spurt; at least three of them may be presented here. One theory argues that maybe the hype surrounding *Brokeback Mountain* was badly timed; the eligible members of the Academy may have been fed up by the media attention and the film itself by the time of casting the vote – and may have opted for *Crash* instead, a film that had been in the running with far less obtrusive media presence.

It was also assumed that *Crash* as a definite actor's film, given its huge cast, and shot in Los Angeles, which makes it very much a *hometown movie* about L.A., must have appealed to the eligible members, most of whom are actors who also to a great extent live in and around Los Angeles, in Pasadena, Burbank, North Hollywood, Pacific Palisades and Brentwood.

And last but not least, probably still the most significant explanation for the <collapse> of *Brokeback Mountain* on the home stretch being: Ang Lee's film presents an unconcealed homosexual love story embedded within the classical setting of a Western. This might have been met by the eligible Academy members – as already indicated by the introductory quotes – with irritation and discomfort. *Brokeback Mountain* is said to have contaminated the most American of all genres, the Western, with its particularly virile heroes, through a gay love-story; the Academy is said to have reacted allergically to that. There are numerous examples for this <allergy> to be found. Matt Brunson, for instance, reports:

Tony Curtis, now 80 years old, doubtless spoke for this vast voting bloc when, during an interview with FOX News, he stated that he had no intention of watching *Brokeback Mountain* and that he knew most of his friends in the Academy also had no plans to pop the screener into the DVD player. He objected to the idea of gay cowboys (<Howard Hughes and John Wayne wouldn't like it>), and this strain of intolerance is especially disappointing since it comes from a man who starred in that classic cross-dressing comedy *Some Like It Hot*. (For the record, Curtis' favorite movie of 2005 was *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*). And Entertainment Weekly quoted 89-year-old Ernest Borgnine as saying, <I didn't see it and I don't care to see it... If John Wayne were alive, he'd be rolling over in his grave.> Forget Borgnine's muddled thinking for a moment (if Wayne were alive, he wouldn't be in a grave suitable for rolling): This time around at least, it appears Curtis and Borgnine – two presently irrelevant actors hardly typical of the current Hollywood scene though probably typical of Academy membership – are the organization's poster boys.

Continuing the tradition of classics like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* which preach *racial tolerance*, *Crash* was therefore on hand as a politically correct, liberal alternative to *Brokeback Mountain*.

In the following, I am interested in the argument found in many reviews that *Brokeback Mountain* continues the tradition of the classical Western and implements this tradition with a love story between men. My thesis is that the achievement of *Brokeback Mountain* is not so much a supplementary one, that is, adding a homosexual subject matter to the genre, but an analytical one: The achievement of *Brokeback Mountain* lies in pointing out that negotiations of homosexuality have always been constitutive to the Western genre; it's almost impossible to unearth a Western that succeeds eschewing something one could refer to as homosexual, homoerotic subtext. *Brokeback Mountain* performs a reconfiguration: text and subtext are being interchanged with one another. Having always organized the Western genre, but hidden from view, homoerotic, homosexual configurations are now openly negotiated; the traditional subtext becomes text.

Thus Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* is not primarily important for the history of the Western genre because of its significant rewriting of the genre, but rather for the possibility it creates for us to take a retrospective, less disguised view on the fact that negotiations of homosexuality, of homoeroticism, of homosociality have always been essential to the Western and in what way; Ang Lee's film allows us a re-reading of the genre. The most American of all genres, concerned with the production and depiction of heroic manhood, reveals itself as a genre that despite its claim to the sexually straight virility of its protagonists has always been dealing with the very thing that threatens this straightness. The straightness of the Westerner has always been threatened by a predicament into which theories on the construction of filmic spectatorship thrust the genre.

SPECTATORSHIP IN THE WESTERN: *LOOK, BUT DON'T LOOK*

Laura Mulvey has noted the gendered construction of bodies through filmic spectatorship as early as 1975 in her highly influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey combines the findings of the feminist debate with the approaches of the psychoanalytically grounded apparatus theory and expresses a radical criticism of the filmic apparatus by arguing that the female object of the male gaze implemented into the whole arrangement of narrative cinema is to be seen as a repetition and stabilizing of patriarchal structures¹.

What Mulvey terms as the basic theoretical principle of the filmic gaze in Hollywood cinema is something that art historians like John Berger have described as a cultural principle ever since the ancient age: *Men look. Women are looked upon*. Be that as it may, as a medium concerned with the representation of the corporeal, the cinema has also always been exhibiting heterosexual male bodies; however, in the Western, not without reason regarded as the most male genre there is, female characters only appear on the margins. The Western is a male genre: Directed by male directors and predominantly addressed to a male audience, the camera focuses on male protagonists (just the mere existence of female characters in the Western has been repeatedly described as “disturbing” or “superfluous”). So if the Western is predominantly interested in male characters, and if the camera focuses on male bodies and thereby turns them into objects of the filmic gaze, this objectification moves the male body into the vicinity of the female body, which especially in a male genre may elicit homoerotic connotations. The evident obsession of the genre for the display of the Westerner's attractiveness appears curious in a perspective informed by gender theory, as quite precisely noted by Lee Clark Mitchell in *Westerns. Making the Man in Fiction and Film*: “Given such consensus about the male gaze and the female body, it may seem odd that the Western so obviously celebrates the male body, as if that tall, handsome, bright-eyed, broad-shouldered figure who rides through our national dream represented some radical inversion of the stereotype”².

By focusing on the protagonists, the camera celebrates *the spectacle of masculinity*. This aestheticisation of the male corporeal is realized in connection with dueling or fighting scenes. This structural connection to the moment of violence allows for both the gaze to fall on the male body as an excuse to capture the scenic action, and for the fighting scenes to punish the man who displays himself, as much as his opponent and – according to the brutality of the physical conflict – even the spectator. Both aspects serve to repress the homoerotic gaze. Mitchell has fittingly termed this *double bind* of exposing the attractive body of the Westerner, who is displayed to the gazes, while simultaneously trying to conceal this state of display, as “this bizarre ‘look-but-don’t-look’ experience”³.

¹ Sandra Rausch (2003): Männer darstellen/herstellen. Zur Inszenierung des männlichen Körpers im Hollywood Genre Film. Eine Fallstudie, Magisterarbeit Köln. Tr. Asokan Nirmalarajah, pp. 41-42.

² Lee Clark Mitchell (1996): *Westerns. Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, Chicago: Chicago UP, p. 161.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

Brokeback Mountain now picks up on this *look-but-don't-look*-pattern of the Western, but allows the desire to look overpower the prohibition to look: During their first summer on the Brokeback Mountain, we see Ennis and Jack exchanging furtive looks with one another. The protagonists on screen thus introduce the film spectator into the field of gazes which the film sets free: the desiring homoerotic view onto the male body. In opposition to the specifications of the genre, these heroes sometimes do away with their clothes. In the traditional Western, the careful dressing of the Westerner serves to distract from all too obvious eroticism. “[T]he cowboy’s elaborate sign-laden costume permits the eye to roam across the male body without seeming to focus on that body as flesh [...], invites and deflects our gaze, doing so in a characteristic moment of oscillation, of nervous distortion that seems ever attached to the scandal of aimlessly gazing at men”⁴. *Brokeback Mountain* allows this focus “on that body as flesh”; Ennis looks at the undressed Jack, Jack looks at the undressed Ennis. Both strip off the clothing of the Westerner, which in the tradition of the genre seems almost to be grown together with the bodies of the protagonists, who always sleep in their clothes with their hats pulled into their faces, and who also do not seem to take them off at any other opportunity. Jack becomes a kind of Susanna from the *Book of Daniel*, on whom the desiring gaze of Ennis falls, and vice versa. Love irrupts between Ennis and Jack on Brokeback Mountain like a force of nature (the tagline of Ang Lee’s Western reads: *Love is a force of nature*); and until the gloomy ending the love between the two men stays bound up with Brokeback Mountain – even a brief summary of the film’s story makes this apparent.

The film begins in Wyoming in the year of 1963, in a rural ambience. In front of the trailer of a shepherd, Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid), rancher Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and rodeo cowboy Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) meet each other for the first time. Aguirre hires them to guard a herd of sheep against poachers and wild animals during the summer months on Brokeback Mountain. Both men, tight-lipped Ennis and extroverted Jack grow closer during their shared time in the seclusion of the mountain area, fall in love with one another, have sex and go on meeting each other afterwards – although both of them also get married to women. Jack, especially, suffers from the rare meetings with Ennis, takes trips to Mexico to pick up street hustlers, gigolos, and starts an affair with a neighbor. Eventually, he falls victim to a homophobic assault and is tortured to death. (At least that’s what we see in brief images cut into the scene in which Ennis talks to Jack’s widow on the phone and she informs him of an accident; it is not completely unlikely that these images spring from Ennis’ mind, for he is particularly fearful of homophobic violence). Ennis is left with nothing but a postcard picturing Brokeback Mountain and a bloodstained shirt of Jack which he hangs with one of his own shirts in his closet. Metonymically, both heroes are brought together in this final image of the film – however, only “in the closet” – and the “closet-structure” was the very thing which structured their relationship: Brokeback Mountain was their *closet* – and it was their heterotopia.

THE HETEROTOPIA OF HOMOSEXUALITY

The concept of heterotopia, which is useful in describing Brokeback Mountain, we owe to Michel Foucault: he notes that there

are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias⁵.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁵ Michel Foucault (1986). Of Other Spaces [1967]. In *Diacritics* (16:1, Spring, pp. 22-27). Tr. Jay Miskowiec, p. 24.

These heterotopias are thought to be

linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time. This situation shows us that the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance⁶.

Brokeback Mountain fits the criteria put up by Foucault. It is a space that exists (and is not to be found in the nowhere of utopia), and as Foucault states, is a “counter-site”, a “kind of effectively enacted utopia” – a space into which Ennis and Jack repeatedly break out, and which appears to make time stand still, allowing them year by year, even decade by decade to immerse themselves into the timelessness and even “eternity” of their love.

In internet forums discussing the film as well as in reviews, a strong case has been made for the restriction and latent violence of the heteronormative system as the most obvious reasons for the hindrance and destruction of the love between the two cowboys – a charge which deserves acknowledgement and sympathy. Naturally, every claim for the right of *all* social groups – not only heterosexuals – to live according to their own liking without fear of sanctions is justified (and *Brokeback Mountain* supports this in its stirring filmic form). However, the relationship between the dominant heterosexual system and the homosexual heterotopia of Brokeback Mountain is not sufficiently covered by the lament over the restrictions of heteronormativity: a further perspective is necessary. The love between Ennis and Jack is so powerful, so intense, *because* it is a forbidden, an impossible, a threatened love; the heteronormative restriction hinders – looked at it this way – not the constitution of Jack and Ennis as lovers who stand tall against a social order, but in a way creates this couple in the first place. Ang Lee, adapting a short story by Annie Proulx, modifies in his way the formula for all love stories, if we can speak of *one* formula for all love stories, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. While in Shakespeare the feuding families are the ones who prevent the lovers from uniting *to live happily ever after*, in *Brokeback Mountain* the restrictive heteronormative society fills this role for Jack and Ennis by blocking the possibility of a shared life for them. The love between Jack and Ennis is threatened, very much like the love between Romeo and Juliet, and possibly the love between all great romantic couples, by death. For it is death with its semi-metaphysical, transcendental aspect which stands for the absolute and exclusiveness of romantic love. In so far, every notion of romantic love that sees itself as ‘absolute’ (and romantic love is traditionally always thought of as absolute) is destined for death. The emotional intensity of the relationship between Jack and Ennis, which stands the test of time, also owes its existence to this opposition to everything that is permissible and possible. Of the two protagonists, of Jack and Ennis, only the former is able to imagine a shared life with Ennis; he yearns for togetherness. Ennis, however, cannot think of a possible shared future; he tells Jack at the very beginning of their relationship of a traumatic childhood memory, a backstory wound, which will always keep him from giving in to Jack’s plans: “I tell ya, there... there were these two old guys ranched up together, down home. Earl and Rich. And they was the joke of town, even though they were pretty tough ol’ birds. Anyway, they... they found Earl dead in an irrigation ditch. Took a tire iron to ‘im. Spurred him up, drug him ‘round by his dick ‘till it pulled off”. Jack asks: “You seen this?” To which Ennis answers: “I wasn’t... nine years old. My daddy, he made sure me and brother see it. Hell, for all I know, he done the job”.

The end of the film seems to confirm Ennis’ assumption that homosexuality cannot be lived openly in rural America of the 60s and post-60s. Jack presumably dies, as mentioned before, as a victim of an especially violent homophobic assault; he becomes a postfiguration of Earl, of whom Ennis has told him earlier. But maybe this homophobic assault only really happens in the mind of Ennis, maybe it was really an accident which killed Jack. Regardless, it is Jack’s death which brings

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

the male arrangement between Jack and Ennis to an end – this arrangement to break out of the narrowness of their middle-class, heterosexual lives after long intervals of time and return over and over again to Brokeback Mountain, a semi-paradisical place with a grand natural backdrop, where they camp, drink whiskey, allegedly go fishing and can love each other, leaving behind the heterosexual restrictions and the boredom of everyday life.

This behavioural pattern is applicable to the Western ideology of the cowboy who travels out into nature, towards West, or into battle with Indians or bandits, not only to defend the social order, his and other families, women and children, but also to flee the familiar day-to-day-life. In so far, the most American of all Genres, the Western, has always been staging a precarious relationship to heterosexuality. The real Westerner is not married and will not marry; he keeps on travelling towards West as a *lonesome cowboy* and rides with a friend or with a group of *gunmen*.

The most American of all genres, concerned with the production and depiction of heroic manhood, reveals itself as a genre that despite its claim to the sexually *straight* virility of its protagonists has always been dealing with the very thing that endangers this *straightness*. Western films operate with homosocial configurations, with decidedly homosexual subtexts – and Ang Lee's terrific Western inscribes itself into this tradition, bringing its very foundation to the surface, and thereby distorting it to recognizability.

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