



All that Brokeback Allows

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■ JIM KITSES



Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto (left) and Ang Lee on the set of *Brokeback Mountain*

All that Brokeback Allows

TWO COMMENTARIES, THE first from a nineteenth-century memoir subtitled *The Truthful Narrative of the Events in the Life of a California Girl on a Sheep Ranch*, the second from one of America's greatest twentieth-century writers, Thomas Wolfe, in their different ways both testify to the loneliness that, as Wolfe put it, "is stamped on the American face."¹

These men lived lonely lives . . . Often there was some mystery about those who took this work—a life with the sheep was far away from curious observation, and served very well for a living grave. Once I overheard talk of a herder

who . . . had hanged himself. And no one knew what tragedy in his life lay behind the fatal despondency!²

The mountains in the wintertime had a stern and demonic quality of savage joy that was, in its own way, as strangely, wildly haunting as all of the magic and the gold of April. In Spring, or in the time-enchanted spell and drowse of full, deep Summer, there was always something far and lonely, haunting with ecstasy and sorrow, desolation and the intolerable, numb exultancy of some huge impending happiness.³

More often expressed through a stoic style and taciturn manner rather than openly addressed, isolation and solitude nevertheless have been a key subtext of the Western genre. And it is the sympathy and depth with which that motif is explored in *Brokeback Mountain* that produces much of its powerful impact. Like Wolfe's angels, Ang Lee's protagonists look homeward in vain.

Yet the relationship of the film with the Western genre is a confused and contested question. This is puzzling given the film's reliance on genre aesthetics and motifs to shape its lament for a broken America. A prime example is the key image employed in some of the film's advertising: Ennis del Mar stands looking down at two foul-mouthed louts he has cowed as Independence Day fireworks explode above him. Ennis's imposing stature and righteous demeanor bespeak a character absolutely certain of who he is and of his role and power. He is the Western hero incarnate, America's defender of family and community, a transcendental character of agency and action.

Compare a later, equally powerful and significant moment. "I wish I knew how to quit you": Jack Twist's anguished remark elicits Ennis's own tortured feelings—because of their history "I'm nothing . . . I'm nowhere." Against the vista of Brokeback's high country beyond, they grapple with each other, helpless victims of love and pain, rage and despair.

These images so crucial in mapping the film's trajectory testify to its sophisticated play with Western conventions. Like stereotypes, genre labels can offend by being reductive, yet nevertheless often point to an

appropriate, even fundamental, relationship. Director Lee repeatedly rejected "gay Western" or "gay cowboy movie" as misleading and limiting descriptions. However, the labels had stuck well before he came on the scene in the seven years the Larry McMurtry–Diana Ossana screenplay circulated among studios and directors.

One can sympathize with Lee. As a popular genre the Western is very much past its glory days. Commercially once the bread-and-butter of the industry, the form is now seen as a pejorative category signifying "old-fashioned" to the mainstream audience. But in Lee and *Brokeback Mountain*'s case the change in emphasis suggested by the preferred labels of gay love story or romance is somewhat more complex.

Beyond the stigma of an unfashionably ancient genre, such efforts to market the film were also attempting to soften suggestions of a film with a radical gay agenda. In effect this campaign to orchestrate a more open reception of *Brokeback Mountain* amounted to an implicit depoliticizing of the film. Such efforts undoubtedly contributed to the pronounced tilt in some of the film's reviews seeing it as a tragic and universal study of tabooed passion and unrealized dreams.⁴

Yet Diana Ossana has acknowledged that she and writing partner Larry McMurtry were well aware that they were involved with a project that "subverts the myth of the American West and its iconic heroes."⁵ The culture wars that dominate America and fuel much of its politics are in fact centered on gay issues such as same-sex marriage. No matter how high-culture its



Ennis as American hero and broken man



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Images that recall the classical Western and melodrama

style and approach, a mainstream project like *Brokeback Mountain* at this stage in the nation's history inevitably has radical social implications. In fact, the film's subversive potential is all the greater for its lack of highlighting, dodging a conservative audience's defensive radar by the delicate humanizing of its characters and their hopeless situation. In any case, the extraordinary impact of the film as a mega-event is undeniable; *Brokeback Mountain* immediately achieved an iconic status as a code word and cultural reference point that dominated its historical moment. Ironically, the strongest proof of the political significance of the film is in the industry's calculated slight, the Academy preferring *Crash* for best picture and thus limiting the extent to which predictions of a "gay Oscars" would be realized.

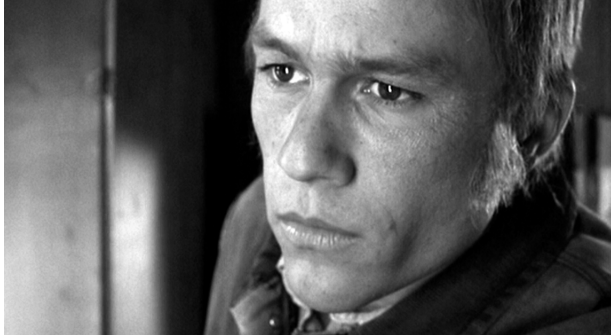
"It has very little to do with the Western genre," Lee has said.⁶ However, if the film avoids what the director terms "the fictionalized Western," nevertheless it is the genre's conventions that launch and drive *Brokeback Mountain*. Universal some of its themes may be, but this is not a film about lawyers or stockbrokers, not a study of a medieval or Victorian era. The cowboy is the American emblem par excellence, and Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are nothing if not prototypical cowboys. Exemplars of pastoral purity and yeoman industry, they possess the knowledge and skills of the wilderness. They are authentic American heroes, self-reliant and brave, honorable and loyal. The circumstances of their relationship are such that we cannot judge them as flawed, cowardly, or duplicitous. Their passion's costs are counted in the dead and scattered sheep of their compromised mission and in their fatally damaged families. Yet if anything, paradoxically, such failures only serve to ennoble them in the innocence and depth of their love, and to dramatize the devastating scale of their—and everyone else's—sacrifice and victimization.

Recent Westerns have indulged a postmodern nostalgia for the cowboy way of life. Neo-Westerns set in

the 1960s (as is *Brokeback Mountain's* early action), both *The Hi-Lo Country* (1998) and *All the Pretty Horses* (2000) rhapsodize over the joys of the cattle drive and bronco busting. The neoclassical *Open Range* (2003) indulges a more conventional end-of-the West melancholy; after Robert Duval's consummate cowboy, "they broke the mold." But in *Brokeback Mountain* such yearning for the independent life of the cowboy is given a spin that is not so much romantic—or for that matter queer—as it is edgily realistic.

If the figures of Ennis and Jack draw on the Western's grand myth, they are also remarkably detailed both in terms of individual psychology, and social and economic setting. The context and nuance provided by Annie Proulx's short story make for the kind of backstory for cowboys typically glossed over in the genre. Young, uneducated, dirt poor, Ennis and Jack are rough-necks struggling to survive in a hardscrabble world. All cool and swagger on the surface, they are in fact lonely and needy, the products of broken families and absent fathers. Hiring them to herd sheep during the winter, Randy Quaid's sour supervisor addresses his new employees as "you pair of deuces."

Lee exploits the Western's conventions to definitively place his characters. The taciturn cowboy, a genre cliché, is reinvigorated in Heath Ledger's charged, contorted performance that externalizes his inability to address the emotional complexity of their situation. Although the more adventurous and articulate, the rodeo performer, Jake Gyllenhaal as Jack is no less at the mercy of "Brokeback." The opening scene of their non-meeting, the two cowboys pointedly avoiding each other as they wait for a job interview, immediately defines a world governed by macho drives and fears. Thereafter Quaid's abusive manner in hiring them gives further voice to these values. Formed by a competitive and violently homophobic society, Ennis and Jack's conviction that they "ain't queer" is understandable. Theirs is "a one-shot thing . . . nobody's business but



Cabined and confined, Ennis's sacrificial pain recalls that of Robert Stack's Kyle Hadley in *Written on the Wind* (1956)

ours.” What drives the emotional attack of the film is the inadequacy of its characters to articulate and understand, let alone control, the experience that strikes them like a storm. American cowboys—of all people—have no business falling in love with each other. Practical and conservative types of a rough and ready manhood are by no means ready for man-love. It is precisely because their involvement is such an irrational and implausible event that it can elude easy categorization and is so persuasive and affecting. These are men of a particular time, region, and occupation far removed from a culture at ease with feelings and their verbal expression. The stone-faced Ledger in particular is a study in spastic, constipated pain, hunched over, gagging, swallowing his speech, a man who has been taught to hate feelings he has now discovered within himself.

The isolation of the wilderness and the utter loneliness of their lives both make possible the love that overwhelms these two men and also renders it intelligible, for us if not them. In open range, feelings, gender, and sexuality cannot be fenced in or legislated. What is sinful or perverted or deviant in the natural world, the world of the sublime?

But mountains are like the oceans, aggressively visible and yet mysterious in offering a variety of meanings—threat, challenge, spectacle, the eternal. Mountain literature has defined the extremes of ideology that have been influential in shaping understanding of such landscapes. “Mountain Gloom” is the term John Ruskin coined in his *Modern Painters* (1907) for the repulsion and fear that dominated representations of nature’s most dramatic form until the nineteenth century. “Mountain Glory” was his balancing phrase to characterize the onset of positive views of mountains as embodiments of radiance and grandeur that coincided with the discovery of the sublime in nature.⁷ Inevitably, we have read into nature whatever we have been taught or needed to see. Thus the Rockies—within which

Wyoming’s Brokeback would sit—were called the Shining Mountains by the Cree Indians who lived below them, and the Stonies by the first Americans who climbed them.⁸

Brokeback is obviously colored by these two extremes given the painfully ambivalent experience that it finally becomes for the men. A landscape (in Wolfe’s words) of “savage joy,” offering both ecstasy and torture, *Brokeback Mountain*’s mountain setting is crucial both as physical site and as the marker it becomes for the cowboys (“Old Brokeback got us good”). A signifier of their transformative experience and high hopes, the peak becomes the touchstone of their life and both a fond and finally haunting memory. Lee has said he was pleased at the abstract quality of the strange poetic title that Proulx had bestowed on her fictional peak. What is Brokeback-ness? A resonant allegorical reading implicit in terms of the Western’s ideology and landscape is the notion of a damaged nation of tarnished ideals and betrayed promise. Such an idea is reinforced if one recalls that the Rockies have been proclaimed “the backbone of the continent.”⁹

Quite apart from the aesthetics of the infinite, Brokeback’s majesty and radiance can thus be said to have a national dimension. This is the American wilderness, the grandeur, beauty and isolation of the film’s setting echoing the language John Ford had helped to shape with the buttes and mesas of Monument Valley. It is the world of the pioneer and the nomad, of adventure and adversity, the vessel that shaped American character. As foreign critics were quick to see in the early days of Hollywood, the Western’s settings gave it a unique power to express in what became a coded aesthetics the ideological promise of America—freedom, openness, redemption, reinvention. Within this perspective it is possible to see the validity of the claim that *Brokeback Mountain* queers the Western, that setting a saga of same-sex love in the American wilderness both naturalizes and nationalizes it.



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Love, loss, memory

However, as Lee has argued, this is not the world of the traditional Western. If *Brokeback Mountain* recalls the frontier, the range is no longer open. The wilderness may appear pristine, but the mountain is the preserve of the Forest Service and its land is broken into allotments; Ennis and Jack are akin to government employees, like their hostile supervisor. The men soon find themselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Moreover, Ennis and Jack also differ from the classic cowboy in their work as shepherders. Despite an importance in the West's economic history that rivals that of cattle, sheep have been assigned a marginal role in the movies. Traditionally, they have been the source of conflict, their place on the frontier contested as a threat to cattle ranches. In this they have been seen as interlopers, the property of a lower class of immigrants and minorities. Coloring such conflicts have also been hints of a gender motif in the suggestion of caring for sheep as a less manly pursuit. Such tensions have also been exploited for comedy, as in George Marshall's *The Sheepman* (1958), where Glenn Ford is the despised but frustratingly imperturbable sheep rancher. However, from *Little Bo Peep* to *Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), sheep have often had distaff shepherds. Maggie Greenwald's feminist Western features Suzy Amis as the Eastern woman who finds her salvation out West in her disguise as a man and shepherd. In *Brokeback* too the sheep suggest a more nurturing, maternal function for the characters, appropriately softening the world of the film. Of course sheep also come to mind, not inaptly here, as the butt of classic sexual comedy in providing the lonely shepherd with a substitute for women.

The trick of *Brokeback Mountain* is to evoke repeatedly at the outset a vast and desolate frontier setting that allows the creation of a passionate relationship, but thereafter to leave behind that space and its possibilities. In the end, for all its promise of a shining glory, *Brokeback Mountain* delivers gloom and an un-

forgiving reality. As the film unwinds, the wilderness setting is left behind but for brief scenes sandwiched between the domestic norms of the men's lives. The expansive images from the film's early scenes—trucks traversing vast open plains, the huge sheep herd flowing up into the mountain's meadows, Ennis on horseback framed against the horizon like a John Ford hero—shrink to the dimensions of crowded kitchens, closets, trailers, and window-framed views. The awesome scale and reach of the mountain is reduced to a postcard.

The film ends with the traumatized and profoundly alienated Ennis all but a recluse, his world that of a scruffy mobile home that is neither. He watches his about-to-be-wed daughter drive off—another painful scene of farewell, another separation. He finds her forgotten sweater and then rediscovers the earlier forgotten garments, his shirt within Jake's, "like two skins" as the script has it. The images reprise shrinking spaces—the closet, the postcard, the window with its bleak view. He is holding the shirts and crying—"Jack, I swear . . ."

It may be a stretch to invoke Douglas Sirk's delirious Universal 1950s melodramas, but something very like his un merry-go-round structure, where A loves B who loves C, is clearly operating in the interlocking and frustrated relationships of the film's world. Convention, tradition, and social regulation rule family, gender, sexuality: *Brokeback Mountain* becomes *Written on the Mountain*, or perhaps more aptly, *Back Mountain*. The traditional Western was the province, in Robert Warshaw's elegant phrase, of "the last gentlemen,"¹⁰ whom the genre allowed to affirm their identity through action. Although there are brief returns to the wilds, the world of the Western that is created in the film's first forty minutes soon transitions into melodrama, both male and family varieties. Our wilderness types are instantly civilized on their return, cabined, cribbed, and confined. The Western's liberating confrontations and duels, the resolution of personal and communal con-

flicts, is denied these heroes. They become impotent, repressed, oppressed. Their heroism will be forged of sacrifice, victimization, and the long odyssey of suffering that is the classic fate of melodrama's characters. As the years go by the battles they fight are with their families, in kitchens and dining rooms, or with each other at the end of cramped idylls. The film's violence is ugly in the murder of Jack, but also in the emotional attacks both repressed and unleashed, and in the anguish that punishes the couples. Lee's film is careful to give the wives and families their due. After the arrival of Jack after a four-year hiatus, the passionate clinch of their reunion is shown us from Alma's point of view, complicating our relationship with the lovers. Thereafter the film is scrupulous in providing a kind of equal time for the disappointments and despair of the women, their loss of joy and spirit. Jean Renoir's famous dictum comes to mind: everyone has their reasons.

This melding of the Western and the melodrama has received little attention. This is partly the result of the unclear status of the term and of melodrama as a genre. Indeed, more than one reviewer praised the film for avoiding "melodrama":¹¹ that is, an excess of emotion, melodrama as tearjerker. Would a more florid style have diminished the film, perhaps pushing it toward the baroque rhetoric of a *Johnny Guitar* (1954)? In any case, in *Brokeback Mountain* the marriage of the two genres can be said to interact to mute the film, contributing to the restrained style. The melodrama contains the action, the heroes unable to achieve self-definition, to draw their weapons, to save the ranch, to bring civilization to America. But at the same time the Western's conventions can be said to constrain the melos, lowering the emotional and stylistic peaks, the extreme gestures, the "music" of the melodrama. The result is a haunting, unsettling film that may be easier to admire than love, a bittersweet rendition of defeat and lost opportunity.

The scene of their last rendezvous culminates in a moment that captures the "what-might-have-been" that tortures the men. Ennis's confession that he cannot see Jack for six months precipitates a violent scene. Hurling angry words, they struggle in each other's embrace, fighting and hugging, finally overcome with hurt. We dissolve to a toasty camp fire over which stands a dozy Jack wrapped up from behind by Ennis—"Come on now, you're sleepin' on your feet like a horse"—quoting his mother and quietly humming him her lullaby from his childhood, a moment in which we are suspended with Jack as he is rocked gently from side to side within the embrace, the moment ending with him contemplating Ennis ride off to sleep with the sheep,

and then the flashback ending with a desolate Jack in present time watching the truck drive away. That the flashback is crucial—the film's defining Brokeback moment—is underlined by its positioning after their agonized struggle as they separate, unknowingly, for the last time. Their life together has been one of life apart, a life of constant separations, a life separate from all others too, family included. All separate lives. "A few high-altitude fucks," as Jack has said, were not enough. He and Ennis had been denied intimacy, constancy, humanity, soulfulness.

NOTES

This essay is in memory of Jack Babuscio.

1. Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (1939), excerpt anthologized as "Home from the Mountain," in *The Book of the Mountains*, ed. A.C. Spectorosky (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1955), 486.
2. Sarah Bixby Smith, *Adobe Days: The Truthful Narrative of the Events in the Life of a California Girl on a Sheep Ranch and in El Pueblo de Nuestra de Los Angeles While It Was Yet a Small and Humble town; Together With An Account of How Three Young Men Drove Sheep & Cattle Across the Plains, Moutains, & Deserts from Illinois to the Pacific Coast; And The Strange Prophecy of Admiral Thatcher About San Pedro Harbor* (1931; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 84.
3. Wolfe, 486.
4. J. Hoberman sees the film as a "sagebrush Tristan and Isolde" in "Blazing Saddles," *Village Voice*, 29 November 2005; Roger Ebert claims "their tragedy is universal" in "Brokeback Mountain," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 16 December 2005.
5. Annie Proulx, Larry McMurtry, and Diana Ossana, *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 145.
6. See Roger Clarke, "Lonesome Cowboys," *Sight and Sound* 16, no. 1 (January 2006): 28
7. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), 3–7.
8. Frank Waters, "High Country," in Spectorosky, 480.
9. Ibid.
10. Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Anchor / Doubleday, 1962), 94.
11. Ebert, for example.

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ABSTRACT In *Brokeback Mountain*, the grand Western tradition's heroes are deconstructed, and the monumental landscape with its coded promise of freedom and opportunity reduced to the scale of a postcard. *Brokeback Mountain* transforms into melodrama, albeit with a restrained style that disguises its radical take on an America betraying its original ideals.

KEYWORDS Western, neo-Western, melodrama, mountain literature, betraying America