Brokeback Mountain (2005)

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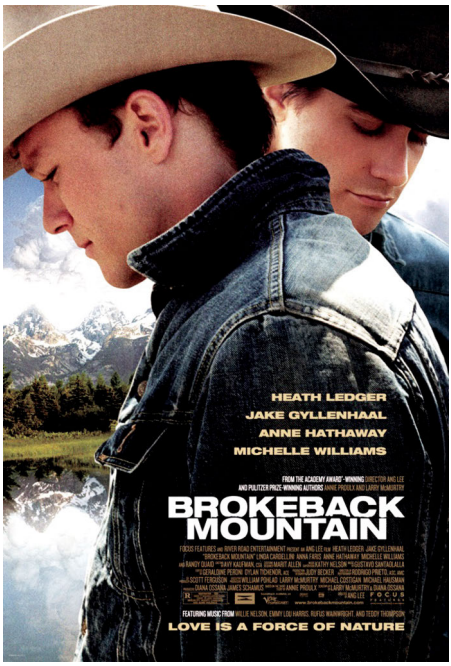
dir. Ang Lee; prod. Diana Ossana, James Schamus; screenplay Larry McMurty, Diana Ossana; photography Rodrigo Prieto; music Gustavo Santaolalla. 35mm, color, 134 mins. River Road Entertainment, distrib. Focus Features.



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Based on Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Proulx's eponymous short story, which was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1997, *Brokeback Mountain* not only became an instant commercial and critical success but was also immediately labelled »the gay cowboy movie« and thereby enmeshed in controversy (Cohan 233-34). It became a prime target for conservative critics and pundits, some of whom even outright refused to watch the film (Handley 18). *Brokeback Mountain* draws on two classical American film genres, the Western and the melodrama, which advance but also significantly contain its radical subject matter. For many observers, its release and crossover success constitute a breakthrough for the representation of queer characters in mainstream cinema (Osterweil 38). However, the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences' decision to award the Oscar for Best Picture in 2006 to Paul Haggis' crime drama *Crash*, which interweaves several characters' lives and highlights racial and social tensions in L.A., instead of *Brokeback Mountain*, caused an outcry over Hollywood's perceived homophobia—and, in a 2015 revote among Academy members, Ang Lee's film came out on top (»Recount!«). From the initial hype to its ongoing critical (re)evaluation, *Brokeback Mountain* has clearly secured its place in film history.

Set mostly in the Western states of Wyoming and Texas, the film traces the relationship between Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhall) from the early 1960s into the 1980s. The two men meet on a job to herd sheep on Brokeback Mountain and develop an intimate relationship that, in the sociocultural climate of their time and place, can only exist temporarily and in isolation amidst a romanticized

landscape. *Brokeback Mountain* explicates the homosocial dimension usually contained in the dominant version of the Western myth. Lee utilizes the U.S. Western genre to contextualize his protagonists: »Setting a saga of same-sex love in the American wilderness both naturalizes and nationalizes it« (Kitses 25). Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto stages the pastoral idyll of Brokeback with expansive, lingering shots that emphasize the impressive landscape, wide skies, and open land of the American West. In the »civilized world« and within the literal and metaphorical constraints of their everyday lives, both protagonists (have to) deny parts of their desires and identities. Furthermore, they hide their deep emotional attachment to each other, for which they even lack a proper term. They use *queer* once »to possibly describe their bond […] and they do so in order to disavow it« (Tinkcom 3). Jack is marked as the more transgressive character of the two by, for instance, his revealing last name (»Twist,« as in to contort or pervert), his black hat, and his range of mobility that extends to Texas and Mexico, while he also suggests early on that the two could ranch and live together. Ennis, however, who as a child had to see the lynched body of his presumably homosexual neighbor, does not give in to Jack's seemingly unrealistic visions of a shared future. Their initial romance only lasts until the end of the summer. They reunite years later to continue their love affair under the guise of occasional trips as »fishing buddies« to the Wyoming mountains.

Meanwhile, both characters create a life for themselves that conforms to the heteronormative standards of U.S. society: They marry, have children, and make ends meet. Throughout the film, they juggle these two worlds with mixed success leading up to the film's tragic ending. Ennis' wife, Alma (Michelle Williams), eventually finds out about their affair and leaves him; while Jack never fully settles into his middle class home and his role as father and husband in Texas. Time and again, he tries in vain to convince Ennis to fully commit to their relationship and to finally live together. Frustrated and rejected, Jack solicits a male sex worker in Mexico, and he eventually meets another man from Texas with whom he envisions a shared future. After his divorce, Ennis continues to care for his daughters, and he also has a short-lived relationship with another woman. He learns about his friend and lover's death when one day one of his postcards to Jack is returned with the stamp »deceased« on it. Jack's widow, Lureen (Anne Hathaway), tells him over the phone that her husband had an accident. Ennis, however, imagines Jack's death as a hate crime. By showing how Jack is beaten to death, the film visually connects his passing with his sexual transgression, while remaining opaque as to the actual circumstances of his death. At the Twist's home, Ennis finds a bloodstained shirt of his own under one of Jack's—a keepsake from their time on Brokeback Mountain, a reminder of the violent moments of their relationship, and a material testament to Jack's unbroken love for him. Jack's father makes dismissive comments about his son and firmly resists Ennis' plan to scatter Jack's ashes on Brokeback Mountain per his wishes. Yet, Jack's mother, in a gesture of belated blessing, not only lets him take the shirts from Jack's room but also encourages him to return. The film ends with Ennis living on his own in a trailer in a remote part of Wyoming. The two cowboy shirts and a postcard nostalgically commemorate their relationship and the fleeting moments of happiness in the wilderness. Ennis' final words, »Jack, I swear . . .«—captured in a close-up of his face with tears welling up in his eyes—attest once more to his inability to articulate his emotions. They can also be read as a promise for the future of queer love.

Though set in the mid-20th century, *Brokeback Mountain* relies on iconic Western tropes and settings, and it largely subscribes to »the Western's preoccupation with masculinity—and especially white, working-class, rural masculinity« (Tinkcom 102). Its protagonists, to some degree, resemble the cowboy type, i.e., the mythical male hero of Western films, in style, attitude, and demeanor. Yet, they are hired hands who have to do menial work in order to survive, they connect emotionally and act upon their mutual attraction, and they clearly lack the control, power, and freedom usually associated with this iconic American figure. Jack and Ennis also resemble the suffering heroines of classical melodrama as they are star-crossed lovers bound up in a doomed romance and caught within the social expectations of their environment. *Brokeback Mountain* revolves around the romantic love story between the two male protagonists, at the same time that it depicts them trying hard to perform as dedicated husbands and fathers. Especially Ennis' commitment to his daughters and his precarious economic situation come into conflict with their relationship and trips to the mountains. Jack and Ennis are shown as victims of a heteropatriarchal society that forces them to forsake their individual happiness in order to conform to the hegemonic masculinity of their time and place, and they are ultimately punished for their transgressions. »The awesome scale and reach of the mountain«—which represents the Western landscape of male action, signals some degree of freedom for the protagonists, and metonymically stands in for their relationship—ultimately becomes »reduced to a postcard« (Kitses 26). Whether shot »in dimly lighted washed-out grays and browns« to indicate an impoverished life and a lack of opportunity in the case of Ennis and Alma or cast in an aesthetic of »brightly lighted mid-twentieth century consumerism and comparative economic prosperity« in the case of Jack and Lureen (Tinkcom 74, 75), the domestic sphere and small-town family life are predominantly depicted as spaces of confinement for the main characters. Many critics have discussed *Brokeback Mountain*'s queering of classical genres and have debated its seemingly »strange fusion between a Douglas Sirk melodrama and a John Ford Western« (Osterweil 38). This genre-mixing is reflected in the marketing of the film: While the tag line of the »gay cowboy movie« persisted, director Ang Lee frequently discouraged the categorization of his film as Western and rather emphasized its universal appeal as »a great American love story« (Needham 33). *Brokeback Mountain*, in fact, relies on both of these genres that are often seen as mutually exclusive: the masculine-coded classical Western with its emphasis on agency and action versus the feminine-coded melodrama with its emotional excess and its tendency to focus on passivity and powerlessness (Needham 79). The two genres interact in the film, as Jim Kitses explains, with »the melodrama contain[ing] the action, the heroes unable to achieve self-definition, to draw their weapons, to save the ranch, to bring civilization to America« and »the Western's conventions […] constrain[ing] the melos, lowering the emotional and stylistic peaks, the extreme gestures, the ›music‹ of the melodrama« (27).

The aesthetic and narrative elements that *Brokeback Mountain* borrows from the Western and the melodrama also work together in shaping the film's politics. Its (Neo-) Western repertoire, on the one hand, serves as a framework to center the film's queer characters within the national mythology of the United States, and naturalizes their romance set in the pastoral idyll of the American West. On the other hand, the remoteness of its rural setting allows for individualizing the protagonists' struggle which detaches them from the social changes and activism of the Stonewall era and disrupts

the »metronormativity« (Jack Halberstam) that casts queerness/homosexuality as an urban phenomenon (Alley 6-7; Needham 44). The film's melodramatic features serve to affectively align viewers with the fate and suffering of the two heroes and invites audiences to feel with them. The melodramatic plot and aesthetics can be read as a strategy of containment that imagines queer love in a familiar register, and with an expectedly tragic ending. However, its emphasis on negative affect also supports a reading that highlights these feelings as »politically efficacious« and serves as a reminder that queer »modern subjectivity is constituted by a painful, closeted, homophobic past and that ›feeling bad‹ is an important affective dimension of queer subjectivity in the present« (Needham 93).

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