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“If you can’t fix it, you gotta stand it”: *Brokeback Mountain* and the Western Genre

There are many common associations that come with the western genre: cowboy hats, boots, spurs, horses, and a rugged hero, just to name a few. Classic westerns, like John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, have programmed us to have certain expectations for the genre. While associations and expectations may vary from viewer to viewer, one is surely not to expect a tale of two cowboys falling in love with one another. Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* takes full advantage of our preexisting expectations of the western as it uses them against us in his queering of the genre. The film contradicts its genre, and even self-consciously contradicts itself, through its portrayal of the mythology of the western frontier and its depiction of the cowboy as an icon.

Similar to the classic western, *Brokeback Mountain* features several shots of strong, broad landscapes. However, unlike the classic westerns, these landscapes rarely seem to complement our protagonists. Rather than our cowboys standing tall against infinite terrain, they are belittled and isolated by it. When watching the film, we are so often denied the reassurance that comes with the cowboy becoming larger than life and owning his surroundings. For instance, when the Ringo Kid of *Stagecoach* stands in front of us, we are confident in his confidence. John Wayne owns the frame and we know that this frontier is his and that no one can take that from him. To the contrary, when we see Jack and Ennis, they are almost always lost in their surroundings. They do not own the frontier; the frontier owns them. Due to common expectations of the western and the frontier, these visuals in the film become quite unsettling.

It seems that this belittlement reflects the views of Jack and Ennis's society on homosexuality. The two know that their love cannot become public because it would yield horrific consequences. Ennis, much more so than Jack, seems to be regularly paranoid that their secret will be revealed. Through a story told by Ennis, we are informed that a gay man was once beaten to death by the locals when they found out the truth about his sexual orientation. He tells Jack, "If we're around each other and this thing grabs hold of us again, in the wrong place at the wrong time, we're dead." Jack and Ennis are literally stunted by a lack of social acceptance, both in the film and in the real world, and this is visually represented in how they are portrayed amongst the frontier. They cannot own the landscape because society will not allow them to. Instead, they are put down and forced to live small, ordinary lives. In addition to this idea of the frontier representing social views, it seems that it is also representative of the genre. Jack and Ennis cannot rise up to take control of the frontier because the genre will not allow two gay cowboys to do so. The two are constantly restricted by both cultural and generic verisimilitude (Neale, 161).

One of the very few times we see Ennis take control of his surroundings is the morning after his first sexual encounter with Jack. Ennis leaves the tent and drenches himself in every aesthetic aspect of the classic American cowboy. While surveying the land on horseback, he embodies everything one would expect out of a cowboy. Ennis appears larger than life as he rides against the endless mountainous terrain. He is an icon that is bigger than the earth which his horse gallops upon. With his striking presence it seems that Ennis knows his actions from the previous night were unacceptable for a cowboy. It is almost as if he is trying to turn himself into the classic western hero in order to compensate for his encounter with Jack. However, his icon status is soon ripped away from him as he comes across a mangled sheep. He stares at the

sacrifice made in order to be with Jack for the night, and he realizes that sacrifice is sure to continue with him living two opposing lifestyles. And once this is realized, he returns to being lost in the frontier.

Brokeback Mountain, the physical location, almost takes on a life of its own as the film progresses. The mountain becomes Jack and Ennis's relationship as it is the only place where they can live how they want to live. Jack even screams at Ennis the last time the two ever see each other: "So what we got now is Brokeback Mountain! Everything's built on that! That's all we got, boy." Despite the fact that the cowboys never truly take control of the frontier, they are able to make it theirs. They may succumb to it and be belittled by it, but it is theirs and no one can take it from them. This serves as an excellent example of the duality of the film and its contradictions of itself; they cannot own the frontier, but they can make one part of it their own.

The idea of Jack and Ennis making Brokeback Mountain their own personal frontier is further exemplified through reoccurring visuals in the film. In many scenes involving Jack and Ennis on or near the mountain, there are boundaries that separate the mountain from the rest of the frontier. The boundary can be composed of anything, like logs or a herd of sheep, but it is always rather dominant in the frame. Seeing these boundaries creates an instant sense of separation. There is literally a dividing line between Brokeback and civilization, and, symbolically, a line between the lives Jack and Ennis want to live and the lives they are expected to live.

It seems that this portrayal of the western frontier in a way prohibits Jack and Ennis from maintaining conventional iconic status. The fact that they are not able to visually take control of their surroundings clashes with the more familiar iconography of the cowboy. Connotations of the genre lead us to believe that our protagonists will be portrayed in a visually iconic fashion,

and when we are denied this aspect, it can be sometimes challenging to view these characters as iconic cowboys.

When we are introduced to our cowboys for the first time, it is done so in a very anticlimactic fashion. Unlike the Ringo Kid, who stands tall, wielding a smoking shotgun during his introduction, Ennis is simply hitchhiking to a job interview. When he arrives and meets Jack, the two are disrespected and spoken down to by their new boss. Right from the start we see that these are not the typical heroes of the classic western. This introduction prepares us for what is to come for these characters; we almost do not expect them to be iconic because of the way they are initially presented to us. However, regardless of how mundane the scene may seem, we are presented with Jack and Ennis on display right from the beginning. Unlike the common introductions in classic westerns where our hero storms in to a scene after his supporting characters are introduced, Jack and Ennis are the first two characters we meet. This suggests that regardless of the (their) differences, these characters are equally as important as the classic western heroes. Once again, the duality of the film is conveyed through self-conscious contradiction.

Despite how much Jack and Ennis may differ from the conventional cowboys of cinema, they still possess many of the quintessential characteristics: they dress the part, they can survive in the wilderness with the bare essentials, and they work as herders. These characteristics cause us to crave the icon. Jim Kitses states, "...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...The cowboy is the American emblem par excellence, and Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are nothing if not prototypical cowboys" (Kitses, 24). It is worth noting that while Ennis and Jack can clearly hold their own in the wilderness, most of their duties (chopping wood,

building fires, pitching tents, etc.) are displayed through montage. These actions are not glamorized; they pass along as if Jack and Ennis are just simply going through the motions of their role in the genre. As Erika Spohrer states, "...Lee's film might be deemed progressive or counter cinema, highlighting conventions only to turn them on their head...By using genre conventions—with vital changes—Lee effectively highlights and dismantles the very genre in which he works" (Spohrer, 29). We are presented with conventionality only to have it manipulated right before our eyes.

As an audience, we have certain expectations of what a cowboy should be, and that is why the film works as profoundly as it does. The cowboy, the representation of the classic American hero, should not fall in love with another man. The fact that Ennis displays so many characteristics of the classic cowboy, his love and his struggle becomes much more emotionally charged for him and for us as an audience. He knows that his lifestyle does not correspond with his true nature, while we know that his true nature does not correspond with his role in the genre. "American cowboys—of all people—have no business falling in love with each other" (Kitses, 25).

Going along with the iconic expectations one typically has for a cowboy, even the word "cowboy" possesses a certain iconic identity. In *Brokeback Mountain*, the actual word is used very sparingly and very deliberately. Jack, who embraces his homosexuality a bit more than Ennis, is referred to as a "cowboy" in an almost derogatory manner. When he offers to buy a rodeo clown, Jimbo, a beer, Jimbo is instantly unnerved by Jack's actions. Disgusted, he tells Jack, "Save your money for your next entry fee, cowboy". It is almost as if he is shooting Jack a reminder of who he is supposed to be. He is asking, "Why would a cowboy be trying to pick up a man in a bar?" Jack is referred to as a cowboy again just a few scenes later when he meets

Lureen. As in the previous scene, Jack is standing at the bar when Lureen approaches him and asks, “What are you waiting for, cowboy? A mating call?” Once again, the term is used as a jab at Jack’s sexual orientation. It is as if she is asking, “Why would a cowboy not approach a beautiful woman?”

Ennis, on the other hand, seems to be referred to as a cowboy in an endearing manner. This seems logical since Ennis represents the more prototypical American cowboy. In relation to Jack, Ennis has a tougher demeanor and seems to struggle more with his homosexuality. He has the same feelings that Jack has, but fights to keep them caged internally. He fears their being seen in public with one another, while Jack goes as far as to suggest that they should get their own place together. When Cassie refers to Ennis as “cowboy” the few times that she does, it is obvious that it is out of admiration for who she believes him and his persona to be. She is mesmerized by the presence of his role and seems to get enjoyment out of using the word. Ennis is also referred to as a cowboy by Jack as they are leaving Brokeback for the first time. Seeing that Ennis is dwarfed by the terrain and struggling with his emotions, Jack tosses a lasso around him and states “time to get going, cowboy”. It is as if Jack can see Ennis’s internal conflict between the cowboy and the gay man that he is and tries to reassure him, not only by calling him “cowboy,” but also by encompassing him in an iconic symbol of the cowboy. However, from Ennis’s point of view, this could imply that he is being trapped by the cowboy persona: he is referred to as “cowboy” while a cowboy restrains him with an iconic symbol of the cowboy.

Another interesting use of the word occurs when Alma receives Jack’s postcard. She asks Ennis, “Is he someone you used to cowboy with?” Ennis lies and states that he and Jack were just “fishing buddies”. Though they were herding sheep rather than cows, Jack and Ennis were carrying out cowboy duties on Brokeback. It seems that Ennis did not want to associate the term

“cowboy” with what he and Jack were actually doing on the mountain. He knows that the title will not allow him to be who he is with Jack.

Throughout the film, it appears that Ennis can only test the boundaries of an icon when he and Jack are together. When Ennis is with Jack on Brokeback, he is a self-sufficient, roughneck dressed in classic cowboy attire, and seems to handle any task at hand. However, when he is at home with Alma, he is often wearing sweatpants and a wife-beater while getting drunk and being lazy. With Jack, he can kill an elk and survive outside in a blizzard, but at home, he cannot even care for his two daughters properly. “If I had three hands I could,” he claims when Alma asks him to wipe his daughter’s nose. This is coming from the same man who survived months in the mountains with nothing more than a tent.

The duality of the film is again expressed during the Fourth of July scene. Ennis embodies the iconic role that the genre demands, and he does so in the presence of Alma. After two foul-mouthed drunk men ignore Ennis’s request for them to watch their language in front of his daughters, Ennis stands up and takes control of the situation. He throws one man to the ground and kicks the other in the face as fireworks explode in the night sky behind 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” (Kitses, 23). However, this one instance of Ennis embodying everything that a cowboy should be is performed in vain. Alma is not at all impressed by his iconic stance; she appears to be deeply frightened.

This scene depicts another contradiction in the film: Ennis feels like he has to portray an icon in front of Alma in order to fill his persona, yet he is so often the complete opposite when he is with her. When Ennis is with Jack, his iconic status comes naturally, even if he wishes to not

embrace it. Jack makes Ennis the icon he wants to be, even though it is not the icon that the genre usually delivers. With Alma, Ennis feels like he has to portray the conventional icon, but seems to be tired of doing so (especially after meeting Jack).

This argument is supported through an interesting change that occurs after Ennis and Alma get divorced. From the divorce until the end of the film, with the exception of one short scene, we never see Ennis wearing one of the classic cowboy hats that we have grown accustomed to seeing him wear. (It is worth noting that in the short scene in which he wears a hat that more closely resembles one of his originals, he is in the presence of Alma Jr.) He trades in his iconic symbol for a small, floppy, much less defined hat. During Jack and Ennis's final encounter, Ennis wears his new hat while Jack is the ultimate visual representation of the American cowboy. Choking on his tears, Ennis cries out, "It's because of you, Jack, that I'm like this." It is possible that Ennis is not only referring to Jack as a person, but the cowboy persona in general. Why is Ennis really the way he is? He loves Jack, but cannot be with him. But why can he not be with him? Because he is a cowboy, and the conventional cowboy is not allowed to be gay. As Ennis gazes at Jack for the last time in his life, he is reminded of who he is and what he can never become.

The final scene of the film profoundly depicts the previously discussed concepts of the frontier and the cowboy as an icon. This scene seems to express a theme of reducing one's life: everything we have come to know in the film has been reduced down to almost nothing. Ennis, who once displayed the iconic appearance of a cowboy, is now hatless, weathered, and broken. He once made his home on a majestic mountain, and he now resides in a cluttered trailer. Kitses states, "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” (Kitses, 26). Jack is gone and, in his passing, he took Ennis’s iconic persona with him

When Alma Jr. invites Ennis to her wedding, Ennis initially seems to be hurt by the fact that his daughter is making a life of her own. He explains that he will not be able to attend the wedding because of a prior commitment to a roundup. After seeing his daughter’s reaction, he states, “I reckon they can find themselves a new cowboy.” Once again, the word “cowboy” is used quite insightfully. Ennis may still be a cowboy, but after what he went through with Jack, he is done with the expectations that come with the title—the title that made it impossible for him to live his true life.

As Alma Jr. is leaving, Ennis notices that she has left her sweater behind. As he stores the sweater away, we are presented with a shrine that he has created in memory of the love of his life: Jack. Jack’s bloodied shirt rests inside of Ennis’s bloodied shirt, where the two will be forever connected. Jack will always be kept safely inside Ennis, much in the way their secret was. The two shirts will remain where Jack and Ennis’s love was forced to stay—in the closet. As Ennis examines the shirts, we see that he has tacked up a Brokeback Mountain postcard from Jack. The vast mountain landscape, along with their vast love for one another, has been reduced down to a tiny piece of paper. Next to the closet door, a small window presents us with a claustrophobic view of a landscape that Ennis could never conquer, but was able to somehow make his own with Jack. Everything that was once the biggest part of Ennis’s life has been reduced down to almost nothing at all. The love that he and Jack so passionately shared has left him with hardly anything: an icon reduced to fabric, a frontier and a lifestyle reduced to a piece of paper, and an obscured view of what was once everything.

The ending scene of *Brokeback Mountain* far differs from that of the majority of classic westerns. Our hero cannot ride off in to the sunset with his love, because his love is gone. Even if Jack had not died in the film, we can be sure that we would have been denied this happy ending anyway. The genre would now allow for two gay cowboys to ride off into the sunset and live happy lives with one another. Strong expectations such as this serve as the power behind the film once they are queered, or even defied. Jack and Ennis were expected to be something that they simply could not be, and were forced to hide everything that they wanted. The western genre may not allow them to own the frontier or to become conventional icons but, like *Brokeback Mountain*, they were able to make it their own.

### Works Cited

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