

BRAZIL AND “*BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*”: A PERFECT SCENARIO FOR THE THEME “EMERGING IDENTITIES VERSUS EXPECTATIONS AND THE NEW CHALLENGES OF COMPARATIVISM”

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Background

The short story “*Brokeback Mountain*” by Pulitzer Prize winner, E. Annie Proulx (then in her ‘60s), was first published in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1997 after years of rejection slips by other publishers. It is now seen as one of the best short stories ever published in that magazine.

The screenplay by well-known authors, Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, was also rejected by a number of directors. No one seemed to think it would succeed with a general audience. In fact most people were surprised that such a short story (35 pages) could be made into a feature length film. Larry McMurtry has said that he seldom even reads short stories for that reason.

The film, directed by Ang Lee, Taiwanese, went on to win general acclaim and box office success and was nominated for and won a number of prestigious awards (the Venice Film Festival, the Golden Globes, the Academy Awards etc.). It opened in Brazil on February 3 topping all the charts. It has earned over \$90 million dollars in the United States and over \$80 million around the world. It is already the fifth highest grossing Western movie in history.

Yet, and here secure your saddles, the critical reviews generally and often the general public in particular often misunderstood, sometimes completely, the story, the screenplay, and the film! Sometimes reversing, in fact, the original intent and meaning.

That is the reason I wanted to present this paper at this Symposium in Brazil. This symposium in focusing precisely on new technologies, emergent identities versus expectations, and the new challenges of comparativism might possibly clarify how and why so much literature and film around the world is misunderstood and misinterpreted. In fact this may be more evident in the case of *Brokeback Mountain* in Brazil than in the United States!.

I know there are cowboys and even rodeos in Brazil; some of the best rodeo riders in the world are from Brazil. {I even know one of them personally who now lives in Vitoria, Espirito Santo. I know about and like Forro. I also lived in Rio Grande do Sul for a year, the home of the Gaucho.} But I do not think most Brazilians or people outside the United States can feel, or think, or understand, or react to this story or this film the way a North American does! The West, the cowboy, the wide open spaces are central to the way North Americans think of ourselves and our country. It is our central “myth.” We are steeped in it from childhood by television, comic books, magazines, literature, theatre, music, film, costumes, games (Daniel Boone, Wyatt Earp, Kit Carson, Wild Bill Hickock, the Lone Ranger, Shane, the Dallas Cowboys, country and western music, Levis, the Marlboro Man, the musicals *Oklahoma*, *Annie Get Your Gun* etc.).

Increasingly, though, a number of major literary critics have noticed that there is more to that myth than most of us realize. Leslie Fiedler in his important and seminal work *Love and Death in the American Novel* asserts that the friendship between the early American pioneer, Natty Bumppo, and the native Indian, Chingachgook, in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper’s is

An archetypal relationship which haunts the American psyche [...] two lonely men bend together over a carefully guarded fire in the virgin heart of the American wilderness [...] They have forsaken all others for the sake of the austere almost inarticulate, but unquestioned love that binds them to each other and to the world of nature which they have preferred to civilization.(1959).

In another book, *The Return of the Vanishing American*, Fiedler says that Cooper's

peculiar brand of sentimentality underlies all genuinely mythic descriptions of the West, all true westerns—a kind of Higher Masculine Sentimentality utterly remote from all fables whose Happy End is Marriage (1968)

In 1923 D.H. Lawrence from an English standpoint was even more specific. In an essay on James Fennimore Cooper and the *Leatherstocking* novels, he writes that

When you are actually in America, America hurts, because it has a powerful disintegrative influence [...] America is tense with latent violence and resistance. The very common sense of white Americans has a tinge of helplessness in it, and deep fear of what might be if they were not commonsensical.

Lawrence then describes Cooper's prototype, but one not nearly as radical as that depicted in *Brokeback Mountain*:

What did Cooper dream beyond democracy? . . . he dreamed a new human relationship. A stark, stripped human relationship of two men, deeper than the depths of sex. Deeper than property, deeper than fatherhood, deeper than marriage, deeper than love. So deep that it is loveless. The stark loveless, wordless unison of two men who have come to the bottom of themselves.... Then it finds a great release into a new world, a new moral, a new landscape. (D.H.Lawrence, *Studies in Classical American Literature*, Chapter 5; New York: T. Seltzer, 1923).)

In my opinion Annie Proulx goes much farther and much deeper, depicting what happens when two men come to "the bottom of themselves" "stark, wordless"---- but not "loveless." *Brokeback Mountain* (short story, screenplay, and film) intentionally and radically subverts our American myth, turning it upside-down, shockingly, completely, and convincingly. I don't think many people who aren't reared and educated in the United States can have any idea of how disturbing and disorienting these emerging identities versus expectations in *Brokeback Mountain* are to us as Americans. I even doubt that James Fenimore Cooper, Leslie Fiedler, or D.H. Lawrence could ever imagine anyone treating our archetypal myth in this way, especially a female writer!.

Not only is the surface text of the story often misread, but often the rather evident subtext and contexts are ignored. Perhaps in part this happened because of the GENRE

in which it is written, the Western or Cowboy story, so traditional in the United States, or even because the author is a woman (GENDER). The story also has multiple important ramifications: social political, psychological, economic, and historical

Genre

The story, screenplay, and film have often been understood and interpreted using outdated models and compared to other stories with completely divergent expectations. The short story and film seem to be purposely leading the reader and viewer into expecting a typical Western or cowboy story, so central to the American myth and self-identity.. All the traditional features are there: location, the great outdoors, the West, horses, dogs, tents, campfires, rodeos, rifles, even a bear and a can of beans!

Of course a close reader or viewer would notice at once that they are not herding cattle but sheep! considered by real cowboys as less challenging. Only two shots are fired (and only at animals), only three fistfights, and no murders except in two flashbacks. What kind of Western is that? That may be why so many readers and viewers are unable or unwilling to begin to understand even the surface text of the story because of the expectations and traditional depictions of the West and cowboys. Even Ennis and Jack are always depicted as manly, macho, masculine, able and willing to ride and shoot and fight..

Gender

The author of the original short story as well as one of the authors of the screenplay is a woman. Women are important to this story, often not the case in other Westerns, and even more important in the film. In fact the major additions to the short story in the film are meant to flesh out the unsatisfactory family lives of these two men. Women and family life are usually in the background of the Western story.

Both men are married, both have children. The women characters are all portrayed positively in both short story and film, although often as helpless victims (the wives, a waitress, and the daughters)¹.

Gender and Jack and Ennis

The Point of View of the story is Ennis's, so we can't completely know what the other characters are thinking, but in the story and the film both men are obviously taken by surprise at what happens on Brokeback Mountain a few days after they get there. They have gotten to know each other. Ennis has probably talked more than he ever has before, and even thinks that "he'd never had such a good time." One night a few days after they get there, Ennis gets too drunk, and it is too late to go down the mountain to the sheep. It is cold, and they share a bedroll in the tent and "deepened their intimacy considerably." The story has many more erotic details than the film, but it is obvious from both that that they have sex, and it continues that whole summer, first only by night, then by day. They don't talk about it except once Ennis says "I'm not no queer" and Jack replies, "Me neither. One-shot thing. Nobody's business but ours."

When they part after the summer, they make no plans to meet in the future. In fact Ennis says again he is going to get married that December, but after Jack drives off, Ennis "felt like someone was pulling his guts out hand over hand...tried to puke but nothing came up. He felt as bad as he ever had." Ennis had evidently not had that kind of relationship until he met Jack.. As he puts it, "You may be a sinner, but I have not

had the opportunity.” Neither man is the predator. Both obviously enjoy immensely their relationship and the sexual act, the greatest passion either has ever known.

That scene ends the only summer they will ever spend on Brokeback Mountain (truly a “mountain top experience”), but four years later, Jack writes to Ennis and says he is coming that way. Ennis writes back at once, “You bet.” Ennis takes the day off, paces the floor, waiting for Jack. When he arrives they keep hugging and kissing each other “mightily.” Ennis wife sees it, but Ennis explains it away saying that they have not seen each other in four years. They spend the night in a motel in town with the excuse that they can get drunk. Jack says, “I didn’t know we was goin a get into this again—yeah, I did. Why am I here.” He calls Ennis “Friend” repeatedly and endearingly throughout the story and film. They are not only friends but lovers.

Ennis tries to put a name on what they are doing and says things like “I know I ain’t. I mean, here we both have wives and kids, right? I like doing it with women, ..but ain’t nothng like this.” In the short story he says he has never done it with another guy, but has masterbated often thinking of Jack. Jack in the story has evidently continued to seek out sexual relationships with other men. Basically the word “homosexual” denotes an orientation or a specific sexual act, “gay” denotes the attitude (usually positive) toward that orientation. Both are definitely not :”gay” or “queer” in the usual sense of those words. Homoeroticism may be evident in many Western stories, but seldom so overtly! Andy Warhol is one of the few ever to depict a “gay” cowboy.

Regret is a major feature of the story and film. Ennis realizes already in the motel room that he should have never let Jack leave. But it was “Too late then by a long long while.” He thinks there is nothing they can do. Both are married. Ennis fears what others might think and do if they were caught together. Jack suggests they could move to his family’s farm together. Ennis says he is stuck, caught, and tells the story of what his father showed his brother and him when he was about nine: a man who had ranched together with another man in a ditch beaten with a tire iron and dragged by his penis until it was pulled off. That experience has stayed in his mind ever since. That is why he thinks they can only get together once in a while “way the hell out in the back a nowhere”

Ennis concludes “If you can’t fix it you got to stand it” (a continual theme of the story). They go on so called fishing trips once or twice a year, but that is it. Ennis’s wife divorces him, and he is forced to pay child support. For years (until 1983) they get together a few times a year in a variety of wilderness locations, but never return to Brokeback Mountain.

In May of 1983 they get together again. Jack summarizes his own situation saying nothing has ever worked the way he wanted it too. The short story adds, “One thing never changed: the brilliant charge of their infrequent couplings...darkened by the sense of time flying, never enough time, never enough.” Ennis then tells him that their next get-to-gether can’t be until November. Jack, again calling him “friend,” responds by saying what an unsatisfactory situation this is. Ennis asks if he has a better idea, Jack replies, “I did once” (farming together). He lashes out at how few times they’d been together in 20 years and ends by saying, “I wish I knew how to quit you.”

The short story is wonderful here with added undercurrents of what is left unsaid which the film can’t relate, and Ennis falls to the ground in anguish. But it comes to nothing: “Nothing ended, nothing begun, nothing resolved.” Jack is always the romantic, the optimist; Ennis the realist, the pessimist. Jack remembers again that distant summer on Brokeback Mountain when Ennis held him close and shared a

sexless hunger. That was in his memory “the single moment of artless, charmed happiness in their separate and difficult lives.” They were really only happy when they were together and only in the wilderness, in nature. “Doing what comes naturally” to quote one of the great musicals about the American West— in effect doing much more than merely embodying the “archetypal relationship” to use Fiedler’s words. They take it to its ultimate!

That same year Ennis gets a postcard back saying that Jack had died (age 39) supposedly killed by an exploding tire. Ennis of course thinks the same thing happened to Jack as to that rancher his father had shown him when he was nine. That is not confirmed in either the short story or film. Jack had expressed a wish to be buried on Brokeback Mountain, “his place” in his wife’s words. So Ennis goes to Jack’s parent’s ranch to scatter Jack’s ashes on Brokeback Mountain, and receives a cold welcome from the father who says they will be put in the family plot. Jack’s mother invites Ennis to see Jack’s old room where he discovers that Jack had kept an old shirt of his inside (embracing) one of his own., “one inside the other.”

Both the short story and the film are rich in imagery and symbolism. When he gets back, he buys a postcard of Brokeback Mountain which he pins up on the closet in his trailer and below it a nail on which he hung the two old shirts. (In the movie, this time, Ennis’s shirt is on the outside embracing Jack’s shirt inside, a touch supposedly suggested by Heath Ledger.) His last words in the story and film are, “Jack I swear...” which are left unfinished as are many things in the story and film. The reader and viewer are invited to add their own interpretations. The story has a detail the film does not show and that was Jack’s appearing in Ennis’s dreams after that. “And he would wake sometimes in grief, sometimes with the old sense of joy and release; the pillow wet, sometimes the sheets” (obviously from tears and wet dreams).

There is no question that they do love each other! An overwhelmingly powerful love in both the story and film. And the emotions, the characters, the situation, the setting are so realistic that readers or viewers will be able to empathize with them and identify with them with regards to the importance of love and relationships in general, and even feel a sense of tragedy at what this has done to both of them and their families and what society and public opinion has done to them.

Setting

Both the story and film have multiple ramifications: personal, psychological, social, political, economic, historical. The era is indicated (1963-1983) but almost ignored except for a reference to the draft {I should add here that I was about the same age as the characters were supposed to be when the story takes place.}

My sister has another “take.” She thinks that mystique of the “Great West,” the “Westward Migration, that Great Vanguard of Civilization and Liberty, essentially ended in 1805 when Clark (of Lewis & Clark) wrote in his journal ‘Ocian {sic} in view! O! the joy.’ Everything beyond that date...is anti-climax for the American West. Predictable, heroic, heart-breaking, horrible, hopeful, and Homeric. The sea stopped us....years of westward migration ended at the sea. We lost our drive, our ambition, our destiny, our Manifest Destiny when Clark saw the sea.” It has just taken generations for that reality to become evident.

True poverty is seldom portrayed realistically in the Western story. If it is, it is treated as quaint, or rustic, or out-of-date, seldom the reality it was and is! These two, like so many others at that time, are going nowhere. Ennis doesn’t even have a tenth

grade education. They have few options. Both have fathers of no value, Ennis an orphan, and Jack's never gave his son any advice or help or even watched his son perform in a rodeo, his own profession.

Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of human needs (1954) has a vivid illustration of the social, psychological, economic, triangle to illustrate what this means. Human beings need to have their basic needs met (food, shelter, clothing, income, safety) before they can ever think of the higher kinds of happiness, love, self-esteem, self-fulfillment, let alone have the interior strength to go against society's norms. Jack and Ennis have little awareness of the larger world or possibilities. The Kinsey report has already been issued, but probably these two had never even heard the name let alone made aware of the range of sexuality he discovered..

Film and literature

The film includes just about the entire short story word for word but doubles its length to 100 pages by a few additions (like portrayals of the unsatisfactory family lives of the men, the daughter of Ennis, a waitress he meets-- to underscore their situation and put it in stark contrast to everything else in their lives). Otherwise both story and film are focused almost entirely on the relationship between these two men.

The film works marvelously at expanding and opening up the story itself because the setting is so important The American West! Cowboy country! Words cannot express what images and visuals can, at least in the same way. The Cinematography by a Mexican American justly won an Academy Award The Actors of course not only flesh out the written descriptions but add the visual and the aural. Heath Ledger brings to life Ennis, a difficult character to portray, surprisingly well. The author has said that she was amazed how well the actors interpreted her descriptions, but she added that Heath Ledger did even more. He inhabited the character! Part of the power of film is its ability to show people's reactions to what is being said and done to one another. Here the film is brilliant, especially in portraying the women's responses to what they surmise and what they see. (The wives of Ennis and Jack and Jack's mother are particularly evocative.)

The film also tries to imitate the passage of time, the 20 years that this relationship continues. That is harder to do, but the director has slowed the pace enough (and has Jack grow a moustache) to let the viewer know time has passed. There are few references though to current events to let the viewer locate when this all took place. The film leaves out a lot of the erotic from the story, It leaves out, for example, the dreams that Ennis had after Jack dies..

The story and film begin and end in trailers (different ones), but with a similar idea. The film and story end with two extremely dramatic closet scenes (one in Jack's old bedroom and the other in Ennis's trailer). The screenwriters and film director (more than the author of the short story) seem to be trying to underscore the internalized and external homophobia back then and now.

In this film, especially, music adds another dimension. The composer, an Argentinian, Gustavo Santaolalla, justifiably won an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for it. The words are astonishingly appropriate. It is hard to believe that an Argentinian wrote music so evocative of American country and western music and words to match so closely what is happening in the film. Imagine, a Taiwanese director, a Mexican-American cinematographer, and an Argentinian composer having so much to do with enabling this film to embody the Western film genre so convincingly..

Adding the Bob Dylan/Willie Nelson song, "He was a Friend of Mine" was a perfect choice to end the film as was including Rufus Wainwright's "The Maker Makes." Otherwise Santaolalla's words and music ARE the film. It is worth quoting a few lines from some of the songs. This is one film where it is important to pay attention to the words and music.

Willie Nelson sings: *"He was a friend of mine/Every time I think of him/I just can't keep from crying/ He died on the road/ Never reaped what he could sow."*

Rufus Wainwright's "Maker Makes":

"One more chain I break/to get me closer to you./One more chain does the maker make/to keep me from bustin' through. Oh Lord, how I know/Oh Lord how I see, /That only can the maker make a happy man of me."

But it is Gustavo Santaolalla's words and music that undergird and parallel the film's meanings so well, like

"A Love That Will Never Grow Old" (which won a Golden Globe award)
"Just lay back in my arms for one more night/I've this crazy notion that calls me sometimes/ Saying this one's the love of our lives/Lean on me, let our hearts beat in time/ In a world that may say that we're wrong."

Or his: *"No One's Gonna Love You Like Me./ No one /No one can't you see."* . Or *"I don't want you to Say Goodbye"* *"All I want to do is live with you/Don't you know that's where our heart's belong"* Or still: *"I will Never Let you Go"* *"When I feel that lonesome prairie wind/I let my soul get back to you again. Even though this wasn't meant to be/ I will never let you go."*

The wonderful instrumentals throughout the film are an art work in their own right.

The title

The story and the film present the reader and viewer with options, places to put personal responses and reactions and leaving them open forcing the reader and viewer to become personally involved. The viewer is left, for example, to finish Ennis's concluding words in the story and film, "Jack I swear. . .". Some think he was ready to say "I love you" (words never mentioned either in the film or the story). What about adding something like the words, "If I knew then, what I know now! What a difference that would have made" to finish Ennis's concluding exclamation? Of course the saddest words are those it might have been.

My reading is that Jack's death has changed Ennis-- too late, of course, but for the better: ready to reach out and touch and be touched, more ready to open up. The film tries to give this take, but both the film and the story leave us all overwhelmed with sadness for so much gone wrong. Tragic in the way that everyone involved is hurt, but heroic in a sense that they both keep on loving and coming back although the outcome seems doubtful and dubious. Some viewers have even felt that the film gives people permission to love again: If these two poor, uneducated, 60's Western cowboys found it, it might be possible for anyone. In fact in an interview, the Director Ang Lee says that this film healed and enabled him "to love" making films again.

The title *Brokeback Mountain* ? On one level I think it refers to the poverty so evident throughout the film and story, always dignified, but always so pervasive and overwhelming. Poverty like this keeps both men from having many choices. Negative. Broke all the time (so unlike the traditional Western story).

But I am wondering also if it might refer to that American saying, “the straw that broke the camel’s back”. Was it finally the social, the psychological, the economic, the political surroundings, America itself, that finally broke them? The internal and external judgments about such relationships? The pervasive poverty and lack of options? Society’s negative judgments on such relationships? Only a year after the story was written, in 1998 a young man, Matthew Shepard, a young gay male, was hung on a fence to die outside Laramie, Wyoming, the home of the Univ. of Wyoming, probably the most enlightened region in the state!

How true D H Lawrence’s words sound after reading the story and seeing the film.. “America hurts, because it has a powerful disintegrative influence. . . .tense with latent violence and resistance.” And is Annie Proulx in some way tapping into and fulfilling James Fenimore Cooper’s dream beyond democracy “....of a new human relationship”? and will it in the words of D.H.Lawrence find release into a “new world, a new moral, a new landscape”? Could this film be a watershed in the way Americans think of themselves and gender and sexuality?

The film and the story, however, never try to step back and give the reader or viewer a message. We make our own conclusions, and I think both story and film can affect people differently depending on what the reader or viewer brings to it! That is why I think viewers reared and educated in the United States will read this story and see this film so differently than anyone else. Not better perhaps or more aware, but certainly having the American myth, the American dream, the American West, American hopes and dreams, disturbed and rethought--subverting the Western story and the American myth about ourselves to show the harsh contemporary reality! This is NOT a Western story about Roy Rogers and Dale Evans or John Wayne or the O.K. Corral! Those depicted unreality, romantic fiction; myths, that we wanted to believe about ourselves. The story and film reverse our expectations allowing new possible identities to emerge, possibly even (using D.H.Lawrence’s words) “finding release in a new world, a new moral and a new landscape.”. A lot to expect, to be sure, from a short story and a film, but perhaps it is a start in the right direction.

This is one of the few times that a work of literature has been so faithfully adapted into a screenplay and film. It “works” as a short story, as a screenplay, and as a film.

Read it and see it on its own terms!

¹ One answer to some of these perplexing reactions may lie precisely in the fact that WOMEN are so involved, as authors and characters. In fact mention must be made of the parallel phenomenon that probably some of the best contemporary fiction written about male homosexuals is written by women. So many could be mentioned, but among the best known are Mary Renault who wrote a series of excellent novels about homosexuality often in the ancient or classical world: *The King Must Die*, *The Bull from the Sea*, *The Praise Singer*, *The Last of the Wine*, *The Mask of Apollo*, *Fire from Heaven*, *The Persian Boy*, *Funeral Games*. Of course there is the even more controversial, frequently filmed, and popular work of Patricia Highsmith (who also wrote using the name Claire Morgan): *Strangers on a Train* (filmed by Alfred Hitchcock), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (one film version starred Alain Delon and another Matt Damon), *The American Friend* (starring Dennis Hopper) are inspired by Ripley, *Ripleyunderground*, *Ripley’s Game*(also made into a very popular film with John Malcovich), *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*,

Ripley Under Water, and others. Just as interesting is the fact that Patricia Highsmith also wrote lesbian novels under her pseudonym (Claire Morgan) *The Price of Salt*, *Small G*; *A Summer Idyll* and others. Significantly there have also been few male authors of good fiction about lesbians. The answers to this last question are often complex and go beyond one obvious conclusion: Women are better able to perceive and even evoke the feminine side of the male. But why did and do so many critics and so much of the public have difficulty even deciding if the story and film are a love story, a gay love story, or really something else and more significant?

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Brokeback Mountain. The Film. Director Ang Lee, Cast: Ennis DelMar: Heath Ledger; Jack Twist: Jake Gyllenhaal; Alma Del Mar: Michelle Williams; Lureen Twist: Anne Hathaway; Joe Aguirre: Randy Quaid, Music and Soundtrack: George Santaolalla