

Amy Brancolli, “‘Brokeback Mountain’: A Tragedy of Love, Lies, Silence,” *Houston Chronicle*, Dec. 16, 2005. (4 stars)

<http://www.chron.com/entertainment/movies/article/Brokeback-Mountain-1510394.php>

Yes, it's a gay cowboy movie. But lazy designations will go only so far with *Brokeback Mountain*, a film about love and the cost of lying that's exquisite in its beauty, painful in its truths.

Directed by Ang Lee (back from *The Hulk*) and based on a story by E. Annie Proulx, *Brokeback Mountain* begins in 1963 and ends around 20 years later, at the heart-sore conclusion of an off-and-on affair. Except it's never off and rarely on — and even when it's over, it isn't. For the tragedy that colors this broad Western canvas is a tragedy of inaction as much as action, of fear as much as love. It's the tragedy of silence.

In the world of Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger), two men can't keep house together. They first meet while tending sheep for a rancher (a gruff, steady Randy Quaid) in Wyoming. Ennis stays at base camp on Brokeback Mountain, in charge of supplies and meals. Jack sleeps with the herd to keep predators at bay.

It's just the two of them, shell-mouthed Ennis and voluble Jack, and for a while Lee's movie has the homespun, companionable feel that comes from roasting hotdogs by the fire.

When a single frigid night turns friends into lovers, these mountain scenes become something more — a refuge, or an island of denial. "You know I'm not queer," says Ennis, and Jack replies, "Me neither." At the close of their first summer they head down the mountain and away, into straight, parallel lives of marriage and fatherhood. Four years later, they meet and head up Brokeback. Some months later, the same. Fishing trip, they tell their wives. Fishless, they return.

That's the rhythm of the film: love on the mountain, lies down below. The cycle repeats with sad inevitability, getting sadder and more inevitable as the years roll on. The upbeat, ingenuous Jack asks Ennis to make a life with him, but even as he says it, even as hope twangs in Gyllenhaal's voice like the soundtrack's steel guitar, you sense it won't be. Ennis won't do it. As a boy he saw the corpse of a gay man bloodied by hate, so he knows what the consequences can be. "Two guys livin' together," he says. "No way."

All of this depends on Ledger. When he first cracked his mouth to speak, I was amazed any sound came out; the space between his lips didn't look big enough. To say that Ledger's work (already nominated for a Golden Globe and bound to be nominated for an Oscar) is a masterpiece of reticence doesn't do it justice. It ranks among the classic, virile, laconic-cowboy performances in the annals of Western movies — and so what if the role is gay?

The screenplay (by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana) is taciturn in its own way, opting to show rather than tell its biggest revelations. Nothing is gratuitous. When Ennis makes love to his wife, and we see him — with one simple gesture — yearn for Jack, we see the resignation on her face, too. It is as bleak and profound a moment as you'll find all year, and it reveals the movie's single greatest strength: It demonizes no one, not Ennis and Jack, not their wives (Michelle Williams and Anne Hathaway). All are players in this tale of tragic mortal longing. You'll only understand it if you're human.

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