

David Edelstein, "Lasso Me Tender," *Slate.com*. Dec. 8, 2005

In dubbing *Brokeback Mountain* (Focus Features) "Marlboro men in love," I'm not being flip. OK, I'm not only being flip. Ang Lee's films often focus on the tension between people's formal roles—those ritualized, culturally mandated poses they feel compelled to strike—and the passions under the surface that struggle to express themselves. Even manners as elaborate as the ones in the martial-artsy (a reader's phrase) *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* were destabilized by the characters' unruly ardor and volcanic sex drives.

So, in *Brokeback Mountain*—adapted by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana from a plain but evocative story by Annie Proulx—you have two guys with slim hips and dungarees and cowboy hats pulled low. They lean against pickups, smoke cigarettes, and trade monosyllables (if that). They're suitable for framing. But in the course of an early 1960s summer herding sheep on an isolated Wyoming mountain, they find themselves growing closer and closer and ... yes, on Brokeback Mountain they make the beast with two broken backs.

Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger play the men. Gyllenhaal's Jack Twist is the more extroverted one, the rodeo rider, the cowboy who makes cow eyes. Ledger's Ennis Del Mar is the quintessential Westerner of few words, and the words he says are not always audible: He speaks with a Wild West lockjaw that's sometimes annoying but also weirdly hypnotic. Ledger's performance is prime Oscar bait: He's ostentatiously immobile, with uncanny low tones—his voice is 50 fathoms deep. The whole performance is subtextual.

What does Brokeback Mountain (the place) symbolize? It's the natural world in which society's strictures fall away and these men can be true to their own natures—where dinners of canned beans yield to elk-hunting, shirtless romps, and hungry coupling. Lee and his cinematographer, Rodrigo Prieto, mirror the forces in play with vast mountain backdrops full of mysterious planes, huge cumulous clouds, slashes of lightning in the far distance, and hailstones the size of apples. When Jake and Ennis return, as they must, to civilization, they live amid squat, faceless, pre-fab buildings set far apart from one another, and the flat landscapes once again mirror their emotions—now flat-lined.

They take wives—Michelle Williams as Ennis' high-school sweetheart, Alma, and Anne Hathaway as Lureen, a kind of Texas rodeo queen with a wealthy daddy who's the perfect trophy for an up-and-comer like Jake. But these are passionless unions, and Ennis' drift into unemployment and alcoholism is relentless. Despite the physical distance between them (Ennis is in Wyoming, Jake in Texas), they come together again and again and head back to the wild—aware that if they're caught, they could be lynched by all their neighbors, those less-than-liberal "real" men who wouldn't know a real man if he fucked them in the ass. (Or maybe that's the only way they would know a real man.) The lovers wonder: Can you build on Brokeback Mountain?

Cartman on *South Park* famously dismissed independent movies as "gay cowboys eating pudding." I have no idea where the pudding image came from, but I'm bound to say that Brokeback Mountain could use a little more of it—by which I mean more sweat and other bodily fluids. Ang Lee's formalism is so extreme that it's often laughable, and the sex is depicted as a holy union: Gay love has never been so sacred. On the other hand, Lee treats the wives as either sexless drudges (Williams) or lacquered mannequins (Hathaway). Williams gives a fine performance (more Oscar bait) as the kind of wife who inevitably gets labeled "long-suffering," but she seems to exist only in relation to her husband, and only then to drag him down.

As distant as I felt from the movie, there were people around me weeping uncontrollably at the end—gay men, some of them, and a few women who were moved by the spectacle of cowboys in tears. (This is actually something of a chick flick.) And I did find *Brokeback Mountain* more powerful in retrospect, when its tone and images and emotions lingered beyond all its elevated Oscar-worthiness. There were also moments in which Lee deconstructed the cowboy persona so completely that he made me wonder: Are a lot of cowboys, like, totally gay?