

J. Hoberman, "The Lusty Men," *Village Voice*, Sept. 13 2005
<http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-09-13/film/the-lusty-men/>

TORONTO—Even before news arrived that BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN won the Golden Lion in Venice, Ang Lee's epic love story was the talk of Toronto. Conveniently described as a "gay western," it was more aptly characterized by one festival programmer as the "gay *Gone With the Wind*." Will America give a damn? The western has always been the most romantically homosocial of modes, and the true cowboy love between tight-lipped Heath Ledger and doe-eyed Jake Gyllenhaal precipitates the not-so-latent theme of early-'70s oaters like *The Wild Rovers* and *The Hired Hand*. Some 40 minutes too long, *Brokeback Mountain* is pumped with lyrical Marlboro-man imagery. But perhaps that inflation is necessary. The movie earns its pathos through Ledger's performance, but the closet has never seemed more cruelly constricted than in comparison to the wide-open spaces of what Americans call "God's country."

Although *Brokeback Mountain* is a landmark, its tale of undying passion will be no one's idea of obsessive personal filmmaking. Still, Toronto offers something for everyone, and the screens were alive with the sound of auteurs crashing. "I hear that TAKESHIS is Kitano's *Nutty Professor*," one colleague hazarded hopefully. The movie is self-conscious enough to make your teeth ache, but Takeshi Kitano playing sad clown and Mr. Tough Guy lacks the liberating force of Jerry Lewis's Dean Martin impersonation. For all its doubling, Takeshis' is oppressively solipsistic; Kitano's attempt to reconcile his various personae is a structuralist editing exercise—the same riffs repeated over and over to no particular end....

J. Hoberman "Blazing Saddles," *Village Voice*, Nov 22 2005
<http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-11-22/film/blazing-saddles/>

Brokeback Mountain, which opens (finally) next week, is less a movie than a chunk of American landscape, or perhaps, as director Ang Lee suggests, a pioneering settlement on Hollywood's "one last frontier." Are those storm heads massed around Lee's conveniently designated "gay western"—or is it only a radiant cloud of hype?

As all media savants know, *Brokeback Mountain* has transformed Annie Proulx's 1997 *New Yorker* short story into a sagebrush Tristan and Isolde in which Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) are the tragic loves of each other's lives. *The Drudge Report* has already managed to dredge up a playwright from the land of Matthew Shepard, claiming that she never met a homosexual cowboy and accusing *Brokeback Mountain* of ruining the state's image. Focus, which finally financed a script (by professional westerner Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana) that had been languishing for eight years, must be hoping that some higher-powered culture warriors will attack their movie as a manifestation of the Antichrist—or, at least, the anti-Mel Gibson.

Hysteria can only help: From the opening scene of semiconscious cruising to the final scene of ultimate bereavement, Lee's accomplishment is to make this saga a universal romance. *Brokeback Mountain* is the most straightforward love story—and in some ways the straightest—to come out of Hollywood, at least since *Titanic*. (Several websites offer the posters for comparison.)

One summer, chatty Jack and taciturn Ennis are hired to watch some curmudgeon's flock. It's a boy's-life Eden, camping out in a tent under the stars in a national park environment (actually Alberta), and one cold, liquor-lubricated night the thing just happens. Are these tough yet tender shepherds fighting or fucking or just doing what comes naturally? Wouldn't you know that would be the night the coyote picks off a sheep? And that soon after, their boss (Randy Quaid) spies them wrassling?

A last tussle, a farewell of unspoken regret, and a venture toward normality. Ennis takes a wife (Michelle Williams); Jack meets a nice cowgirl (Anne Hathaway) who is both sexually forward and born rich. Both men father children. But a nervous reunion washes away the sand castles of their current lives in a raging tide of feelings, and sends them hightailing for the nearest motel, the vulnerable Mrs. Ennis sobbing quietly in the background.

Graduating from weird adolescent roles to bronc-bustin' cowboy here and combat-primed marine in *Jarhead*, Gyllenhaal is a throwback to the (relatively) sensitive, if not androgynous, male stars of the late '60s and early '70s—the period during which *Brokeback* is ostensibly set. But moony as Gyllenhaal is, he's only barely able to hold up his side of the equation; it's the self-contained Ledger's repression and scary, sorrowful, hard-luck rage that fuel the movie. (While a \$13 million production like *Brokeback Mountain* will have to make some real money to lasso any Oscars, Ledger and Williams, the real-life mother of his child, seem a cinch for nominations.)

The western has always been the most idyllically homosocial of modes—and often one concerned with the programmatic exclusion of women. This is hardly a secret and thus the true cowboy love between tight-lipped Ennis and doe-eyed Jack precipitates the not-so-latent theme of early-'70s oaters like *The Wild Rovers* and *The Hired Hand*—not to mention Andy Warhol's hilarious disco western *Lonesome Cowboys* and its more conventional Hollywood analogue *Midnight Cowboy*. (Conventional up to a point, that is: *Midnight Cowboy* not only made a gay fashion statement but included Joe Buck's incredulous cri de coeur, "Are you telling me that John Wayne is a fag?!")

Inflated with Marlboro Man imagery and pumped with pregnant pauses, *Brokeback Mountain* is, like most Lee films, a good half-hour too long. The director wrings as much pathos as he can out of every Same Time, Next Year "fishing trip," but the guys' first reunion and parallel Thanksgivings aside, the real handkerchief moment comes late in the day, when forlorn Ennis visits Jack's parents and sees his life pass before his eyes.

The sex scenes may be hot, but it's difficult to believe that Madonna found them "shocking." All is tasteful, and far more convincing than the movie's representation of passion is its only-the-lonely evocation of a punishing social order. The closet has never seemed more cruelly constricting than in comparison to the wide open spaces of what Americans are pleased to call "God's country."