

Mick LaSalle, "Brokeback Mountain," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 8, 2005
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"Brokeback Mountain" is already being talked about as the "gay cowboy movie," shorthand that neither does it justice nor gives the right impression. It makes it sound either cavalier or easy to categorize, when the relationship depicted in the movie is a lot more complicated and difficult to pinpoint.

It's about two men who are in love, and it makes no sense. It makes no sense in terms of who they are, where they are, how they live and how they see themselves. It makes no sense in terms of what they do for a living or how they would probably vote in a national election.

It makes no sense, except in one place in the world, the place where it started, on Brokeback Mountain in Wyoming. And though they come down from that mountain and go about their lives, they keep going back to it, over the course of years, because however much the love doesn't make sense, it's real -- so real, it makes their lives unreal. There are kids, marriages, jobs, nights of drinking, heterosexual flings, in-laws and holidays to celebrate, and they do everything they're expected to do, but numb. Then every so often, they meet back up on the mountain and get to be themselves for a few stolen days. The situation carries a lot of emotional power, largely because it's so specific and yet undefined. The two guys -- cowboys -- are in love with each other, but we don't ever quite know if they're in love with each other because they're gay, or if they're gay because they're in love with each other.

It's possible that if these fellows had never met, one or both would have gone through life straight. That's one way of looking at the movie, though only one. In any case, because their attraction is not defined as some inevitable consequence of sexual orientation but as something that just happens to them, we see them as irreplaceable to each other -- like Romeo and Juliet. There's no notion that either could go out tomorrow or 10 years from now and find someone else.

"Brokeback Mountain," based on Annie Proulx's 1997 story, is directed by Ang Lee in a style that pays attention to the nuances of expression, to the thoughts and emotions being articulated between the words and in the pauses. This is necessary, because cowboys don't do much talking. Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal play Ennis and Jack, respectively, who meet when they're hired to tend a herd of sheep in Wyoming in 1963. They're both tight-lipped fellows, but Ledger is the more closed off of the two. He adopts a manner of speaking that suggests repression, a pressing down of the vocal cords as though jealous of any word that might escape. It's up to interpretation whether he knows, at first, the thing that he's trying to hide. In any case, nature will out, and it does one night, with a suddenness bordering on violence, when the two men share a tent.

The idea of two Marlboro men having sex in a tent is, in itself, an unexpected twist on a traditional image of American manhood. They cook beans, make coffee, share rodeo stories and do all the things that cowboys usually do. They are Western outdoorsmen in the true American tradition, and they can't be transplanted, which makes their love all the more difficult. You can't be a gay couple in a small Western town in 1963, and you can't be a cowboy in New York or San Francisco.

Both actors do memorable work, but Ledger has the better role, and he makes the strongest choices. He gives Ennis a voice and mannerisms that are utterly idiosyncratic, and then inhabits those choices psychologically, making sense of the locked-down speech, the haunted look and the strong but diffident manner. He completely transforms himself. It's a performance that was thought through in detail and then lived in the moment, and it's one of the most beautiful things in movies this year.

Lee's attention to the unspoken carries over into the domestic scenes, of the men with their respective wives. As with the men, there are things the wives don't dare say out loud, as well, but we can read their thoughts and see the toll the years take. Anne Hathaway, the star of the innocuous "Princess Diaries" movies, plays Jack's wife, in a committed portrait of a woman getting blonder and blonder, and more bitter and pinched, over the course of some 15 years. It's a brilliant and insightful performance, a time-lapse photography demonstration of what happens to someone who expected to be loved, but wasn't.

-- Advisory: Sex scenes, adult subject matter, strong language.