

THE TWILIGHT OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY COWBOY MASCULINITY : *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN* (ANG LEE, 2005)

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RÉSUMÉ

Un peu plus de dix ans après la sortie de *Brokeback Mountain*, on s'accorde à voir dans ce film une *bromance* (film romantique masculin), deux termes contradictoires. Il reconnaît et dénie montrer « ce que les hommes peuvent faire entre eux » pour reprendre la formule énigmatique d'Henning Bech. Il célèbre et en même temps fait le deuil de la masculinité crépusculaire, hétérosexuelle, solitaire, homophobique du cowboy du XX^e siècle. Tout en apportant à l'homme blanc sans éducation des classes populaires quelque chose de neuf – l'éclat d'une liberté sexuelle subjective à laquelle il n'avait jamais accédé auparavant, et qui était totalement inimaginable jusqu'à maintenant –, ce film est malgré tout une fable prudente. Il s'inscrit dans le paradoxe de la nostalgie et du fantasme dans la zone limite, impossible, d'où surgit le désir, dans le fantasme nostalgique du cowboy comme héros américain authentique, mais aussi solitaire et pauvre, le produit réel ou métaphorique de familles brisées et de pères absents. Le film active le fantasme d'un amour idéal et érotique et en même temps propose l'allégorie d'une nation abimée par des promesses trahies et des idéaux dégradés, qui dans sa version la plus rétrograde pourrait être exprimée dix ans plus tard par le slogan de campagne du candidat républicain qui a gagné l'élection de 2016 : « *Make America Great Again* ».

MOTS-CLÉS : WESTERN – MASCULINITÉ – COWBOY – HOMOPHOBIE – NOSTALGIE – PARTI RÉPUBLICAIN – RELATION ROMANTIQUE MASCULINE.

ABSTRACT

A little more than a decade after *Brokeback Mountain* was released, we recognize that the film belongs to the bromance genre, and as such it manages to do two, contradictory things at once. It both avows and disavows, in Henning Bech's enigmatic phrase, « what men can do with one another. » It both celebrates and mourns the twilight of nominally heterosexual, lonely, homophobic, twentieth-century cowboy masculinity. While offering the uneducated, working-class, white male something new— a glimpse of the sexual and subjective freedom that has never been available to him before, and which indeed had been all but unimaginable until now – the film is nevertheless a cautionary tale. It is inscribed in the paradoxes of nostalgia and fantasy, in the impossible, liminal zone from which desire springs : in the nostalgic fantasy of cowboys as authentic American

heroes, but also as lonely and needy, the products of real or metaphorical broken families and absent fathers. The film both animates a fantasy of ideal and erotic love and offers an allegory of a damaged nation of tarnished ideals and betrayed promise, which in its most retrograde variation would be expressed ten years later by the campaign slogan of the Republican nominee in the 2016 presidential election : « Make America Great Again. »

KEY WORDS : WESTERN – COWBOY MASCULINITY – HOMOPHOBIA – NOSTALGIA – REPUBLICAN – BROMANCE

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In one of many fine essays that have been written about *Brokeback Mountain* over the years, Jim Kitses addresses the all-important question of allegory : « What is Brokeback-ness ? » he asks. His answer helps to explain why the film enjoyed a phenomenal popular and critical success : « A resonant allegorical reading implicit in terms of the Western's ideology and landscape is the notion of a damaged nation of tarnished ideals and betrayed promise »¹ (Kitses, 2007 : 25).

With the hindsight of the decade since the film was released, and fifteen years into the new millennium – a very disorienting period for many that was symbolically inaugurated by the « 9/11 » terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 and followed by the « cowboy diplomacy » of the Bush-Cheney administration and its never-ending « War on Terror »² (Allen & Ratnesar, 2006) – *Brokeback Mountain* as a cultural phenomenon can be contextualized as a moment of nostalgia for a disappearing American « cowboy masculinity » cherished by conservatives and progressives alike. Most unexpectedly, perhaps, the film appealed to mainstream straight audiences and also to politically conservative viewers, whose response to the film, when measured against the homophobia underpinning the narrative, revealed the extent of the changes of public attitude regarding homosexuality in the last decade of the twentieth and first decade of the twenty-first century.

Both conservatives and progressives can read the film in the allegorical terms Kitses suggests. But they will likely be at odds over which national ideals allegorized by the film have been tarnished and what promise has been betrayed. The film's principal characters Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger) can be seen, in Kitses' phrase, as « authentic American heroes, self-reliant and brave, honorable and loyal » but reviews of the film reveal that

¹ Subsequent page numbers will be cited in the text.

² The period included the felt strains of social and economic trends that would eventually result in the U.S. financial crisis of 2007-2008 and subprime mortgage crisis of 2007-2009; the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010 allowing gays, lesbians, and bisexuals to serve openly in the United States Armed Forces; and the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2015 in favor of same-sex marriage nationwide.

the homophobia inscribed in the narrative remained a largely unexamined category.

The film commemorates the end of an era – the end of a broad range of interrelated ideological imperatives underpinning the American patriarchal hegemony – even as it depicts the death-throes of that era and the beginnings of a conservative backlash, which was most vividly on display in the ghastly spectacle of the collapse of the traditional Republican Party and the rise of what has come to be called « Trumpism, » a variation of neoliberalism described by Greil Marcus in early January 2017, thus :

[Donald] Trump has created a government that on paper is only steps away from realizing the dream of generations ... the repeal of any notion of the Federal government playing an affirmative role in national life, « to protect the general welfare » : the repeal, in essence, of 20th century democracy. That means Social Security, the FAA, the Food and Drug Administration, the Center for Disease Control, the National Weather Service, and countless other institutions of American life. It means the dismantling of laws and institutions against discrimination of any and all kinds, to the point, perhaps, of allowing states and municipalities to re-institute de jure racial segregation along with the abolition of abortion rights, the abrogation of rights of women to legal equality with men, and the criminalization of homosexuality (none of that sounds that far away for me; that was the America I grew up in).

Trumpism, *avant la lettre*, culminated in the election of Donald Trump (running as a Republican) to the United States presidency in 2016. Far from being an aberration in the evolution of the Republican Party, Trump's endorsement by the party revealed that, to avoid the appearance of collapse, the party had to acknowledge in some fashion that Trump was indeed the face of what it had become. Throughout President Obama's two terms in office, a great many Republicans found it increasingly difficult to disguise the fact that their core values, going back to the very origins of modern conservatism in the 1950s and 1960s, are sexist, racist, and, at the ruling-class end of the Republican spectrum, unscrupulously avaricious³.

³ The Republican Party, straining to give the appearance of still being a responsible, parliamentary party, rapidly disintegrated after George W. Bush's presidency and the election of Barack Obama. « It is important to bear in mind that the Republicans have long abandoned the

COWBOY POLITICIANS AND THE NEOLIBERAL TURN

Republican politicians have been much attracted to the Western idiom, although successive failures to regain the White House after George W. Bush's presidency and the widely acknowledged catastrophe of Bush's performance as president appeared to diminish its appeal with both voters and politicians. Arizona Senator John McCain, for example, the failed Republican nominee in the 2008 presidential election, liked to call himself a « maverick » (originally a term for an unbranded range animal, deriving from the nineteenth-century Texas cattleman Samuel Maverick, which came to mean, sometimes indeed pejoratively, an independently minded person), and he chose for the title of one of his books: *Worth the Fighting For : The Education of an American Maverick, and the Heroes Who Inspired Him*⁴. But during the most dramatic days of the financial crisis in September 2008, McCain the maverick revealed himself to be quite out of his depth. On 2 October 2008, *Vanity Fair* published « The John McCain Campaign-Suspension Timeline » in which the magazine observed that « the last two weeks have thrown Wall Street into a tailspin ... But they seem to have weighed especially heavily on Senator John McCain, who went so far as to suspend his campaign – and almost cancel the first presidential debate – in order to address the crisis. Heroic altruism or desperate act of politicking ? You decide. »⁵

On 15 September (« Black Monday » – so-called because on this day the global financial services firms Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch collapsed),

pretense of functioning as a normal parliamentary party », Noam Chomsky told Vijay Prashad in an interview on 19 September 2015 : « Rather, they have become a 'radical insurgency' that scarcely seeks to participate in normal parliamentary politics. » He went on to say : « Since Ronald Reagan, the leadership has plunged so far into the pockets of the very rich and the corporate sector that they can attract votes only by mobilizing sectors of the population that have not previously been an organized political force, among them extremist evangelical Christians, now probably the majority of Republican voters; remnants of the former slave-holding States; nativists who are terrified that « they » are taking our white Christian Anglo-Saxon country away from us ; and others who turn the Republican primaries into spectacles remote from the mainstream of modern society – though not the mainstream of the most powerful country in world history ».

⁴ See David Brock and Paul Waldman, « McCain's 'Maverick' Myth Is the Media's Creation, » *AlterNet*, 30 March 2008, http://www.alternet.org/story/80724/mccain's_'maverick'_myth_is_the_media's_creation.

⁵ *Vanity Fair*, « The John McCain Campaign-Suspension Timeline. »

McCain declared that the « fundamentals of the economy are strong ». *Vanity Fair* invited its readers to decide whether McCain's response demonstrated « a heartening faith in the American people » or rather, « how little he understands the worst economic crisis of our time ». A few days later, on 18 September, McCain stated that, if he were president, he would fire S.E.C. chairman Chris Cox. *Vanity Fair* asked rhetorically – indeed derisively – whether, in the opinion of its readers, this showed « how his maverick-y qualities could help bring accountability back to Wall Street » or whether it revealed that McCain appeared not to realize this « is something a president doesn't really have the power to do ». The *Vanity Fair* piece continues in this vein of suggesting that the candidate who traffics in the iconography and symbolism of the Western hero is unequal to the task of managing a twenty-first-century, national/global, financial/economic crisis. Observing wryly that ten hours before the scheduled debate McCain quietly announced the resumption of his campaign, the magazine wonders if he did so, « because the sheriff can't ride off into the sunset when the world needs him » or because he was « hoping his suspension bluff [would] catch Obama off guard ».

McCain's running mate Sarah Palin (from Alaska, « the last frontier »), was also keen to choose a title for her 2009 memoir from the Western lexicon, and like McCain with his choice of « maverick » to describe himself, she appeared to misunderstand the meaning of her choice of idiom – to « go rogue ». (Her memoir is called *Going Rogue : An American Life*.) Just as « mavericks are by definition bad at following rules and bad at process » (as one sales and marketing advisor put it) (Suster, 2010), so too is a person who goes rogue. When the term was first used in the 1830s to refer to an elephant that has become violent (because it has been separated from its herd or been injured), it meant « behaving in an erratic or dangerous fashion ». The online *Urban Dictionary* now defines it as : « To cease to follow orders; to act on one's own, usually against expectation or instruction. To pursue one's own interests »⁶.

⁶ *Urban Dictionary*, [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=go rogue](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=go%20rogue).

Republican Governor of Texas Rick Perry, meanwhile, who made a career out of being from a maverick state (Texas is known as the Lone Star State, and Samuel Maverick, as it happens, was one of the signatories of the Texas Declaration of Independence in 1863), called his 2012 memoir : *Fed Up! Our Fight to Save America from Washington*⁷. In August 2014, Perry started wearing glasses in public, in an attempt, according to an article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, « to soften his cowboy image for one that's more humble ». The bemused *Monitor* went on to explain : « The glasses are considered a centerpiece of his rehabilitation effort nationally, following a disastrous 2012 presidential bid »⁸.

In an essay about Dorothy M. Johnson's short story « The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, » Daryl W. Palmer goes so far as to suggest that the very term « cowboy », when used to describe a man who draws on the language and iconography of the Western in his pursuit of « power or money or fame », suggests « slipperiness » :

From Buffalo Bill to John Wayne to George W. Bush, men have swaggered theatrically while claiming to speak for the Americas. Although their messages differ in many particulars, these men find their popular support by appealing to their audience's identification with the Old West. Masters of the utterance, they may be angling for power or money or fame, but they always claim to speak the simple truth and back up their talk with the threat of violence. They often (to appropriate a bit of contemporary slang useful for its suggestion of slipperiness) come off as cowboys. As a rule, people either worship or despise these bold men(Palmer, 2009)

During the 2016 presidential elections, Donald Trump's campaign slogan, « Make America Great Again » would express the nostalgia of the billionaire real-estate developer and reality-show celebrity's message of a promise of a return to a lost era – not of cowboys, those « authentic American heroes, self-reliant and brave, honorable and loyal » (for this was the fantasy peddled by Presidents George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan before him), but of white, patriarchal

⁷ See Lewis (2015), « Rick Perry, George W. Bush, and the death of the cowboy conservative », *The week*.

⁸ Associated Press. « What's the deal with Rick Perry's \$500 hipster glasses ? »

privilege. Indeed, as Elad Nehorai wrote on 11 January 2017 in « How Trump's Primitive Masculinity Tempted and Confused American Conservatives »:

You, the traditional, the conservatives, the religious, you voted for Trump because he promised to make America manly again. But you voted for a primitivism that betrays your own beliefs... He represents a masculinity you feel has been missing from the White House. You are angry at the weak-kneed policies of the last eight years. You want to get back to the basics of what it means to be a real leader: manliness.⁹

If George W. Bush, John McCain and others in the Republican Party had bankrupted the image of the cowboy for a generation of politicians to come, Donald Trump would successfully tap into another great American myth : the United States as a « Land of Opportunity ». He campaigned on the notion that « America » was a damaged nation of tarnished ideals and betrayed promise, and he insinuated that a revitalized America under his leadership would be, first and foremost, one of and for white men, whose proper place used to be (and ought to be again) at the top of the societal pyramid – with his campaign slogan implying that the proof that this « America » used to be « great » was the fact that it had made him a billionaire.

It is in this neoliberal socioeconomic and political climate – already well formed by 2005 when *Brokeback Mountain* was released, and resulting in unprecedented levels of inequality in the United States – that the contradictions surrounding the struggles for ownership of the cowboy as symbol of traditional, heterosexual, American masculinity became dire. The « cowboy » ethos of movie Westerns and of Republican politicians who identify with the romance of the Western hero is echoed in the neoliberalism of our contemporary moment. For our purposes, the « neoliberal period, » as Noam Chomsky calls it, dates at least from Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981 – 1989) to the present, although more properly, as Susan George said in « A Short History of Neoliberalism », a speech she gave in Bangkok in 1999 at the Conference on Economic Sovereignty in a

⁹ Elad Nehorai (2017), « How Trump's Primitive Masculinity Tempted and Confused American Conservatives », *Haaretz*.

Globalizing World: « [For the term] to make any sense, [one has] to start even further back, some 50 years ago, just after the end of World War II ». Briefly, as George puts it : « The whole point of neo-liberalism is that the market mechanism should be allowed to direct the fate of human beings. The economy should dictate its rules to society, not the other way around. And just as [Karl] Polanyi foresaw [in 1944, in his « masterwork, *The Great Transformation*... a fierce critique of 19th-century industrial, market-based society »], this doctrine is leading us directly towards the ‘demolition of society’ » (George, 2015).

Christopher Sharrett, in a *tour de force* essay about *Brokeback Mountain*, draws a link between the cowboy as emblem of the Western genre and the end of white patriarchy’s murderous drive always to dominate the « other » :

The American ideal of the strong, silent male depends upon the acceptance and even idealization of repression, of concealing the deepest need behind a façade of denial (which is the stony-faced visage of the archetypal cowboy). This may be seen as a gender code adjacent to a national program of annihilation and conquest, whose coming-home-to-roost is the terrain explored by *Brokeback Mountain*. (Sharrett, 2009: 17-18)

From what we might call the progressive point of view, the crude (and cruel) philosophy of neoliberal economics that has overtaken the United States in recent decades is responsible for the « hardscrabble world » in which Jack and Ennis find it so hard to survive (the film’s action takes place between 1963 and the mid-1980s) ; and the homophobia underpinning the dominant style of masculinity in their conservative society is responsible for their emotional impoverishment and, in Jack’s case, death.

COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET

Brokeback Mountain is nostalgic for a number of features of the fictional world of the movie Western, chief among them being the mystique surrounding the figure of the (nominally heterosexual) cowboy, whose image, on the one hand – to the dismay of many contemporary neopatriarchs and conservatives – has

been queered by the rise of the gay rights movement¹⁰ ; and on the other – to the dismay of liberals and progressives – has been tarnished by the uglier realities of Republican Party ideology. Now that he is out of the ideological closet, as it were, the average cowboy, we are forced to recognize, is as likely to be queer as he is to be a Republican.¹¹

The notion that the worldview of most cowboys resembles that of the average Republican is perhaps counterintuitive, given the historically close convergence of white hetero-patriarchal cowboy masculinity and Republican ideals, for the cowboy has traditionally been an itinerant farm worker, closer to Mexican immigrants than white settlers, and he is often romanticized for precisely the qualities that set him apart from settlers: his mobility, his love of uncomplicated homosociality (and discomfort with women), his hatred of fences and property, and his subordinate position in relation to landowners. The latter are the ones who in Westerns are often portrayed as proto-Republicans.

For liberals and progressives, *Brokeback Mountain* can be seen as nostalgic for the dignity of the cowboy who has not yet been compromised by the neoliberal values of cynical politicians like George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan, who played the cowboy, with blue jeans and boots and swagger, or been sold out to corporate power by New Democrats like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. As the 2016 U.S. presidential elections revealed, however, lower-class whites – the

¹⁰ For my purposes, the symbolic turning point in the rise of the gay rights movement occurs in 1969 with the Stonewall riots: « The Stonewall riots transform the gay rights movement from one limited to a small number of activists into a widespread protest for equal rights and acceptance. Patrons of a gay bar in New York's Greenwich Village, the Stonewall Inn, fight back during a police raid on June 27, sparking three days of riots. » (« The American Gay Rights Movement: A Timeline, » <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0761909.html>.) The queering of the cowboy in mainstream culture was perhaps signaled by the success of the song « Macho Man » (1978), the second single recorded by the camp American disco group « Village People, » and by the group's follow-up single, « Y.M.C.A, » (1978), which would become two of the most popular hits of the 1970s. The four members of the group dressed in costumes depicting American masculine cultural stereotypes : the Native American, the soldier, the construction worker, the cowboy, and the leatherman. Other hits queering the group's chosen masculine stereotypes included: « Go West » (1979) and « In the Navy » (1979).

¹¹ Selfconsciousness about the sexism and racism of the traditional cowboy's politics was allowed to surface as critique only rarely in studio-era Westerns—most memorably in films starring John Wayne: for example, as an inflexible and paternalistic capitalist and patriarch in *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948), and as a pathologically driven racist in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956).

cowboy classes – are angry. And it should not surprise us, Chris Hedges argues, that – feeling « politically disempowered and disengaged, » and having been for so long « ignored and reviled by the establishment » – some of them should « discover a voice and a sense of empowerment » in fascism :

There are tens of millions of Americans, especially lower-class whites, rightfully enraged at what has been done to them, their families and their communities. They have risen up to reject the neoliberal policies and political correctness imposed on them by college-educated elites from both political parties: lower-class whites are embracing an American fascism. These Americans want a kind of freedom – a freedom to hate... They want the freedom to idealize violence and the gun culture. They want the freedom to have enemies, to physically assault Muslims, undocumented workers, African-Americans, homosexuals and anyone who dares criticize their cryptofascism. They want the freedom to celebrate historical movements and figures that the college-educated elites condemn, including the Ku Klux Klan and the Confederacy. They want the freedom to ridicule and dismiss intellectuals, ideas, science and culture. They want the freedom to silence those who have been telling them how to behave. And they want the freedom to revel in hypermasculinity, racism, sexism and white patriarchy. These are the core sentiments of fascism. These sentiments are engendered by the collapse of the liberal state¹².

In *Brokeback Mountain*, the « cowboys » Jack and Ennis have not yet been radicalized¹³. Both progressive and conservative viewers can empathize – and even identify – with them because they are victims (and because we do not know whether in 2016 they would have voted for Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, or Donald Trump). Not all movie cowboys are proto-Trump voters – the Western genre offers many films in which the social analysis takes place outside the parameters of fascism that so much discontent now feeds into. As victims of a corporatized and homophobic society, and as characters in a film released in 2005, Jack and Ennis are poised to discover their voice, and to act – but we do not know how they would « vote », because the real subject of the film of course

¹² Chris Hedges (2016), « The Revenge of the Lower Classes and the Rise of American Fascism », *Truthdig*.

¹³ Strictly speaking, Jack and Ennis are not cowboys (during their first summer together at *Brokeback Mountain*) but shepherds – a step down in the Western's hierarchy of honorable «masculine » identities.

is the viewer, whose identification with characters on the screen will always be partial, provisional, contested, and contradictory.

The world of the cowboy – his « nation », of which he was once a proud emblem and in which he once held an honorable place – has been betrayed.¹⁴ The back-breaking work of the cowboy has lost its romance and is now revealed to be merely the poorly paid work of the exploited and politically powerless itinerant laborer. Like the soldier, who once (believed he) fought « for God and country, » but who now is denied even the pretense of fighting for an honorable cause, and who often, when he returns home from a war zone, broken and bitter, is neglected by the corrupt and mendacious state that has maimed him for life, the cowboy – the working-class man – no longer has a respected place in the neoliberal society that in reality defines the « American Dream » as a (rigged) game for (always already comfortably « middle-class ») winners only.

According to Ang Lee, the film's director, *Brokeback Mountain* « has very little to do with the Western genre » (Clarke, 2006 : 28, cited by Kitses, 2007 :24). Nevertheless, the genre's conventions, especially those related to the cowboy's style of masculinity – his sexuality – provide the measure against which we can judge the extent of patriarchy's overreach and unraveling in the twenty-first century. To mark the tenth anniversary of the film, *Out* magazine invited Lee, the screenwriters Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry, and actors Jake Gyllenhaal, Anne Hathaway (who plays Lureen Newsome, who will become Jack's wife), and Randy Quaid (who plays the ranch manager Joe Aguirre) « to look back on the making of this seminal movie », and the resulting conversation was published in the September 2015 issue as : « *Brokeback Mountain* Ten Years On »¹⁵. Ossana explains that she read the story by Annie Proulx when it first appeared in *The New*

¹⁴ The notion of « a damaged nation of tarnished ideals and betrayed promise » and the film's nostalgia for a time when cowboys had a cherished place in the American imaginary is strikingly compressed in the scene in which Ennis stands up to the boorish bikers during the Fourth of July picnic he attends with his wife and children, the complex ironies of which – mostly having to do with the social irrelevance of the cowboy in twenty-first-century America – are held by Lee for a moment in a tableau: a low-angle shot of Ennis looming over the bikers, while fireworks explode in the sky above him.

¹⁵ Aaron Hicklin (2015), « *Brokeback Mountain* Ten Years On », *Out*, p. 100. Subsequent page numbers will be cited in the text.

Yorker in 1997 and found it very « affecting ». So she gave it to McMurtry (her husband), who, despite his initial reluctance to read it (« only because he's not interested in short fiction »), admits to a feeling of having missed an opportunity : « I wondered why I hadn't written it myself », he says, « because [homosexuality] has been hanging there in the West for over a hundred years, waiting to be written. I knew it, and everybody who was really familiar with cowboy life knew it »¹⁶.

He may well ask why no one had outed the genre before. But clearly there must have been a sense in Hollywood that the mainstream filmgoing public was not « ready » – before *Brokeback* – for what the film's producer James Schamus calls a « shattering [of] the 'epistemology of the closet' »¹⁷. Schamus' allusion to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's landmark study of male homosocial desire, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), is potentially problematic, not least because *Brokeback Mountain* does not so much « shatter » the closet as offer one more representation of it. As Harry Benshoff observes :

Brokeback Mountain is frightening to heteronormative patriarchy not so much because it is a gay cowboy movie, but because it looks so much like a straight cowboy movie. It must be labeled « THE gay cowboy movie » to particularize it, to let everyone know that it is indeed very different from all the other Westerns it so closely resembles both in terms of its mise-en-scène as well as its thematic concerns : civilization versus the wilderness, conformity versus freedom, and ultimately the preference for male-male bonding over heterosexual romance (Benshoff, 2009 : 229)¹⁸.

If, as Schamus declares, « no mainstream film in history has been promoted with as open, proud, and insistent a celebration of the love between two men », it is also true, as Linda Williams writes in her essay about the film in her book, *Screening Sex* : « We do not know how gay desire suddenly becomes speakable or representable in a culture. One day homosexual desire is hidden, another day it

¹⁶ See also Chris Packard (2005), *Queer Cowboys, And Other Erotic Male Friendships in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*.

¹⁷ James Schamus and Joel Conarroe (2006), « *Brokeback Mountain* : An Exchange », *The New York Review of Books*.

¹⁸ Subsequent page numbers will be cited in the text.

is plain as can be. » (Williams, 2008 : 256-257)¹⁹. Williams' short answer to the question of how gay desire suddenly becomes speakable or representable in a culture – which I think is correct – is that : « The proliferation of gay pornography could have functioned as the single most important factor in the recognition and acceptance of homosexual practices on/scene » (241). More broadly, we can say that widespread access to the Web since the early 1990s is the most significant factor in the normalization of homosexuality among the American populace.

ANXIOUS MASCULINITY, HOMOPHOBIA AND THE HIDDEN INJURIES OF CLASS

To make sense of McMurtry's question about why it had never occurred to him to write about the homosexuality that « has been hanging there in the West for over a hundred years », or how it is, in Williams' phrase, that « one day homosexual desire is hidden, another day it is plain as can be », we have to go back to *The Outlaw* (Howard Hughes, 1943), which I argued in a 2003 essay is « the first major Western to acknowledge the sexuality and subjectivity of its [homosexual] heroes as the film's dominant themes, articulating them in terms of melodrama. »²⁰ (Lang, 2002). If Schamus was accused by some of marketing *Brokeback Mountain* as a universal, rather than a gay-specific, love story²¹, Howard Hughes, we know, went out of his way to promote *The Outlaw* as a sexy superwestern starring Jane Russell, when in fact, as George Fenin and William Everson note in their landmark book, *The Western* : at the time of *The Outlaw*'s release, many opponents of the film were angered not so much by its « obtrusive eroticism » (*i.e.*, the part played by « Russell's bosom... enhanced by an ingenious 'heaving' brassière designed by Howard Hughes »), but by « the minimal importance of the woman, even on a sexual level. » (Fenin & Everson, 1962: 266-267)²². They note that « there is no sincerely motivated love story » in the film, but judge that its « long trail of censorship hassles and the fact that it *did* deliver

¹⁹ Subsequent page numbers will be cited in the text.

²⁰ Much of the following discussion of *The Outlaw* is derived from this chapter of *Masculine Interests*.

²¹ See Mendelsohn (2006) « An Affair to Remember », *The New York Review of Books*.

²² (emphasis in original). Subsequent page numbers will be cited in the text.

the goods it advertised tended to obscure the fact that it was really a good Western in its own right ²³» (266).

Edward Buscombe in *The BFI Companion to the Western* acknowledges that *The Outlaw* is « generally credited with introducing sex into the Western »²⁴ (Buscombe, 1988: 43), but only Parker Tyler, among major critics, has ever pointed out that the proper locus of the film's sexuality is not embodied in Jane Russell as Rio MacDonald, but is played out in the relationship between the two men (and their horse) (Tyler, 1971); and only David Thomson (decades after the film was released), describing *The Outlaw* as « that mistreated vagrant », has identified the movie as « the first American film to suggest that homosexuality might be pleasant » (Thomson, 1994 : 356).

Brokeback Mountain, made more than sixty years later and set in the second half of the twentieth century, in which two itinerant ranch-hands who are in thrall to the image of the cowboy fall in love with each other, echoes the love story between Doc Holliday (Walter Huston) and Billy the Kid (Jack Beutel) in *The Outlaw*. If Hughes's film is unintentionally awkward about depicting the male-male intimacy that is central to the film's meanings, we see that Lee's film is entirely intentional in its depiction of the initial awkwardness between Jack and Ennis. It is not always easy to judge what is intentional and what is not in *The Outlaw*. The film is very knowing about its homosexual subtext, but the viewer cannot be certain whether the characters themselves (Doc, Billy, Pat) have ever allowed themselves to think about genital sexuality between men as something that « might be pleasant », or whether they have not dared to think about it at all. Doc and Billy do spend the entire movie trying to judge if they can *trust* one another – and the viewer understands that this trust revolves around each man daring to acknowledge that he recognizes the other's desire. One can very easily imagine Doc or Billy, if they were to sleep with each other, saying – as Ennis and

²³ For an account of *The Outlaw*'s censorship problems, see chapter 6 of Leff and Simmons (1990), *The Dame in the Kimono : Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s*.

²⁴ In Tom Ryall's description of the film in part 3 of *The BFI Companion*, he acknowledges that « it is usually Howard Hughes' calculated exploitation of Jane Russell's celebrated physique that dominates discussion of the picture, » but observes that « its centre of interest seems often to lie elsewhere, » and that the narrative « focuses on the jealousies of a small male group. »

Jack do after they have had sex together for the first time – « You know I ain't queer », and the other replying : « Me neither. It's nobody's business but ours ».

Brokeback Mountain, however, in which the characters do acknowledge and act on their desire for each other, becomes shot through with nostalgia for that moment of innocence lost – of that moment of *recognition* – which is a moment of *jouissance*, in every sense of Lacan's term – and which is closely followed by a feeling of loss²⁵. In his review of the published screenplay of the film, John Beebe remarks on the « strangeness » of the men's relationship : « [It] does not reside in its socially inconvenient sexual orientation but rather in the fact that it enables them to articulate to each other the disorientation which relationship itself can bring to men »²⁶ (Beebe, 2006 : 89). Beebe's essentialism about « men » notwithstanding, there is perhaps some truth in his observation that : « The basic idea of *Brokeback Mountain*, depicted with appealing baldness through the scaled-down simplicity of its scenario, is the inexplicable unadaptedness of men in relationships » (89). One assumes Beebe is referring to the difficulty that so many heterosexual American men appear to have – and other men who have internalized the values and dictates of their historically homophobic society – in developing intimate relationships with each other that are free of the feared taint of the « homosexual ».

In an emailed interview for « *Brokeback Mountain* Ten Years On, » Proulx writes :

Of course there were and are gay men in the world of cattle and horses since the first cow spent the winter on the plains west of Laramie, but the great fiction that evolved in the 19th century and lay over the ranching West is that all cowboy horsemen and ranch hands were heterosexual, strong and fearless, brave and handsome, and though tough and daring, they were shy, sparing of words, always kind to orphaned doggies and children, extravagantly polite to women, etc. All this made up an irresistible masculine ideal that had/has political value. For many, the cowboy image became a potent symbol of

²⁵ See Lacan, « The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience ». I am also thinking here of Juliet Mitchell's insight that « desire is the desire to have one's desire recognized – it is a yearning for recognition ». (Mitchell, 1975: 396.)

²⁶ (Subsequent page numbers will be cited in the text.) Surely, not all – or even most – men are so ill-equipped for « relationship » as Beebe suggests. But his remarks do seem to apply to Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain*, whose fear of the homophobia that is widespread in his society cripples his ability to even know how to go about having a « relationship » with another man.

American men. It was this confrontation with unreality that the story wanted to show through a look at two characters living in the real world of homophobic closeting.²⁷

Proulx's intention to look at the harsh, lived reality of two young men – who to all appearances embody the ideal of American masculinity – is fully realized as an indictment of « the real world of homophobic closeting ». A question to consider, then, when accounting for the extraordinary success of the film with mainstream audiences, is the status of homophobia in the United States around the time of the film's release. Not all homophobia is the same, we now realize. In *Slate* magazine on 30 January 2014, Zach Howe asks : « Homophobia Is a Real Fear... but of What, Exactly ? »²⁸ Acknowledging the continued existence of homophobia in our society – despite the fact that : « To be a homophobe in 2014 is, increasingly, to find oneself on the fast track to social scorn », and that in an environment of growing acceptance, « we condemn homophobic feelings, particularly in men, because we think they come from inside the individual and are thus his full responsibility » – Howe believes we must reexamine homophobia's « basic nature ». He begins with the conviction that we must « stop thinking of homophobia as a personal choice and understand it as the inevitable and deliberate result of the culture in which American men are raised » :

²⁷ Proulx, in Hicklin, « *Brokeback Mountain* Ten Years On, », *Out*, p. 100.

²⁸ Howe, « Homophobia Is a Real Fear... but of What, Exactly ? » Howe (or his editor) very aptly illustrates his article with a still from the music video of Steve Grand's first hit single, « All-American Boy, » which went viral on YouTube in July 2013, with over a million views in eight days: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjiyjYCwNyY>. (On 23 March 2015 Grand released his debut studio album, *All-American Boy*, some tracks of which, according to Wikipedia, « express a celebration of a person's sexuality or identity, predominantly aimed to the Gay community, » while some songs can « relate to anybody no matter what sexual orientation. ») The caption for the image, which appears to be a paraphrase of a lyric from the song, « Lovin' Again » (from the album *All-American Boy*), reads : « There's no turning back... and that's a problem. »

In an interview with Jase Peeples that Grand gave to *The Advocate* prior to the release of *All-American Boy*, he talked about his hopes for the album : « While people say this is no big deal anymore. Who cares ? You know who cares are the kids that are really struggling with this. The kids who feel like they would still rather be dead than live life as a gay person... I'm thinking about them all the time when I'm doing these things. Because deep down we really all just want to be loved, we want to experience love, we want to give love, we want to take in love, and we want to feel valued and understood. » (<https://youtu.be/SFjzzANL-qM>)

(Note : In his interview, Grand says : « Deep down, we really all just want to *be* loved » – not, as the title of Peeples' article suggests : « Deep down, we really all just want to *feel* loved. »)

Clearly, men in America have grown up learning to be scared of gayness. But not only for the reasons we typically think – not only, in the end, because of religion, insecurity about their own sexuality, or a visceral aversion to other men’s penises. The truth is, they’re afraid because heterosexuality is so fragile.

Howe’s article is not scholarly – and it is a pop-psychology cliché to think of heterosexuality as « fragile » – but his journalist’s turn of phrase is useful for us as a place to begin asking, as he does, « why homophobia is such an easy bulwark against masculine insecurity ». His conclusions about the persistence of homophobia are confirmed by Arlene Stein in a research article about « anxious masculinity and emergent homophobias in neopatriarchal politics », which appeared in *Gender and Society* the same year *Brokeback Mountain* was released. « While polls suggest that the vast majority of Americans are wary of extreme efforts to legislate sexual morality », she writes, « the popularity of homophobic rhetoric among large sectors of the American public indicates continuing ambivalence about the normalization of homosexuality » :

During the past three decades, the percentage of Americans who think homosexuality is « wrong » declined significantly, and Americans are much more willing to condone private homosexual behaviors, view openly lesbian and gay characters in popular entertainment, and provide some limited benefits to the spouses and children of lesbians and gay men. Still, in terms of public discourse, as a nation we remain divided over whether lesbians and gay men are the moral equivalent of heterosexuals²⁹. (Stein, 2005 : 601-602)

Indeed, according to Alan Wolfe in *One nation, after all*, whom Stein cites : « No other issue taps into such potential conflict [between tolerance and need to adhere to common public principles that can occasionally overrule tolerance] than the issue of homosexuality »³⁰.

Stein’s research into how the issue of homosexuality has « engaged the passions of men, particularly white working-class men », reveals that men’s antipathy toward homosexuality has been reformulated in « unprecedented

²⁹ (Subsequent page numbers will be cited in the text.) Stein provides ample bibliographic citation in support of each of her assertions.

³⁰ Wolfe, *One nation, after all*. Cited by Stein (2005), « Make Room for Daddy, » p. 602.

ways » by the changing forms of American masculinity since the 1950s. She acknowledges that traditional psychoanalytic theory, which suggests that homophobia serves the purpose of allowing men who are anxious about their masculinity to affirm themselves through the repudiation of femaleness – « Heterosexual men are troubled by male homosexuality because it represents feminized masculinity » – still « provides a compelling explanation for one type of male homophobia, but as a description of the multiplicity of different homophobias now circulating, it is somewhat less useful » (602). (She offers the brutal killing of the 21-year-old gay college student, Matthew Shepherd – who was beaten, tortured, and left to die on the night of 6 October 1998, near Laramie, Wyoming – as an example of this type of homophobia as the convergence of internalized self-hatred and patriarchal threat : the same-sex desiring subject in conflict with his straight consciousness).

Stein's findings reveal that since the 1990s, which saw homosexuality becoming more and more normalized in many parts of the nation, antigay activists have become less preoccupied with feminized men – the traditional object of homophobia – and more preoccupied with « masculine homosexual men imagined as culturally and economically privileged and as sexually promiscuous »³¹ (Stein, 2005 : 602). They know, as Howe puts it in « Homophobia Is a Real Fear, » that : « In an environment of growing acceptance, we condemn homophobic feelings, particularly in men, [and that] a man who says hateful things about gays is 'backward' ». (Howe is inclined to believe that such a man is « protecting his social status, or maybe he's secretly gay himself », and admonishes him : « to grow up or come out already ».) And so, Stein reports : « In opposition to this supposedly powerful group [of masculine homosexual men imagined as culturally and economically privileged and as

³¹ Stein bases her report on a shift in homophobic rhetoric she sees as having played out between 1990 and 2005 in two political campaigns in the state of Oregon : « The first an attempt to outlaw civil rights protections for lesbians and gay men and the second a campaign to define marriage as the union between man and woman » (603). She explains : « For the past two decades, national social conservative organizations have used Oregon as a testing ground for a number of antigay initiatives. Because it has a very open state referendum system and is highly polarized politically, divided between progressive urban areas and highly conservative rural and suburban areas, it has been fertile ground for 'culture wars' battles » (605).

sexually promiscuous], male anti-gay rights activists positioned themselves as strong but compassionate, committed fathers and faithful husbands, and suggested that if gay men (and lesbians) were offered civil rights, their own sacrifices would be diminished » (602). Many men – white working-class men in particular, Stein observes – are experiencing an erosion of their power at home, in the workplace, and in the community : « Men are anxious because the arena of masculinity is being rapidly reconstituted by a dazzling array of social changes that call patriarchal authority into question. The rise of feminism, the economic restructuring of the labor force, and the decline of cultural hierarchies in general are calling into question the naturalness of male dominance » (605).

Jack and Ennis are not represented in *Brokeback Mountain* as « having it all ». Far from being culturally and economically privileged and freely indulging in the sexual promiscuity that anti-gay rights activists since the 1990s imagine gay men to be (illegitimately) enjoying at their expense, Jack and Ennis are both made to suffer. The film's success with a broad public is perhaps not unrelated to the fact that the two lovers are punished by the narrative. Married life for the more middle-class Jack, though not the material struggle it is for Ennis, is a form of daily humiliation and emotional deprivation, with his manhood defined by his boorish father-in-law and his homosexual desire given only occasional and furtive expression, away from the homophobic gaze of the community in which he lives and works. (We are given to understand that his death – which we see imagined by Ennis – is a homophobic murder.) Ennis ends up living alone and lonely in a small trailer, cut off from all family and community.

In « A Straight Cowboy Movie », Benshoff discusses the cruel costs to Ennis and Jack (and to their wives) of their heroic struggles to perform – to *be* – the straight men they feel they ought to be. As Benshoff argues, the film depicts heterosexual life – at least, in the American Midwest during the 1960s and 1970s – as being caught up in the imperatives of capitalism, which « traps men and women into narrowly defined social roles derived from their biological sex » (230). Jack and Ennis « unthinkingly » inscribe themselves within the punishing and dreary structures of « traditional heteronormative patriarchal capitalism ».

They marry, for example, « not so much out of desire or love for their spouses, but because it is what is expected of them », and they work in fields that depend on « the exploitation of young male bodies » – their bodies being the only commodities Jack and Ennis, as poor and uneducated men, have to offer (230-31).

Heterosexual, white working-class film viewers who (however vaguely or unconsciously) resent the normalization of homosexuality in American society, perhaps derive a sense of justice from seeing Jack and Ennis being made to « pay » for acting on their transgressive desire. But as white working-class men themselves, Jack and Ennis can serve as figures of identification to those very viewers and across a range of audience types responsive to what Michael Lerner, in an article seeking to understand Trump's victory in 2016, describes as a suffering « rooted in the hidden injuries of class and in the spiritual crisis that the global competitive marketplace generates ». Lerner insists that the « racism, sexism and xenophobia used by Mr. Trump to advance his candidacy does not reveal an inherent malice in the majority of Americans », but rather speaks to « the suffering caused by classism ». Democrats, he suggests, could rebuild their political base by helping « working people understand that they do not live in a meritocracy, that their intuition that the system is rigged is correct (but it is not by those whom they had been taught to blame) and that their pain and rage is legitimate »³².

For male anti-gay rights activists, not surprisingly, same-sex marriage « called into question the father-headed household and placed children at risk » (Stein, 2005 : 603). (Maternal lesbians also came under attack, for essentially the same reasons.) Following from the definition of homophobia as a term coined in 1972 by the psychologist George Weinberg to describe the « irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals » (*i.e.*, as an antigay prejudice or pathology rooted in an individual's psychological makeup), Stein argues that : « Weinberg's definition failed to account for why certain groups of individuals are more homophobic than others – and in particular why men, by most accounts, tend to be more

³² Lerner (2016), « Stop Shaming Trump Supporters », *The New York Times*.

homophobic than do women. Missing, in part, was an analysis of the link between gender and sexual prejudice » (603).

Stein cites a number of important scholars who have attempted to draw the link between gender and sexual prejudice, including feminist theorist Nancy Chodorow, who has suggested that what is threatening about homosexuality is « men not being men and women not being women »³³ (603), and R. W. Connell, who in 1995 most usefully distinguished analytically between « hegemonic » and « subordinate » masculinities and femininities. Stein's conclusions derive from the, by now commonplace, observation that the challenges of modernity to patriarchy have resulted in the metamorphosis of patriarchy into neopatriarchy. In a traditional patriarchy, the patriarch's authority and control (primarily over women and children within the family, but evident in the relations of authority, domination, and dependency characterizing the larger society as well) are supreme. But with the rise of the nuclear family, in which there is greater economic and democratic freedom for its members than there ever was in the patriarchal family, patriarchy has not disappeared so much as reconfigured itself in the form of neopatriarchy, which attempts to retain patriarchy's power and privileges, without (necessarily, or always) providing its historical benefits or exercising its traditionally concomitant responsibilities.

What Stein has discovered, however, as we have said, is that – far from failing, or not trying, to provide for their families – (antigay-activist) neopatriarchs in the United States « struggle to define a role that maintains male authority without sounding overly authoritarian, [such that] new forms of homophobia have emerged that are compatible with conservatives' quest to be seen as compassionate protectors of the family » (601). Neopatriarchal rhetoric does not call for the subordination of women, nor does it explicitly support practices and arrangements that buttress gender inequality. Rather, it speaks of the importance of gender differentiation in the family, as we saw it enacted on 21 September 1996 in the Defense of Marriage Act (« An Act to define and protect the

³³ Stein is quoting a remark made by Nancy Chodorow in an American Psychoanalytic Association Public Forum : « Homophobia: Analysis of a 'Permissible' Prejudice » (Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York City, 18 December 1998).

institution of marriage »), which defined marriage for federal purposes as the union of one man and one woman. Neopatriarchal antipathy toward the granting of legal rights to lesbian and gay men and their families is, for the most part, not expressed as open opposition, but rather as « concern » (604).

CAPITALIST IMPERATIVES

In *Brokeback Mountain*, we see that Jack and Ennis both attempt to integrate themselves as « straight » men into the neopatriarchal structure of their society. But they are in constant danger of being outed – even before they are out to themselves. Indeed, during their very first meeting with Joe Aguirre, the surly ranch manager who hires them to tend his sheep, the atmosphere is thick with something like distrust and hostility, or homophobia. The viewer senses that Aguirre's homophobia is excited by these two young men. He is a type that has always been distrusted in American cinema. As a ranch manager – like a factory foreman – Aguirre is still an employee (of, possibly, a large and exploitative corporation), and very likely was himself once a ranch hand. His move up the corporate ladder has perhaps not given him quite the (financial/social/psychological) freedom it promised: hence his aura of resentment.

A title superimposed on an image of a desolate, Western outpost tells us we are in Signal, Wyoming and it is 1963. Aguirre arrives at his office trailer, brushes past the two men without greeting them, and enters. A few moments later, he comes to the door and barks at them : « You pair of deuces lookin' for work, I suggest you get your scrawny asses in here pronto ! »

As soon as they enter the trailer, Aguirre lays out their responsibilities :

The Forest Service has got designated campsites on the allotments. Them camps can be three, four miles from where we pasture the woollies. Bad predator loss if there's nobody lookin' after 'em at night. Now, what I want is a camp tender to stay in the main camp, where the Forest Service says. But the herder, he's gonna pitch a pup tent on the Q.T. with the sheep and he's gonna sleep there. You eat your supper and breakfast at camp, but you sleep with the sheep one hundred percent. No fire, don't leave no sign. You roll up that tent every mornin' in case the Forest Service snoops around.

Right away – this is the opening scene of the movie – a covert theme of homophobic threat is established. What Aguirre wants them to do is illegal and puts them at risk with the law. (As it is implied in a later scene, in which Ennis recounts how his father took him as a boy to see the mutilated corpse of a gay man – in whose murder, it is suggested, Ennis suspects his father was complicit – gay men were constantly at risk among homophobic men in rural Wyoming, and indeed nearly everywhere in the United States, in 1963.) Moreover, Aguirre’s instructions, as any queer viewer will pick up on, seem to be a warning to the young men themselves : *they must not sleep together*, either at the camp, or in a pup tent where they will be pasturing the sheep. They must « *leave no sign* » of having camped with the sheep, for fear of being caught. Not only is the Forest Service a threat, but (as he wants to make clear) so is Aguirre himself. And so are the wolves. In the Freudian metaphor, the threat of castration looms large. Aguirre’s name, as well, suggests that the wrath of God will come down upon them if, like some hapless sheep, they should « stray. »³⁴

Ennis and Jack’s position undercuts a capitalist imperative, in that shepherding is a form of livestock farming, which is threatened by their sexual communion. Here, homosexuality is placed in direct opposition to capitalist profit : Aguirre’s interdiction is one made on behalf of unregulated capitalism.

³⁴ Cf. *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (Werner Herzog, 1977), a film set in South America in 1560, about the madness and folly of a Spanish soldier, Lope de Aguirre, who leads a group of conquistadores down the Orinoco and Amazon River in search of the legendary City of Gold, El Dorado. It culminates in Aguirre’s doomed and incestuous vision which, because (with his daughter) he is the last survivor of the expedition, he must speak to the monkeys that have overrun his raft, which is adrift on the Amazon: « I, the Wrath of God, will marry my own daughter and with her I will found the purest dynasty the world has ever seen. Together, we shall rule this entire continent. We shall endure. I am the Wrath of God! Who else is with me ? » (The link with Joe Aguirre in *Brokeback Mountain* can be found in the idea of homosexuality as a catastrophe equal to that of incest : it short-circuits the system upon which patriarchal privilege is built: it makes nonsense of patriarchy’s pretensions and prerogatives.) The apocalyptic consequences of homosexuality/incest are suggested repeatedly throughout the film. In one scene, for example, when Jack and Ennis are on the mountain, Jack sings a song he remembers his mother sang in the Pentecostal church of his youth: « Water Walking Jesus. » Ennis asks him what the Pentecost is, and Jack replies that he does not know but guesses « it’s when the world ends and fellas like you and me march off to Hell. » (Ennis’s kidding riposte to this is one of the movie’s unexpected and thrilling moments of erotic possibility : « You may be a sinner, but I ain’t yet had the opportunity. »)

Keeping the men straight reduces the risk of a loss of profits, and Aguirre's demand that one of them illegally « pitch a pup tent on the Q.T. with the sheep » identifies him as an anti-government proto-Reaganite, or a proto-Trump capitalist who thinks a « winner » is someone who knows how to avoid paying taxes and how to avoid getting caught deceiving the government. Aguirre is positioned at the intersection of American capitalist self-governance (a cherished shibboleth of the Republican Party) and responsible government oversight (considered by Democrats to be a necessity of successful, equitable, complex, modern economies). His character is smartly conceived this way—but the very negativity of his profile also makes him a darkly ironic inversion of the paternal shepherd of the mythical space of Arcadia, where the young are tutored by older shepherds in an idealist ethos of personal freedom and the responsibilities of human beings toward one another.

When Jack and Ennis exit the trailer after their brusque « interview » (during which Aguirre seems pointedly to ignore Jack – which becomes even more curious, when the viewer discovers later that this is Jack's second year herding sheep for the rancher), we notice that there is a sign on the door of Aguirre's trailer: TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT, SURVIVORS WILL BE SHOT AGAIN. In their first (for Westerners, conventionally laconic) conversation with each other, Jack and Ennis reveal a great deal about themselves as men who are, in Kitses' phrase, « lonely and needy, the products of broken families and absent fathers » :

JACK. My second year here. Last year, one storm, the lightnin' killed forty-two sheep. Thought I'd asphyxiate from the smell. Aguirre got all over my ass, like I was supposed to control the weather ! But beats workin' for my old man. Can't please my old man no way. That's why I took to rodeoin'. You ever rodeo ?

ENNIS. You know, I mean, once in a while. When I got the entry fee in my pocket.

JACK. (*Smiles knowingly.*) Yeah. Are you from ranch people ?

ENNIS. Yeah, I was.

JACK. Your folks run you off ?

ENNIS. (*He gives a small smile.*) No, they run themselves off... There was one curve in the road in forty-three miles, and they miss it. (*He shakes his head*

incredulously.) So the bank took the ranch... and my brother and sister, they raised me, mostly.
JACK. Shit, that's hard.

Not only does this brief conversation speak of their real, existential loneliness—of feeling unloved – it cuts directly to Ennis' difficulties of being « uneducated » and « dirt poor ». The plight of impoverished rural and working-class Americans like Ennis' parents who, in the film's metaphor, lacked the savvy necessary in neoliberal America to anticipate the « one curve in the road in forty-three miles », echoes throughout the genre as a historical feature of rural and small-town life in the Southwest and the Great Plains states, going back to the Depression era. *Brokeback Mountain* builds on the twilight Western tradition of films like *The Lusty Men* (1953), *The Misfits* (1961), *Hud* (1963), and *Cool Hand Luke* (1966), and more recently John Sayles's *Lone Star* (1996), in which we see impoverished Western scenarios in contemporary settings. (There is also much trucker lore and Country and Western music of the 1960s and 1970s that address the impoverishment of cowboys by neoliberalist economic changes). As itinerant ranch hands, Jack and Ennis represent the poorest of society's rural poor, but in the movies – in the Western genre – the cowboy has been figured as glamorous. By 1963 (when Jack and Ennis first meet each other, and more or less coinciding with the end of the Hollywood studio system of film production), and certainly by 1997 (when Proulx's short story was published), and in 2005 (when *Brokeback Mountain* was released), the cowboy of genre fiction seemed to be on the verge of extinction. But as an icon of American national identity, he persists in the imagination as a figure of nostalgia, sometimes as an icon of neoliberal, conservative values, and inevitably as a figure of erotic contemplation or pornographic fantasy. Jack and Ennis are undoubtedly allegorical figures, and as movie cowboys they have a charisma of their own, offering an image of dignity for conservatives and progressives alike in a world of « tarnished ideals and betrayed promise ». To paraphrase a line of dialogue from a quite different film and genre (Noah Baumbach's 2015 indie screwball comedy *Mistress America*) : They are the last

cowboys: all romance and failure. The world is changing, and their kind have nowhere to go³⁵.

THE PARADOXES OF NOSTALGIA AND FANTASY, OR : MOVING FORWARD, LOOKING BACKWARD

The social, political and legal climate for gay people in the period in which *Brokeback Mountain* is set, especially for those who live in small towns or rural areas, both is and is not a world away from the United States in which the film was released. It is a period that has seen vertiginous change, and it is one in which the film itself participates as both mirror of that past and agent of change in the present. On the one hand, the fundamentalist turn by conservatives in recent years toward willed ignorance and obscurantism, and on the other, the growing acceptance by the mainstream of homosexuality as « normal » – reflected in the slow but forward-moving legalization of homosexuality in its various permutations and ramifications (the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2015 in favor of same-sex marriage ; the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010 allowing gays, lesbians, and bisexuals to serve openly in the U.S. Armed Forces, and so on) – make our present moment feel contradictory. The film is a melodrama, but it is a tragic one, for the happy ending would be posthumous, and in 2005 it was still far from certain that the traditional ending of melodrama – an image of the couple united in a happy embrace – would appear anytime soon on the horizon as a legal reality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people.

The genius of Lee's film, we can see, is that it captures that moment when homosexual desire comes into view, and all seems possible, before it is lost... to societal prohibition, conservative backlash, individual inhibition, heteronormative conformity, banality. Linda Williams' focus on what is thrilling in the film – that moment when desire becomes legible as such and starts to

³⁵ I am paraphrasing Tracy (Lola Kirke), the narrator of *Mistress America*, who tries to capture what it is that makes her friend Brooke (Greta Gerwig) singular : « They were matches to her bonfire. She was the last cowboy, all romance and failure. The world was changing, and her kind didn't have anywhere to go. Being a beacon of hope for lesser people is a lonely business. »

organize itself into a narrative of seduction – goes a long way toward explaining what makes *Brokeback Mountain* a landmark film (its generic and stylistic conventionality notwithstanding). In her essay on the film, Williams argues that it does something no other Hollywood Western has ever done : « We cannot say where this desire originates, but the fantasy of seduction [in *Brokeback Mountain*] operates as America’s first mainstream movie example of the seduction into homosexual desire » (246). And to answer her own question about « how gay desire suddenly becomes speakable or representable in a culture », Williams notes that : « The history of minority sexualities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is indissolubly linked... to its mediated publicity. Indeed, between the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* and the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* ruling, it is possible that the proliferation of gay pornography could have functioned as the single most important factor in the recognition and acceptance of homosexual practices on/scene » (241)³⁶. Stein, too argues the importance of the Supreme Court’s *Lawrence v. Texas* ruling, which « legalized sodomy and thereby weakened the equation of homosexual behavior with perversion that had been the basis of earlier conservative campaigns » (615).

Jack and Ennis are very much victims of their time and place. But today, in Heather Love’s inimitable turn of phrase (writing in the spring of 2008), we see that LGBTQ people have options. Indeed, « happiness » for queer people, she jokes, is « compulsory » :

If you are homosexual, there’s a lot to keep you busy these days. It can be hard to keep up with the ever-expanding menu of rights, privileges, and lifestyle options being made available. These new opportunities include not only the right to enjoy legal sodomy in the comfort of your own home and to be protected from discrimination on the job but also widening access to niche goods and services: lesbian cruises, gay cake toppers, queer prime time. Apart from all the A-list entertainment, there are also weddings and commitment ceremonies to plan. Being in the life has never looked so good or cost so much. (Love, 2008)

³⁶ Williams cites Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, Gayle Rubin, Rich Cante, and Angelo Restivo as scholars who have all made the argument that the history of minority sexualities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is indissolubly linked to its mediated publicity.

Love in effect observes that the moment in which homosexuality becomes widely accepted in American society is the same moment in which it is coopted by consumerist and neoliberal imperatives seeking to monetize it and inscribe it safely within the familiar patterns of heteronormative narratives.

In his review-essay about the film in *Cinéaste*, Roy Grundmann remarks that *Brokeback Mountain* rather panders to viewers with a « middle-class mainstream mentality » and to gay and lesbian activists whose biggest cause these days « seems to be the fight for the right to get married »³⁷ (Grundmann, 2006 : 52). He notes that some queer thinkers have pointed out that seeking to minimize the difference between gays and heterosexuals by promoting gay marriage – the attempt « to get the respect of heterosexuals and reassure them that gays aren't really any different from them » – may be a viable strategy in the fight for equal rights but « courts the risk of redividing the gay community into good gays (the married ones) and bad gays (those who continue to be promiscuous) » (52).

The story of Jack and Ennis is also one of class bonding and, ultimately, of class division. The seductive (romantic/desiring) register appears to be the only one in which the two men can bridge the class divide that ultimately keeps them apart. Jack, the more middle-class character of the two, proposes that he and Ennis live together – a notion that is inconceivable to Ennis – and in this sense, the film and its ending may be seen as a parable rather than as allegory. The very fact that they fail as a couple is juxtaposed to the potential they may have had as a couple. It is one of the most powerful fantasies embedded in the film that two men of somewhat different class formation can make it together and thus offer a model of how to counteract some of the deleterious effects of neoliberalism on the (small-town, rural) West. That the film clads this utopian potential in an implicit plea for marriage is unfortunate, but since the term « marriage » is nowhere really mentioned, the viewer can perform a revisionist reading of the film in terms of male bonding, male romance and partnership, without necessarily having to consider marriage as the telos of the narrative, which, after all, in the Western and road movie genres signifies the end of desire and romance.

³⁷ Subsequent page numbers will be cited in the text.

From *The Outlaw* to *Brokeback Mountain*, then, we see a persistent desire and ambivalence in mainstream American cinema around the question of how to represent an intimate friendship between two men. *Brokeback Mountain* occupies an interesting position on the cusp of the consolidation of the category of the bromance, a term which first appeared in the 1990s and by 2005 had attained broad currency to describe an exceptionally tight affectional, homosocial male bonding relationship that exceeds that of usual friendship and is distinguished by a particularly high level of emotional intimacy³⁸. As Michael DeAngelis elaborates the term in his edited volume, *Reading the Bromance* (2014) :

« Bromance » has come to denote an emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males who demonstrate an openness to intimacy that they neither regard, acknowledge, avow, nor express sexually, and this definition already begins to point to some of the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the phenomenon : bromance involves something that must happen (the demonstration of intimacy itself) on the condition that other things not happen (the avowal or expression of sexual desire between straight males). (DeAngelis, 2014 : 1)

Brokeback Mountain manages to be a bromance between two straight men (who albeit *do* cross the line and have sex with each other – though Jack, in a moment of extreme frustration, will eventually complain to Ennis that he wants more than « a couple of high-altitude fucks once or twice a year »)³⁹, and it is also a passionate romance that, in Grundmann's rather marvelous phrase, « possesses the bodacious seize-the-day beauty of every love-is-a-many-splendored-thing yarn of yore ». Their powerful attraction to each other is both a passion and a yearning, and as Grundmann puts it : « Most viewers following this fantastic pas de deux are likely to forget that love and sex are not the same thing. Those who still remember may wonder whether all romance isn't lost on them » (50).

Ten years on, with other films exploring what Henning Bech enigmatically called, « *the interest between men in what men can do with one another* »

³⁸ I take this definition of the bromance from Wikipedia, precisely to suggest the (nature of the) broad currency the term has achieved.

³⁹ The reader is again directed to Benshoff's essay, « A Straight Cowboy Movie, » which in effect explains how the film functions in an allegorical register (although Benshoff does not use the term), which allows the viewer to see Jack and Ennis as either(/both) straight or(/and) homosexual.

(Bech, 1997 : 47), we realize what we probably always knew : that the intensity of desire between two people is most intense in the fantasy of seduction. The « Brokeback-ness » of *Brokeback Mountain*, then, like the bromance genre to which the film belongs, manages to do two, contradictory things at once: it both avows and disavows « what men can do with one another ». It both celebrates and mourns the twilight of nominally heterosexual, lonely, homophobic, twentieth-century cowboy masculinity. While offering the uneducated, working-class, white male something new – a glimpse of the sexual and subjective freedom that has never been available to him before, and which indeed had been all but unimaginable until now – the film is nevertheless a cautionary tale. It is inscribed in the paradoxes of nostalgia and fantasy, in the impossible, liminal zone from which desire springs: in the nostalgic fantasy of cowboys as « authentic American heroes, self-reliant and brave, honorable and loyal », but also as « lonely and needy, the products of [real or metaphorical] broken families and absent fathers ». The film both animates a fantasy of ideal and erotic love and offers an allegory of « a damaged nation of tarnished ideals and betrayed promise », which in its most retrograde variation, we have said, would be expressed by the campaign slogan of the Republican nominee in the 2016 presidential election : « Make America Great Again ».

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