

Deciphering Brokeback: The New Gay Film Genre

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Abstract

This paper looks back at the groundbreaking gay film *Brokeback Mountain*. It is still considered one of the most successful mainstream gay films to date, which numerous scholars and critics have thoroughly attested to in their film reviews. But what made the film so successful? The paper looks at how *Brokeback* contained the critical elements needed for mass consumption: a straight director with gay sensibilities, global appeal due to its Western setting, inclusion of Oscar-bait actors and themes and last but not least hypermasculine gay male characters. Using genre theory as the foundation, the paper outlines how *Brokeback* proliferated its own genre that many of today's LGBTQ films have tried to mirror. Conclusively, this study demonstrates that while the film has its flaws, it was the director's artistic choices mixed with the film's intrinsic cinematic elements that made it more accessible to mainstream audiences, thus creating a viable blueprint for an emotionally satisfying and financially successful queer film.

Key Words: *Brokeback Mountain*; Gay Films; Cinema; Genre Theory; Hollywood.

Introduction

Considered the quintessential Cinderella story of Hollywood gay films, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) tells the story of two cowboys in remote Wyoming who fall in love without quite realizing what has happened to them. Unexpectedly, the "Art House" film, featuring A-list actors Heath Ledger, Jake Gyllenhaal, Ann Hathaway and Michelle Williams, was able to garner wide release when audiences saw beyond the gay characters to identify with the film's core message of longing and loss. Film scholar B. Ruby Rich described *Brokeback* as "the most important film to come out of America in years," and is responsible for a "shift" in queer cinema of a "scope and tenor so profound as to signal a new era" (Rich, 2005, para 2). Film scholars and critics have noted the positives and negatives of *Brokeback* regarding its representation of gay life in rural America during the 1960s and '70s; however, one thing most of them agree upon is how the film is a cultural phenomenon allowing mainstream America to confront a topic that they rarely discussed and often with little subtlety.

"Here was a case of cognitive dissonance: a gay love affair between two cowhands... in the most macho possible setting, with every gay

stereotype stripped away" (Schneider, 2006, p. 10). This narrative is what allowed the film to break into the paradigm of popular culture, proving that gay or straight, love is a spontaneous, irresistible force of nature that blossoms in the wilderness and cannot be contained.

Robin Wood (2007) agreed that *Brokeback* was the ideal film about gay men that general audiences were ready for and could accept. "Whatever one thinks of the film, its influence can only be positive. Its release coincides with a precise and rapidly developing phase of gay history, the movement toward acceptance and integration... 'for better or for worse,' one might say, but, in any case, it has to happen, there can be no turning back even if one wanted to." (p.28)

In his review, *Newsweek's* David Ansen wrote that the film was "a watershed in mainstream movies, the first gay love story with A-list Hollywood stars" (Ansen, 2005, para 2). Acquiring a long list of honors and awards, including numerous Golden Globes and Academy Awards, *Brokeback's* impact on the film industry has been well substantiated. Given its success, other LGBTQ films have tried to replicate *Brokeback's* formula, raising the question of how

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today's form and formula of gay representation circulating within critically acclaimed films about the LGBTQ experience has been impacted by *Brokeback's* storytelling element. By not conforming to the traditional paradigm of gay cinema, did *Brokeback* create a distinct, new genre for gay films, which allowed it to propel to mainstream success? And does this new genre authentically represent the gay experience or does it instead create a contrived version only meant to placate mainstream audiences?

According to genre theorist Daniel Chandler (1997), conventional definitions of genres tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts which are regarded as belonging to them.

While some genres are based on story content (the war film), others are borrowed from literature (comedy, melodrama) or from other media (the musical). Some are performer-based (the Astaire-Rogers films) or budget-based (blockbusters), while others are based on artistic status (the art film), racial identity (Black cinema), location (the Western) or sexual orientation (Queer cinema). (Stam, 2000, p. 14).

Long-established film genres, created during the silent film era (beginning around 1891), include the melodrama, the Western, the horror film, comedies, and action-adventure films. Musicals were inaugurated in 1927 with *The Jazz Singer* being the first "talkie," and the genre of science-fiction films wasn't generally popularized until the 1950s. Current films are often hybrids, meaning they cross several film genres by containing elements of two or more disparate ones. Filmmakers today reflect familiar elements of traditional or classical genres while putting a unique twist on them. So, between hybrids and sub-genres, there can be hundreds of different genres in which films can be classified. Carolyn Miller suggests that "the number of genres in any society... depends on the complexity and diversity of society" (Miller 1984, cited in Freedman & Medway 1994a, 36).

Steve Neale (1980) declared that "genres are instances of repetition and difference" (p. 48). He added that "difference is absolutely essential to the economy of genre": mere repetition would not attract an audience (p.48). Tvedten Todorov argued that "any instance of a genre will be necessarily different" (cited in Gledhill 1985, p. 60). John Hartley (1994) noted that "the addition

of just one film to the Western genre... changes that genre as a whole - even though the Western in question may display few of the recognized conventions, styles or subject matters traditionally associated with its genre." *Brokeback* squarely aligns itself in the Western genre, but the film manipulates the traditional narrative by including gay themes, disrupting the typical stories framed in the genre (O'Sullivan et al. 1994). Therefore, the film is not only a Western, but it also intersects many other genres as well including those of gay cinema and romance, making it a hybrid while still changing the entire Western genre and thus creating its own.

Rick Altman (1984) posed two approaches to analyzing genre: semantic and syntactic. When applied to film, semantics should be thought of as the building blocks of genre: costume, acting, cinematography, set, iconography, etc. (materials). Syntax, by contrast, is the overlying structure, deeper meaning (arrangement) (p.11). *Brokeback's* syntax or theme is a tragic love story of two gay men who are forced apart by the stigma of homosexuality during the 60s and 70s.

Using both approaches, I will analyze *Brokeback's* formula for the creation of this modified genre by dissecting the elements that allowed it to resonate with wider audiences. I will also discuss how the recent proliferation of this new genre, including the repetitive formulaic assimilationist representations of the LGBTQ community appearing in these films, affects the perceptions of the community.

While it makes sense to want to find patterns and categorize them in order to better understand the content and form of specific genres, film theorist Robert Stam argues that "subject matter is the weakest criterion for generic grouping because it fails to take into account how the subject is treated" (Stam 2000, p. 14). One fundamental problem of genre identification, especially with films, is the 'empiricist dilemma':

To take a genre such as the "Western," analyze it, and list its principal characteristics, is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films which are "Westerns". But they can only be isolated on the basis of the "principal characteristics" which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated. (Tudor, cited in Gledhill 1985, p. 59)

Brokeback incorporates this same dilemma. While its form aligns with the traditional Western, the actual content or story resides within queer cinema. When creating a film, the director is ultimately responsible for how the story is told. The word *auteur* is used when his or her personal influence and artistic control over his or her films are so great that he or she may be regarded as their author, and whose films may be regarded collectively as a body of work sharing common themes or techniques and expressing an individual style or vision (Etherington-Wright and Doughty, 2011). Given the importance of this role, the first element of *Brokeback* to analyze is its director.

The Film Director

The film director sets the tone and creates the overall vision through which a film is eventually realized. The director controls a film's artistic and dramatic aspects and visualizes the screenplay (or script) while guiding the technical crew and actors in the fulfillment of that vision. The director also has a key role in choosing the cast members, production design, and the creative aspects of filmmaking. Given the director's enormous influence over a film, it is easy to see how the director plays a huge role in the gay filmmaking mainstream success formula. This was certainly true for *Brokeback*.

Director Ang Lee consistently stated in a number of interviews that the film was a love story, not a gay story. "I do what's truthful to my feelings. I brought some universal feelings, whether you're gay or straight, about love... It's a good gay film for people because it's in the middle of the road. I don't squeeze the characters into gay cinema" (Roman, 2005, para 18).

At first glance, Lee was the least likely candidate to direct a successful gay film of any kind. "Lee is a Taiwanese American whose first language is Chinese. Lee is a married heterosexual with no apparent political affiliation or background in civil rights activism" (Leung, 2008, p. 23-24). On the other hand, Lee has directed thirteen major films, and his resume is quite diverse, directing films like *Hulk* (2003) and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) to *Life and Pi* (2012) and the *Wedding Banquet* (1993), which is also a gay film.

Banquet features a gay Taiwanese immigrant man who marries a mainland Chinese woman to placate his parents and get her a green card. His plan backfires when his parents arrive in the

United States to plan his wedding banquet and he must hide the fact he is gay and has been happily living with his boyfriend. The film was relatively popular with LGBTQ audiences, but Lee can hardly claim a cult following among queer audiences. His films are noticeably plot-driven with rich characters, rather than the stylistic non-linear approach often used in queer cinema. "Lee favors a traditional humanist and social-realist approach to storytelling, so much so that to describe him as a classical filmmaker would strike most people as apt." (Leung, 2008, p. 24). Because of this approach, he can take unusual, difficult and controversial material and get things "just right" by showing the truth of these complex situations in a way that can appeal to almost anyone.

Throughout his work, Lee has resisted the temptation of telling only superficial personal stories in his films. Rather, he captures life histories that encompass the authenticity and depth of his characters, which is why the historical and cultural aspects are so prominent in his films. Andrew Tudor (1974) discusses the relationship between *auteur* and genre by illustrating how directors use generic rules and established concepts within genres (formal elements and narrative) to develop their own filmmaking strategies, allowing them to tell stories in a fresh, innovative way. Formal elements include the use of iconography (costume, setting, staging and stars) and tone (lighting, music and cinematography). Narrative refers to how genres typically adhere to a formulaic way of telling a story. Narratives are often seen as blueprints that are frequently repeated across numerous films. However, the director must take this blueprint and establish ownership of the narrative through his or her filmmaking techniques.

Filmmaking strategies can often be placed into two discourses, the straight discourse and the queer discourse. The queer discourse, fashioned by queer directors, tends to be more theoretically provocative, radically polemical and highly stylized, even when working in social-realist modes. (Examples would be Todd Haynes' *Safe* (1995) and *Far from Heaven* (2002)) While the straight discourse, utilized by straight directors, tends to be uninterested in queer, and even when these directors attempt films with gay themes, the outcome is often formulaic, awkward, uninspiring and downright dull. (Example would be Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993)) (Leung, 2008, p.

25-26). Lee, on the other hand, skillfully fused the straight film discourse with the queer film discourse, thus allowing queer to be firmly instituted within mainstream cinema, allowing it to have more widespread appeal without falling into the familiar formulas of creating something commercially superficial and inauthentic. So following this logic, does this mean that it takes a straight director with certain sensibilities and specific approaches to filmmaking to create a successful gay film that is treated like a love story, not a queer love story? And what does this shift mean in terms of mainstreaming queer realities in terms of homogenizing them with the norm?

There is another distinct element that Lee brings to the film, his adept sprinkling of melodrama (exaggerated characters engaging in stimulating events and outrageous antics intended to appeal to viewers' emotions) into the traditional Western narrative. Growing up in Taiwan, Lee became very familiar with the popular Chinese "family-ethics" films that were popular throughout Southeast Asia. The films are known for their melodrama as they focus on "traditional Confucian" values, illustrating how a person's duty can challenge his or her personal desires. Lee's *Banquet* is considered a comical, melodramatic family ethics film. According to Chris Berry in his essay, *The Chinese Side of the Mountain* (2007), Lee's mixing of the traditional Hollywood family melodrama with the Asian family-ethics film intensifies the struggle that exists between pre-modern values that still persist and modern values, which distinguishes *Brokeback* from your typical family melodrama or the standard Western.

While both the family melodrama and the family-ethics films focus on the family, the way they go about it is quite different. The family melodrama's main focus is on the individual's efforts to become a full, independent individual and break free of their family's identity, allowing them to create their own. Usually, the story is structured around the conflict between romantic love and the family. In order to have the familiar Hollywood ending, romantic love must win (whether or not the family agrees in the end), and so the film ends with the formation of the couple (Schatz, 1981). However, in the family ethics film, Confucian-derived values dictate that the primary concern is with the family, not the individual. Therefore, the focus is on the struggle between the individual's sense of duty and their selfish personal desires. Duty usually prevails, and

it is not uncommon for the end result to be the protagonist's tragic self-sacrifice.

If *Brokeback* is analyzed under the Hollywood-style family melodrama lens, then it can be understood as the struggle of Ennis to break free from his conservative family values. Jack's love would be the catalyst to set him free, allowing him to become his true self. However, in the end, he and Jack do not ride off into the sunset as a couple. In fact, when Ennis marries and has two daughters, his struggle between duty and personal desires take on the traditional family ethics film elements, ultimately leading him to give up personal desire (Jack) to stick to his duty (raising his daughter).

Within the terms of the family-ethics film, this ending achieves full tragic impact because Ennis has succeeded and matured by sacrificing his love for his duty. But within the terms of the Hollywood family melodrama, the tragedy is one of failure because Ennis has been blocked by social homophobia and the demands of the heterosexual family system, is never able to mature as an individual and remains thwarted. If you see the film from a traditional-family ethics point of view, then it upholds certain values. But from a contemporary family melodrama point of view, it is a protest against the same values. (Berry, 2007, p.34)

Of course, there are those who feel that Lee's film should not even be categorized as a gay film because of his inclusion of the straight discourse and his use of the "family ethics" framework. Avant-garde film scholar Ara Osterweil made this point in her essay in *Film Quarterly's* 2007 special issue on *Brokeback*. "Ang Lee succeeded in breaking the mainstream Hollywood taboo on homosexuality at the expense of creating a truly radical film" (p. 42). Do all queer films need to include some sort of radical discourse, nonlinear narrative, campy characters, and a gay "happy ending"? Is there something inherently wrong with diminishing these traditional tropes of queer cinema to allow it more mainstream appeal? According to Leung (2008), "Queer can transcend angry protests, artful postures, and esoteric arguments to become a complete, ubiquitous metaphor for love, joy, pain, and loss" (p. 26).

One could argue that is exactly what *Brokeback* accomplishes.

Yaoi or tongrennu culture is another distinct ingredient in Lee's unique recipe for storytelling. Given his Taiwan origin, one could assume that Lee is familiar with yaoi fandom (also called Boys' Love or BL), which stages gay male love stories for female audiences. These narratives are common in East Asia and mostly appeal to teenage girls and young women. Dr. Rebecca Copeland, a professor of Japanese language and literature, said *Brokeback* might be the "ultimate chick flick" in Japan where BL stores have been popular with Japanese women for decades.

...Japanese women are attracted to stories of male homosexuality because it's the only place in their society where they can see images of men in a loving, caring relationship where both partners are considered to be equals. It's the kind of relationship that Japanese women crave for themselves but rarely find within the confines of traditional Japanese society (as cited in Beard & Larmour, 2006, para. 21).

Once again, Lee puts his own spin on the film because *Brokeback* doesn't exactly follow the yaoi model. The film was adapted from a short story by Annie Proulx and it is not a text that could be easily categorized as one that features gay male sex for female pleasure as do most BL-themed works. *Brokeback* also includes women romantically connected to the male characters, which is something yaoi culture avoids because female readers often don't want to be reminded of unhappy or forced marriages. That is the entire reason why they escape into the BL universe in the first place. However, Lee does break away from the original story by choosing to cast young, attractive men, which aligns it more with yaoi guidelines. In the original story, both men are depicted as being out of shape. According to Berry (2007), "...Brokeback Mountain does seem to me to (consciously or unconsciously) borrow from yaoi and tongrennu culture in its efforts to produce a text about a male-to-male sexual and romantic relationship that will appeal to the most important audience for it: women" (p. 35).

Yaoi also includes elements in which each of the characters must be a clear top (active partner) and bottom (passive partner) as well as their

sexual urges must be beyond their control and, when realized, are so powerful, they can result in physical pain. These factors are clearly seen in *Brokeback* with Ennis being the dominant partner and Jack being more submissive, even though Jack initiates the seemingly accidental and somewhat violent sex they have during their first intimate encounter.

Given these similarities, the closer you look at *Brokeback*, one can't help but recognize Lee's Asian culture had some influence on the film's ultimate appeal leading to its groundbreaking success.

Genre revisionism occurs when the dominant ideology (formal elements and narrative) in traditional genres is no longer considered applicable to the time period. So, to be relevant, genres develop in a manner that is pertinent to contemporary audiences. Because of these developments, when genres reemerge, many of the established features have evolved, mutated, become subverted or, in some cases, are omitted (Etherington-Wright and Dougherty, 2011).

Whether you agree with his storytelling choices and strategies, it is evident that Lee borrowed from the established genres during the creation of the film while mixing and matching them to revise the genre in a way that resonated with audiences like no gay film had ever done before. Wood (2007, p. 29) summed up the film as follows:

Here we have a film that twenty years ago would have been treated with abhorrence, a film, in which, less than a half-hour in two handsome young men, both familiar to the youth audience, go far beyond the exchange of a carefully prepared and tasteful kiss, having violent and passionate anal sex, and it is greeted by the large mixed audience with almost universal enthusiasm.

Global Appeal

What is so fascinating about a cowboy on horseback galloping through the American West? Why does it stir up emotions of admiration, pride and prestige? Aker (2009, para 2) provided insight with the contention that, "One answer might be that in a society growing more impersonal, with urbanization and computerization rapidly closing in, people instinctively yearn for a sense of place. Solace is found in a vicarious reliving of those simplistic days of yesteryear."

Solace is something the characters in *Brokeback* desired. So, is it a coincidence that the film was set in the American West? According to Yu-tien Ho (2011), the Western setting is crucial to the story because it is through the American West that the romantic tragedy is fully realized. Using the cowboy hero cultural icon plays on the romanticized images of the West, thus allowing the gay themes to easily be repackaged for global consumption.

The cowboy image universally epitomized the highest and most honorable qualities of mankind, outdoors, freedom, individualism and defense of the oppressed (Aker, 2009, para 2). The hyper-masculine image is highly scripted in films to globally symbolize the cultural presumption of heterosexuality, which is common for the Western genre.

The genre may be considered as a practical device for helping any mass medium to produce consistently and efficiently and to relate its production to the expectations of its customers. Since it is also a practical device for enabling individual media users to plan their choices, it can be considered as a mechanism for ordering the relations between the two main parties to mass communication. (McQuail, 1987, p. 200)

Ho (2011, p. 84) argued in this regard that “In *Brokeback*, we see a redefinition of manhood with Ennis and Jack. They are specimens of masculinity, yet their homosexual relationship seems incompatible with the usual expectations of what a cowboy should be.” Ho also proposed two visions of the American West -- the Wild West and the agricultural west. The Wild West focuses on the adventures of a cowboy hero whose deeds are to defend the family or the community from outlaws, thieves, vagrants, etc. The agricultural West is far less romanticized and focuses on the working class, the farm hands, sheepherders, wage laborers, etc. *Brokeback* is discernibly set in the agricultural West which demystifies the cultural cowboy icon as being free from social constraint. Instead, both Jack and Ennis are seen as everyday, regular individuals working hard for their survival on a daily basis.

“As a matter of fact, the vision of the agricultural West represented in *Brokeback* is, in a way, playing down the homophobic antagonism that viewers are likely to have as they see the portrayals of the homosexual relationship between Ennis and Jack” (Ho, 2011, p. 86). Working class values are something that many people can relate to, gay or straight, thus adding to the film’s global appeal.

Throughout the film, Jack and Ennis are faced with numerous challenges, including having to live seemingly straight lives and deceive their wives, finding opportunities to sneak away together, wrestling with the acceptance of their sexualities, and having to live in a society in which their love could get them killed. This all leads to them being star-crossed lovers who because of external and internal factors (i.e. family disapproval, societal or internal homophobia, etc.) cannot be together. As with other doomed loves, like Romeo and Juliet, the pinnacle ending must be tragic.

Ennis and Jack are living in a society full of animosity against homosexuality, and they need to go to the wilderness to shun social censorship whenever they get together. The open spaces of the American West are antithetical to the bigotry of homophobia in the civilized world. It seems politically correct and realistically accurate to give *Brokeback* a tragic ending as far as the mainstream ideology of heterosexuality is concerned (Ho, 2011, p. 91)

The gay-bashing and killing of Jack at the end allow viewers to sympathize with their fate, once again, allowing their predicament to align with the conventional grand narrative and thus resonate with a universal audience. It would be remiss to overlook how Jack’s death could reaffirm the belief that being sexually deviant always ends tragically. So while such an affirmation could gain even more global appeal given particular societal beliefs, it comes at a cost when considering how it reaffirms certain viewers’ negative perspectives of gay relationships. Osterweil (2007) noted that while *Brokeback* realistically explores gay sexuality in a way that is socially acceptable for mainstream audiences, Lee was forced to make multiple

compromises. “While the success of *Brokeback Mountain*... suggest[s] that controversial subjects are not completely incompatible with Hollywood treatment, they also imply that mainstream audiences prefer their gay sex with cathartic tears of tragedy rather than the crocodile tears of camp.” (p. 42).

“Masc-centric” Storytelling

Labeling the two lead characters in *Brokeback* as hyper-masculine, especially given the fact they are portrayed as cowboys, would be an understatement. The film’s narrative is in perfect sync with its tagline “Love is a force of nature,” as viewers watch these two seemingly straight men who despite themselves fall in love. This love is culminated in their having forceful sex that additionally frames their masculinity even through their intimacy.

Hypermasculinity is not unique to assimilationist queer films. This grand narrative can be seen in many mainstream movies, especially popular action films, like *Die Hard*, *Commando* and anything with Jason Stratham. It can even be seen in Disney movies with Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast* being the most noticeable example.

Hypermasculinity imposes rigid guidelines of what a man should be, and this image of a “real man” is a misrepresentation of what a man truly is. Therefore, when the majority of crossover, critically acclaimed queer films portray gay men using cisgender, hyper-masculine narratives, it can restrict the myriad of life stories and histories of gay men and at the same time devalue those gay men who do not conform to those behaviors.

This type of storytelling is not so different from Laura Mulvey’s (1975) feminist film theory of male gaze, which invokes the common practice of mainstream narratives being told from a heteronormative male perspective that empowers men and objectifies women. In the male gaze, women are visually positioned as an “object” of heterosexual male desire. Critic and scholar Pier Dominguez has reappropriated the theory to apply it to the dominant gay male masculine perspective found in many critically acclaimed queer films, but it differs in the way women are portrayed, not as sexual objects but instead as secondary and often nonrelevant.

According to Dominguez (2017), the highly masculine characterizations in films like *Brokeback*, *Moonlight* and *Call Me by Your Name*, which are all critically acclaimed, are all

examples of “masc-centrism,” a perspective in which same-sex desire is largely separated from any kind of gender nonconformity while centralizing conventional masculinity.

There is now a thematic pattern emerging that connects many (although not all) of the “prestige” queer films that break out of indie circuits and reach the top tier of mainstream recognition: They tell stories about queerness through the lens of masculine emotion. They are each different in many ways, not least in their attention to class or race, but they are all narratives about the difficulty or impossibility of love between men who just happen to desire other men. (Dominguez, 2017, para 4)

This pattern of ensuring the gay male characters within the film exhibit traditional masculine behaviors is clearly evident in *Brokeback*. The male intimacies are front and center with the female characters being relegated to the background. The film also completely avoids any type of gay male femininity and gender nonconformity to ensure mainstream audiences can better relate to the characters and its overall theme. “These films’ depictions of masculine men expressing emotion pave the way for mainstream audiences to interpret a narrative that might otherwise be considered melodrama as serious tragedy — and a “gay” romance as a universal meditation on love.” (para 6)

Reviews of the film by both the mainstream and the LGBTQ press reinforced the hyper-masculine viewpoints, which have long been the dominant and default perspective in most cinematic film narratives. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote that *Brokeback* was “a deeply felt, emotional love story that deals with the uncharted, mysterious ways of the human heart just as so many mainstream films have before it. The two lovers here just happen to be men” (Turan, 2005, para 1). This highlights the masculinity within the film, allowing the movie to rise above other same-sex films to create a more acceptable mainstream “love story” appeal.

David Buckingham argues that “genre is not... simply ‘given’ by the culture: rather, it is in

a constant process of negotiation and change' (Buckingham, 1993, p. 137). Nicholas Abercrombie suggests that 'the boundaries between genres are shifting and becoming more permeable' (Abercrombie 1996, p. 45). While Abercrombie's focus is on television and how genres within TV programming are being steadily dismantled due to economic pressures to pursue new audiences, this same commercialization is evident in film as well, particularly with the persistent inclusion of the seemingly straight gay male in films used to acquire wider audiences.

Straight audiences are not alone in their preferences for traditional masculine characteristics. According to the British gay magazine *Attitude*, an overwhelming number of gay men disfavor those in the community who express their gender outside of whatever they believe "masculine" means. In a survey of over 5,000 readers, 71% of gay men said they were turned off by a prospective partner because they "have shown signs of femininity." Only 29% of respondents said showing effeminate characteristics was positive, illustrating how being feminine is not even fully accepted within some LGBTQ communities (Rodríguez, 2017, para 1-3).

Some LGBTQ film critics even downplayed the role of masc-centrism in the film, instead focusing on the film's high production values.

In the *New York Review of Books*, Daniel Mendelsohn argued that the film was ultimately about the closet, and 'tells a distinctively gay story that happens to be so well told that any feeling person can be moved by it.' Yet the emphasis on *Brokeback's* aesthetic quality as an explanation — implying that other queer films don't transcend simply because they're not as well-made — overlooks the way the film also presented the closet as a kind of universal, emotional closet of stoic masculinity (Dominguez, 2017, para 14).

Films that use this masc-centric pattern always seems to have an ending that allows the characters to emote only when they ultimately break down the wall of hyper-masculinity they

have tried so hard to maintain. We see this with Ennis as he sobs and clings to Jack's shirt at the end of *Brokeback*, acknowledging the suffering he has undergone for being gay and loving another man and the suffering he is still undergoing caused by the closet of masculinity. Audiences are thus left with the familiar feeling of sorrow for this gay man and his plight to find happiness in this heteronormative world.

"Oscar Bait" potential

Films that appear to be produced for the sole purpose of earning nominations for Academy Awards are known in the film community as "Oscar Bait." Oscar bait films often have distinct characteristics and that could be described as a genre of its own. According to Jackie Horsfall (2016), a popular entertainment blogger and creator of the blog *Oscar Buzz*, these are the most common themes that emerge in most Oscar-nominated films: 1) Historical Event/Epic Period Dramas. Movies that focus on a historical event ensure that the technical elements in the film can also be considered for awards such as cinematography, makeup and hairstyling, costume design or production design, etc. 2) Previous Nominations. Movies that include actors, writers and directors that have previously won or nominated for an Oscar or other prominent awards, like the Golden Globes or the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) awards, are always the best contenders. 3) Playing a Famous Person. Movies that center around the life of a famous person, whether dead or alive, creates a great reference for those watching actors to compare them to the real-life mannerisms of the person they are portraying to judge how well the actors are capturing the essence of the individuals. 4) Physically or Mentally Disabled. Movies in which actors portray people with disabilities are rewarded because of their method acting, showing all the research the actor did to accurately portray the disability. 5) Overcoming Odds and/or Substance Addiction. Movies that have a happy ending after overcoming unbearable odds have long been fan favorites. 6) Themed around Hollywood. Movies that feature the film, television and music industry tend to do very well with Academy voters because they are in the industry themselves.

Certain films are created using the criteria outlined above just for the purposes of not only winning awards but also realizing the draw that such films have on audiences and thus the film's profitability. "The industry is aware of its

audience and aims to deliver films that fit our expectations. Accordingly, the marketing of films is very important because it plays on our knowledge of genre” (Etherington-Wright and Dougherty, 2011, para 16)

Oscar-nominated movies from 2018 that fit neatly into these categories and thus have been identified as Oscar Bait include *The Post*, *The Darkest Hour*, *Dunkirk* and *Call Me by Your Name*. *Brokeback* might not fit into all of the above categories, but it certainly falls into enough of them for many film critics to have labeled it as Oscar Bait as well.

Brokeback obviously meets the Historical Event/Epic Drama criterion. It is set in Wyoming from 1963 to 1983. In fact, because the story is set during this era and focuses on homosexuality, many critics and scholars have discussed how the time period alone was one of the biggest antagonists in the film.

The A-list cast and director had more than their share of nominations and wins before the Academy Awards. Ang Lee had long been an award-winning director before his work on *Brokeback*. He had won awards and was nominated by the Golden Globes, British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA), Director’s Guild of America, Independent Spirit, National Board of Review, Satellite and Critics’ Choice Awards for his work on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Sense and Sensibility*. He was honored with the Gotham Independent Film Tribute Award in 2002. He won best director for his work on *Brokeback* by BAFTA, the Golden Globes and later the Academy Awards in 2005.

Before working on *Brokeback*, Jake Gyllenhaal was nominated for Satellite acting awards for his roles in *The Good Girl* and *Jarhead* in 2003 and 2005, respectively. He actually won his first acting award in 2001 when he received the Breakthrough Male Performance by the Young Hollywood Awards for his role in *Donnie Darko*. He won awards for his performance in *Brokeback* by the North Texas Film Critics Association, the Palm Spring International Film Festival, British Film Awards, and the Phoenix and San Diego Film Critics Associations as well as the MTV Movie Awards. He was also nominated for best supporting acting awards by SAG and the Satellite, and Academy Awards.

Heath Ledger had been nominated for his fair share of awards before *Brokeback* as well. He earned numerous nominations by the Teen Choice awards for his roles in *A Knight’s Tale*, *Lords of*

Dogtown and *10 Things I Hate About You*. Before the 2006 Academy Awards, Ledger won numerous acting awards for *Brokeback*, including the Santa Barbara International Film Festival Awards, and the New York, San Francisco, St. Louis, Toronto, Kansas City, Iowa and Florida Film Critics Awards. He was also nominated for best actor by the Academy Awards, SAG, Gotham Independent Awards, Golden Globes, National Society of Film Critics, Critics’ Choice Awards, Independent Spirit Awards, and the BAFTA Awards.

Michelle Williams had been nominated for a cast SAG Award for her work in *The Station Agent* in 2004. Her first award was a 2001 Lucy Award for Excellence in a Motion Picture Made for Television for her role in these *If These Walls Could Talk 2*. She went on to win the Critics’ Choice Awards for Best Supporting Actress for *Brokeback*, and she was nominated for numerous awards for her *Brokeback* role, including by the Independent Spirit Awards, Gotham Independent Awards, SAG, BAFTA, Golden Globes and the Academy Awards.

The entire cast was nominated for the Best Performance by a Cast at the 2005 SAG awards and for the Best Ensemble Performance award at the 2005 Gotham Independent Film Awards.

Depending on your viewpoint, the film could also qualify for the Physically or Mentally Disabled criterion. Technically, during at least half of the time in which *Brokeback* was set, homosexuality was considered a mental illness. Homosexuality was not officially removed from the list of mental illnesses by the American Psychological Association until 1973. So an argument could be made that according to APA standards at the time, both of the gay characters in the film could be classified as mentally ill, which would allow it to fit into this category. This could also tie into why the tragification of homosexual relationships resonates with mainstream viewers because of their implicit bias of gays being deviants or mentally ill.

The Overcoming Odds and/or Substance Addiction category is up for debate as well. Both gay male characters were unquestionably battling both internal (self-hatred due to their sexuality) and external (societal homophobia) issues throughout the film. However, few, if any, would say, this film has a happy ending, considering one character is murdered by gay bashers and the jury is still out on whether Ennis is ever able to come to terms with being gay. There are those who do

interpret the final scene in this way and thus would consider the film a semi-happy ending.

Brokeback substantially met four out of the six criteria, confirming this author's position, that not only was the film Oscar Bait, but it was precisely this designation that allowed it to receive the mainstream appeal that it ultimately received during its run in the theaters. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (2016) in their text, "Hypotheses on the Queer Middlebrow," discuss how middlebrow films, which they basically classify as films that don't meet the Oscar Bait criteria, often don't receive the same exposure or funding to garner such wide consumer appeal. "*Brokeback* could not win the Academy Award for Best Picture despite being Oscar bait in every possible way. Ang Lee had the power to make a gay love story play in every multiplex, but very few gay directors could move their films out of the LGBT section of the video store" (p. 203).

This can also be seen by looking at the film's trajectory at the box office. *Brokeback* first opened in December 2005 at only 5 theaters. However, after receiving critical acclaim at the major film festivals and being infused with a robust marketing campaign, including the A-list stars doing the talk-show circuit, at its height in February 2006, the film was in over 2,000 theaters and had made over \$70 million. Then with the actors (Ledger, Gyllenhaal, and Williams) being nominated for Academy Awards and Ang Lee winning for best director, the film continued to reign supreme in the box office until April, earning box office totals of \$83 million domestically and \$177 million worldwide. In the end, being Oscar Bait proved to be very beneficial for the film.

LGBTQ Representations in Film

It is important to acknowledge how the recent rise of these repetitive formulaic assimilationist LGBTQ films, their creation of this new genre, has affected the quality and quantity of the LGBTQ representations in the media. These films are quite different from the "new queer cinema" films of the 1990s that focused on combating the heteronormative narratives of mainstream films during that time. Instead, the films in this new genre specifically place the LGBTQ characters within traditional heteronormative storytelling to make it more appealing to heterosexual audiences. The shifting relationship between Hollywood and its audience is under constant renegotiation. Ideas of mass conformity change depending on

political, economic and social climate (Altman, 1984, pp.13–14).

Beginning five years ago, GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) has constructed a Studio Responsibility Index to map the quantity, quality, and diversity of LGBTQ characters in films released by the seven major studios and their smaller "art house" divisions. Based on the overall quantity, quality, and diversity of LGBTQ representation, a grade was then assigned to each studio: Excellent, Good, Insufficient, Poor, or Failing. According to the 2017 study, of the 125 films released by the major studios and the 41 released by their smaller art house offshoots, only 30 of those films included LGBTQ characters and/or themes. Much like "Bechdel Test," which examines the way female characters are portrayed and situated within a narrative, GLAAD developed its own set of criteria to analyze how LGBTQ characters are included within a film, which they call the "Vito Russo Test." To pass the Vito Russo Test, the following must be true:

- The film contains a character that is identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender.
- That character must not be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity (i.e. they are comprised of the same sort of unique character traits commonly used to differentiate straight/cisgender characters from one another).
- The LGBTQ character must be tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect, meaning they are not there to simply provide colorful commentary, paint urban authenticity, or (perhaps most commonly) set up a punchline. The character must matter. (GLAAD, 2017, para 2)

Only nine of the 23 (39%) LGBTQ-inclusive major studio films passed the Vito Russo Test this year. On the new five-grade scale, three studios received "Poor" ratings for their 2016 slates [20th Century Fox, Paramount, Warner Brothers] and three others [Lionsgate, Sony Pictures, Walt Disney Studios] received "Failing" ratings. Universal Pictures is the only studio to be rated

“Insufficient.” No studios were rated “Good” this year, and none have ever received an “Excellent” rating. (GLAAD, 2017). These results really illustrate how most mainstream film continues to lag far behind TV and other forms of media when it comes to LGBTQ representation. In fact, of the mainstream films that GLAAD found to be LGBTQ-inclusive, 10 (43%) included less than one minute of screen time for their LGBTQ characters. The study also found that comedy films were the genre most likely to include LGBTQ characters and they usually included blatant defamatory portrayals of LGBTQ people. Both Paramount’s *Zoolander 2*, which included Benedict Cumberbatch’s over-the-top portrayal of someone who identifies as non-binary, and Fox Searchlight’s *Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie*, which included transgender characters, all used the characters as punchlines in the film often to incite humor rooted in trans-panic. The racial diversity of LGBTQ characters, along with the inclusion of trans characters, continues to be problematic in films. There was a five-percentage-point drop in LGBTQ characters of color, and this was the second straight year with such a significant decrease. *Moonlight* was actually cited as the shining star in LGBT films last year, especially given its Oscar win. “It was the center of critical and popular attention for many months, and on top of providing much-clamored-for representation, it did some of the work of setting the bar for these stories going forward” (GLAAD, 2017, para 6). There was only one trans character represented in all of the film studied in 2017.

According to GLAAD’s 2017 *Accelerating Acceptance* survey, 12% percent of the American population self-identifies as LGBTQ, with 20% of that figure being millennials. Given these statistics, the dearth of LGBT characters, especially trans and minority characters, in films is quite clear. However, the study also illustrates the importance of a film like *Moonlight*, which falls into this new genre, showing how such films can penetrate the mainstream audience and provide representation for voices not usually heard, like that of a gay black boy growing up in the ghettos of Miami. While these assimilationist films conform to traditional storytelling, and some scholars feel by doing this, they downplay the LGBTQ experience in order to be accepted by the masses, they are still sharing LGBT voices with large audiences that might not ever encounter them in any other way.

Tzvetan Todorov argued that a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres. “Each new work within a genre has the potential to influence changes within the genre or perhaps the emergence of new sub-genres (which may later blossom into fully-fledged genres). *Brokeback* transformed a traditional genre by incorporating additional ones and creating something new, which has already created its own sub-genres (i.e. *Love*, *Simon*), and resonated with changing audience preferences.

However, such a perspective tends to highlight the role of authorial experimentation in changing genres and their conventions, whereas it is important to recognize not only the social nature of text production but especially the role of economic and technological factors as well as changing audience preferences.” (cited in Swales 1990, 36). This highlights the importance of financial gains and how the film industry being a business is always focused on their bottom line, thus investing in genres that are most lucrative. Based on these economic factors, some genres are more powerful than others: they differ in the status which is attributed to them by their audiences and by those who produce texts or films within them. Currently, franchise films, especially those based on comics or *Star Wars*, like *Avengers* and *The Last Jedi*, would be considered powerful genres. Animated films are also commonly blockbusters and would be identified as a powerful genre. In fact, when looking at the top 10 films for the past five years, over 80% of them are franchise and animated films.

Conclusion

Theorist Tony Thwaites wrote, “In the interaction and conflicts among genres we can see the connections between textuality and power,” meaning there is a direct relation between the film’s genre and the power it holds to influence societal norms. Yet there are certain texts that are considered to be canonized and are discussed as exemplary classic texts (Altman, 1984, p.7). *Brokeback* contained the crucial elements needed for mass consumption: a straight director with gay sensibilities, global appeal due to its Western setting, inclusion of Oscar-bait actors and themes and last but not least hypermasculine gay male characters.

Even almost fifteen years after the film’s release, *Brokeback*’s unprecedented influence on queer cinema endures. In December 2018, the Library of Congress on its 30th anniversary added

the film to the National Film Registry, which recognizes, celebrates and preserves cinematic treasures that must be protected because they document our history, culture, hopes and dreams” (Library of Congress, 2018, para 2). The Library of Congress had this to say about the film:

Haunting in its unsentimental depiction of longing, lonesomeness, pretense, sexual repression and ultimately love, *Brokeback Mountain* features Heath Ledger’s remarkable performance that conveys a lifetime of self-torment through a pained demeanor, near inarticulate speech and constricted, lugubrious movements (para 26).

Despite all the praise for the film, *Brokeback* is not a perfect film. As mentioned earlier, some traditional queer cinema critics, like Osterweil, feel that Lee could have been much more radical in his approach to showing the plight of homosexual men during the film’s time period in the ‘60s. But ironically, staying away from such radicalism is what made the film so relatable to mainstream audiences. The same can be said about the film focusing on very white, masculine attractive gay characters, which in some ways deviated from the original short story on which the film is based. The accessibility of the film could have been comprised by including more diverse representations of the gay community, such as LGBTQ persons of color and even trans individuals. So given these compromises, the film does maintain the dominant hegemony of LGBTQ culture, but this author asserts that even with those restrictive choices, given *Brokeback*’s success and the fact that no other LGBT film to-date has met all the elements within the formula, it is still the canon that has set the bar for accessible, financially successful LGBTQ films.

Lee sums it up best:

I didn’t intend to make a statement with *Brokeback Mountain*. I simply wanted to tell a purely Western love story between two cowboys. To my great surprise, the film ended up striking a deep chord with audiences; the movie became a part of the culture. A reflection of the darkness and light—of violent prejudice and enduring love—in

the rocky landscape of the American heart (Library of Congress, 2018, para 6).

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