

# Transience and Imperfect Tense: Brokeback Mountain as Melodrama

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For a number of critics, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) is a groundbreaker, the boundaries it extends, broadly, being generic. B. Ruby Rich believes Ang Lee has "taken an established conventional genre by the horns [...] creating something entirely new [...] read[ing] the history of the west back through an uncompromisingly queer lens" (Rich, 2005: 2). Philip French argues that "the film is a major contribution to our understanding of the western genre" (French, 2006: 3). I have no particular problems with this. For while Lee seems to want to distance the film from the Western genre (in Clarke, 2006: 29) and, as Peter Bradshaw indicates, this ascription can limit how the film is conceived (Bradshaw, 2006: 3), I think the Western is big and complex enough to go quite a long way toward explaining what *Brokeback Mountain* is "all about." However, the best way into *Brokeback Mountain*, as it were, is via melodrama. Various theorists and observations lead me to this belief. Moreover, I want to argue that theorising *Brokeback Mountain* as melodrama is important for a number of reasons.

Firstly despite the valuable work of Christine Gledhill (1985, 1987), Steve Neale (2000), Linda Williams (1998) and others, there remains in film studies and beyond a tendency to think of melodrama as a feminised, domestic and, at best, secondary or diminished form. In this essay, I will focus on the mode's ability to engage with questions of men and masculinity. I'll also consider the importance of external space alongside and in relation to internal and domestic settings. I want to argue, like Williams and others, that melodrama remains a central part of popular media and culture, however much naturalistic realism may have superseded it and be considered separate from it in contemporary cultural criticism. In film studies, we need to keep melodrama to the fore in our analysis of historical and contemporary texts, continue to consider its relation to other cultural forms, and think how the mode adapts and gives form to changed circumstances.

In this essay, however modestly, I try to meet these aims. The essay's focus and main argument is that *Brokeback Mountain* is a historical and developing form of melodrama which I call "transient pathetic melodrama." This sub-category of the mode, I suggest, has a special relation to the Western and the road movie, and what Duncan Webster calls New American Fiction (Webster, 1988). This seems clear given Larry McMurtry's close involvement with the film, Lee's observation (in Clark, 2006: 32) that *The Last Picture Show* (1971) was the only film he thought about when making *Brokeback Mountain*, and of course that the film is adapted from Annie Proulx's short story of the same name. The connection, though, points both to shared themes and forms -- of mobility, loss, masculinity, space and a regional realism -- as well as to what's special about *Brokeback Mountain* as a transient pathetic film melodrama. *Brokeback Mountain* is an expansive and excessive film. It exhibits an excess of confusion, suffering and restlessness and it expands on two key motifs of melodrama in order to express and to some extent work through this excess. By utilising a version of the "maximised type" (Gledhill, 1991: 211), the film makes Ennis an emblem of transience and abjection; it makes him, as it were, transient pathetic melodrama. And by

expanding and re-routing Freud's rescue motif, *Brokeback Mountain* both complicates questions of gender and takes us away from Oedipus and toward an imperfect fantasy of in-betweenness.

So in defining *Brokeback Mountain* as transient pathetic melodrama, I hope to show that the film has a certain genesis and is most comparable to other transient pathetic melodramas. More tentatively, I want to suggest that *Brokeback Mountain* is not alone in renewing the melodramatic mode for contemporary social circumstances. Melodrama has indeed, as Elsaesser suggests, "come full circle" (in Gledhill, 1985: 75). But it also now must negotiate and figure uncertainty as well as bourgeois alienation, so that while *Brokeback Mountain's* themes, as this essay shows, are born of modernity, they also speak to contemporary audiences -- audiences perhaps less wedded to particular forms of morality and realism, and more exercised by questions of risk, authenticity and life chances. For these audiences, antinomy, incompatibility, transience and flimsy but collectable memories may have a particular resonance. Before examining these questions, though, I want to consider some of the basic ways in which *Brokeback Mountain* can be defined as melodrama.

### ***Brokeback Mountain* and melodrama**

Firstly, most broadly, and following the work of Williams (1998), Gledhill (1987) and Neale (2000), if we accept that melodrama is a key cinematic mode, then it's also arguable that it underpins most of the commercially successful films that emerge from Hollywood. The Western here is a case in point. For as David Lusted has argued, "the Western emerged in the earliest days of Hollywood as a generic form of melodrama, dependent on the melodrama stage for its dominant narratives, themes and performance styles" (Lusted, 1992: 13). [\[1\]](#) These melodramatic themes, Lusted suggests, include love sacrificed and reunited; suffering, misunderstanding and reconciliation; victimhood, emotionalism and pathos (Lusted, 1992: 17ff).

In this respect, Lusted, like others, considers melodrama to be defined by the way in which "everything happens 'inside'" (Singer, 2001: 53, quoting Sirk). And indeed the Western gains its cultural force for Lusted by the way it combines these melodramatic features with the more widely recognized romantic aspects of the genre -- qualities which include a manichean moral code, Oedipal quests and traumas of accession, and a tragic, individualized hero who identifies with the wilderness and embodies the contradictions of modernity (Lusted, 1992: 6ff). Lusted notes that in popular culture, romance and melodrama are closely related forms (Lusted, 1992: 14). But we could go further still to suggest that, in film, all Lusted's Western attributes can be placed under the heading of melodrama. Steve Neale, for example, shows how male action genres were understood as melodrama before the term became restricted to the home and hearth (Neale, 2000: 181). Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams argue that film melodrama exhibits a strong manichean code (Gledhill, 1987: 20; Williams, 1998: 77). And Laura Mulvey suggests that film melodrama should be understood as more or less Oedipal depending on the degree to which it focuses upon a women's point of view or male Oedipal problems (Mulvey, 1987: 76).

Further, and most usefully for this essay, Ben Singer argues that we can distinguish between action film melodrama and pathetic film melodrama (Singer, 2001: 55). Action film melodrama is propelled by an active hero and frequently is devoid of pathos, while pathetic film melodrama is looser in its narrative structure and is peopled by figures equally damaged and deserving of pathos. Singer does not suggest, however, that the two types of film

melodrama are absolutely distinct. His preference, indeed, in defining film melodrama, is for a cluster concept. If a film exhibits at least two of five defining features -- pathos, overwrought emotion, sensationalism, moral polarization and non-classical narrative structure -- in varying combinations, then we can think of it as melodrama (Singer, 2001: 44).

Following this definition, I want to suggest that *Brokeback Mountain* in the main is a pathetic film melodrama; but also that this does not preclude it from broader (action, Oedipal, romantic) definitions of the mode. Most straightforwardly, it's clear that a number of the film's characters are morally sympathetic and have the capacity, at least, to engender pathos. Much has been made of Lee's sympathetic treatment of women characters (though less of the fact he's added one or two), and this is one of a number of ways in which the film distinguishes itself from the short story. So though neither the story nor the film include any characters which really, or narratively, can be considered villainous, it's fair to say that the film both amplifies and disperses any pathos evident in Proulx's short story. It achieves this in quite complex ways.

That is, *Brokeback Mountain* doesn't meet entirely some of the established theories of film melodrama and pathos. In Williams' account, for example, pathos is engendered via time, character and parallel editing, so that a cathartic release from narrative powerlessness can simultaneously feel like the triumph of right ideas and justice -- the classic scenario (and character triad) being the saving of the victim-heroine from a villain by a hero. Not only, then, argues Williams, will characters be clear with regard to their literary and theatrical archetypes, but also with regard to their polarized moral status (Williams, 1998: 77). And, while Singer disagrees with parts of Williams' argument, his theory of melodramatic pathos diverges from that of Williams only slightly. He follows Aristotle to suggest that pathos is "a kind of visceral...sensation triggered by the perception of moral injustice against an undeserving victim" (Singer, 2001: 44).

*Brokeback Mountain* has neither morally polarized characters nor a give and take, nick-of-time narrative structure. Further, while, as I've noted, it features a number of sympathetic characters, none of them, consistently and within the terms of the text, is especially virtuous. Indeed, while we spend most narrative time travelling with Ennis (Heath Ledger), there are key and repeated moments when from a number of perspectives he is less than attractive -- most obviously in his numerous acts of physical violence; but also in his almost singular unwillingness to commit, to give of himself to his lover or the women (wife, daughter, girlfriend) in his life. The film's characters, then, exist in moral antinomy rather than polarized opposition, the tensions between them resulting from differing perspectives or incompatible "situations" (Singer, 2001: 54). They are indeed trapped and victims of sorts, but their powerlessness and their pathos go beyond those theorized by Williams and Singer. At the heart of their pathetic status is suffering; and as Mary Ann Doane notes, "the etymology of pathos insists that suffering is its central emotion" (Doane, 2004: 14). Doane also notes that pathos frequently is associated with lower forms (like melodrama), with deviance and transience: "Pathos is sometimes opposed to logos [...] and sometimes situated as the transient or emotional in opposition to ethos as the permanent or ideal" (Doane, 2004: 10).

### **Men and Mobility**

This indicates how *Brokeback Mountain* is pathetic film melodrama. In various ways it engenders pathos not necessarily or just of the morally deserving, but more and perhaps most

of the suffering, the deviant and the transient. The target of Doane's definition is the cinema of Todd Haynes. And just as Haynes' films -- most obviously *Far From Heaven* (2002) -- revitalize certain traditions of pathetic film melodrama, so is this concept of pathos germane both to traumatic and "cold" (Sconce, 2002: 350) film melodramas released in recent years, and part of a longer tradition. For if the Western arguably has always been a rite of passage (Lusted, 1992: 8) and the US's favourite rite of passage, then *Brokeback Mountain* may signal both the protracted death of that story as well as its latest twist. As Neale indicates, in the post-WWII years, in a death throes of sorts, the Western immersed itself in what it knew best: men -- men as heads of families and business empires, men as fathers and sons, men as loners, brothers, mercenaries (Neale, 2000: 141).

As Neale's exhaustive study of Hollywood genres shows, this move was more complicated than a singular, desperate plunge. It both continued to refigure a genre more multiple than frequently theorized and responded to changed circumstances. Primary among these circumstances was a new regime of mobility -- economic, social and geographic mobility, where the romance of the trail was joined and superseded by that of the road. As Duncan Webster notes, in what he calls New American Fiction these new mobilities presented themselves at once as promise and threat, freedom and necessity (Webster, 1988: 118). In the Western, more accurately perhaps they were figured as fantasy and flight; a flight, as Barbara Ehrenreich argues, from new commitments and a new order of domesticity and consumerism (Ehrenreich, 1983). But this horror also provided some of the materials for new fantastic versions of masculinity.

Steven Cohan shows how consumerism in the post-WWII period played a key part in the re-alignment of masculinity on screen (Cohan, 1992: 2). A major part of the capital of new stars like Brando, Clift, Dean and Hudson was their saleable good looks and appeal across audiences and markets. The new heroes of Westerns and pathetic melodramas didn't so much feminize masculinity, argues Cohan, as sexualize it. They became "object(s) of erotic delectation, but...without the threat of male action" (Cohan, 1992: 18). What these 1950s Westerns negotiated too -- more so, even, Cohan argues, than sexuality -- was youth. And the tensions and contradictions of new mobilities were captured and expressed in a host of US post-WWII rites of passage films which included and went well beyond the Western genre (Neale, 2000: 122-123). Pathetic film melodramas like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) tended to take these predominantly male-oriented questions of youth and mobility indoors to the beleaguered family; while other forms -- most obviously the novel and most notably *On the Road* (1957) -- took them out onto the road. But pathetic film melodrama also frequently takes an interest in extra-familial space and the liminal (from *Sunrise's* [1927] use of the river, to the centrality of the forest and the railtrack in *Stand By Me* [1986]). Moreover, this movement between the internal and external, which, as I noted earlier, Lusted attributes to a specific period of Western film production, may also be evident in a modified way in particular types of male-oriented transient pathetic film melodrama, where the external is especially expressive and liminal and the internal and frequently tortured world of the Bildungsroman has a strong impact.

Further, the Western's use of external spaces, as I've noted, should not only be understood as questing, frontier and ego building, or in the service of regeneration-through-violence. As Lusted shows, external space in the Western is equally able to be used in order to express contradiction, and is, in post-WWII years, as much a flight from modernity as to nature. As in the mid-twentieth century gay novels examined by Richard Dyer, what some Westerns and pathetic film melodramas like *The Last Picture Show* and *Brokeback Mountain* express is

mobility and transience as restlessness; a restlessness born of a period of life and urban modernity (Dyer, 2002). This sense or spirit is perhaps most memorably captured in the novels of Salinger and Kerouac, and most acutely figured in those of McMurtry. As McMurtry notes, "In my own generation of adolescents the shakeup [of an urbanizing society] manifested itself as a consuming restlessness -- an urge to be on the move" (quoted in Stout, 1976: 38). Janis Stout argues that while this urge only heightens across the period of McMurtry's writing, its impulse becomes less clear (Stout, 1976: 37-38); but that it is most obvious in *The Last Picture Show*, which exhibits "a virtually unrelieved distaste for the moribund small-town life which succeeded that austere (Texas) heritage" (Stout, 1976: 37).

Ostensibly, this unrelieved distaste recurs in transient pathetic film melodrama, the small town figuring as villain and partial explanation for transience and suffering in films like *This Boy's Life* (1993), *Stand By Me* and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). And it's tempting and to some extent accurate to argue that this trope recurs in *Brokeback Mountain*. For it's clear that Ennis feels hemmed in by small town life and the poverty of Alma's (Michelle Williams) ambition. This is made plain, for example, by his refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Alma's work in the local store, his rejection of the church social group, and, in one of the film's most powerful scenes, his flat refusal, it would seem, of Alma's sexual-domestic terms: "I'd have 'em if you'd support 'em."

But this is not only a rejection of moribund small-town life. This seldom occurs entirely or unequivocally in transient pathetic film melodrama. For films like *Stand By Me* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, while making crude and cruel parodies of the small town, also find it difficult to escape a fantasy of the past. Moreover, in transient pathetic melodramas like *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Running on Empty* (1988), it's made clear that for all their restlessness and confusion, stability and home are what the films' central characters want most -- both Jim (James Dean) and Danny (River Phoenix) railing against their parents' belief that only flight, again, can save the family.

In the opening scenes of *Brokeback Mountain*, though, Ennis and Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) are indeed restless and pathetic. They're vaguely aware but powerless regarding the ugliness of their work and the way it's been tossed at them. They persuade each other that it's temporary and a means to an end and provide explanations of sorts as to why they've arrived at this juncture. Both are under-fathered and neither, in Stout's terms, has a "useable past" (Stout, 1976: 44). The under-developedness of Ennis and Jack might also be read as a trope of melodrama. [2] In one of the most influential theories of film melodrama, Thomas Elsaesser argues that the form privileges existential and psychic realism over psychological realism (Elsaesser, 1987: 48-50). Elsaesser also shows how effectively melodrama is able to combine theme and form, so that its narrative and aesthetic disjunctions speak vividly of cultural contradiction. One of transient pathetic film melodrama's key points of excess and tension, I've argued, are its external elements and settings; as well as, at times, its transience alone. This is one of the features of the important relationship between this sub-category of melodrama and particular branches of New American Fiction. But *Brokeback Mountain* is melodrama and in particular film melodrama. Along with landscape and transience, a key point of affect and excess in the film is character.

### **Maximised types**

It's difficult to separate character and mode in *Brokeback Mountain*. Ennis is transient pathetic film melodrama in that, to paraphrase Colin McArthur, he seems to gather within

himself the qualities of the sub-genre in which he appears, "so that the violence, suffering and *angst* of the (film) is restated in [...] (his face), physical presence, movement and speech" (in Gledhill, 1991: 215). While McArthur discusses pre-Method stars, his broad notion of authentic screen performance points to the famous mid-twentieth century "school" nonetheless. And just as, as Cohan observes, the Method school is inseparably a part of expanding consumerism, so it is, arguably, a renewal of the melodramatic mode. Method, argues Gledhill, draws realism toward melodrama (Gledhill, 1991: 221). It is part of the popularization of Freudianism, and its famous (if dubiously all-encompassing) techniques:

suggest a return to the primal and ineffable gesture that underpins melodramatic acting for the access it offers to hidden moral drives and desires. Like the melodramatic persona, the Method actor *embodies* conflicts, if not in terms of public rhetoric, then through an equally codifiable set of personal mannerisms, nervous ticks, inarticulate mumblings and so on (Gledhill, 1991: 223-224).

Further, Gledhill follows Elsaesser to argue that, in the absence of psychological realism, cinema affords performers special opportunities for affective melodramatic realism: "(this) lack of interiority is offset by the paradoxically intimate relations with the actor's body afforded by cinematography" (Gledhill, 1991: 224).

Ennis and Jack's bodies do indeed play a major affective part in *Brokeback Mountain*. [3] Ennis especially would seem to be one of melodrama's emblematic or "maximized types" (Gledhill, 1991: 211), embodying contradiction and the conflict between desire and repression which arguably characterizes the post-Enlightenment world (Gledhill, 1991: 213). He is a relatively timeless figure and returns us not only to Method and melodrama, but to the enduring romance and archetype of the Western hero. [4] Part of what Ennis embodies is the "original American wilderness" (Hellmann, 1982: 421). If he's profoundly uncomfortable -- shuffling, stooped, mumbling, primed to go off -- in domestic spaces, at local festivities, on road crews, in church, in bars and diners, then it's important, if he's to reach heroic status of any kind, that this is contrasted with how at ease he is in the saddle and outdoors. Proulx makes more of Ennis' affinity with horses; but Lee can't resist iconic shots of Ennis on horseback -- through trees in dappled sunlight, high on the mountain, majestic, and riding fast to discover the wolf-mauled carcass of a sheep the morning after the night before.

These are quick but potent and familiar signs of wilderness and/as virility; and Lee also can't resist at least one more opportunity to confirm that under Ennis' dignified, taciturn and socially awkward exterior lies an unusually quick, virile and principled man. The Fourth of July bikers scene performs this function and also confirms Ennis' dysfunction. Ennis doesn't walk tall like other Western heroes. He's a mixed emblem, half-way between rugged, romantic individualism and pathetic, mumbling Method. From the Western he carries forward caution, enigma, chronic individualism, and necessary violence. Jack too is not entirely shorn of this tradition. Like other Western buddies, he's a loquacious, spontaneous risk, providing drama and confirmation that Ennis does possess love, loyalty and humanity after all. In some ways he is indeed the clear other to Ennis' quiet stoicism. He's the wild to the straight (Laderman, 1996: 45), the feminine to the masculine, the child to the man (Wood, 1986: 232); he's the "earthy, impatient partner" (Laderman, 1996: 47) and, following Laderman, yet another variation on the Sal/Dean, Bonnie/Clyde dyad (Laderman, 1996).

More than Ennis, Jack bridges the journey from Western to road movie. He not only brings forward the glamorous masculinities of Ladd, Clift and Brando's "unusually dandified cowboy(s)" (Naremore, 1988: 195); he also embodies the restless sensuality of the road. As Robert Lang notes, frequently the road movie combines the romantic symbolism of the road with a certain bodily and sensual sexuality (Lang, 1997: 332). This, argues Lang, is heightened in, what he calls, the new queer road movie, which replays a central erotic impulse of the gay imaginary: "a basic romanticism combined with an easy acceptance of promiscuity" (Lang, 1997: 332).

This captures something of the spirit of Jack. The film at points marks him out from Ennis as promiscuous: as the experienced teacher of sex to the initiate on their first, defining journey into the hills; as the insouciant recipient and recommender of sex to Lureen's (Anne Hathaway) fearful, father-shadowed desire; and latterly as the restless transient, submitting to any sexual encounter able, temporarily, to abate frustration, much to Ennis' -- one-shot, one-man -- disgust. Furthermore, Jack's romanticism, if multiple, does indeed seem basic. He has a boyish love of rodeo -- of the showman cowboy -- which he plays out in the opening passage of the film; and which won't be suppressed by Ennis' silence or his father-in-law's brutish masculinity.

But ultimately it may be Ennis who is most transient and restless, less able than Jack to "do" domesticity and modernity, and unable to free himself from casual labour, exploitative bosses and outsider status. Ennis to an extent is Dyer's old-school hustler, devoid of introspection and upholding masculine values of toughness and resistance (Dyer, 1990: 140). It's Ennis who can't abide unnecessary talk, whether with Alma in bed, a road-crew workmate, or when Cassie (Linda Cardellini) tries to loosen him up; it's Ennis, for all Jack's rodeoing, who's most at home and most virile in the saddle of a horse; it's Ennis who can tame nature with one shot; and it's Ennis who's forced into explosive manliness when leering bikers threaten his family's peace. Manliness here seems "not to do with inner feeling but with performance" (Dyer, 1990: 140). Moreover, Ennis' one-shot -- one shot to kill a moose, and his insistence that sex with Jack is a one-shot thing -- is redolent not only of *The Deer Hunter's* (1978) taciturn hero, but of the hyper-masculine hustler who must assert -- as Ennis does -- both that he's not queer and "wouldn't have sex with another man under any other conditions" (Moon, 1993: 31).

Ennis, then, performs masculinities both of the residual Western hero and the hustler as Dyer defines it. In this respect, as I noted earlier, he also appears a classically melodramatic figure in that he embodies contradiction. But Ennis is neither Dyer's hustler entirely, nor melodramatic in quite the way that Gledhill theorises the form and its stars. Ennis certainly is a "maximised type" (Gledhill, 1991: 211); but he's not an emblem of ambivalence in the way that, for example, Bogart is (Gledhill, 1991: 216). For the duration of the film -- or until Jack's death at least -- Ennis is confused, not ambivalent. In this respect, his public face is little and seldom different from his private one. The boundaries of Ennis' inner and outer selves are hard to gauge. Rather than lacking inwardness (Dyer's understanding of the hustler), he seems indeed a "well of imputed subjectivity" (Moon, 1993: 29).

Ennis is, though, an emblem nonetheless, and a melodramatic one. He's an emblem not of ambivalence, but of transience and abjection. For Ennis' confusion and pain owe something not only, as I noted earlier, to New American Fiction, but also to the distinct but arguably related phenomenon of the "sad young man." The stereotype of the sad young man, Richard Dyer argues, is evident across popular media and is strongly marked by transition: "Both physically and narratively the sad young man is a stereotype of impermanence and

transience" (Dyer, 2002: 132). It is a particularly potent and malleable image, argues Dyer, because of the way in which it crystalizes a number of cultural formations. The sad young man's genealogy includes, Dyer suggests, Christianity, especially the "adoration of a naked, suffering young man" (Dyer, 2002: 119); the Romantic poets, cadaverously beautiful and "feminized in their [...] ultra-pale looks" (Dyer, 2002: 119); the Bildungsroman and other male coming-of-age traditions; the third sex or "congenital inversion" (Dyer, 2002: 119); Freudianism and the popularization of ideas about dangerous narcissism, suffocating mothers and homosexuality as a phase; the invention of adolescence and attendant moral panics; and urbanism as social alienation and loose morals.

These latter two traditions, especially, are strongly connected to the youthfulness of the sad young man. For while, clearly, his transience is inseparable from his between-age years, the sad young man's youthfulness has a wider significance and cultural specificity. At the peak of its mid-twentieth century cycle, it was part of the general and considerable anxiety invested in youth in the US and UK. In stories and images of sad young men, [5] this anxiety found expression in the fear that manhood might not be reached successfully -- that is, that a wrong turn might be taken; a temporary or, worse, permanent turn toward queerness. Much of this anxiety, Dyer argues, results from contradictory definitions of real manliness, "on the one hand asserted and reproduced through compulsory heterosexuality but on the other hand most intensely expressed in the women-excluding buddy system" (Dyer, 2002: 132).

This helps to explain Ennis' pain and confusion. For much of the film his face seems to say: Is loving men, then, not the logical outcome of loving men? In this respect, Ennis not only reworks the sad young man syndrome; he also, at the height of his confusion, becomes the abject stray of recent pathetic film melodrama. After his most violent and ugly domestic scene with Alma, he self-destructs. Following Laura Christian's definition of the abject (Christian, 2004: 105), he plunges; apparently giving up on all pretences to self-mastery and embracing his despised status, he attacks a bewildered and blameless man, who it's clear can return Ennis' blows with credit.

### **The rescue fantasy**

This fight (except in passing) and this abjection are absent from Proulx's story, and in this sense Ennis' plunge is an expression of transient pathos, special to pathetic film melodrama and evident in films such as *21 Grams* (2003). Ennis' violent plunge into self-destruction, though, neither forces clarity -- as hyperbolic film melodrama -- nor leaves Ennis stranded further still, as could be argued of Jack's (Benicio Del Toro) plunge into religion in *21 Grams*, or Carol's (Julianne Moore) repeated turn to therapy in *Safe* (1995). Instead it seems to mark a turning point in the film which further characterizes it as melodrama in a distinctive way. That is, like other pathetic film melodramas, *Brokeback Mountain's* second part is organized around the theme of rescue. This, as Robert Burgoyne shows, is a trope of melodrama, particularly those film melodramas which try to move beyond some of the more familiar ways of figuring gendered identities:

In contrast to the Oedipal scenario, with its consistent emphasis on rebellion, competition and lack as necessary components of identity and desire, the rescue fantasy is shaped by a variety of emotions [...] that gives the 'performance of the masculine'...a more balanced and complex character. (Burgoyne, 1994: 233, quoting Freud)

Burgoyne's focus is *Born on the Fourth of July*. And Stone's film generally supports Freud's theory that sons feel compelled to repay a perceived debt to their mothers. However, as Burgoyne notes, *Born on the Fourth of July* also features the rescue of Kovic on a number of occasions; and this is also in keeping with Freud's observation that the fantasy has inbuilt "a certain reciprocity and role reversal" (Burgoyne, 1994: 233). In *Brokeback Mountain*, it's arguable that this possibility is given greater expression still.

As I noted earlier, reviewers of *Brokeback Mountain* made much of Lee's treatment of women, believing it to be more sympathetic than that of Proulx. The most affective scene in this respect is Alma's pathetic, stricken witnessing of Ennis and Jack's passionate embrace. Moreover, such reviewers' arguments would seem to be lent more weight still by the film's latter scenes. It is in these scenes that Ennis, repeatedly and increasingly, is rescued by women.

In the diner, Cassie berates Ennis for his inability to communicate, to take responsibility, to commit, giving short shrift to his response as little more than mumbling self-pity. If this is a powerful wake-up call, then the held shot of Ennis' wounded face indicates both a recognition of this, as well as a total lack of ideas regarding how to act on Cassie's advice. But he's saved again, as it were, by another call. The phone call Ennis makes to Lureen performs important and potent confirmation. It confirms Jack's death and that it was no accident. In melodramatic terms, Lureen's dialogue can't explicitly -- or denotatively -- express this, but all the scene's affective elements, including Ennis' elliptical, horrific vision of Jack's death, can; and this flashback also echoes and confirms an earlier one. That is, Ennis is confirmed here in his portent (as a melancholic visionary) and his unwillingness to follow Jack's fantastic vision: we set up your dream home and this is where it will lead. The following scene is redolent of Burgoyne's example of post-Vietnam film melodrama, *Born on the Fourth of July*.

It is at this point, when Ennis visits Jack's parents, that *Brokeback Mountain* moves fullest into rescue mode and comes closest to meeting Burgoyne's thesis. Ennis, like Kovic, at last has direction and purpose and some kind of account to settle. He's not torn by pathetic guilt, like Kovic, but he owes it to the dead, nonetheless, to make a difficult journey to a desolate place. He's not sure what he'll find at Jack's parents' house, but he and we sense it may be a final piece of the picture. What he finds, arguably and certainly with greater force than Proulx's story, is "a maternal figure who functions as an icon of forgiveness and understanding; an emblem of promised community who sets aside her own pain to sympathize with the protagonist" (Burgoyne, 1994: 227). In her face (emphasised by Lee), in her appearance (markedly different again from the short story), in her exchange of looks with Ennis, in the whole extended treatment of the scene, and of course in her final parting gift, Mrs. Twist (Roberta Maxwell) gives Ennis sympathy, affirmation and some kind of closure.

In this respect, Lee has not so much given sympathy and space to women, as recognizable typing. In this scene of rescue and redemption, if Mrs. Twist is film melodrama's "milk-giver," then Alma becomes more clearly the "blood-seeker" (Burgoyne, 1994: 227). Moreover, as in *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Brokeback Mountain*'s powerful farmhouse scene completes the maternal constellation of demon, whore and angel (Burgoyne, 1994: 232): Alma still wants to save Ennis, but to him she's too much the demon, hounding him and sending him spiraling into abjection; Cassie still wants to save Ennis, but to him she's too easy with her virtues ("Looks like I got the message in any case"), a holiday of repair, a whore; Mrs. Twist can save Ennis and in this penultimate farmhouse scene she's not far short of an angel. For fans indeed of Lee's womanly-redemption, *Brokeback Mountain* is doubly

angelic and willing to afford women restorative powers in that Ennis is symbolically embraced and loved not only as a worthy son by Mrs. Twist, but as a good father by Alma Jr. (Kate Mara) in the film's closing scenes. Whether this makes *Brokeback Mountain* a more or less conservative film is debatable; but what's clear is that the rescue fantasy remains here, as Burgoyne notes, "fraught with ambivalence" (Burgoyne, 1994: 234).

This ambivalence in *Brokeback Mountain* results not only from the film's questionable treatment of women, but in its different and more multiple version of the rescue motif. For if Mrs. Twist becomes Ennis' mother and saviour at Lightning Flat, what his conspiratorial, reciprocal look thanks her for is not so much the gift of life (as in Freud's rescue fantasy) as the gift of death. With the gift of death, the fantasy of Brokeback is settled. No longer is it the shocking start of an uncertain future; it's now for Ennis a compass, a useable past at last. It is a fantasy at once utopian and pathetic; a fantasy not only of rescue, but, by Dyer's terms, of transience. For as in the sad young man novels focused upon by Dyer, Ennis' transience is an in-betweenness of social and psychological dimensions, an indefinite twilight hell from which he can only be rescued by death, a good woman or "an ordinary fellow like oneself" (Dyer, 2002: 129). In *Brokeback Mountain* Ennis is rescued by all three.

### **Transience and Imperfect Tense**

Now that all the dangers attendant to commitment have passed, Ennis can commit. He's able to embrace the frozen memory of his dead lover and "delicious melancholia" (Dyer, 2002: 134). His face, an emblem of transient blankness and confusion for most of the film, is now a mix of pain and ecstasy. In this respect, the film's closing words are indeed a clinch of sorts; an ambiguous sign both of betrayal and betrothal. They betray inasmuch as they repeat Barthes', and the film's, last-word scene: "Grant me only a little peace and everything will be settled" (Barthes, 2002: 208, quoting Werther). Give me just a little more time, says Ennis, soon I'll be all yours. This lie, so familiar to pathetic melodrama, so clung onto by Jack, is uttered now as a kind of truth by Ennis: "Jack, I swear...", in the endless space of your memory, I'm yours.

Pathetic melodrama's inevitable betrayal, then, but also a marriage: "(T)he melancholic marries death, his one true love" (Scribner, 2003: 314). This, though, is a fantasy of death without suicide: "death liberated from dying" (Barthes, 2002: 12). Ennis' postcard image of Brokeback is important in this respect. In Barthes' terms, it's an intensified object of remembrance, a souvenir that condenses themes of love, loss and transience. It represents "imperfect death; neither oblivion nor resurrection; simply the exhausting lure of memory" (Barthes, 2002: 217). Exhausting yet irresistible; Ennis has arrived now at a place he always, vaguely, knew he'd be, and where arguably he's always been. Barthes calls this structure of feeling anamnesis or imperfect tense (Barthes, 2002: 216-217); for Freud, it's a condition of transience and melancholia (Freud, 2006: 216).

Ennis is indeed the transient, the melancholic visionary who refuses to and cannot contemplate the present without seeing also the past's "ghosts and specters...flaring and fleeting images" (Eng and Kazanjian, 2003: 4). Every one of Brokeback's affective scenes of beauty and passionate love exist for Ennis:

in the imperfect tense (that) murmurs behind this present...(G)reedy to play a role, scenes take their position in memory: often I feel this, I foresee this, at the very moment when these scenes are forming. -- This theater of time is the

very contrary of the search for lost time; for I remember pathetically, punctually, and not philosophically, discursively: I remember in order to be unhappy/happy -- not in order to understand. (Barthes, 2002: 216-217, quoting, in part, Proust)

Ennis clearly doesn't understand the place he's in, but he knows now it's permanent in its imperfection: a beautiful, treasured, always-near souvenir. And if the ending of Proulx's story seems far-removed in its spare realism from the melodramatic excessiveness of the film's tearful conclusion, then it's worth remembering that the start of the short story (introduced as a memory) is a strong overture to these themes of transience and remembrance.

Ennis' treasured, fetishized souvenir (the postcard, the shirt, the memory) can be read as regressive, just as the film's conclusion seems inevitable: Jack, the loquacious, sexual risk, is dead and we are at a "scenic terminus that reveals itself to be...an immobilising and catastrophic tableau...an emblem of the past, dangerously fooling the eye" (Natali, quoted in Lang, 1997: 347). But just as Lang questions quite how terminal is the ending of *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) (Lang, 1997: 341), so should we do the same with *Brokeback Mountain*. It isn't singularly about illusory, regressive nostalgia; and neither is it only an effort after emotional depth via tragedy. This is the way Clover and Nealon understand *Brokeback Mountain's* ending (Clover and Nealon, 2007: 65). The film for them is a missed opportunity. Instead of setting free its mobile icons, Lee has restricted them to middlebrow melodrama, humanistic depth and tragic realism (Clover and Nealon, 2007: 62ff).

This assessment is a bit too stark in its oppositions. [6] Earlier I suggested that while Ennis is a psychic, maximized type, he exhibits nonetheless some degree of interiority. This is not an argument for *Brokeback Mountain's* humanistic depth. It is, rather, to suggest that Ennis is a mixed emblem and what Freud calls a moral masochist (Freud, 1963: 190) who engenders transient pathos -- pathos without telos and based not only on moral clarity. So however conservative *Brokeback Mountain* may be -- and however vexed by questions of its radical status -- I would argue that it retains a certain "flimsiness" (Kristeva quoted in Eng and Kazanjian, 2003: 4) and blankness (Webster, 1988: 124) nonetheless.

Part of the flimsiness is about the working through and working out of loss; about the way in which the film, like some other pathetic film melodramas, combines pathos with transience and melancholia. Eng and Kazanjian follow Freud and Kristeva to argue that melancholia can be productive as well as regressive; can create "a realm of traces open to signification, a hermeneutic domain of what remains of loss" (Eng and Kazanjian, 2003: 4). Part of it is also about Proulx and her love of ephemera and the "comic obscenity" (Proulx, 1998: 58) of unfixable, intensified icons, captured in the crooked postcard image of Brokeback at the close of Lee's film. [7] The blankness too is multiple in *Brokeback Mountain* and Lee arguably gives it the last word. Ennis' tearful face, the garish postcard and the lush music may be how most viewers remember the film's ending. But *Brokeback Mountain's* final shot, more even than the opening ones, is blank and hard to think of as a terminus. After an obligatory or otherwise intensifying of the image of Brokeback with the help of Gustavo Santaolalla's music and a swinging wardrobe door, Lee finishes with a held medium shot of half a cheap wardrobe in shadow beside the trailer's pokey picture window, through which we see in the distance sun, sky, colour, a full crop in the wind and the horizon, and in the foreground, the road.

If Ang Lee's use of a restrained, flat realism promises closure, then, it also promises that this closure cannot be absolute. As at the close of Proulx's story, there remains "some open space between what he (Ennis) knew and what he tried to believe" (Proulx, 1998: 58). And as in some other transient pathetic film melodramas, Ennis here is curiously triumphant in his uncertain mobility. His guides are imperfect but cherished: flimsy and intensified images and memories of impossible love and loss.

## Notes

[1] This type of historicisation is a useful corrective to the observations that *Brokeback Mountain*'s mix of western and melodrama is "unusual" (Berry, 2007: 32) and a "strange fusion" (Osterweil, 2007: 38); as well as to the arguments that melodrama in *Brokeback Mountain* performs a predominantly restrictive function (Osterweil, 2007: 40; Clover and Nealon, 2007: 62).

[2] Ennis and Jack's lack of a useable past is not quite the same as saying they're narratively underdeveloped. How to locate these characters within realism and melodrama, indeed, is not easy -- and presently I will suggest that thinking of them as "maximized types" is a useful start. However, I would reject that they are realism's or naturalism's filled-in, plausible characters. This is what Jim Kitses suggests, arguing they are "remarkably detailed both in terms of individual psychology, and social and economic setting. The context and nuance provided by Annie Proulx's short story make for the kind of backstory for cowboys typically glossed over in the genre" (Kitses, 2007: 24). My argument is that we get very little backstory for Ennis and Jack in either the film or the short story (which is why the short story's latter father-pisses-on-infant-son-to-shockingly-reveal-foreskin scene is so memorable and implausible as realist-psychological in-fill), and that it's a mistake to think of the short story as the film's narrative backstory. Moreover, it's debatable whether any character, relationship (even Ennis and Jack's relationship, I would argue) or set of relationships is developed in *Brokeback Mountain* in the psychological-realist sense. Instead, we do indeed get highly "iconizable" (Clover and Nealon, 2007: 64) or paradigmatic scenes -- of love, wilderness, masculinity, work and domestic dysfunction -- which combine the "flatly descriptive" (Webster, 1988: 130; understood as poetry, restraint and understatement for favourable reviewers of Lee and Proulx) with the "surprising (and in *Brokeback Mountain* frequently violent) image" (Webster, 1988: 130).

[3] And cinema's special intimacy in this respect may have been realized before Lee Strasberg and post-WWII consumerism. As Lusted indicates, Tom Mix, a major Western star of the silent period, seemed well aware of the opportunities for glamour, posing and display offered by the movie camera (Lusted, 1992: 18). Like a number of film actors of the early twentieth century, Mix's background was in shows -- especially rodeo and circus -- and he offered audiences familiar spectacular pleasures as well as, perhaps, new ones based around a highly narcissistic and sexualized male hero: "The pose (of Mix for the movie camera) carries a particular shock of recognition today; for all the world a twenties forerunner of Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*" (Lusted, 1992: 19).

[4] Though the 1950s may be a special period in the establishment of what Naremore calls the "existential paradigm" (Naremore, 1988: 201) -- a paradigm of male emotionalism and angst of "studied inarticulateness" -- Hall and Whannel, (1964: 284), which crosses genres and continents and which Jameson considers to be a "'middle-brow media usage' of existentialism, entailing the favorite liberal theme of 'the inability to

communicate" (Jameson, quoted in Naremore, 1988: 201). And as Jameson notes, the theme, the mode only becomes more highly favoured, the inarticulateness (of Pacino and his contemporaries) becoming "the highest form of expressiveness" (Jameson, quoted in Naremore, 1988: 201).

[5] As Dyer notes and should be noted, stories and images, usually, of attractive sad young men. This is one function of Ledger and Gyllenhaal's photographable good looks: they bring the film more fully into the realm of youth and the sad young man; perhaps considerably more fully, given that Proulx's Ennis is narrow-faced and cave-chested, with long caliper legs, a small torso and a high-arched nose (Proulx, 1998: 6); and Jack in the short story is small, heavy in the haunch and bucktoothed (Proulx, 1998: 5-6).

[6] As well as questionable in its terms: not only, as Gledhill (1987) and Williams (1998) show, are tragedy and melodrama historically changing modes, but it's arguable that, as with realism, melodrama has borrowed quite selectively from bourgeois (rather than classical) tragedy, en route, in the eighteenth century, to becoming a distinctive, if highly mixed, aesthetic and cultural mode.

[7] I am aware of the perils of fidelity criticism, and am not interested here in arguing for the superiority of the short story (or the film), or whether the film "lives up" to it.

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