

# **Outside/In: Abjection, Space, and Landscape in *Brokeback Mountain***

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The interaction between hero and landscape lies at the [Western] genre's center, overshadowed in the popular image of the Western by gunfights and chases, but no less essential to the experience Westerns provide. In the end, the land is everything to the hero; it is both the destination and the way. He courts it, struggles with it, defies it, conquers it, and lies down with it at night.

Jane Tompkins (1992: 81)

Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), while often referred to as a "gay Western," occupies an ambiguous position in relation to the Western genre. Its plot lacks many of the trappings of the archetypal Western -- for example, the film sports no gunfights or chases, which, as Tompkins notes in the above quote, have become standard Western conventions. If the Western is, however, a genre centered around the landscape of the American west and the complex relationship of its central characters to that landscape, as Tompkins also suggests, then *Brokeback Mountain* unquestionably deserves to be placed within the tradition of the great Hollywood Westerns. In the first place, the very notion of "genre" as stable or solid fails to account for the ways in which most films occupy multiple generic positions or move fluidly between them; critics such as Jim Kitses have helpfully suggested that we think of the Western genre in particular as "a varied and flexible structure, a thematically fertile and ambiguous world of historical material shot through with archetypal elements which are themselves ever in flux" (Kitses, 1969: 63). Indeed, *Brokeback Mountain* remains a complicated film that bears the conventions of a number of familiar genres, among them melodrama (see Kitses, 2007: 26, and Osterweil, 2007). However, I would ask that we momentarily put aside the film's interplay with other genres in order to focus more specifically on its complex representation of the Western landscape and of space in general. The film is, after all, named for the crucial site where the film's two heroes, Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger), first begin a passionate love affair and to which they continually return in order to meet secretly over the next twenty years. Brokeback Mountain the place stands at the centre of *Brokeback Mountain* the film, a spatial locus that signifies a number of (often contradictory) meanings for the characters as well as the audience.

While the space of Brokeback Mountain serves a similar function in both the film and its source, the short story by Annie Proulx, it takes on greater significance when considered within the filmic context of the Hollywood Western, a genre that has historically defined itself by its iconic representations of the Western landscape. This paper attempts to unpack the complex layers of meaning surrounding the film's use of space -- both the "wide open space" of the eponymous mountain (which both does and does not signify a conventional Western landscape -- that is, a symbol of freedom from mainstream social responsibility, as in *Stagecoach* (1939) or *The Searchers* (1956)), and various other spaces seen throughout the

film: the Western town, domestic spaces, literal and figurative closets, and the film's final image of an open closet door which bears the framed image of a Western landscape. *Brokeback Mountain* not only queers the familiar conventions of the Western genre and traditional American masculinity but also queers the Western landscape itself, subverts our expected understanding of space, and both literally and metaphorically blurs the line between inside and outside. Furthermore, the film's plot continually works to stage the conflict between inside and outside by dramatizing moments of abjection. While the meeting of inside and outside results in violence and horror throughout most of the film, *Brokeback Mountain* ultimately suggests the possibility of a reconciliation between them and so arrives at a kind of resolution of the two seemingly opposed terms.

In its continual disruption of literal and symbolic borderlines, *Brokeback Mountain* announces itself as an important film in the contexts of both the Western genre and gay and lesbian studies, which has often sought to examine sexuality in terms of borders and spatial relationships. In *Inside/Out*, Diana Fuss writes that the hetero/homo distinction founds itself on the distinction of inside/outside, and that queer theory has begun to make clear that "sexual possibilities are no longer thinkable in terms of a simple inside/outside dialectic" (Fuss, 1991: 1). For Fuss, value lies in disrupting seemingly stable borders because doing so allows us to problematize the binary logic that supposes to regulate not only sexuality but also epistemology in general: "the figure inside/outside cannot be easily or ever finally dispensed with; it can only be worked on and worked over -- itself turned inside out to expose its critical operations and interior machinery" (Fuss, 1991: 1). *Brokeback Mountain* does just this, "working over" the seemingly impermeable boundaries of inside and outside, both at a narrative level, as a film about characters who inhabit and cross a series of delineated spaces, and at an extra-narrative level, as a film that both adheres to and re-imagines the conventions of the Western genre. Diagonally, the film ultimately fails to apply this idea as radically as it might have done, as it continually stages the traumatic effects of such boundary crossing rather than exploring its value or usefulness. In a larger sense, however, the film's near-obsessive attention to the instability of those boundaries suggests a successful application of queer theoretical concepts within the form of the Hollywood film.

### **Closet Space: Queering The Western Landscape**

The landscape of *Brokeback Mountain* itself acts as a multiple signifier within the film, providing a range of sometimes contradictory meanings and significances. If Kitses is right in suggesting that "the relationship of [*Brokeback Mountain*] with the Western genre is a confused and contested question" (Kitses, 2007: 23), then the film's framing of the Western landscape is a major site of this relationship's complications. The film's use of landscape both follows in the tradition and departs from that of the classical Hollywood Western (and of most contemporary Westerns, in which landscape continues to be used more or less conventionally), simultaneously fulfilling and subverting audience expectations about space and landscape in the contexts of the Western genre and queer sexuality.

As other critics such as Martin Manalansan have pointed out, the landscape of *Brokeback Mountain* appears lush and highly romanticized:

In the film, the romance between Ennis and Jack is framed as 'private' business between two men. Landscapes of bubbling brooks and majestic vistas emblemize the timelessness of popular romance stories as well as privatized

notions of intimacy. Literally and figuratively, Ennis and Jack are away from it all, from the turmoil of everyday life. (Manalansan, 2007: 98)

Not only are Ennis and Jack surrounded by the pastoral beauty of nature while on Brokeback Mountain, they are, significantly, "away from it all" -- namely, their wives and the prying eyes of their homophobic communities. Proulx's story similarly constructs the mountain in terms of its privacy and removal from the rest of the world:

There were only the two of them on the mountain flying in the euphoric, bitter air, looking down on the hawk's back and crawling lights of vehicles on the plain below, suspended above ordinary affairs and distant from tame ranch dogs barking in the dark hours. (Proulx, 1999: 260)

The Western landscape thus signifies as a free zone to which the men retreat, a privileged space where Jack and Ennis' love can exist openly against a breathtakingly scenic Western backdrop. Kitses agrees that the film's "mountain setting is crucial both as a physical site and as the marker it becomes for the cowboys" (Kitses, 2007: 25), and goes on to remind us that Western landscapes have traditionally functioned as symbolic representations of "freedom, openness, redemption, reinvention" throughout American culture; as a result, the film's "setting a saga of same-sex love in the American wilderness both naturalizes and nationalizes" homosexuality in a remarkable way (Kitses, 2007: 25). Many years before *Brokeback Mountain*, Kitses had similarly identified "the wilderness" as a spatial location within the world of the Hollywood Western where "freedom" and "self-knowledge" (among many other things) are privileged, as opposed to civilization and the community, which impose "restriction," "institutions," and "social responsibility" on the Western hero (Kitses, 1969: 59). Thus, *Brokeback Mountain* introduces queerness into what would still seem to be the familiar Western landscape, a place which promises its heroes freedom from societal restraints and where they may lead their lives as they please, "free from the blessings of civilization," to quote the famous words of Doc Boone in John Ford's *Stagecoach*.

In keeping with this traditional representation of the binary split that supposes to set apart the liberating privacy of the Western "wilderness" from the restrictive public space of the Western town, *Brokeback Mountain* depicts town life as tedious and demanding, a space from which there seems little rest from work, crying babies, meddlesome in-laws, and "nagging" wives; in other words, the world of the town is made up of an endless number of people from whom Jack and Ennis continually desire to escape. Kitses notes that the film's early scenes, all of which take place outdoors, are gradually replaced with those set amidst "the domestic norms of the men's lives"; the majesty of Brokeback Mountain "shrinks to the dimensions of crowded kitchens, closets, trailers, and window-framed views. The awesome scale and reach of the mountain is reduced to a postcard" (Kitses, 2007: 26). It seems no accident that, aside from the brief scenes in which Ennis and Jack are shown having returned to Brokeback for "fishing trips," interior spaces dominate the final two-thirds of the film. As Kitses suggests, the town is a world of *insides* in which enclosed spaces and cramped rooms mirror the psychological entrapment faced by Ennis and Jack, who are "cabined, cribbed, and confined [...] They become impotent, repressed, oppressed" (Kitses, 2007: 27). Jane Tompkins agrees that the space of the traditional Western town acts as a "paradox" that offers social temptations (represented by the saloon, the brothel, etc.) but also "threatens to entrap the hero in [...] a network of social and emotional responsibilities" (Tompkins, 1992: 86). In *Brokeback Mountain*, those social and emotional responsibilities -- those associated with marriage and rigidly defined heterosexual gender roles -- become all the more undesirable

and confining since the heroes' true desire and commitment lie elsewhere, seeming never to be incorporated within the social network. Predictably, just as the outside world with its open air signifies freedom from the pressures, demands, and dangers of a homophobic society, the closed world of the town figures as the primary site of that society, punishing the film's heroes through a network of heteronormative regulatory regimes. As in classical Hollywood Westerns such as *Stagecoach*, in which a crew of stern-faced matrons drive out the prostitute Dallas, the town acts to regulate sexual behavior and expel sexual "deviants" from within its borders.

In these ways, then, *Brokeback Mountain* would seem to be very much in keeping with the familiar conventions of the Western genre, which nearly always privileges outside over inside, wilderness over society, individual freedom over oppressive social networks and institutions. The difference, however, lies in *Brokeback Mountain*'s introduction of queerness into these familiar spaces. By foregrounding the queer sexualities of its heroes, the film succeeds in disrupting our conventional understanding of inside and outside space, bringing together associations of "the closet" with those of the Western landscape and prompting us to consider the relationship between these two seemingly opposed spaces. We are left to sort out the contradictory resonances brought about by the "placing over" of the metaphor of the closet onto the Western landscape.

The metaphor of the closet has long been used to describe a number of interconnected experiences faced by many people who do not identify with "normative" genders and sexualities -- i.e., those whose genders or sexualities are "queer." (The complicated history of the term "queer" has been concisely outlined by Annamarie Jagose; see 1996: 72-75.) To be "closeted," then, is to have hidden one's queerness from the outside world, to have placed it metaphorically within the confines of a private, often secret, enclosed space. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has cited silence as a primary component of the act of being closeted: "'closetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence" (1990: 3). Not surprisingly, silence figures hugely in *Brokeback Mountain*, where the words that go unsaid by Jack and Ennis carry as much weight as those that are spoken: neither Ennis nor Jack speaks the words "I love you," and the final line of the film ("Jack, I swear...") remains an unfinished thought, trailing off into ambiguity. While there has been some debate about how to classify or define Jack and Ennis's sexual orientation(s) (are they gay, bisexual, or straight-identified men who have sex?), we can probably agree that both men are queer in the sense that, whatever other name we may assign to their relationship, it stands outside the bounds of normative heterosexuality. We might also agree that, being queer, Jack and Ennis are also closeted in the sense that they attempt to keep hidden their relationship and are unable to express publicly their desire or affection for each other. Perhaps it goes without saying that the film's plot in fact hinges on these twinned axioms -- that Ennis and Jack are queer, and that they are closeted -- which in turn generate much of the plot and create conflicts between the major characters.

If the metaphorical closet, then, represents the inner space in which queer sexuality is so often contained and hidden from the outside world, the space to which queerness is relegated, then *Brokeback Mountain* problematizes this notion by locating "the closet" in the wide-open space of the Western landscape. Typically, the closet can be said to house not only a single queer person, but a queer relationship, a "love that dare not speak its name"; the closet is mirrored in the dingy motel rooms, bathroom stalls, bars, flophouses, etc. in which such relationships traditionally were (and very often still are) kept secret, walled off. In appropriating the symbolic connotations of the Western landscape, the film moves the closet

outside, as it were. Contrary to our understanding of queerness as hidden inside an enclosed space, *Brokeback Mountain* locates queer sexuality in the world *outside* that of closed spaces (that of the town) and continually stages it within a setting of literal openness, expansiveness, and exteriority. In one sense, the film liberates its heroes by literally transferring the site of "forbidden love" from a claustrophobic interior setting to a romanticized pastoral one; while Jack and Ennis are permitted to escape to Brokeback Mountain, the other characters in the film remain trapped in the claustrophobic world of the oppressive symbolic order. Jack and Ennis' love affair is, as Kitses claims, "naturalized" by its being set against the backdrop of the majestic Western landscape, thus revealing the social network of the town to be the true site of "unnatural" behavioral restraints and regulations. Thus, the "closet" in which Jack and Ennis are forced to conduct secretly their relationship becomes a more desirable and healthful place than the world outside the closet -- which is, paradoxically, one ruled by confining interior spaces.

This turning inside out of the closet metaphor cuts two ways, however; we might look at the other side of the coin when we say that the Western landscape has been made the equivalent of a closet. If this means that the space of the closet has been opened up into the great American outdoors, then it also means that the landscape itself simultaneously registers as a claustrophobic space that threatens to close in on the protagonists. The psychological and figurative implications of the closet -- secrecy, enclosure, suffocation, illicit passion -- have been mapped onto the open space of the Western landscape. By "hiding themselves" in the open, as it were, Jack and Ennis not only transform the closet into a pastoral free zone but also *undo* the freedom of the Western landscape, transforming it into a site of confinement. Proulx hints at this in her story when she describes the mountain as both liberating and menacing, a place that "boiled with demonic energy" and where the blowing wind creates the sound of a "bestial drone" (Proulx, 1999: 260-1). The mountain quickly and unexpectedly turns from a healing sanctuary to a place of punishing cruelty from which Ennis experiences the ominous sense of "a slow-motion, but headlong, irreversible fall" (Proulx, 1999: 261). As Proulx herself puts it, "in a disquieting way everything seemed mixed" to Ennis and Jack during their first summer on Brokeback (Proulx, 1999: 260), and the space of the mountain seems to be the locus of this "disquieting" mixture of opposing atmospheres.

That the landscape lies outside of the world of the town may also be read in contradictory ways. We may interpret the mountain as the site of Jack and Ennis' love affair as a testament to its purity and defiance of social norms: they belong there, against the beauty of the Western landscape, rather than within the oppressive social network of civilization. We may just as easily, however, read the marginality of their affair as "proof" of its deviance: they belong there because it deserves to remain outside the world of those social networks; they cannot hope to find a place within the symbolic order and need to remain "in their place" on the fringes. By relegating Jack and Ennis's love affair to the beautiful remoteness of the mountain, the film privileges queerness by giving it the more lush and physically appealing space while simultaneously ghettoizing it by forcing it to remain away from any legitimizing social structures. John Howard has noted that many of the sex scenes between the two men, set outdoors on or around the mountain, do more to stigmatize queerness than to romanticize or normalize it: "*Brokeback* admits associations of homosexuality and bestiality. Animal passions. Rural queers ostensibly closer to nature. Grunting, squealing, if not exactly like a pig" (Howard, 2006: 101). The question becomes: do we read Jack and Ennis' relationship as more or less noble for its standing outside the world of the social order? By superimposing our traditional understanding of the Western landscape with that of the closet, *Brokeback Mountain* continually subverts our notions of inside and outside, public and private, literally

turning them inside out. The film leaves us to decide whether to view the Western landscape as a privileged space of individual freedom from social regulations or a marginal space of loneliness and despair. *Brokeback Mountain* acts as an over determined space that signifies as open and closed, liberating and confining, natural and deviant, all at the same time.

### **When Inside Meets Outside: Confronting the Abject**

If *Brokeback Mountain* sets as its literal backdrop a series of spaces that blur the lines between inside and outside, this blurring of borders and boundaries manifests itself in subtler but no less crucial ways at the level of the film's plot and character development. The film continually reminds us of this central theme -- a conflict of seemingly opposed spatial relationships -- via a series of moments, scenes, and individual shots in which the boundary between inside and outside is ruptured. These ruptures serve as moments of abjection -- Julia Kristeva's term for the meeting of inside and outside -- and consistently register as traumatic for the characters who experience them. According to Judith Butler, "[w]hat constitutes through division the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control" (Butler, 1990: 170). In other words, the social order, the world of "regulation and control," presumes to monitor the inside/outside border; it attempts to divide neatly hetero from queer, civilization from wilderness, public self from private self. The film's narrative structure largely works to reinforce this border in its alternation between sequences set amidst the world governed by the social order (homes, workplaces, and various other public spaces) and those set apart from it, against the seclusion and privacy of the Western landscape. Moments of abjection throughout the film, however, reveal the fundamental instability of such a border and thus threaten to destabilize the regulatory regimes that attempt to keep them in place. When met with these moments of abjection, which collapse (or at least threaten to collapse) the inside/outside border, the characters in *Brokeback Mountain* generally react in violence, horror, or physical conflict in an attempt to reestablish such a border. As we will see eventually, however, the film does arrive at a kind of resolution in which the instability of borders has found a kind of equilibrium suggestive, perhaps, of Ennis's reconciled sense of self.

The film's first and perhaps most shocking moment of abjection occurs during the first sexual interaction between Ennis and Jack, late at night in their tent. The intensity of this scene is near violent, as Ennis appears overwhelmed with pleasure as well as shock, confusion, revulsion, disbelief, and fear. In terms of sexual penetration, Ennis acts as the dominant partner in this moment, literally entering Jack's body from behind. This scene uncannily dramatizes Butler's definition of abjection in which bodily orifices serve as its primary sites, places where "the inner effectively becomes outer" and where "[t]he boundary between the inner and the outer is confounded" (Butler, 1990: 170). It might be putting it too crudely to say that by penetrating Jack, Ennis passes through a kind of portal or barrier from which he can never really turn back; in the brief scenes leading up to the moment of intercourse, Jack has also persuaded Ennis to come inside the tent rather than sleeping outside in the cold night air. Taken as a whole, then, the scene functions as a series of progressive movements by Ennis from outside to inside as he gradually nears acknowledgement of his sexual desire for Jack.

Although Jack and Ennis essentially share joint positions as the film's primary characters, moments of abjection tend to become associated with Ennis (whom we might read as the more repressed of the two, both sexually and emotionally) rather than Jack. When, for

example, a male acquaintance unexpectedly propositions Jack outside of a dance hall where they have each brought their wives, we and Jack respond with surprise, having not expected queerness to enter this public space in such a way; but the scene does not register as one of abject horror or disgust, and the acknowledgment of Jack's queerness does not cause him to react violently. Ennis, however, continually reacts with violent emotion to moments of abjection in which the boundary between the two halves of his "double life" fails to hold, beginning with his first night with Jack inside the tent. Clearly, a number of violent emotions are entangled within this primal moment of sexual passion, as Ennis first encounters an abject collision of boundaries -- between hetero and queer, dominant and submissive, inside and outside, fear and desire, between his true self (which desires Jack) and his outer persona (that of the traditionally straight cowboy).

The morning following this initial sexual encounter, Ennis appears nervous, unsettled, apparently haunted by the sexual knowledge he now possesses, as he sternly packs his horse (ominously loading a shotgun) and avoids contact with Jack, already reliant upon silence as a response to emotional trauma. This brush with the abject continues to haunt Ennis throughout the day, however, re-materializing when he discovers the bloody remains of a sheep, its insides literally having been ripped out by a wolf (presumably the night before). A reaction shot of Ennis registers his horror. In this moment, the abject returns to confront Ennis, reminding him not only of the sexual act in which he has participated but also of what it represents -- the fluidity of various boundaries previously thought to have been impenetrable. The shot of the bloody sheep later finds a visual rhyme in a similar shot (framed as Ennis's flashback, and thus similarly filmed from his point of view) of Earl, a victim of homophobic violence whose mutilated body was made an example of to Ennis as a child. Both of these images instill panic and fear in Ennis because they represent abjection and its possible consequences: to associate with abject acts and identities (queer sexuality) is to risk abjection of the most deadly kind -- that is, torture and murder in which the barriers of one's own body are ruptured beyond repair. Earl's mutilated body (and that of the sheep, with which it shares a direct visual link) signifies for Ennis the dangers of tampering with those borders and boundaries that the social order has defined as "off-limits." To experiment with such a border (as in sex between men) is to play a dangerous game that seems doomed to result in more extreme forms of abjection, such as having one's own body literally turned inside out.

After having finished his work on the mountain for the summer, and seemingly with the intentions of putting his relationship with Jack behind him, Ennis re-crosses a series of borders, signaling his re-entry into the world of the symbolic order, represented by the town and its heteronormative regulatory regimes. Upon having temporarily left behind the world of Brokeback Mountain and his relationship with Jack, Ennis briefly suffers a kind of emotional collapse, vomiting and weeping violently in an alleyway. The physical act of vomiting (the inside coming out) signals this moment as one of abjection in which the crisis of being made to cross a series of borders -- leaving behind the world of the mountain for that of the town, queerness for heteronormativity, Jack for his wife Alma (Michelle Williams) -- physically manifests itself within his body. As in the earlier scenes, an act of bodily abjection is prompted by a more figurative crossing of boundaries or by the liminal space in which Ennis stands poised between two worlds, the borderline. His momentary emotional and physical breakdown takes place in the alleyway immediately following his separation from Jack and the end of their work together on the mountain but before his return to town and his previous life, thus serving as a kind of border or crossroads.

Traumatized by these seemingly impermeable boundaries having been crossed and hoping to avoid their further disruption, Ennis attempts to reinscribe a series of borders (physical, emotional, psychological) by compartmentalizing his identity and behavior. He does this most obviously by separating (or attempting to separate) his heterosexual life with Alma in town from his illicit "fishing trips"/liaisons with Jack. (In this way, the film's plot invokes the trope of the "double life" or dual self, characteristic of so many pre-Stonewall films and novels.) Ennis intends to avoid any collision between his private and public lives, between Jack and Alma, between "straight self" and "queer self," by imposing seemingly stable borders between them. Once again, Ennis's body reflects the presumed stability of these borders: as he attempts to restabilize them, his body hardens and toughens, a physical manifestation of the discipline with which he attempts to maintain the line between the two seemingly irreconcilable halves of his identity. Butler suggests that

[f]or inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible impermeability. This sealing of its surfaces would constitute the seamless boundary of the subject; but this enclosure would invariably be exploded by precisely that excremental filth that it fears. (1990: 1970)

Butler's analogy of the "impossibly impermeable" self, which attempts to avoid the trauma of abjection by sealing itself air-tight, almost uncannily describes Ennis's character, especially in the film's final third. Ennis walls himself off, becoming emotionally unavailable to women as well as to Jack, the man he seems to love; no one else is able to "get inside" his head or his heart, to know his thoughts or his feelings; even his body language suggests an unbearable tension, particularly in the tightness of his mouth, which he barely opens even to speak. His ex-girlfriend Cassie (Linda Cardellini) makes note of this when, in reference to the man she has begun dating after being dumped by Ennis, she tells him, "Carl's nice -- he even talks." Ennis compartmentalizes and encloses various aspects of his life and identity, believing himself capable of walling off or accessing them when he so pleases, just as the closet presumes to be a delineated space that can be opened and shut "at will."

As discussed above, however, *Brokeback Mountain* destabilizes our traditional understanding of the space of the closet. Just as the film's notion of the closet bleeds together with that of the space of the Western landscape, continually turning them inside-out and outside-in, the various spaces between which Ennis seeks to impose borders soon begin to escape his control by sliding into one another. The attempts of Jack and Ennis to keep their relationship private -- to separate it from the rest of their lives -- inevitably fail, with tragic consequences. Both men are powerless in keeping their secret from escaping from its designated place (on Brokeback Mountain) into their "other" lives. This abject slippage between the two worlds thwarts their desire to inscribe stable distinctions or borders between them, to keep outside without and inside within.

Ennis and Jack's attempts to keep private their relationship are further disrupted when others see them in moments of passion, as when their employer Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid) catches them locked in a playful embrace on Brokeback Mountain early in the film, and later when Alma discovers them kissing outside of her and Ennis's home. In both of these moments, Ennis and Jack imagine themselves to be embracing privately, in spaces that would seem to be safe from the demands and constraints imposed by the public sphere as constructed by the film (and the story, in which Proulx writes that Jack and Ennis "believed themselves invisible, not knowing Joe Aguirre had watched them through his 10x42 binoculars", 1999:

260). Private and public again collide dangerously in these moments, as the private embrace becomes a public spectacle seen by others. Although in both of these scenes neither Jack or Ennis is aware that they have been spied upon by Aguirre and Alma, these scenes strike the viewer as dramatically powerful and anxiety-producing because we are made not only to see the moment of collision of public and private spaces but also to imagine the disastrous consequences that might befall Jack and Ennis as a result. These scenes, then, exemplify another kind of abject instability of the public/private border, one in which we as audience members experience its anxious effects instead of Ennis.

These moments of symbolic abjection, in which the separate spheres of Ennis's life meet, result in conflict and pain, if not actual violence. Perhaps the best example of this occurs when Alma, now divorced from Ennis, confronts him after Thanksgiving dinner and reveals that she has known about his relationship with Jack all along. As their words and emotions intensify, Ennis grabs Alma by the shoulders and makes to hit her across the face, but stops himself; instead, he leaves the house and immediately picks a fight with a random (male) stranger outside of the town bar. The scene ends with Ennis lying prostrate and bleeding on the street. The two halves of his "double life" having leaked out of their proper places -- that is, having leaked into one another -- erupts in violent pain and helplessness. Within the world of the film, to break down the borders between inside and outside, between what one attempts to confine to one place and another, is to court damage and destruction; the price of abjection, of testing the limits of behaviors and identities not sanctioned by the social order, is paid through violence. The blurring of the lines between borders and barriers horrifies, frightens, and traumatizes those occupying the world of the film; it represents the threat of order being disrupted, the threat of the uncategorizable and the uncontrollable, that which neither responds nor adheres to stable definition. Abjection disturbs because it reminds one of everything that cannot be contained by voluntary control or human will; in the end, it seems, the truth will out.

### **Conclusion: "A Draw"**

But if the secret of Jack and Ennis's relationship does "out," as Alma's confrontation with Ennis would suggest, then it also retreats inward; the final scenes of the film suggest not a kind of liberating personal freedom brought on by the embrace of one's true self or the making public of private knowledge. In other words, *Brokeback Mountain* does not end in the manner of an optimistic "coming out" narrative in which the protagonist, having come to terms with his queerness, may now lead a more satisfying life -- emotionally, psychologically, sexually, romantically. The ending of the film does suggest a kind of hope, but an ambiguous kind in which inside and outside spaces and their respective associations are overlaid in such a tangle of signification that they have achieved a kind of balance or resolution. Ultimately, we may read the film's final image (over determined as it may be) as a sign of the film's thematic tension between inside and outside having at last been brought to a kind of reconciliation.

The film's climactic narrative turn, in which Ennis learns of Jack's death, seems a tragic loss from which Ennis cannot hope to recover, partly because it also represents the irredeemable loss of the magic space of Brokeback Mountain, to which the men may never again return together. Moreover, the shock of Jack's death seems to entrap Ennis further within a space of claustrophobic powerlessness, suggested by the image late in the film in which Ennis, grief-stricken, weeps in the closet of Jack's childhood bedroom. This image might suggest that

Ennis's repression and fear have won out in his ongoing struggle to come to terms with his sexual identity.

The film does not end with this image of powerlessness, however. The final shots of the film reveal a picture postcard of Brokeback Mountain tacked on the inside of the door of the closet in Ennis's trailer, which Ennis opens, then closes; just beyond the closet door, which frames the postcard image of the mountain, we see the real Western landscape framed by a window. While John Howard reads this as nothing more than a "clunky closet metaphor" (2007: 101), I am not so sure how "clunky" it is when one considers the seemingly inexhaustible play of meaning(s) that it sets into motion. The image remains over determined in that it allows for the proliferation of multiple interpretations and even combinations of readings: are we meant to believe that the opened closet door stands for Ennis's having allowed his sexual identity freedom to move from the confines of the closet into the wide-open space of the Western landscape? Or does his shutting of the closet door suggest his continual attempts to sanction off his identity, to impose spatial boundaries on that which cannot be contained? The visual mirroring of the postcard, with its depiction of the iconic Western space, and the actual Western landscape outside Ennis's window throws up the same contradictory resonances with which the film toys from its opening scenes. In this moment, the film suggests (in keeping with the values of the classical Hollywood Western) that the Western landscape is a privileged space where the socially marginalized may find freedom; at the same time, it suggests (quite subversively) that the Western landscape is itself a closet, a space in which men may hide their secrets or lead lives of solitude and pain, but may never know real happiness and love. Once again, the film presents us with an abject moment in which clear boundaries and stable divisions fall away to reveal the permeability and fluidity of spatial relationships: outside becomes inside becomes outside, open becomes closed becomes open, and so on, continually pointing to the fundamental instability of the inside/outside border.

This final moment, however, registers differently than the film's previous moments of symbolic abjection, which inspired trauma and anxiety, and culminated literally in bodily abjection (tears, vomiting, bleeding, etc.). Here, the confrontation of inside and outside, in which each remains bound up in the other, presents itself as a kind of harmonious balance rather than as a site of conflict. The image of the postcard on the closet door juxtaposed with the Western landscape that lies just beyond the window suggests an optimistic meeting rather than a violent collision of inside and outside: the two seem to have been reconciled (if only momentarily) in this image, each serving to complement the other. Perhaps, then, however else we may choose to read the ending of the film -- as tragic or hopeful, as a reactionary throwback to the pre-Stonewall era or a progressive milestone in queer cinema -- it succeeds in problematizing the difference between inside and outside to the point of their inseparability. The film does not end with a shootout in the manner of so many classical Westerns because its central conflict takes place within Ennis's own psyche rather than between hero and villain. But if Ennis has fought with himself throughout the film to keep inside and outside separate, then this final image is suggestive of a kind of standstill or "draw," as though the fight has been neither won nor lost but rather has resolved itself in some less violent way. That the film resists traditional narrative closure is precisely its point; it is entirely appropriate for a film that continually blurs spatial and generic boundaries to avoid a clear-cut ending.

If *Brokeback Mountain*'s place within the Western genre remains a contestable issue, that is because the film unconventionally (and disturbingly, for some audience members) upsets the

conventions not only of the genre itself but of space, landscape, and boundaries both literal and figurative. The film queers our notions of the closet and the Western landscape, of public and private space, of inside and outside, as each term continually twists and doubles back on itself to dizzying effect. By mapping queerness onto the Western, the film does much to remind us of the futility of imposing stable limits on our sexualities and the spaces that they occupy. Perhaps, then, to quibble about the "place" of *Brokeback Mountain* either within or outside of the Western genre is to ignore the very ideas that it puts forth. Instead, let us allow the film to be both/and rather than either/or, inside or out: let us take down the borders and call it a draw.

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## Filmography

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*Stagecoach*. 1939. Dir. John Ford. Walter Wanger Productions.