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CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

**New Queer Cinema in the USA: Rejecting  
Heteronormative Categorisations in *Desert  
Hearts* (1985) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)**

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

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Vº Bº

Signature

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## ABSTRACT [EN]

This paper attempts to analyse how Donna Deitch in *Desert Hearts* (1985) and Ang Lee in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) struggle against heteronormative and oppressive categorisations. Beginning from the 1950s, homophobic discrimination in the USA led to various campaigns which fought for LGBT rights and together with supportive ideological movements such as Lesbian Feminism and Queer Theory, encouraged a progressive notion of equality in terms of social rights and acceptance. In the context of American films, New Queer Cinema (NQC), in its support for the sexual minorities, helped to bring forth the problem of homophobia. In *Desert Hearts* (1985), which can be considered a significant precedent of the NQC, Vivian Bell challenges heteronormativity and societal oppression of homosexuals, and so does Ennis del Mar in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). However, it must be noted that while Vivian defeats her fears of a homophobic environment, Ennis is incapable of doing the same as his fears are too deeply ingrained in his psyche which ultimately prevents him from leading a happy life. Nonetheless, despite the difference in their plots, both films try to raise awareness regarding LGBT issues by showing the harsh social conditions homosexuals have to face and by promoting equal rights.

**KEYWORDS:** New Queer Cinema, Heteronormativity, Homophobia, LGBT rights, Queer Theory, Lesbian Feminism, *Desert Hearts*, *Brokeback Mountain*.

## RESUMEN [ES]

Este trabajo trata de analizar cómo Donna Deitch en *Desert Hearts* (1985) y Ang Lee en *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) luchan contra las categorizaciones heteronormativas y opresivas. Desde los años cincuenta, la discriminación homófoba en Estados Unidos dio lugar a varias campañas que lucharon a favor de los derechos LGBT y, junto con el apoyo de movimientos ideológicos como el Feminismo Lésbico y la Teoría Queer, fomentaron una progresiva noción de igualdad en términos de derechos y aceptación social. En el contexto de las películas americanas, el New Queer Cinema (NQC), en su apoyo a las minorías sexuales, ayudó a dar luz al problema de la homofobia. En *Desert Hearts* (1985), la cual puede ser considerada un precedente significativo del NQC, Vivian Bell desafía la heteronormatividad y la opresión social hacia los homosexuales, al igual que Ennis del Mar en *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Sin embargo, cabe señalar que Vivian supera sus miedos a un entorno homófobo, mientras que Ennis es incapaz de hacer lo mismo, ya que sus miedos están tan profundamente arraigados en su mente que finalmente le impiden llevar una vida feliz. No obstante, a pesar de las diferencias en sus argumentos, ambas películas tratan de crear conciencia acerca de temas LGBT mostrando las duras condiciones sociales a las cuales los homosexuales tienen que hacer frente y promoviendo derechos igualitarios.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** New Queer Cinema, Heteronormatividad, Homofobia, Derechos LGBT, Teoría Queer, Feminismo Lésbico, *Desert Hearts*, *Brokeback Mountain*.

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## INTRODUCTION

The struggle for LGBT rights in the USA was a key issue from the mid-twentieth century. Throughout this period, the LGBT community became victims of homophobic discrimination in a society which was essentially heteronormative and patriarchal in nature. Nonetheless, from the 1950s, the LGBT activists began to fight for their rights and social acceptance by organizing different *gay* rights movements, such as the Homophile Movement and Gay Liberation Movement. Moreover, from the 1970s, various ideological movements and theories such as Lesbian Feminism and Queer Theory, contributed to the LGBT cause as they challenged the dominant structure of patriarchy and heteronormativity in order to achieve social equality and overcome discrimination.

This activist agenda was adapted to cinematic representations of LGBT issues. So far, the LGBT community had been contemptuously depicted in American films, but, from the 1980s, LGBT issues progressively began to be portrayed in a sensitive manner with an effort to spread awareness. The beginning of the 1990s marked the emergence of New Queer Cinema (NQC), a new kind of cinema which supported the LGBT community and attempted to break the prevailing anti-homosexual mentality among the public. One of the main precedents of the NQC is Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts* (1985), where lesbianism is depicted in a positive way and Vivian Bell –one of the protagonists– challenges heteronormativity thereby overcoming her fear of a homophobic society. Likewise, Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) portrays male homosexuality and challenges derogatory labels, but in this case, the protagonist Ennis del Mar is not able to overcome his fear because of the homophobia which he had internalised since his childhood due to his upbringing in an oppressive society. Both films support the LGBT community and present homosexual characters who face discrimination, with the purpose of promoting LGBT rights and acceptance within society. The ending of these films vary due to their release dates. While in

*Desert Hearts* (1985) a happy ending reinforces the directorial intention of giving a positive message about the LGBT community, in *Brokeback Mountain* a happy ending is unnecessary as by 2005 American society was more aware of LGBT issues than they were two decades ago.

In this paper I will explain the history of the LGBT community through the twentieth century and its progressive cinematic depiction, from offensive stereotyping to portrayal of well-rounded homosexual characters. Then, I will focus on Lesbian Feminism, Queer Theory and New Queer Cinema and their important contribution to the LGBT agenda in American society. Finally, I will analyse how *Desert Hearts* (1985) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) bring forth the LGBT cause by depicting a homophobic society and the protagonists' struggle to survive within it and challenge heteronormative categorisations.

## 1. HISTORY OF THE LGBT COMMUNITY IN THE USA

The history of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community has not an exact date of beginning since multiple sexual identities have always been present from the beginning of time.

In this chapter, I attempt to investigate the decades which follow World War II. Though the end of this conflict gave rise to a wave of repression against these collectives, at the same time, this period also witnessed the commencement of the struggle for LGBT rights in the USA to overcome discrimination and resistance against violent acts committed due to homophobia. Moreover, LGBT welfare organisations demanded equal rights in a society which at that time remained heterosexist, patriarchal and conservative.

In this section I will discuss the main LGBT rights movements that began to gain momentum and importance in American society from the 1950s. A discussion of these social activities in favour of LGBT rights will enable one to gather a chronological description of



the most significant organisations and mobilisations which LGBT people committed themselves to from the second half of the twentieth century to present.

### 1.1. *Gay*<sup>1</sup> Rights Movements from the 1950s through the 1980s

The most relevant movements for LGBT rights in the USA took place in the second half of the twentieth century. After World War II was over, there was a latent desire for change among homosexuals, bisexuals and transgender people; they wanted to attain the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts and put an end to the violence suffered due to their sexual orientation. These goals were pursued by the most significant LGBT movements, which were the Homophile Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement. Likewise, it is necessary to highlight the immense effort which some LGBT organisations put in order to fight against AIDS and its negative association with homosexuality.

The Homophile Movement took place between 1950 and 1970, when an increasing number of welfare organisations began to fight for social change and LGBT rights. The term *homophile* was chosen to stress the emotional connotations rather than the sexual implication that society of that time tended to associate with the word *homosexual*. In addition, these activists practised an accommodation policy; they fought for their rights but cautiously, their actions were not radical and did not instigate any kind of violent demeanour. The choice of this peaceful or rather somewhat subdued behaviour was due to the incessant fear of even severe oppression at the hands of society and the continuing discrimination faced by the LGBT community in the 1950s. Moreover, the opinion that homosexuality was a mental

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<sup>1</sup>The use of *Gay Rights* to denote LGBT rights in the title of this section is due to the fact that the word *gay*, which nowadays is commonly used to refer to male homosexuals, was widely employed in the second half of the twentieth century as a collective term for people who were gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

disorder, ratified by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1952, further reinforced this repression and validated the mistreatment of the LGBT community.

Associated with the Homophile movement, the most significant organisations were the Mattachine Society (1951) – the first homophile organisation – and Daughters of Bilitis (1951) – the first lesbian activist organisation in the USA. Both groups fought together to achieve social advancement of the LGBT community and the Homophile movement served as a precedent for the Gay Liberation Movement, which began after the violent Stonewall Riots in 1969.

The turning point which resulted in the shift from the Homophile to Gay Liberation movements was due to immense agitation and uproar caused as a result of a police raid that took place in the Stonewall Inn (New York) on June 27, 1969. This incident led to a wave of radical activism within the LGBT community and the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was created that same year in July. As Vicki L. Eaklor notes, this organisation adopted a more radical behaviour in comparison to the previous homophile groups and defended not only the LGBT collectives and their social visibility but also fought for the rights of African Americans, women and other social minorities who were subjected to discrimination in the United States (124). After a period of substantial activism, the GLF was dissolved in 1972 due to internal conflicts, but the fight for LGBT rights did not cease.

Moving on to the issue of AIDS and its misleading identification with homosexuality, it is important to acknowledge the immensely crucial work that organisations such as AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) did in order to promote the acceptance and fair societal treatment of people suffering from AIDS. ACT UP attempted at providing physical healthcare, financial and emotional support to the patients and most importantly worked towards debunking the incorrectly held notion that AIDS and male homosexuality were interconnected. AIDS was discovered in 1981 by researchers at the National Center for

Disease Control. After the discovery, mass media rapidly spread the false rumour that “AIDS was the *homosexual cancer* or *gay epidemic*” (Seidman 190. Emphasis added), which ensued further social rejection towards gay and bisexual men. Many LGBT organisations fought in order to overthrow this prejudice which was based on completely incorrect information and to facilitate the access to expensive medicines, however, the most prominent one was ACT UP. This group was founded in 1987 and promoted the slogan “Silence=Death” with the aim to raise people’s awareness regarding the dangers of the disease. Their main goal was “[to] mobilize against both AIDS and homophobia” (Eaklor 176).

## 1.2. Late 20<sup>th</sup> and Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Growing Acceptance of the LGBT Collectives in American Society

From the late twentieth century LGBT people have come a long way in relation to social rights. One of the most remarkable accomplishments is the elimination of homosexuality as a mental disorder from the APA Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973 and by World Health Organization in 1990. In addition, different theories and varied approaches to sexuality have shifted the perception and the degree of acceptance of the LGBT community in American society. Some of the most important ideologies and theories comprise Lesbian Feminist and Queer Studies, which emerged during the last decades of the twentieth century and helped formulate LGBT rights more comprehensively. They promoted a progressive struggle against sexism, patriarchy and heteronormativity, which I will explain in more detail in the third chapter.

Other significant achievements include the abolition of the USA military policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in 2010. This policy allowed homosexuals to serve in the army only if they did not reveal their sexual identity and at the same time, asking about the same was forbidden. In the last decade, an increasing number of anti-discrimination laws were passed in

the USA. However, by far the most significant achievement in terms of equal human rights for the LGBT community has been the legalisation of same-sex marriage in many states of the country, such as Massachusetts –the first state to permit it in the year 2004, Vermont, and Connecticut among others. Finally, it is important to mention the permission granted to same-sex couples to adopt and the option of insemination made available to lesbian partners. This is a giant step towards equality as it allows for same sex couples to form a family. These opportunities are currently offered in an increasing number of states such as California, New York, Arkansas and Minnesota (“Equality Maps”).

To sum up, *Gay Rights Movements* along with new theories and ideologies contributed to the development and achievement of LGBT rights since the 1950s. The strategies and tactics that LGBT organisations used to fulfil their goals varied and evolved from accommodation to radicalisation and, in this manner, they became more visible and accepted within American society. Thus, activism has proved to be indispensable in the LGBT quest for advancement and social progression and all in all for the attainment of equal human rights.

## 2. EVOLUTION OF THE LGBT PORTRAYALS IN AMERICAN CINEMA: FROM EARLY AMERICAN FILMS TO NEW QUEER CINEMA

As I explained in the first chapter, the LGBT community suffered from discrimination for more than half of the twentieth century. This issue was portrayed in American cinema due to the fact that society and institutions did not support positive visibility and condemned it in that period. However, LGBT presence in American films evolved with time as well as society’s perception of it.

In this chapter I will briefly explain the trajectory of the cinematic representation of the LGBT community beginning with the early American films, where the depiction of the

sexual minorities was either minimalistic or altogether avoided. Furthermore I will discuss the role played by the Motion Picture Production Code (1930-1968) in terms of censorship in American cinema. Later, LGBT characters started to appear more often in films but their portrayal continued to be offensive; ripe with negative connotations. Nonetheless, many film-makers refused to be a part of this discrimination and they fought for the acceptance of the LGBT community. Subsequently, New Queer Cinema (NQC) arose and promoted LGBT representation with innovative ideas and activist purposes.

### 2.1. LGBT Presence in Early American Films

In this section I will comment on the cinematic treatment and representation of the LGBT community concentrating specifically on homosexuals. This brief analysis will cover the time period spanning from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the 1950s.

Although explicit sexuality was controversial at the beginning of the twentieth century, film-makers of this period showed heterosexual couples and employed different techniques to imply their sexual acts. Even so, LGBT people were not depicted in early American films and if we consider the rare instances when they appeared on-screen, their sexuality was merely suggested. In addition, these characters were commonly depicted as either gay or lesbian as other sexual minorities were even more discriminated. Also, it is important to note that many people mistakenly equated homosexuals to transgender people, believing that a homosexual man wants to be a woman and a homosexual woman wants to be a man. Film-makers used this misguided belief as a strategy to hide certain characters' homosexuality (sub-textual homosexuality). According to Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, in those days spectators would not consider the possibility of a masculine man or a feminine woman to be a homosexual, so some characters who today might be seen as homosexual were considered heterosexual in that period (21).

Apart from sub-textual homosexuality, film-makers began to employ stereotypes that helped foster scorn towards the LGBT community instead of promoting the acceptance of homosexuality within society. From the 1920s, the *pansy* and *mannish woman* stereotypes started to spread but these characters did not show any demonstration of same-sex attraction. As Benschhoff and Griffin note, this way of presenting gays and lesbians in films helped strengthen the belief that homosexuality was related to gender inversion (24-27). A few notable examples of this trend can be found in films like *The Broadway Melody* (1928) and *Morocco* (1930) among others.

In 1930 an obstacle hindered what could have been a rapid evolution of the accurate portrayal and acceptance of the LGBT community in American films. It was the Motion Picture Production Code (MPPC), which I will explain further. This code prohibited a wide range of issues which were considered *immoral*, so “suggestions of any kind of sexuality were muted” (Benschhoff & Griffin 29). Despite the severe censorship of the MPPC, homosexuality continued to appear in films, but in a more subtle and derogatory manner.

Moving on to the 1940s, the situation was more or less the same as in the previous decade. Depiction of the LGBT community increased slightly in films, but the portrayals were not explicit. This was due to the heavy censorship laid upon by the Code. In addition, Benschhoff and Griffin explain that homosexual representations changed from being stereotypically ridiculous and funny for homophobic audiences, to be a cruel presentation of homosexuals as villainous and morally corrupt (32-37). However, LGBT characters were not the only people who faced discrimination; LGBT workers often had to hide their sexual orientation due to widespread homophobia, not only present in the film industry, but also in their daily lives –as I have explained in the previous chapter.

Concerning the post-war period, there was a palpable sense of homophobia which gradually subsided with the emergence of LGBT rights movements. Films still condemned

homosexuality and refrained from showing it overtly. In 1954, the Code allowed some forbidden issues “as long as they were depicted with restraint” (Benshoff & Griffin 91), but it took a considerable amount of time for movies to finally attain the permission and the opportunity where homosexuality was freely and positively shown.

## 2.2. Censorship of the Motion Picture Production Code from 1930 to 1968

In 1930 a series of rules were put into effect in order to censor American cinema. These regulations were created by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), whose head was William H. Hays.

The Motion Picture Production Code, also called Hays Office, banned any depiction of sexuality in films as well as any kind of issues which were considered immoral such as topics dealing with drug trafficking, crimes, miscegenation, and especially homosexuality. However, during the first years of its implementation, the Code was not very severe due to the lack of a systematic procedure required to review and censor films. But in 1934, when Joseph Breen was appointed the head of the MPPC, Benshoff and Griffin note that it became mandatory for the studios to submit all the information about their films –scripts, wardrobe tests, and so on, to the Production Code Administration. This therefore entailed that only after meticulous inspection the films which were finally approved and awarded with the Code’s seal could be released (29).

Nevertheless, *sex perversion*<sup>2</sup> was still present in films during the Code era. According to the film historian Vito Russo, LGBT representation in American cinema continued to appear but in a more subtle fashion (qtd. in Eaklor 65). In addition, as David M. Lugowsky

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<sup>2</sup> Term used by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) to refer to homosexuality.

points out, certain viewers among the audience of that period were indeed able to recognise LGBT issues even though they were shown subtly (3-35).

As aforementioned, in 1954 the Code modified some of the previous prohibitions, but still the issues had to be presented carefully or contemptuously in the films. Later, in 1961, the Code was further amended and permitted the depiction of homosexuality in films, but when dealing with this sensitive subject it called for discretion and caution. Finally in 1968 the Code was discarded and this gave way to a more tolerant rating system.

In my attempt to explain the magnitude of power which the Code had during this period, I would like to mention the cinematic adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* (1934) as *These Three* (1936). The film exchanged the lesbian plot for a heterosexual love triangle because lesbianism in that period, as Chon Noriega states, was considered “an abnormal relationship”, “unnatural affection”, and ‘abnormal misbehaviour’” (24).

### 2.3. LGBT Issues in American Cinema from the 1960s to New Queer Cinema

Throughout the 1960s, the cinematic reflection of LGBT issues went through several stages; initially it faced the prohibitions of MPPC, but gradually American cinema saw the advent of LGBT activism.

During the first years of this decade, films still ridiculed LGBT collectives and their portrayal was often negative. Moreover, it was not possible to see explicit and happy relationships on-screen because of the strict regulations of the Code. Besides the subtle representation of LGBT issues, the Code had a detrimental effect as it encouraged homophobia at a time when homosexuality was still considered a mental disorder. In fact, LGBT scriptwriters and film-makers sometimes pretended to be not just heterosexual but also homophobic in order to go unnoticed. Nevertheless, according to Benshoff and Griffin, LGBT



audiences enjoyed the presence of any kind of sexual minority in films because they self-identified with the characters, who were progressively becoming less subtle (100-101).

Concerning alternative film-making, it is noteworthy that during and after the period of the Code's implementation many experimental and independent film-makers wanted to show different issues that mainstream Hollywood films did not depict. One of the most important movements that comprised this kind of film-making was the Underground Cinema, which spread during the 1960s and provided significant films such as *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and *Camp* (1965).

Therefore, Hollywood was pushed to start portraying more modern and progressive issues to be able to compete with independent films. *The Killing Sister* (1968) and *Boys in the Band* (1970) are examples of Hollywood films which depicted homosexuality in a relatively less sub-textual and derogatory way. These films "dramatise how homosexual identity was then beginning to . . . celebrate itself as a valid social identity deserving of equal rights" (Benshoff & Griffin 139).

During the 1970s Hollywood returned to its conservative treatment of LGBT issues because mainstream critics condemned the new style. However, independent film-makers began to work on an increasing number of LGBT-themed films that foreshadowed the coming of New Queer Cinema, which I will explain shortly.

Moving on to the 1980s, Hollywood evolved very slowly regarding the reflection of LGBT issues. Hence, LGBT independent films, produced by both LGBT and heterosexual people, gained popularity among filmgoers. Many of these films participated in gay and lesbian festivals and unlike Hollywood, independent film-makers showed the issue of AIDS awareness, debunking myths which claimed that homosexuality led to AIDS, thereby defending LGBT people from discrimination. This can be seen in films like *An Early Frost* (1985) and *Parting Glances* (1986).

Due to the innovative treatment of LGBT issues, some films from the mid-1980s are considered the precedents of New Queer Cinema. Sometimes these films were regarded as too “bland or conciliatory” but it is important to acknowledge that they actually marked the advent of NQC (Benshoff & Griffin 196). Some of these films even had many of the NQC features, as is the case with *Desert Hearts* (1985), which I will analyse in the following chapter as one of the most representative predecessors of NQC.

At the beginning of the 1990s, NQC emerged as a new independent kind of cinema which employed innovative and revolutionary techniques such as depiction of discriminatory treatment and suffering –among other themes– to give an honest portrayal of the LGBT community in films and help to struggle for LGBT rights and acceptance, which will be explained more elaborately in the following chapter.

To sum up, the LGBT portrayals in American films evolved throughout the decades. Early homophobic and subtle depictions were progressively exchanged for positive and overt images of LGBT issues. With the advent of New Queer Cinema, LGBT people were depicted in new ways –with energy and defiance among other characteristics, and all this was for a common purpose: vindicating LGBT rights and acceptance.

### 3. LESBIAN FEMINISM, QUEER THEORY AND NEW QUEER CINEMA: A THEORETICAL APPROACH AGAINST HETERONORMATIVE LABELS

From the 1970s onwards several theories and movements concerning varied sexual identities emerged, such as Lesbian Feminism, Queer Theory and New Queer Cinema (NQC). These approaches helped strengthen and support the LGBT rights movements which fought for equality and social acceptance from the 1950s. Hence, Lesbian Feminism, Queer Theory and NQC will serve as a theoretical framework for the analysis of *Desert Hearts* (1985) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

### 3.1. Lesbian Feminism

As the scholars Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor state, lesbian feminism is “a variety of beliefs and practices based on the core assumption that a connection exists between an erotic and/or emotional commitment to women and political resistance to patriarchal domination” (33). Lesbian Feminism emerged in the USA at the beginning of the 1970s and lasted until the late 1980s. It was closely related to the feminist movement but the lesbian feminists felt excluded from mainstream feminist groups because discrimination based on sexual preference was not considered a relevant issue among the predominantly heterosexual-feminist groups. Homophobia from feminist organisations can be seen in the expulsion of lesbians from the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1970 and their denomination as the *Lavender Menace* or *Radicalesbians*.

On the one hand, lesbian feminists faced homophobia from heterosexual feminists and on the other they bore the brunt of sexist ideology from gay activist groups, which were mainly composed of men. Lesbian feminists therefore wrote a manifesto called “The Woman-Identified Woman” (1970) to declare their rightful position in the struggle against patriarchy and at the same time to critic the social heteronormativity, issues that can be found in *Desert Hearts* (1985) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Lesbian feminists engaged in different, non-conforming ways to reinforce their beliefs and goals, such as the rejection of *butch-femme* relationships or the adoption of their own dress code. They interpreted the couples who consisted of a *masculine* woman and a *feminine* one as an imitation of heterosexual pairing so they refused to be assigned to these roles. Moreover, according to Vicki L. Eaklor, they fostered a new clothing style to distance themselves from heterosexual materialism and so they began to wear boots, trousers, plaid shirts and short hair, among other features (146).

Another distinctive characteristic of lesbian feminism was separatism. Lesbian feminists created and organised a great number of cultural events—specifically meant for

lesbians– which helped promote their ideologies and provided the opportunity to become more visible and socially accepted within American society. Furthermore, lesbian feminism was supported and expatiated by the academia in terms of literature and scholarly journals, such as *Sign*, founded in 1975, in which, five years later Adrienne Rich, an influential feminist and writer, published an article called “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. With this essay, Rich contributed to lesbian feminist theory by explaining that the *mandatory* heterosexuality that existed in American society was a product of patriarchy –an issue which I will analyse in *Desesrt Hearts* (1985) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) in the fourth chapter– and described the concept of a *lesbian continuum* “which embraces women who resist male control but are not sexual with other women . . . originally known as *political lesbians*” (Rupp and Taylor 45).

Separatism undoubtedly did benefit the lesbian community but it could not escape controversy. It faced criticism from other members of the LGBT community as transgender people and homosexual males who claimed that behaving in what appeared to be an anti-male manner would impede the overall development of LGBT Rights Movements. These groups demanded union and cooperation in order to achieve more acceptance and equal rights within society. Even though lesbian feminism suffered repression and criticism, it led to improve, along with other movements, not just the social conditions of lesbians but also the heterosexual women in America.

### 3.2. Queer Studies and Queer Theory

Queer Studies emerged in the 1980s in the USA as a post-structuralist reaction against various theories which considered sexual and gender identities as natural and biological features of the human being and, therefore, immutable. According to Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi, the purpose of Queer Studies was to defend and justify that both sexual and

gender identities had been socially constructed in the nineteenth century by Western societies (1-17). The queer approach was influenced by many significant scholars such as Judith Butler and David Halperin, who were experts in the field, as well as the French philosopher, Michel Foucault.

Queer Theory was developed at the beginning of the 1990s. The term was first used by the feminist scholar Teresa de Lauretis in her article “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” (1990). Queer Theory states that categories or labels for sexual and gender identities have been imposed by social institutions which operate as a form of constraint and a way to control society, thereby making people conform to what is perceived as normal. Accordingly, Queer Theory promotes the use of the term *queer* to embrace all sexual minorities. Furthermore, Queer Studies and Queer Theory reject heteronormativity, which is prevalent in society and is one of the main causes of LGBT discrimination and oppression. This rejection of heteronormativity and socially-constructed categories will be analysed in *Desert Hearts* (1985) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), paying special attention to the characters of Ennis del Mar and Vivian Bell, who challenge that labelling and its consequent oppression.

The term *queer* has evolved throughout history. When this word appeared for the first time, it was employed as a synonym for *strange*, and it was soon adopted as a contemptuous designation of the LGBT individuals. Eventually, the LGBT collectives seized the word that was previously used to condemn them to vindicate their own rights and define their identity. Finally, *queer* incorporated its theoretical meaning after the emergence of Queer Studies and Queer Theory, as a deconstruction of categories based on identity and sexual politics. Nevertheless, as O’Driscoll declares, the different interpretations of this term coexist even today and vary depending on the context in which it is used (34).

Concerning the acceptance of queer concepts and ideas within American society and academic fields, they have received criticism but what is of more relevance is the social and theoretical contribution they made in the lives of LGBT people. Likewise, Queer Studies and Queer Theory in particular have provided a basis for further social and political theories concerning and benefitting LGBT people, such as New Queer Cinema, which will be explained in the following section.

### 3.3. New Queer Cinema

New Queer Cinema (NQC) emerged in the 1990s as a film genre and was also regarded as a movement in terms of its activist agenda. The term was coined by the film theorist and critic B. Ruby Rich in her illuminating article which held the same title –“New Queer Cinema”– in *Sight & Sound Magazine*, published in 1992. New Queer Cinema denotes a kind of independent film-making which shares some of the main principles of Queer Theory. NQC is against the idea of heteronormativity and it also employs *queer* as an umbrella term to refer to all sexual minorities. Furthermore, NQC differs from previous depictions of LGBT issues because it works towards LGBT acceptance.

New Queer films “aren’t all the same, and don’t share a single aesthetic vocabulary, or strategy, or concern . . . These works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive” (Aaron 16). Moreover, New Queer films often depict homophobia and “negative images” but this is done in order to make the audience aware of the cruel treatment of the sexual minorities and as I will discuss later, “explode taboos, raise controversial issues, and celebrate a variety of queer sexualities” (Benshoff and Griffin 221). Explicit and implicit depictions of homophobia –without film-makers’ negative intentions, will be analysed in the fourth chapter and I will also try to examine the differences and similarities between a great

precedent of NQC –*Desert Hearts* (1985)– and another popular film of this movement – *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

Finally, regarding differences between men and women, it is interesting to note that sexism continued to exist within NQC as well. As Rich argues, during the first years of NQC “all the new movies being snatched up by distributors, shown in mainstream festivals, and booked into theatres are by the boys . . . [and]the amazing new lesbian videos remain hard to find” (18). Likewise, a similar observation is made by Benshoff and Griffin, who state that New Queer films “by and about women . . . were marginalized in the first wave of the movement” (240). These statements reveal that there were still underlying traces of sexism in spite of the activism against it.

In short, Lesbian Feminism, Queer Theory and New Queer Cinema have provided a theoretical background which helped in promoting LGBT acceptance within society. Their activist agenda has positively influenced and encouraged a truthful portrayal of LGBT issues and characters in films and at the same time, they have managed to progressively break the labels which were constructed by a predominantly heteronormative society. In order to further validate the aforementioned points I will now engage in a closer analysis of *Desert Hearts* (1985) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

#### 4. *DESERT HEARTS* (1985) AND *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN* (2005): BREAKING LABELS OF SEXUAL IDENTITIES

*Desert Hearts* (1985) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) are two American films which deal with LGBT issues and the characters are depicted with the purpose of fighting for LGBT acceptance within society and breaking labels which have been constructed by heteronormative and patriarchal systems, as stated by Lesbian Feminism and Queer Theory. Both films are cinematic adaptations of literary works, written by women authors: Jane Rule’s

novel *Desert of the Heart* (1964) and Annie Proulx's short story *Brokeback Mountain* (1997). They share a positive intentionality and thematic parallels which can be found in their characters and context.

However, the films diverge in terms of their plot development and ending. This is because the two films are separated by two decades during which many LGBT issues evolved and changed. *Desert Hearts* was released for the first time in 1985 and was considered the first American film to portray lesbianism in a positive way. So its happy ending was necessary to strengthen the positive outlook of the director, Donna Deitch. On the other hand, *Brokeback Mountain*, which was released in 2005 and directed by Ang Lee, is comparatively more contemporary, so a happy ending is not necessary to impact people and raise awareness of LGBT issues. Thus, *Desert Hearts* is considered one of the most significant precedents of NQC (New Queer Cinema) while *Brokeback Mountain* presents crucial NQC features –as explained in Chapter 3, and both films fight for the same purpose: breaking discriminatory labels which have led to ill treatment and oppression of the LGBT community.

In this chapter I will analyse *Desert Hearts* and *Brokeback Mountain* focusing on their respective characters: Vivian Bell and Ennis del Mar. They live in similar oppressive situations but their character development occurs in distinctive ways; while Vivian challenges heteronormative labels and overcomes fear, Ennis tries to do the same, but in a more secretive manner.

#### 4.1. Vivian Bell: Challenging Heteronormative Categorisations and Defeating Fear in *Desert Hearts* (1985)

*Desert Hearts* depicts a struggle against homophobic discrimination and patriarchy, mainly embodied in the character of Vivian Bell, who will be the primary focus of my analysis. Feminist scholar Karen Hollinger explains that the film had received negative



criticism for being too soft or not radical enough (12-13). However, the fact that *Desert Hearts* challenges the heteronormative labels of society must be acknowledged, an idea which is supported by both Lesbian Feminism and Queer Theory. According to B. Ruby Rich, this film empowers not only lesbians but also women in general (6). This purpose is perceptible in the directorial treatment of the character of Vivian Bell. Donna Deitch wanted to make a film which was accessible to all audiences and not only for the LGBT community. Her activist agenda can be found in the following statement:

My objective in making a film about lesbians is not that we are the best of all possible women, but that we are real, sympathetic, beautiful, intelligent human beings. . . I wanted to make a film that was a love story between two women that did not end with a suicide, a murder or a bisexual triangle. And that hadn't happened. ("Interview")

Moreover, she realised the difficulty of financing a film on homosexuality due to the existing taboo on the topic of homosexuality in the USA. Therefore, she resorted to the means of fundraising in order to overcome these barriers. With the help and support of friends, fellow activists and fundraiser events, in a time span of two years and a half, she accumulated the money for her project. Her determination further demonstrates her strong activist beliefs which finally resulted in the production of the film.

*Desert Hearts* portrays a heteronormative society in which Vivian Bell, played by Helen Shaver, has to challenge homophobic discrimination, derogatory labels and her initial fear in order to live happily and remain faithful to her own feelings. The film traces her attempt to do so, which I will analyse by examining her journey of acceptance, struggle and success.

*Desert Hearts* is set in Reno (Nevada) during 1959, when American society was still largely hesitant towards accepting the LGBT community. This context helps the audience

note how homophobia was prevalent –also depicted in *Brokeback Mountain*– and hindered the progress of sexual minorities’ rights and freedom. This oppression was more widespread in rural areas remote from the big cities where the first LGBT movements had already begun, as explained in Chapter 1. Throughout the film, there are various incidents of homophobic treatment. On the one hand, some characters show an explicit homophobia, as is the case with Frances –Cay’s stepmother. On the other, on paying close attention to the dialogues, many traces of a homophobic society can be found, which I will elaborate upon later.

Vivian Bell is a professor who arrives in Reno in order to divorce her husband. She is presented as an independent, intelligent and modern woman, who teaches at Columbia University (New York) and does not depend on any man. Vivian struggles against patriarchy and attempts to ratify women’s values and independency, notions which are the key focus of Lesbian Feminism. Her behaviour is different from most women of that era, who are subordinated to their husbands. Similarly, Cay Rivers –Vivian’s future partner, performed by Patricia Charbonneau– is a young self-sufficient woman who works at a casino and is uncompromising of her sexual identity. She is attracted to women and she does not hide it. Hence, this film is “remarkable for its feminism as it is for its sexuality” (Dolan), and can be considered as a defender of both women and the LGBT community.

After Vivian’s arrival at Reno, she is attracted to Cay. At the same time, Vivian is afraid of that feeling because she has internalised the homophobia which rules society in that period –as is also the case with Ennis del Mar in *Brokeback Mountain*, which will be analysed later. After Cay and Vivian’s first kiss, Vivian is scared: “I don’t want to talk about it anymore”. At first, she seems reticent about seeing Cay again since she feels worried and oppressed. Vivian states that her acts “allowed Frances . . . to humiliate [them] as [they] were a pair of delinquents”. However, the attraction is mutual and Cay helps Vivian understand that they cannot ignore their feelings simply because they are not socially accepted: “I don’t

act that way to change the world; I act that way so that the goddamn world won't change me!" As the story develops, the audience can acknowledge that being a lesbian at that time meant to be a target of discrimination. As Lucille –a guest at Frances' house– claims, Cay "was kicked out of College for 'unnatural acts'" and fearfully, Vivian tells Cay that she is "a respected scholar . . . married many years to a respected scholar". Consequently, as the two aforementioned dialogues demonstrate, there is no place for homosexuality in that environment.

Nonetheless, Vivian gradually accepts her feelings towards Cay but still fearful of being seen together: "I feel exposed". Hence, the situation is tough, but it is significant to note how Vivian, with Cay's help, struggles against heteronormativity and its consequent discrimination. She is in love with Cay and this gives her strength and motivates her growth in their relationship and her final act of inviting Cay to go with her to New York: "Come with me . . . you deserve to live somewhere with or near someone who sees how wonderful you are". Thus, Vivian evolves by challenging the oppression imposed by society and at the same time, she vanquishes the fear she had when she started a relationship with Cay.

In addition, neither of them defines themselves as *lesbians* because, as Queer Theory state, these labels have been created by a heteronormative and homophobic society and imply a discrimination of minorities. In short, as Hollinger notes, "the open portrayal of lesbianism . . . seems to unsettle the rigidity of sexual categorizations and the maintenance of patriarchal, heterosexist hegemony" (11). Therefore, the challenging of heteronormative labels in linguistic terms is also an example of the activist nature of the film, as demonstrated by its protagonists' refusal to adhere to labels. So, the open and positive representation of lesbianism in *Desert Hearts* as well as Vivian's progressive overcoming of her fear and acceptance of her sexuality makes this film an important contribution to the cause of women and LGBT rights.

#### 4.2. Ennis del Mar: Clandestine Challenges to Heteronormative Categorisations in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

*Brokeback Mountain* portrays the hardships faced by the LGBT community during the mid-twentieth century and at the same time Ang Lee “[breaks] the . . . taboo on homosexuality . . . [by] creating a truly radical film (Osterweil, 42). Hence, *Brokeback Mountain* addresses the issue of homophobia and raises awareness among all kinds of audiences, as aforementioned.

The social and geographical context (Texas and Wyoming, 1963) is similar to that of *Desert Hearts*; rural areas where people are likely to be more conservative and homophobic. In fact, *Brokeback Mountain* depicts a more cruel treatment of homosexuality as this film is more akin to New Queer Cinema, which shows a more radical defence of the LGBT community, as mentioned above. The following analysis will also consider different instances of implicit and explicit homophobia to exemplify how the LGBT community is discriminated in a pro-heterosexual society.

Ennis del Mar –played by Heath Ledger– is portrayed as a heterosexual cowboy who is about to marry his girlfriend but from the beginning of the film, Ennis feels attracted to Jack Twist –played by Jake Gyllenhaal, his shepherd companion at *Brokeback Mountain*. The attraction is mutual and Jack is more forthcoming about his feelings than Ennis, who is scared and tries to hide their relationship, as he affirms: “It's nobody's business but ours”. This situation is similar to the beginning of Cay and Vivian’s relationship in *Desert Hearts*, but Ennis chooses a different way to challenge heteronormativity and unlike Vivian, he does not overcome his fear of being ostracised due to his sexuality. According to Thomas Piontek, this fear is due to “the homophobia he has internalised by learning the lesson his father taught him” (129). When Ennis was nine, his father showed him the dead body of a man who had been killed and tortured for being homosexual –Ennis actually believes that his father did it.

Therefore, right from his childhood this image continues haunting him and is one of the reasons why he is unable to overcome his fear, which is further heightened by other homophobic incidents that continue to happen around him. For instance, Aguirre –Jack and Ennis’ boss at Brokeback Mountain– fires them when he realises that they have had an affair: “You ranch stiffs, you ain't never no good”; and he does not hire them again. A similar incident can be found in *Desert Hearts*, when Frances expels Vivian from the guest house for having a close relationship with Cay. Hence, these events reflect the oppressive and intolerant environment in which Vivian and Ennis live.

Despite Ennis’s fear, he is in love with Jack and wants to continue meeting him. Both Ennis and Jack hide their relationship by having heterosexual families in which they are unhappy, but they keep their relationship for over twenty years. Ennis tries to resist heteronormative categorisation and oppression when he returns to Brokeback Mountain to meet Jack, where Ennis feels free and true to his being. However, when Jack offers Ennis a life together –“what if you and me had a little ranch somewhere”, Ennis cannot overcome his fear and claims that if someone discovered them, they “[would be] dead”. Ennis struggles against derogatory categories imposed by society, but he does so secretly. He prefers meeting Jack at Brokeback Mountain where they “can get together once in a while . . . in the middle of nowhere”. The mountain for Ennis becomes a safe haven, away from the judgemental eyes of society, but Jack does not agree completely.

Eventually Ennis gets a divorce and is unable to pursue any stable heterosexual relationships, being consistent with his true feelings and struggling against heteronormativity. Nonetheless, Ennis’ fear impedes him from having a happy relationship with Jack, who is growing tired of Ennis’ refusal to accept their relationship completely. Jack complains to Ennis: “You wanna live your miserable fucking life?” and tells him regretfully that they “could have had a happy life together”; referring to the many years they have met only once a

year and secretly. Jack behaves in a more courageous and defiant manner. He neither completely hides nor is ashamed of his sexual orientation, and has affairs with other men.

Additionally, as is the case with *Desert Hearts*, neither of the protagonists uses any labels to describe their sexual orientation so this is another way of defying heteronormativity. Likewise, this film, as Robert L. Hilliard states, “plays against stereotypes” since the manly protagonists fall in love in spite of “having been raised in a straight society . . . with prejudicial attitudes towards gays” (196). Yet, there is a scene where Ennis states: “You know I ain't queer” and Jack answers: “Me neither”. This is the sole moment in which a label is applied to their sexuality but they reject those labels. Ennis makes this statement because he is afraid of the consequences of his feelings which are socially unacceptable. Jack, however, has internalised his feelings towards men and does not need to label them, because categorising is a way of oppressing, as Queer Theory claims.

In contrast to Vivian's growth and finding a companion in *Desert Hearts*, Ennis is unable to have a happy life with the person he loves. Regarding the ending of *Brokeback Mountain*, Jack dies and the images suggest that he has been murdered because of his sexual relationships with other men although his wife says it was an accident. Jack's death breaks Ennis and his hidden emotions find an outlet when he visits Jack's parents in order to fulfil Jack's desire to have his ashes spread on Brokeback Mountain. He shows Jack's parents his affection towards their son and does not seem to care if they realise that he was in love with Jack. Although Jack's father does not let him take Jack's ashes, his mother allows Ennis to keep the shirts they were wearing on their first meeting in Brokeback Mountain. At the end of the film, Ennis stores the shirts and a picture of Brokeback Mountain together, which symbolises their love. Eventually, as Jim Kitses declares, Ennis ends “traumatized and profoundly alienated” because of his fear and suffering (26). He seeks refuge in his memories

of Jack and Brokeback Mountain because his fear and the oppressive environment prevented him from having a happy and meaningful life with Jack.

To put it succinctly, Vivian and Ennis challenge heteronormativity and the oppression created by a homophobic society but in their own different ways. Vivian progressively defeats her fear, becomes more confident and is able to share her life with the person she loves. Ennis also defies heteronormative categorisation and oppression but only within the secrecy of Brokeback Mountain, a place outside societal rules. However, within society, he is unable to overcome his fear and the internalised homophobia which ultimately forces him to lead an unhappy and lonely life.

## CONCLUSION

Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts* (1985) and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) reject heteronormative categorisations through the main homosexual characters of Vivian Bell and Ennis del Mar in the two films respectively, who attempt to face a homophobic and intransigent society. This challenging of derogatory labels, influenced by Lesbian Feminism, Queer Theory and New Queer Cinema, is conducted in different ways by Vivian and Ennis, but with the same purpose; struggling for LGBT acceptance.

Within a 1950s conservative society, Vivian Bell challenges heteronormativity and patriarchy. Her position is doubly marginalized due to her gender and her sexual orientation, but she succeeds in overcoming her fear of being discriminated and the film ends with showing her together with the woman she loves –Cay Rivvers. Thus, *Desert Heart's* shows a positive ending in which the activist purpose of the film is demonstrated.

Similarly, Ennis del Mar rejects heteronormative labels by trying to maintain a relationship with his lover –Jack Twist. Nonetheless, he exemplifies how growing up in a homophobic environment can result in an adult who is unable to accept his sexuality without

fear which ultimately prohibits him from attaining companionship and happiness. The cruel reflection of a predominantly intolerant society in *Brokeback Mountain* helps the audience acknowledge the harsh situations that the LGBT community has to confront where the final consequences are either that of sorrow and loneliness or being an outcast.

The two films differ in terms of their endings due to the long time span which separates their releases. While the 1980s screened the first positive LGBT films, by the 2000s the LGBT struggle for equality had progressed significantly further. Notwithstanding, both films share the common goal of raising awareness about LGBT rights and their acceptance within society by breaking heteronormative categorisations, and thereby creating a world which is more compassionate to all, where love is not restricted by sexual orientation.



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