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Brokeback Mountain and the White Male

Meghan Callahan '14

The world of Westerns does not initially seem conducive to a queering environment. The cowboy, as portrayed by John Wayne or Clint Eastwood, is the unquestioned epitome of adventure, nature, and masculinity. But modern cinematography has taken a new look at this classic genre with the film *Brokeback Mountain*, an examination of the intimacy that arises between two cowboys, Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar, and the manner in which it shapes their lives. *Brokeback Mountain* challenges the norms present in the classic Western, troubling strict boundaries between types of whiteness by blurring the clear dividing lines of accepted binary oppositions.

The framework of *Brokeback Mountain* itself immediately positions the film at a unique angle in which to queer; it is a Western that addresses the emotionally and sexually intimate relationship of two cowboys. The Western is a film genre that seems straightforward, a pillar of American cinema and history, but it is simultaneously “a profoundly homosocial, unheterosexual form” by the nature of the phallogocentric environment of the wilderness and the absence of women (Dyer 36). It is perhaps unsurprising that in a world devoid of women, two men would seek physical solace with one another, but *Brokeback Mountain* takes this painstakingly crafted intimacy beyond mere physicality. The relationship between Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar is thrust from the wilderness of the mountainside into the fabric of their daily lives, where women are present and acceptable sexuality is clearly defined. Virtue is not a murky idea in the larger society where Jack and Ennis live and work; the white characteristics of “energy, enterprise, discipline, spiritual elevation, and [acceptable forms of] the white body” have been ingrained in both, and demanded from them as (particularly male) individuals (Dyer 21). The Western makes an ideal breeding ground for this homosocial relationship, a genre of film in which the border between established and unestablished order can be “pushed endlessly back” (Dyer 33). Within *Brokeback Mountain*, the demands of the white character are juxtaposed with the individual weaknesses of the white body beyond the confines of the civilized. The beginning of the film, in which the groundwork for Jack and Ennis’ lifelong romance is laid, serves as a microcosm of the Western, a point in history in which the creation and settlement of their inner selves is underway (Dyer 33). It is in this interior frontier of the spirit that much of *Brokeback Mountain* occurs, following the development of Jack and Ennis as the civilization of the land continues around them.

The use of different types of camera shots within the film reiterates this contrast between nature and the civilized. Shots of nature, particularly the expanses of *Brokeback Mountain* itself, are long and crisp with an attention to detail that is muddled when transferred to the dimly lit, cluttered indoors. The typically Western conventions of film—wide open spaces taken in with wide shots, as opposed to close-ups of restricted or blocked action, are observed within the natural world (Dyer 35). However, as soon as civilization is introduced, the shots become shorter, filled with more restriction. The narrative of entrapment begins in this stage of the film, as Ennis and Jack both examine the socially acceptable lives that they inhabit in contrast to the desires they both desperately wish to fulfill. This stagnation and the sudden limitedness of action can be a visual shock to the viewer, mimicking the trapped feeling of both cowboys within their white roles. This stagnation of the camera is mirrored in the musical score. The repetition of the same musical phrase permeates almost every scene, creating an atmosphere of familiarity and evoking a sense of memory and reflection as the film moves forward. Perhaps most significantly, when the camera views Jack and Ennis, it lingers. The film has its own love affair with Ennis’ jaw, Jack’s eyes, the space or lack of space between their bodies; the Western filming conventions are abandoned as the conventions of accepted sexuality are shed by the two men. Both are continually shot clearly and in sharp detail, like the mountain and the natural world, without the slight blur or haze that surrounds other characters. This closeness to Jack and Ennis can become troubling by queering the passage of time. The longest shots of the film are landscapes, so these closer shots of Jack and Ennis make it difficult to ascertain the length of time that has passed, especially in light of the acute details and the almost ageless qualities of the two characters.

One of the visual details that the camera focuses on in shots of Ennis and Jack throughout the film is the act of smoking. The act of smoking is a mutual one that both initiate that lends itself to the level of oral fixation. Ennis pulls out a cigarette, and Jack lights it. Both smoke profusely after sex, or share cigarettes around a campfire. The whiteness of the smoke draws attention to the mouth, and the physical act of drawing on a cigarette or the thick creaminess of the exhale appear intensely sexual. The direction in which the smoke is exhaled often serves to draw the eye, such as when Ennis is washing himself and Jack is smoking in the foreground. Jack’s exhale drifts across Ennis’ form, targeting the cradle of his hips and billowing out like a flower, mimicking the nature of a male orgasm. Smoking can also serve as a distraction, an excuse for Ennis to break eye contact first or an overture for either to initiate physical closeness. Significantly, the smoke creates a haze between the viewer and the characters, camouflaging them from one another and the audience.

This position of the watcher, however obscured, is a vital part of the cinematography of *Brokeback Mountain*. The watcher is “the ultimate position of power in a society that controls people in part through their

visibility” because it renders the watcher itself *invisible* and in a position to judge others (Dyer 44). Aguirre, the man in charge of sheep herding on Brokeback Mountain, serves as a physical representation of this invisible authority; he spies on Jack and Ennis through binoculars as they wrestle, witnessing proof of their intimacy. His viewpoint is meaningful because it directly mirrors the audience’s perspective on the couple, to a point where Aguirre’s sudden presence onscreen is surprising. The viewers of the film become completely authoritative because seeing is equated both to knowledge and power. They, like Aguirre, are displaced into the third-person position of power that is uninvolved, and the ultimate position of whiteness (Dyer 104).

The watchers within the narrative context of *Brokeback Mountain* are particularly dangerous because of their capacity to do harm, as in the murder incident Ennis experienced as a young boy. In the impossibly homosocial and conservative Western, it is unsafe to express desires that would mar the aspiration towards whiteness, and even “adaptability could be easily viewed as the capacity to infiltrate, ‘passing’...as a kind of corruption of whiteness” (Dyer 57). It is the fear of detection, of being exposed as just ‘passing,’ that contributes to Ennis’ ultimate denial of a life built with Jack. Ennis struggles with this lack of sight, blind to the possibility of a future with Jack and obviously uncomfortable with his intense desire for another man. This level of discomfort is played through the tension of Ennis’ body, especially the half-closed slits of his eyes that are unable to freely admire Jack. Conversely, Jack’s wide, soulful eyes are rarely removed from Ennis, gazing openly and emotionally in a manner that Ennis’ squinty glances cannot overwhelm; Ennis, the epitome of the male struggling with whiteness, must cling to “a sense of separation and boundedness [that] is important to the white male ego” (Dyer 152). It is Ennis who insists that the intimacy between them must exist only “way the hell out in the middle of nowhere” (*Brokeback Mountain*), away from civilization and in the depths of nature. Ennis is the one who is never able to leave the outdoor ranch life despite the poverty it engenders, and his “lament for a loss of closeness to nature” throughout the film mirrors his longing for Jack and emphasizes his extreme discomfort in the suffocating, white environment of any town (Dyer 157).

In addition to the physical level of cinematography of *Brokeback Mountain*, the contrast between light and dark at both a material and theoretical level creates a significant troubling of accepted binaries oppositions. Physically, Jack and Ennis are opposites. Ennis is the ideal white male: tall, muscular, fair haired and clean-shaven, his dark eyes hidden by the shadow of his pale hat. Jack is shorter, thinner, with dark hair and whiskers, and his property—from his clothing to his horse—is all portrayed in darker shades. Like other Westerns, *Brokeback Mountain* calls attention to “the variation in white people; the ways in which some white people fail to attain whiteness” with the juxtaposition of these two characters’ physicality through lighting (Dyer 35). Jack and Ennis are defined in opposition to each

other, but in the end *Brokeback Mountain* becomes a film about Ennis Del Mar. Ennis is heavily lit, both from natural light (the sun, fire) and the dimmer lighting of the town interior. Not only does his screen time feature more heavily, but Ennis seems drawn to light when he is onscreen; he stands near the window when being hired by Aguirre, he is the fire-builder and leans into the flames in a hungry fashion. Jack thrives in the shadow, as his position as a herder on the dark mountainside testifies. He dresses in darker, heavier fabrics with a face that is more shadowed and less liable to catch light. Action is taken by Jack repeatedly and boldly. He initiates the meeting with Ennis after they are both hired; he suggests shooting a sheep; he tends to Ennis’ wound and ultimately initiates sex.

Jack’s role as an assertive individual is most troubled by this sexual relationship. After too much alcohol, Ennis chooses to sleep in the campsite off the mountain, until eventually he is ordered into the tent and out of the cold by Jack. Not only does Jack initiate this sleeping pattern, but he also initiates sexual contact, drawing Ennis’ hand towards his penis when he awakens in the early morning. Ennis springs away, startled awake, and it is Jack who reaches out, casting Ennis into his shadow. Jack, as initiator, appears to play the role of the corrupter due to the intense shadows utilized both on his figure and extended from his form. After a moment of tension, Ennis inclines towards Jack slightly, and they mutually lean into the deeper area of shadow; Ennis embraces the corruption Jack has brought. Though the convention of “the man being illuminated by the woman” is widespread in film, this act of shadowing between the two men is interesting, as is Jack’s “dark desire for the light” that is so frequently cast off of Ennis’ skin (Dyer 134, 139). Jack’s attempt to kiss Ennis turns into rough wrestling, which quickly escalates into a sexual encounter. As Jack loosens his belt, a major role reversal troubles his position as the aggressor: Ennis hauls Jack to the ground, and it is Ennis who is the top. The sex itself is shadowed and punctuated by fast breathing and moans that serve as a non-visual guide to what occurs. In the midst of orgasm, Jack seizes Ennis’ hand, increasing the emotional aspect of the moment. Ennis’ certainty of what he wants, once Jack initiates contact, parallels the idea of the divided white man, an individual with “a more powerful sex drive but also greater willpower... The sexual dramas of white men have to do with not being able to resist the drives or with struggling to master them” (Dyer 27). Though Ennis is always aware of his desire for Jack, both physically and emotionally, he struggles with accepting it, and struggles with the need associated with his desires.

On the night after their first encounter, Ennis’ turmoil is reflected in the intensity in his muscles. He lingers by the firelight, slowly drawn away from it and towards the tent in a tortuous way, almost against his will, until he squats outside the tent, hat in his hand. Jack, who is shirtless, reaches up and moves the hat aside, slowly leaning towards Ennis and initiating a kiss, which is hungrily accepted. Jack pulls Ennis in with the kiss, obscuring the firelight with their locked mouths and casting them both in shadow. Ennis’

slow acquiesce and eventual acceptance of a desire he cannot accept is so wrenching because of its tragic portrayal; Ennis epitomizes the manner in which white men can "give way to darkness" (Dyer 28). It is Jack who initiates, and Jack who apologizes, comforting Ennis: "I'm sorry. It's all right. It's all right. Lie back. Come on" (*Brokeback Mountain*). After this final order, Ennis lets himself go, stroking Jack until Jack rolls on top of him, shadowing him as the firelight catches the muscles in his back, and the distinct outlines of the two merge.

Ennis' tragic nature is alluded to once again, and most directly, after Jack and Ennis part ways at the end of the summer. After Jack's truck is out of sight, Ennis starts trembling and limps into an alley where he heaves, sobbing, and beats the wall. Jack's leaving proves to be too much, and Ennis does not have the words or the capacity to express his grief. He kneels, weeping, as though in prayer or supplication, cast as a dark outline against the sky and the wide expanse of land, framed by the alley's walls. Ennis' suffering at his inability to express emotion and his incapacity to reconcile the situation with the world in which he lives illustrates the divided nature of the white male, in relation "not only to sexuality but also to anything that can be characterized as low, dark and irredeemably corporeal, reproducing the structure of feeling of the Christ story" (Dyer 28). Ennis was faced with the temptation and fear associated with sexuality that made him unable to reach out to Jack at their goodbye. His kneeling form evokes religious connotations as the scene fades into his wedding to Alma, underscored with the spoken words from the Lord's Prayer: "...and lead us not into temptation" (*Brokeback Mountain*).

Ennis' married life fails to assuage his white male insecurities. Little income and lack of stability threaten Ennis' economic status in the capitalistic society in which he lives. Here, rather than being defined in lighting or clothing in contrast with Jack, it is this poverty, "the dreariness and pain of [the working class'] labor that accords [him] lowly status" and makes him darker, although he is racially white, and inferior (Dyer 57). Jack's rodeo career, though short-lived, culminates in his marriage to Lureen, a wealthy woman from a lucrative business background. This economic disparity problematizes which individual is more white; is it Jack, so comfortable with his own fluid sexuality with no financial concern, or Ennis, tortured over his sexual choices and barely making enough to get by? Neither man, it seems, is whiter than the other, and this exchange of whiteness problematizes beyond the scope of their characters and into the society at large.

The relationship between Jack and Ennis, once renewed, pushes the insecurities regarding their sexual border further back. When they first reunite, they grasp each other firmly in an embrace. It is Ennis who acts to break this, grabbing Jack by his lapels and thrusting him into the shadows of the stairway before knocking his hat aside and roughly kissing him. This initial assertion of dominance, typical of Jack in their physical relationship,

is initiated for the first time by Ennis. However, sexual encounters supported by Ennis are limited to the literal shadows of the stairwell, the solitude of a motel, or the wilderness. Ennis' fear about a more open consumption of their relationship stems from the murder victim whose body he witnessed as a child, killed because of his sexuality. Like the society that raised him, Ennis "fear[s] sexuality if it is allowed to get out of control (out from under the will)" (Dyer 210). Ennis worries that if their mutual desires "grab hold of [them] in the wrong time, or the wrong place, [they'll] be dead" (*Brokeback Mountain*). Significantly, Ennis' memories of the mangled body are filmed in a white light that creates an element of the surreal and enhances shadows oddly; the corpse itself looks like a bloodied smudge, and the pale environment adds visual weight to the memory. The heavy hand of Ennis' faceless father squeezes the place where young Ennis' neck meets his shoulder, and it appears like the hand of judgment, a representation of the retribution wrought on anyone who corrupts whiteness.

It is this deeply learned dread, linked inextricably with the approval of the white norm around him, that makes Ennis a more reserved and cautious lover than Jack. The struggle within Ennis over his conflicting desire for sexual/emotional satisfaction and societal approval leads to the discrediting of his identity as a white male. Not to be sexually driven like Ennis, who is capable of waiting months before another sexual experience, "is liable to cast a question mark over a man's masculinity—the darkness is a sign of his true masculinity" (Dyer 28). Conversely, Ennis' very "ability to control [sexual drives] is a sign of his whiteness" (Dyer 28). The taint of the darkness of desire and the emasculating nature of whiteness mingle in the character of Ennis in a way that epitomizes the conflict within the atypical white male. Sexual desires, the *least* white of all impulses, are especially dangerous in homosexual situations because of the lack of reproduction that can act to excuse heteronormative, white sexual experiences. When Ennis imagines the murder of Jack, his thoughts are cast in the same pale light as the horrific memory of his childhood. Jack is a dark smudge bludgeoned by even darker men, taken from behind in a manner that apes the homosexual that would motivate such an attack.

In a bizarre visual merging of reality and Ennis' inner mind, the Twist house appears as a white environment with almost no color or contrast when Ennis goes to visit Jack's parents after his death. The unnatural whiteness is reflected in the skeletal faces of Mr. and Mrs. Twist, who embody the idea of whiteness as death, inhabiting a temporal living space that stifled the life of their son. Even the furniture and appliances are pale or nonexistent; the home is the physical representation of the absence of material reality that is inherent to whiteness (Dyer 75). The only part of the house with clear shadows or solid definition is Jack's closet, where Ennis discovers the shirts they wore on their last day up at Brokeback Mountain. The only place in this white abyss that Jack is able to foster the memory of Ennis takes significance because it is the *closet*, an allusion to the silence of

homosexual or queerly sexed individuals in real life. As Ennis sniffs the scent left on Jack's shirt, hidden in the safety of the shadow, he portrays the limited escapes available for the deviant white. True whiteness is an ideal that by nature "can never be attained...because ideally white is absence: to be really, absolutely white is to be nothing" (Dyer 78). Ennis exits the nothingness of the Twist house, his only remaining connection to Jack becoming these shirts and a postcard of Brokeback Mountain tacked to his own closet door.

Brokeback Mountain is a film richly populated with binary oppositions: staying and going, love and hate, dark and light, nature and civilization. What makes it a film worthy of remembrance and analysis is way it moves beyond these binary oppositions, creating an intense troubling of accepted norms. Through the use of a cinematographic environment, characters, and a storyline that defy simple categorization, *Brokeback Mountain* is a medium that questions the very oppositions it portrays and challenges the viewers' preconceived notions. Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist are white men that *cannot* satisfactorily fulfill whiteness, giving rise to questions about the very attainability of whiteness itself and the true definition of the white male. The tragedy of *Brokeback Mountain* is not only the failure of Ennis and Jack to maintain their relationship or their definitions of self, but their ultimate inability to rise above these societal standards. Jack explodes at Ennis in their final union, crying out: "I wish I knew how to quit you!" (*Brokeback Mountain*). This stagnation, the melodrama of being actually unable to choose either option in a world made only of binaries, is the true tragedy of the film; in the final shot the viewer, like both men, is left only with the memories of a life half-lived.

Works Cited

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