

A "Brokeback Mountain" heteronormative rewriting: from words to the visual

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Abstract

Due to its public reception, *Brokeback Mountain* has become a gay icon of this century. It is therefore my intention to scrutinise Lee's interpretation of Annie Proulx's "*Brokeback Mountain*" as a, in my opinion, heteronormative transposition from literature to cinema. Mainly, how the director has managed to transfer linguistic tropes into pictures with a special interest in gender agencies. I have therefore delved into topics such as: language, sexual identity, or spatiality among others. To that end, I have revised and consequently combined queer theories and film studies to create a comparative analysis on the matter.

Keywords: Ang Lee, *Brokeback Mountain*, Film studies, Gay, Queer studies

Título: Una reescritura heteronormativa de *Brokeback Mountain*: de las palabras a lo visual.

Resumen

Debido a su acogida, *Brokeback Mountain* se ha convertido en un icono gay de este siglo. Es por lo tanto mi intención analizar la reescritura, heteronormativa en lo que a mí respecta, del director Ang Lee sobre la obra de Proulx. Principalmente, me interesa analizar, desde una perspectiva de género, como el director ha conseguido transferir tropos lingüísticos a imágenes visuales. Así, he analizado aspectos como lenguaje, identidad sexual o espacialidad, entre otros. Para ello, he revisado y combinado teorías queer y estudios de cine para crear un análisis comparativo.

Palabras clave: Ang Lee, *Brokeback Mountain*, Estudios de cine, Estudios queer, Gay.

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This paper attempts to clarify the different creative arteries taken when creating "*Brokeback Mountain*" in its antithetic compositions. My intention goes far beyond consulting the faithfulness to the original source, but, on the contrary, how Ang Lee has incorporated words into the visual. Although "film tropes are enormously restricted compared to literary tropes" (Bluestone, 1961: 22), there is a special interest in how, in my opinion, gender has been purposely restructured in the interest of the Western film industry that is not only the show window for American capitalism, but it is ethnocentric and cisheteronormative in nature.

Before going into a more detailed content of discussion, I would accordingly introduce both representations. On the one hand, *Brokeback Mountain* (short story) was published in the *New Yorker* (1997) by the Pulitzer-awarded writer Annie Proulx. It narrates the story of two cowboys who unexpectedly fell in love with each other but because of the time as well as the community they live in they cannot openly express their feelings. Continuously, the story was adapted into visual by the screenwriters Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana to be finally directed by Ang Lee (2005). Both, the story and the film, were very well-welcomed by the international press and the film industry. As a matter of fact, the film was awarded with four Golden Globes, among other prizes.

The first lines of this paper dissect both creators' attitude towards both protagonists. Aesthetic particularities and gender conceptualisations also differ when, from literature to the screen, translating *Brokeback Mountain*. While Proulx (1997) succeeds to present two very predictable "rough-mannered, rough-spoken" (3) cowboys that, because of the plot, do not turn out to be overly chauvinist but rather unexpectedly sympathising; Lee's protagonists synchronise with pink capitalist principles.⁴⁷³ The fact that the director has chosen two heterosexual actors who in any case may represent the gay buying bloc (Sender, 2001): the stereotyped handsome, white, middle class gay who delimits normative categories – such as capitalism, gender, neoliberalism or race – transcends queer consumerism. Blashill & Powlishta (2009) question

⁴⁷³ Pink capitalism refers to the integration of the LGBTIQ+ movement into capitalist dynamics. This incorporation is nevertheless reserved for white western, cisgender, capitalist upper-middle class members of the community.

gender roles while interpolating binary structures understood as masculine instrumental traits –autonomy, dominance and assertiveness— and feminine expressive traits, or empathy, nurturance and sensitivity. (784) In this spirit, Lee's estimation to both characters is vitiated by gender problematic systematisations. While Ennis is depicted as an instrumental *macho*, that is to say "a conformist who prefers to support God and country opposed to living as a rebel on the fringes of society." (Melen, 1978: 5) Jack is, following cisheteronormative canonical standards, pictured as the stereotyped "melodramatic heroine." (Osterweil, 2007: 38) Jack, in contrast with his masculine lover, mirrors this perceptive femininity who makes him "closer to being a heterosexual female than he is to heterosexual male." (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009: 784)

Film adaptation has, as previously stated, the ambitious task of transporting language without getting *Lost in Translation* or, in Chatman's words: "The central problem for film adapters is to transform narrative features that come easily to language but hard to a medium that operates in 'real time' and whose natural focus the surface appearance of things"(1990: 162-163). This second section therefore attempts to explore how in *Brokeback Mountain's* transcription, language and gender differs from the starting hypothesis. To that end, I have consulted the following example to illustrate this linguistic transgression. When in the camp tent, Proulx is keen to present a more visible, passionate and uncontrolled sex encounter. Thus, the author premeditatedly uses coarse language ("gun's going off," 6) for introducing this fabricated masculine rudeness. Lee, on the contrary, molds cinematic language into something more commercial and melodramatic. He directly addresses the spectator when deliberately focusing on the kissing scene making us sympathize with her homoerotic sentimental interpretation, thus taking the film more romantic aromas, as "drama is what makes a film." (Krishna, Rajarajeshwari & Vishnu, 2016: 5) In Lee's adaptation, sexuality nevertheless becomes something prohibited and skin is privately exhibited. Again, in this heteronormative progression, the camera rather focuses on the actors' faces instead of their bodies. Lust is claustrophobically limited to the actors' facial expressions in order to, and these are Lee's words: "it was also intended to *shock* audiences without making the scene *too uncomfortable to watch*, to allow them to delight in the destruction of the taboo without feeling *too intimidated*." (Osterweil, 2015: 41) [italics are mine].

Although sceneries are portrayed in both media as impressively immense, events occur in very minuscule spaces, this final section consequently aims to integrate gender and private spatiality. After his homosexual affair, Jack, on the one hand, performs the role of the homeless emergent nomad who runs away from this monolithic society. He travels to Mexico and he even has some sexual encounters with men in the neighbouring country. Ennis' house, on the other hand, condenses heteronormative panoptical standards (breadwinning, marriage or fathering, among others). He nonetheless represents oppression himself, forces his wife to practice anal sex to, along with its homosexual implications, delimit gender executions. Even if "changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium," (Bluestone, 1961: 5) in *Brokeback Mountain* (the film) this is never intentionally mentioned, and because of this claustrophobic camera movement, this imperative episode is eclipsed, obscuring substantial information about Ennis' sexuality.

After this intense affair in the hills, the cowboys meet years later in a motel. The trope of the Motel room ornaments their situation; hidden in the dark from social stigmatisation. It is indeed interesting both approximations to this very same scene. Proulx delightfully describes the room as "stank of semen and smoke and sweat and whiskey." (11) She artistically pictures the scene so elaborately that the reader gets to feel their vehemence and hopelessness. Ang Lee's close-ups fail to draw any exceptional attention. Due to this "homoerotisation," the scene is reduced to a single physical encounter thus omitting its symbolic climax.

To conclude, this paper has tried to shed much light as possible on the reconciliation between both materials with a particular interest in the cinematic techniques used by the director for the translation of gender categories. Although its comparative nature, this study does not comprise fidelity theories as it would be impertinent as far as art is always personally and individually interpreted. Needless to say, it is neither my intention nor I am entitled to classify Lee's *BrokeBack Mountain* as homophobic. Much on the contrary, this dissertation merely aims to unravel how, when translating linguistic codes into visual tropes, the author meets Hollywood capitalist needs and, in my opinion, by doing so, heteronormative standards may be easily intercepted.

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