NON VOGLIO PIU SERVIR. Today’s culture product comes to market shrink-wrapped in controversy. To arms, citizens! A culture war is being fought! And simultaneously, a commedia dell’arte is being performed, with the Liberal, the Christian, the Feminist, the Media Critic, all stepping onto the stage of public opinion in masks as familiarly defined as those of Pulchinello and Pantalone. In “The Battle of Brokeback Mountain,” some of us have been asked to perform wearing the mask of the Gay Man, whose role in this comedy, of course, is as thoroughly prescribed as the others. He is to be the film’s natural partisan, so innately identified with it that he must weep and cry homophobia when it doesn’t win an Oscar. He is to believe the bad faith of its boosters, who pretend the film is “for” him, when it is merely “about” him and has been made entirely without his kind. He is to be all gratitude at seeing exposed, in 2005, the damage done by the Closet and—in the midst of a struggle to refuse the fatality of his condition—feel nothing but admiration for a nostalgically tragic view of it. And finally, as if so much servility to the master culture weren’t enough, he is to forfeit his reputation for taste and mistake a middling piece of Hollywood product for a major work of art.

It is therefore worth insisting at the outset that, contrary to the playbill, we weren’t born to play this part. In this phony war of ideas, queer intellectuals need to develop forms of what, in other wars, is called conscientious objection. There is something to learn from the morons who, when polled for their opinion on a universally burning issue, answer “none”; or from the philistines who, by way of ending the discussion of a universally admired film, pronounce it “boring.” In fact, erotic disappointment may well be the only genuinely homosexual response to Brokeback Mountain—and hence the only genuine basis for a political critique of the film. For in the spate of opinions that the film has been painstakingly designed to let loose, one attitude remains unsolicited and unprofessed: that of Desire. Here, right on cue, comes the Christian to thunder against sin and the Liberal to warble of love. And, over there, expected harangues from the Woman on the neglected wives, from the Gay Man on still-persisting homophobia, from the Film Critic on the Western or Ang Lee as auteur. But, notwithstanding the scene of two men fucking, no one has stepped forward to attest any sexual excitement in the film, whether around the film’s actors, their bodies, or what these are represented as doing with one another. It is the idea of homosexuality that is hot in Brokeback Mountain, not the sex, which has been skillfully depicted, down to Heath Ledger’s unforgivably harped-upon resemblance to George Bush, so that no one could possibly get off on it. What we are asked to “accept” about the Homosexual is not its sexuality, but his agonized attempts to fight it—touching proof of a certain devotion to normality after all.

The de-eroticization stems from the same principle of mainstream representation that, operating less subtly, eventually produces for our edification, along with other carrion, a couple of gay corpses. For even the Closet needs the stimulus of spectacle, be it only the spectacle of its own enforcement. In enlightened Hollywood, the decorums of this spectacle remain the same as in darkest Wyoming: homosexual desire is shown to best advantage in the condition of having passed on. Small wonder the film is “haunting.” What thwarted love and gay-bashing spell out through plot, nostalgia and melancholy insinuate in the basso continuo of overall tone. As staged in the story, of course, the spectacle of the Closet is meant to stir its yuppie demographic to indignation: why can’t these country gays have Sex in the City, too? But as staged in the storytelling, it is meant simply to be invisible.

TRIM LITTLE, PRIM LITTLE CRAFT. In its making and marketing alike, Brokeback Mountain invites the glib controversy that a homosexual theme still reliably generates in American culture. Far from bringing its public together in compassion or tolerance, as some have suggested, the film diligently solicits, in all their fraticiousness, the main divisions of American opinion on
this “hot-button” issue. So cannily rotated is the homo-
sexual theme that, under one aspect or another, it lends support to virtually all the conflicting positions, attitudes, and judgments that make it so thrillingly—and bankably—contentious. Accordingly, male homo-
sexuality in Brokeback Mountain is massively con-
tradictory: it is by turns, depending on which opinion is up for flattery, irresponsible and committed, casual and deeply felt, shocking and perfectly natural. In one scene, the Homosexual appears as the declared enemy of the family; but in another, he rises nobly to its de-
fense; he hates women, of course—at least when he is not shown loving and caring for them; and though the film implicitly affirms his right to social recognition, it also dooms him, inexorably, to suffer more than social death. The program offers something for everyone to mouth off about.

In all the blah-blah, however, there is widespread accord on one point: this movie of cowboys in love is well made. Christianity Today is nearly blown away; it overrides its predictable reservations on the subject matter to award the film a generous three stars for “the quality of the filming, the acting, the cinematography, etc.” The New York Review of Books, with a warmer wel-
come for this subject matter, nonetheless concurs: the film’s achievement consists in that its “distinctively gay story . . . happens to be so well told that any feeling per-
son can be moved by it.” And from virtually every-
where in between on the spectrum of opinion (which in this sense is not all that broad) we hear of the film’s extraordinary “beauty,” its strong sense of “craft.” As if by magic (or the operation of the unconscious), the art of Brokeback Mountain has turned every media appa-
ratchik, usually busy summarizing plots and assessing star turns, into a Jamesian aesthetic agog at the sub-
tleties of artistic shaping. Even brutal sodomy only whets everybody’s appreciation of the narrative and pictorial “mastery” with which this “raw” subject has been “exquisitely” composed.

It has not been, then, around an always-debatable homosexuality that the film (despite the good inten-
tions professed on its behalf) builds a consensus, but around its own conspicuous craft. This craft is the real universal for which the film asks and is receiving gen-
eral recognition. (The irony of the Academy Awards is that the film, after all, did get the prize it tried hardest to deserve: Best Direction.) In the critical reception, as in the film itself, the topic of homosexuality and the practice of craft work antithetically: the former, by its violent divisiveness, breaks up the social body as ef-
effectively as a centrifuge; whereas the latter unifies all that it touches—and everyone whom it touches—in the spectacle of fine workmanship. But they are com-
plementary principles, too, since, especially now that the ideologization of culture has become total, respect for good form remains the best form of all. Such re-
spect is not just an act of graciousness shown to our defeated adversary, like those statues of ancient roy-
alty posed grandly in front of federal buildings in Hawaii. It is also an act of generosity to ourselves, as, by means of this gesture, we all get to look a little less tendentious: the Christian less rabid, the New Y ork intel-
lectual less shrill, the film itself less messagy. In “The Battle of Brokeback Mountain,” craft is our Switzerland. In acknowledging the neutrality of this country, at once political sanctuary and psychic san-
atorium, we lay claim to our whole, healed humanity—
to the universality of “any feeling person”—which even in wartime is thus affirmed to have never de-
serted us. We are more, and better, than our often nasty positions in combat.

But what, exactly, does craft here consist in? Or rather, of all that it may be thought to consist in, under what particular aspect has it won such extraordinary homage? The answer is far from being immediately ap-
parent, since what usually follows the stiff salute to craft is only a vague wave toward “the filming, the cine-
matography, the acting, etc.” (To elaborate the quality of Rodrigo Prieto’s cinematography, for instance, only a single predicate is ever offered: “beautiful.”) But this reticence conveys its own message, one fully consonant with the intentions and practices of craft itself as an artistic ideology. For the exercise of craft requires not only a high degree of technical competence; it further
demands that the performance of such competence be accompanied—as by a coefficient that multiplies its value—by a rhetoric of discretion. Craft’s golden rule: to keep quiet about itself—or as quiet, at any rate, as is compatible with its recognition as quiet. Accordingly, it offers a spectacle of the All-but-Invisible: the author seems virtually to have disappeared from a world that seems all the more solidly real for his absence; and his techniques, like his meanings, are barely detectable. (In this, craft is opposed to style, which, ostentatious and obtrusive, always seems to point, in the one direction, to a narcissistically indulged self and, in the other, to a factitious, unbelievable world.)

It is this rhetoric of discretion, rather than any specific technical achievement, that is celebrated in Brokeback Mountain. Lee is praised for “renouncing overt politics,” for making his points “quietly,” with “nuance,” “delicacy,” “taste,” and even “heroic restraint.” He is admirably “removed in his direction” and attention to “the thought and emotions being articulated between the words and in the pauses.” The point of this litany becomes plain when there is thrown into its midst, as part of the same approbation, the frequent observation that “there isn’t much sex in the film.” Not unlike that early enthusiast of Gide’s The Immoralist who said, “If Michel freed himself, he would cease to interest me,” critics essentially praise Lee for the prim repressiveness with which he handles the homosexual theme. Craft has become a covert figure for the Closet itself: that well-made piece of cabinetry where homosexual desire, far from generating an overt politics, lives quietly with heroic restraint; and where nothing is more commonplace than words and feelings between the lines, unless it be the virtues—ever propitious to the commonplace—of delicacy, taste, and nuance. Craft’s discreet relation to meaning is here used to sublimate—conceal and idealize—the Closet’s discreet relation to meaning is here used to sublimate—

III

LITTLE DOES HE KNOW. It is not, of course, the homosexual desire of Ennis del Mar that is put in this closet. No, his desire is (within craft’s tactful limits) displayed for all to see. Indeed, we see it far better—and rather sooner—than Ennis himself, without the ignorance, confusion, and disavowal that distort his consciousness of it. “They believed themselves invisible,” Annie Proulx writes of her gay cowboys in the well-made film’s even-better-made source story, “not knowing Joe Aguirre had watched them through his 10x42 binoculars for ten minutes”—and not knowing, either, that they’re being scrutinized far more thoroughly by Proulx herself, from under the narration’s cloak of invisibility. As a matter of fact, this cognitive edge over the Homosexual seems to lie at the very heart of her inspiration. Here is her account of how “Brokeback Mountain” began to take shape:

One night in a bar upstate I had noticed an older ranch hand, maybe in his late sixties, obviously short on the world’s luxury goods. Although spruced up for Friday night, his clothes were a little ragged, boots stained and worn. I had seen him around, working cows, helping with sheep, taking orders from a ranch manager. He was thin and lean, muscular in a stringy kind of way. He leaned against the back wall and his eyes were fastened not on the dozens of handsome and flashing women in the room but on the young cowboys playing pool. Maybe he was following the game, maybe he knew the players, maybe one was his son or nephew, but there was something in his expression, a kind of bitter longing, that made me wonder if he was country gay. Then I began to consider what it might have been like for him—not the real person against the wall, but for any ill-informed, confused, not-sure-of-what-he was-feeling youth growing up in homophobic rural Wyoming. A few weeks later I listened to the vicious rant of an elderly bar-café owner who was incensed that two “homos” had come in the night before and ordered dinner. She said that if her bar regulars had been there (it was darts tournament night) things would have gone badly for them. “Brokeback” was constructed on the small but tight idea of a couple of home-grown country kids, opinions and self-knowledge shaped by the world around them, finding themselves in emotional waters of increasing depth. I wanted to develop the story through a kind of literary sostenente.

Were we to come upon this passage in a novel, as part of a fictional first-person narration, we would immediately understand that there are not one, but two characters in the bar scene. One character, of course, is the designated one. This is the ranch hand who commands our attention as it is deftly led in stages from his shabby-genteel clothes, to his lean, muscular body, to his eyes fastened on the pool players, and finally—the eureka of character-formation—to that “something in his expression, a kind of bitter longing” that definitively suggests he is “country gay.” The other character is the one we see designating him thus. This is the woman
who, by way of noticing that the man isn’t looking at women, has placed him under such close watch. If she seems a freer spirit than he, that is because she has been spared the immobilizing techniques of her own observation. He is the character, she “merely” the narrator. The same process that reveals his body, age, work, social status, and desire denies equivalent knowledge about her, including, most relevantly, the motive for her sudden—and massive—psychic investment in him.

But in a novel, we would nonetheless wonder: what has brought the woman to this bar full of flashing women and desirable young men? How is she occupying its milieu? After all, she does not seem to be playing the social games of the place any more than the ranch hand. And why does she fix on him so intently? He has certainly not noticed her. What is she doing, what is she getting, in her observation of him—an observation that she wants nothing more than to prolong, by as a piano pedal, in a literary “sostenente”? Not all that obscurely, it is a complex of desire that structures her interest, desire not for “the real person against the wall”—from whom it will quickly detach itself for fresher meat—but for the super-exciting possibility of male homosexuality that, on the exiguous basis of “something in his expression,” she eagerly, forcibly makes him personify. The knowing quality of her detection, like its unsurprising discovery, suggests that she has found only what she was seeking. “I had noticed”: this epistemologist of the closet seems to have been on the cruise for a Homosexual well before she found one (“against the wall” indeed).

Whatever the passage makes us wonder about its narrator—without the rest of our novel, we can’t with certainty say—its psychic mix of aggression, paranoia, and identification can hardly be reduced to an innocent reflex of liberal good will. That, though, is precisely the aim of the artistic “idea” as the passage eventually works it through: to replace the woman’s complex desiring relation to male homosexuality with the free-standing figure of the Homosexual. This figure can then become the sole object of our interest, which, thus disinterested, can in turn bear a simpler, nobler name: sympathy.

He will need it. For to designate the Homosexual here is at once to begin elaborating fantasies of his being harmed: “a gay is being beaten.” First, the woman envisions the damage that may have been inflicted on him in childhood, then, by way of someone else’s “vicious rant,” she foresees the danger he runs in adulthood when what is, in effect, her knowledge falls into the wrong hands (the café-owner’s or her friends’). But this fantasy, of course, places her in an implicit dilemma: she must not tell what she knows, can never get her knowledge (or herself as its keeper) recognized. This is the dilemma that will be resolved in the ethically dignified form of a story. The couple originally formed by the woman and the country gay will morph into two country gays who love each other, hurt each other, are harmed by others. In the gays’ now entirely “othered” drama, the woman will entirely disappear, and her implication in dreaming it will have dropped out of the picture—or better, will remain only as part of the enigmatic fascination of their picture. In this same memoir, Proulx notes that Jack and Ennis did something that, as a writer, she had never before experienced: “they began to get very damn real.” And in the process the author can damn well forget she made them up.

In the finished story, the memoir’s narratorial “I” has been replaced by the same anonymous, impersonal narration, with all its objectifying, “realistic” techniques, that Proulx’s naturalist predecessors, absent gay cowboys, reserved for peasants, workers, and petty clerks. It has been replaced, in a word, with Literature—a Literature to which, barely able to read or write, Wyoming cowboys (like Maupassant’s Norman peasants before them) have even less access than to self-consciousness. Harbored in this narration, armed with its devices, Proulx can say of the Homosexual as often as she pleases: “little did he know.” And, objectified as her character, he is less than ever in a position to challenge her: “What the fuck are you looking at?”

IV

HORSEBACK MOUNTING. Proulx’s self-disengagement models the protocol of liberal sympathy that is followed, with varying specifications, by all the men and women connected with the film adaptation. This protocol requires, first, that they establish the Homosexual in all his obvious libidinal difference; and then that they seek, somewhere outside that difference, a basis for “relating” to him understandingly. Having made the Homosexual a Martian, they may then congratulate themselves for finding in him their fellow man—or rather for trying to, as the effort must never be entirely persuasive. Heath Ledger, interviewed on his approach to the role of Ennis, affords an excellent example: “First of all, I had to go in and discover what was causing this inability to express and to love. What was the culprit in that? I figured that it was some sort of a battle, and the conclusion I came to was that he was battling himself and battling his genetic structure.” Ennis is a mystery; he requires nothing short of an expedition, as into unexplored parts, to “go in and discover” the obscure cause of which he is the effect. This cause, quasi-logically “figured” to a “conclusion,” is his “genetic structure,” a strategic synonym for homosexuality that surrounds
even the heart of darkness with a cordon sanitaire. It is now more unthinkable than ever that Ledger might have attempted to “go in and discover” his own repressed homosexual desire for help in playing the part. Yet once the assumption of his external relation to Ennis is in place, there commences the most extraordinary fantasy of the bond between them:

The easiest thing I found [in playing the part] was being a ranch-hand, being a horse backup. I can ride backwards if I had to. I’m very comfortable with horses. I love horses and I have grown up around farm-hands and even if I was born in Perth, Western Australia, there’s something very universal about anyone who’s on horseback night and day. There’s a universal trait. Even physically, when you are on horseback night and day, when you get off that horse, you are still walking as if there’s still a horse between your legs.

It may well be doubted that the universal trait of Brokeback Mountain is horseback mounting; it is more likely to be the hilarity caused by this claim to that effect. But Ledger has a point, albeit an unconscious one. No Western has ever featured so many horses’ asses as Brokeback Mountain, or so much male behavior that begged to be called horseplay. How long, Jack asks Ennis on a fishing trip, must they keep meeting like this? “Long as we can ride it” is the reply. Could the bit bear any more strain? If the critics’ craft was code for the Closet, the actor’s universal horseback mounting is an unwittingly lewd metaphor for the desire inside it.

Ledger’s naivety about this desire (“Though I am not like Ennis in his ‘genetic structure,’ I am like him when I ride backwards or walk with a horse between my legs”) may explain the curious abstractness of his performance. He has been praised, of course, for just the opposite, for concretizing Ennis’s repressed unconscious in a veritable cornucopia of psychosomatisms. If we don’t read repression in the actor’s pursed lips, then we read it in his evasive eyes; and should we miss it there, his rounded posture or his mumbled diction is ready to expound. Overloaded with signage, though, this repression grows generic; it loses the specificity of an unconscious wish, of that unconscious wish. In the hectic competition of symptoms, no single one can seriously invite our imagination to drop below the waist. Any G-rated trauma might have done to account for the repression of this Ennis, who is merely superlatively uptight. (Here the performance chimes perfectly with Lee’s auteurism, which projects a similarly broad-spectrum repression onto Jane Austen heroines, comic book heroes, Taiwanese families, Connecticut WASPs, and gay cowboys alike.)

While it is, of course, a classic mechanism of homosexual repression to displace and generalize itself in just such a way—think how many closet cases come off as asexual—Ledger’s performance is governed by this mechanism, whose logic it obeys rather than lays bare. The overproduced signs of “the clenched” point us more to the actor’s remarkable craft than to the character’s restive ass. In admiring this craft, we reinforce Ledger’s distance from Ennis, who has no more acting ability than, in a former life, he had Proulx’s fluency in style indirect libre. The performance of repression continues repression’s work. Just how thoroughly Ledger threw himself into this repression is suggested in the fact that, on the same set where he was playing at falling in love with Jake Gyllenhaal, he really did fall in love with Michelle Williams, reversing Ennis’s swing from Alma to Jack with fastidious precision.
most futile. Whether we have in mind an otherwise eligible bachelor or the repellent anus of his desire, the Homosexual is not only himself a great waste but also the agent of a still greater wasting. And what he, so to speak, lays to waste is nothing less than sexuality’s social use value: its dependably productive submission to the yoke of conjugal yoke and to the burden of the Child. That is why he is so terrifically exciting and why his represented fate is so regularly to die for us. Just as, in an automotive culture, the spectacle of cars being demolished generates equal parts elation and alarm, so, under the imperium of the Couple and the Child, the spectacle of an irresponsible jouissance—of sex desocialized—is as thrilling as it is threatening. What is consumed and condemned in this spectacle is not just a seductively homosexual desire, but also the seductively desocializing insistence of the sexual drive itself, whatever particular embodiments it may assume.

Here is the contradiction under which Brokeback Mountain “happens to be” well crafted. On the one hand, homosexuality is only interesting (marketable) if it is the occasion for rehearsing a fantasy of the Homosexual as thrillingly, pointlessly antisocial, a bête noire who must die. On the other hand, this fantasy is neither compatible with, nor even tolerable to, the liberal politics of homosexuality as we know them and as Brokeback Mountain would espouse them. Thus the film must give us, along with this fantasy, a “progressive” alibi for indulging it; even while trading on the fantasy, it must tame it into appearing to authorize the formation of gay marrieds with children. The domestication follows two strategies. The first aims at reducing the sexual excitement, while the second deals with recycling the sexual waste. In keeping with the former, the film cultivates a quasi-clinical anhedonia around the male physique and drags outs what we must punningly call the action as distractingly as possible. Compliant with the latter, it takes care to ensure that the gay sex, even from its casual beginning, signifies—that is to say, signifies the socially redemptive values of “love” and “relationship” that alone can give gay sex meaning. Prieto’s beautiful landscapes do double duty: their ready-to-wear ineffability at once suspends the plot and naturalizes its obvious functions. No sooner does Ennis join Jack in the tent, for instance, than the momentum of their erotic adventure is broken by an enormous full moon happening-to-be-gliding across a cloudy horizon. And by the operation of that economy which is one of the great wonders of craft, the same Moonstruck moon that holds up the action also puts a classic signifier of romance in front of it.

Of course, like good naturalist protagonists, the horny cowboys don’t even see this moon, let alone understand what it means or appreciate the anti-narrative artistry of its appearance; only we do. "What the fuck are you looking at?" These are Ennis’s words in the film; they are said to a man who happens to pass the alley where Ennis, having just separated from Jack, is violently throwing up. His question is effectual, shooing the man on despite his curiosity or concern. Why shouldn’t it be? Ennis has resorted to a venerable catchword of gay-baiting, on hearing which every man knows enough to take his eyes elsewhere. Yet this efficacy evidently has its limits; our view of Ennis—who, rebus-like, is “spilling out his guts” to us—continues unaffected by anything except our now heightened appreciation of spectatorial privilege: to see without being seen. And the episode spells out for us what, in this film, that privilege specifically entails: namely, that even as others are debarred from inspecting the gay penetrarium, we get to keep looking.
Medusa was supposed to turn whoever looked at her to stone; the Homosexual is felt to petrify his beholders differently, but no less.

That there is no “sex” in this episode merely permits us to sentimentalize in good conscience the sadism of our prurience. Ennis may have topped Jack in the pup tent; but here, alone with us, it is he, crouched and grunting, who seems to be f***ed royally: back-broken under the burden of his own homosexuality and penetrated un-gently by the superpower we enjoy while watching him squirm. We are, to modify Ennis’s location only slightly, fucking-looking at him; and better still, we never have to hear ourselves addressed by his question.

Like the Homosexual of classic psychoanalysis, Ennis is paranoid: “You ever get the feelin”—I don’t know, when you’re in town, and someone looks at you, suspicious, like he knows. Then you go out on the pavement and everyone’s lookin’ at you like they all know too.” This paranoia has already produced its symptom in the scene where, deep in conversation with Jack, Ennis suddenly looks off into the horizon, sensing something; Jack instinctively follows his anxious eyes, as does the camera. But all we see is a passing pickup truck and a hawk casually flying above it; the driver as does the camera. But all we see is a passing pickup truck and a hawk casually flying above it; the driver

Yet spectatorial privilege does not in itself secure that distance which everyone is so eager to claim in watching the Homosexual. Where the Homosexual is concerned, it is precisely at the visual level that this distance is often felt to be most unsustainable. Medusa was supposed to turn whoever looked at her to stone; the Homosexual is felt to petrify his beholders differently, but no less. The very sight of him threatens to make men hard with his own kind of desire and to glaciate the women with the frigidity of his own indifference to them. And even if the men thus aroused become furious or the women thus scorned compulsively “warm” toward him, these are not dispassionate states of mind. It is as if eye contact absorbs from him the sexual equivalent of second-hand smoke, which causes even the abstinent to reek and sicken, to tingle and turn on, all at once. But Brokeback Mountain has no choice in the matter (to use that hoary trope of pornography): the story involves us in the perilously enjoyable occupation of queer-watching by necessity. How does the film interest us in this story, and make us lose interest, together? What, in other words, is the exact business of its celebrated craft?

I offer three linked shots as key to what the film has to tell us in this regard. The first shot shows Ennis as seen by Jack in the outside rear-view mirror of his truck; it concludes the ocular ballet of approach and avoidance, looking and looking away, that the two men perform while waiting outside Aguirre’s trailer office. The second shot shows Joe Aguirre holding binoculars; he has been spying on what we have just observed ourselves with less trouble: a scene of Jack and Ennis, half-naked, horsing around the campsite. And the third shot shows Alma looking through the window of a screen door and seeing a vehement kiss between Jack and Ennis that is continued over from the shot before it. In all three shots, the Homosexual—unambiguously “as such”—is shown being seen by another character through glass. The vitrification at once singles out the shots and joins them to one another in a series.

Technically speaking, these three vitrified images all do the same thing: they render the preceding shot or sequence, given to us “objectively,” into a “subjective” point of view. And (nothing quiet about the craft here) they do this with unapologetic virtuosity. To speak less technically, we also note that the omniscient narration always has the same content: a spectacle of erotic play between Jack and Ennis. The subjective shots interpose themselves in front of this spectacle like titles in a silent movie. Not only do they bring down the curtain on the spectacle, but they also give it a meaning that is, as it
THE HOMOSEXUAL OBSERVED: EROTIC PLAY UNDER GLASS

Jack is watching

Aguirre is watching

Alma is watching

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happens, no small part of the censorship. Moving from objective to subjective seeing, we move from a homoerotic spectacle to a “view” or “take” on it, a strong, emotionally biased position that effectively replaces visual homoeroticism with narrative captioning. The first shot plainly bears the title “Jack is Amorous” and launches the gay love plot. No less legibly, the second shot—“Aguirre is Wrathful”—kicks off the homophobic counterplot. And with the third shot, almost screaming the message “Alma is Crushed,” there is born the masterplot of the Family’s destruction and ultimate reconstitution.

In this series of views, the film causes to precipitate, as out of a solution, not so much three characters, as three figures, three essences, which the drama will, like a good soap opera, set against one another in numerous permutations. First, the Homosexual (Jack, Ennis, Earl and Rich, the Mexican hustlers, Randall) who acknowledges that the homoerotic spectacle turns him on; then, the Homophobe (Aguirre, the Clown, Earl’s killers, Lureen’s father, Jack’s killers, Jack’s father), whose desire for this spectacle takes the form of a fury to annihilate it; and finally, the Woman (Alma, Lureen, Cassie, Jen and Alma Jr, Jack’s mother) who repels the “family values” that the spectacle would unclude, unless—great liberal “hope”—there were found a way to domesticate it. X loves the thing through his narcissistic mirror; Y hates the thing, which his binoculars mean to keep at a distance; and Z, across the cruel, look-but-don’t-touch transparency of the window pane, feels shut out by the thing. So the film’s triangular dramatic structure already anticipates, even courts, what I have called the commedia dell’arte of its reception.

But, more important, these shots also work to put the spectator at a remove from the very triangle that they construct—to install us, at key moments of narrative expectancy, in a comfort zone outside the narrative. For to be told with so much “theater” that a shot represents an individual character’s perspective is also to be told in the same emphasis that it does not represent our own. By paraded antithesis, these shots reaffirm our prior alignment with the spectively unowned omniscience. Because the characters’ viewpoints are manifestly partial, limited to particular social, psychic, or narrative coordinates, our own seeing gets defined in the contrast as “universal.” The watchers in these shots know more than those they watch, but the spectator of these shots knows more than the watchers; and no one is, or can ever be, watching us. Precisely insofar as their one-sided views (in the best Hegelian fashion) combine to generate the tragedy, they are prevented from wholly understanding it. By contrast, the objective narration with which we are thus pointedly identified never submits to the particularity of Jack’s hunger, Aguirre’s hate, Alma’s hurt, or any equivalent deformation of itself. If it briefly cites these characters’ perspectives, it is to negate them from its own always recoverable (because never actually surrendered) position above the fray.

With this consequence: that, whenever the Homosexual is seen as such, it is not we who are seeing him. Or to put it differently, we’re not seeing him that way—with the cruising glance of the Homosexual, the murderous gaze of the Homophobe, the wounded look of the Woman. On the contrary, the film implicitly invites us to contradict each of these views thus: “but it doesn’t quite mean what the character watching thinks!” Ennis doesn’t mean his stance to be sexually provocative; and he and Jack don’t mean to be fucking around the camp any more than they mean for their kiss to hurt Alma and the kids; in a word, they don’t mean to be homosexual. The men are detached from the particular meaning that “perspective” imposes on them by the felt partiality of that same perspective.

Yet the dialectic of these shots does not move us beyond perspective so much as back to where we were before it, articulating in miniature the film’s overall structure of nostalgia. At one end of each shot is a homosexual who doesn’t mean to be homosexual, at the other end, matching and mirroring him, is a film spectator who doesn’t mean for him to be either. Both parties are disallowed self-consciousness, the homosexual unable to attain it, the spectator freed from it by having its burden shifted to the dramatis personae. Accordingly, what is preserved in these shots is that vague homoeroticism, innocent and ineffable, that Jack and Ennis shared with us and the scenery on Brokeback Mountain. Even as the storyline is busy destroying the Homosexual, the visuals work to safeguard this homoeroticism, which, on condition that it remain unowned, unnamed and unmeaning, need answer to nobody.

Thus the film remains quite faithful to its genre, the Western, where this psychic preserve is more common than an Indian reservation, of which it occasionally takes the form. Finally, however, the ethos of Brokeback Mountain reminded me less of The Searchers (echoed for cinephiles in the last shot) than of Bear Pond, Bruce Weber’s 1990 collection of male nudes. “Bear Pond” is a mythic summer place where unaffectedly naked men, alone or in twosomes, engage in outdoor activities as bucolic as its name. Here the homoerotic, though everywhere diffused, is never condensed into the Homosexual or the Gay; in the prevailing innocence of the place, lust or loathing would be as out of place as a woman. The world of “Bear Pond” has been beautifully, simply, given
to us, the way a mountain landscape is given to sight, or the mountain air to respiration. The emergence of desire would be fatal to this fairyland, would drive it as far off as that El Dorado vainly sought by the cowboys, leathermen, and other assorted faux machos living in Chelsea or the Castro. Some of us used to think that Bear Pond was a regressive daydream peculiar to gay men: an Edenic fantasy of ourselves before the fall—the fall, I mean, not into forbidden sexual practices, but into the state of gay desire itself. Little did we know: in the world that produces and proscribes him, the wish to return the Homosexual to latency is universal.

**NOTES**


7. Copycat crime? At the University of Vermont, Phi Gamma Delta recently “made its pledges wear cowboy outfits and endure a rain of antigay insults based on the recent movie Brokeback Mountain” (Chronicle of Higher Education, News Blog, 10 May 2006).

   Another, more serious crime worthy of note here is the recent death of two men in Columbus, Ohio. I quote the beginning and end of the news report by Theodore Decker in the Columbus Dispatch, 12 January 2006:

   Murder-Suicide of Childhood Friends Baffles Relatives

   They were childhood friends from Utah, riding in rodeos as teens and staying in touch as adults. Now, Columbus police and relatives are trying to sort out how such a close relationship could end in a murder-suicide . . .

   “I know that those two men were best friends,” Michael Stone said. “They were friends all through high school. They rodeoed together.

   “There is absolutely nothing I know of either of these gentlemen that they would escalate into an argument or one of them shooting the other . . .

   “It’s just so shocking that it is almost indescribable because those two were such good friends . . .

   “Hopefully, someday we’ll be able to know exactly what happened.”

The article may or may not be alluding to Brokeback Mountain; and the puzzlement that it compulsively underscores may be disingenuous or merely unimaginative. We may no more resolve these ambiguities, which are typical of the Closet, than we can deny them.

8. To comprehend this spectacle and not just homophobically consume it, one might consult either of two sources. One is the great psychoanalytically minded tradition of queer theory running from Guy Hocquenghem (Homosexual Desire, 1972) through Leo Bersani (Homo, 1995) to Lee Edelman (No Future, 2004). The other is that film tradition one might call “homocinema,” a sampling of whose major works would include Genet’s Chant d’Amour, Fellini’s La dolce vita, Pasolini’s Teorema and Salò, Fassbinder’s Querelle, Oshima’s Gohatto, and most recently Almodóvar’s La mala educación. Hollywood cinema knows only two options: to make homosexual desire invisible, in a closet intended for general use, or to make the Homosexual super-visible, as a minoritized “problem.” In homocinema, what is uncloseted is not the Homosexual, but the nexus of desire, pleasure, and fantasy that normal culture develops around him. In the open circulation of these elements—in their emigration from the person and category of the Homosexual—homocinema finds a radical potential for disrupting social and symbolic order.

9. To underscore the series’ coherence, each shot in it is given an echo: Jack, Aguirre, Alma, all resort to the mirror, the binoculars, the glass pane a second time.

10. Though Alma’s observation does not literally end Ennis and Jack’s kiss, it thoroughly drains the eros from its continuation. We may no longer enjoy the kiss, must entertain feelings quite contrary to pleasure. The film consistently practices this “aversion therapy,” framing its homoerotic scenes, on one side or another, with images that throw a chill on them. The most gruesome instance comes when Ennis, rejoining the herd after his first night with Jack, finds a sheep’s gutted carcass. A first shot gives us Ennis and the dead sheep together. A second shot shows us a close-up of Ennis looking and a third the sheep’s mutilated carcass. A fourth shot makes as if to replicate this shot/countershot elaboration. We see Ennis look away, look back, but then—where the reverse shot of the dead sheep ought to be—we get a shot, in no way continuous with Ennis’s sight line, of Jack naked, washing clothes by the stream. His fresh nudity has already been “spoiled,” assimilated to the carrion it will become.

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ABSTRACT Critics of Ang Lee’s gay-themed Western may or may not condone homosexuality, but they agree on one point: this movie of cowboys in love is well made. The essay unpacks what this perception implies about Lee’s craft, as an art of reticence and a politics of neutrality.

KEYWORDS Ang Lee, Brokeback Mountain, Western, homosexuality, craft