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**THE COWBOY COMES OUT OF THE CLOSET: QUESTIONS ON SEXUALITY
AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE FILM BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN**

LUCIANA HIOKA

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Área de concentração: Inglês e Literatura Correspondente
Opção: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa

Dra. Gloria Gil
Coordenadora

BANCA EXAMINADORA:

Dra. Cláudia Junqueira de Lima Costa
Orientadora e Presidente

Dra. Eliana de Souza Ávila
Examinadora

Dr. Tacer Ramberto Coutinho Leal
Examinador

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To my parents,
who deserve it all

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ABSTRACT**THE COWBOY COMES OUT OF THE CLOSET: QUESTIONS ON SEXUALITY
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2009

Supervising Professor: Cláudia Junqueira de Lima Costa

This thesis discusses the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, directed by Ang Lee) under the light of studies on sexuality and on national identity. The film, which won important awards and was acclaimed by the great public, has brought around great controversy as well, to the extent that it depicts cowboys holding homosexual practices. The thesis examines how the film, although may look conservative by the fact that the men never come out of the closet and by its unhappy ending, still promotes agency to extent that it brings what Judith Butler calls parodic performativity. Moreover, there is also a discussion on how the film, by bringing the subversion of the myth of the cowboy through homosexuality, represents the queering of US national identity imagined with its basis on such myth.

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RESUMO**THE COWBOY COMES OUT OF THE CLOSET: QUESTIONS ON SEXUALITY
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Orientadora: Cláudia Junqueira de Lima Costa

Esta dissertação discute o filme *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, dirigido por Ang Lee) sob a ótica de estudos de sexualidade e identidade nacional. O filme, que ganhou prêmios importantes e foi aclamado pelo grande público, trouxe bastante controvérsia também, na medida em que mostra cowboys que têm práticas homossexuais. Esta dissertação examina como o filme, apesar de parecer conservador pelo fato de que os homens nunca saem do armário e pelo seu final infeliz, ainda promove agenciamento na medida em que traz o que Judith Butler chama de performatividade paródica. Ademais, também há uma discussão de como o filme, ao trazer a subversão do mito do cowboy através da homossexualidade, representa um “queering” da identidade nacional dos Estados Unidos imaginada com base em tal mito.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When a film wins an Oscar in an important category, is watched by the great public, and becomes quite lucrative, there is much talk about it. Such talk is intensified especially if the film has a plot that is rather controversial. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), directed by Ang Lee, is all of the above. It has won important awards (three Oscars, four Golden Globes, and many, many others), it made to the top ten box-office lists of films for several weeks, and, although it was a rather cheap production for Hollywood standards, it had considerable revenue returns. However, the debate aroused by the film was not just because of these factors. The film made its way into the conversation of journalists, critics, scholars, government authorities, activists, and the population at large because of its story, which depicts gay cowboys as protagonists. How could homosexuality personified by cowboys have hit the big screen—and have been so successful? That was one of the main themes of conversation. Can the film be considered revolutionary or is it still conservative? That was another frequent debate. The present thesis, however, addresses issues that are deeper than the aforementioned. It discusses mainly how the film could be read in a political way, be it through its depiction of the sexual “deviance” on the big screen, be it through the subversion of the myth of the cowboy—which, as I will argue, is key to the construction of the United States as a nation—, or be it through the debate of class, race, and gender issues.

1.1. Context of investigation

The context of this investigation is the importance of film as cultural representation, having material effects in people's everyday reality. Graeme Turner points out how the study of film has gone through different perspectives¹ until this medium began to be regarded as a social practice, rather important to the construction of culture. Turner writes about how film has recently begun to be considered as “a specific means of producing and reproducing cultural significance” (39). Film, as “part of a wider argument about *representation*” (author's emphasis 38), started to be “examined as a cultural product and as a social practice, valuable both for itself and for what it could tell us of the systems and processes of culture” (40).

Film is a medium of representation, it is *language* that constitutes not only culture but reality as well. Stuart Hall firmly defends the importance of language in a broader sense—not only as a linguistic code but also as visual images, music, body language, and facial expressions, and here I would include film as well. Such broader language would be the main component of representation—to what he calls the “circuit of culture”. For him, this happens because “language is the privileged medium in which we ‘make sense’ of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged” (*Representation 1*). He adds that language is important not only as a medium for sharing culture but also as a repository of it (*Representation 1*).

For Hall, culture is so important because it is not just cognitive, “cultural meanings are not only ‘in the head’”. He writes that such meanings “organize and regulate social

¹ Such as the aesthetic approach, the realist one, that of André Bazin, the study of auteurs and genres, and the institutionalization of film studies in the academy.

practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects”

(*Representation 3*). According to Hall, in a social constructionist approach,

representation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things; and thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or ‘constitutive’ process, as important as the economic or material ‘base’ in shaping social subjects and historical events—not merely a reflection of the world after the event.
(*Representation 5-6*)

Transferring Hall’s idea to other discussions commonly addressed by cultural studies, it is possible to make a parallel with other social constructs that do have material effects. For example, patriarchy is a culturally constructed system of unequal access to resources, not an inherent cultural essence. This fact does not mean, though, that we should ignore the existence of it, only because it is constructed and not a given. It is a phenomenon that has historically produced negative effects on women, such as violence, inequality of rights, wages, and values. Coming back to the issue of representation, this is why the study of culture in any sense should not be ignored, since culture does have material effects, it is key to reality. Thus, given that representations are a crucial aspect of cultural practices, their study becomes a central concern to the understanding of how people’s sense of reality is both shaped and transformed.

1.2. The research

The main objective of this research is to analyze how the film *Brokeback Mountain* can be read politically, both in terms of the subversion of sexual norms and of U.S. (imagined) national identity based on the myth of the cowboy.

The paramount questions to this investigation are: 1) What does the myth of the cowboy represent to the imagination of the US as a nation? 2) How can the queering of the myth presented in the corpus reflect the imagination of this national identity? 3) How does

the rupture of the myth take place in the film?; and 4) What other political aspects can be discussed in relation to the film?

The conceptual tools I work with in this thesis are Judith Butler's notion of parodic performativity (see 3.3) and Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities (see 2.1).

The corpus of this research is the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), directed by Ang Lee. The film is based on Annie Proulx's homonymous short-story, first published in 1997, in *The New Yorker*, and later compiled in her 1999 *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. The story begins in 1963, in Signal, Wyoming, the least populated state of the country, located in the Western U.S. The place is a great plateau broken by a number of important mountain ranges. One of the mountains is Brokeback. There, two cowboys, Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, meet for a job. There is nothing much to their work: they have to camp up the mountain and look after sheep through the summer. The cowboys hardly talk during the first few weeks, until on a cold night they end up sleeping together in a tent and having passionate sex. The affair goes on during that summer and, by the end of their job season, they each depart their own way and pretend nothing happened. However, they meet every year on Brokeback, and the affair profoundly marks their lives. Although they take separate roads in life, they in fact can never be apart.

Ennis marries Alma and has two girls; Jack marries wealthy Lureen, moves to Texas, and has a son. They are both unhappy in their marriages and, four years after their first time on Brokeback, meet again. From then on, during more than 15 years, they keep seeing each other up on Brokeback. In the meantime, they grow old, their children become adults, their marriages deteriorate. They spend many Thanksgiving Days with their respective families, even though they actually wanted to be with each other. But never do

they get to be together for a period of more than a couple of days at a time. When Ennis gets a divorce, Jack even insists on moving together, but that is never accomplished because the former is afraid of committing to a gay relationship during a time of harsh homophobia—which is carried even by Ennis himself. Their closeted love affair continues up until Jack dies—the film suggests that he could have been murdered by the command of Lureen or of her father. All that remains from their passionate relationship are two shirts, Ennis’s and Jack’s, suggestively hanging on Ennis’s closet, and a postcard with a photo of Brokeback Mountain. Ennis, living alone in his trailer, set in an arid landscape, cries his lover’s death in silence.

1.3. Structure of the thesis

The chapters of this thesis are divided according to the following themes: national identity, sexuality, and other aspects. In chapter II, entitled “The Cowboy, the Country, and the (Opening) Closet”, I investigate how the U.S. has been historically imagined as a nation based on the myth of the cowboy. Then, I reflect on what the subversion of such myth in the film may represent to this imagination of US identity.

In chapter III, entitled “You Know I Ain’t Queer (or Am I?)”, I examine how the myth of the cowboy is subverted in the film: through the rupture of heteronormativity. I analyze such phenomenon under the light of post-structuralist sexuality theories, more specifically, Butler’s on performance.

Chapter IV is entitled: “Beyond the Mountain: Final Remarks”. I point out to issues related to gender, race, and class that can be explored in the film. I discuss, among other themes, the misogynist depiction of women in the story. Finally, I conclude by reiterating my defense of a political interpretation of *Brokeback Mountain*.

When one “dares” say the words “Brokeback Mountain”, whether referring to the short-story or to the filmic adaptation, people in general already think of the gay cowboys. A comment that became quite common among critics and the public was that the film represented the “rupture of the myth of the cowboy”. By analyzing further, indeed, it is possible to defend that the film represents the rupture such myth; myth that, I add, has been crucial to the imagination of the US as a nation, a community. As aforementioned, this is the issue addressed in the following chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER II

THE COWBOY, THE COUNTRY, AND THE (OPENING) CLOSET

Uncle Sam, the Pilgrim Fathers, the Superbowl, Pocahontas, the Statue of Liberty, Marilyn Monroe, the red and white flag with 50 stars, even McDonalds and All Stars shoes. All these elements are commonly attributed to North Americans' national identity, which, in times of globalization,¹ seems as strong, timeless, and inherent to its people as ever. Maybe, however, this is not so. In this chapter, I defend that US historical trajectory has been emplotted² in such a way as to construct the United States as a nation that is actually imagined,³ with its basis on the myth⁴ of the cowboy. The intention is to demonstrate *how* the essentialist association between US national identity and such myth has been constructed/imagined—through the academy, education at large, the media, Hollywood, and even in the speech and images of US presidents. In this chapter as well, the film *Brokeback Mountain*, due to its rupture of the myth of the cowboy through the sexuality “trouble” of the protagonists, is used as an instrument to subvert this constructed US identity.

¹ Globalization is here understood as “the economic, political and cultural weakening of the nation-state’s apparatus [when it comes to defending] social welfare and human rights, vis-à-vis its strengthening [when it comes to further serving] the interests of transnational capital, mass culture and information flows, resulting in the proliferation of capitalism’s self-perpetuating ideologies” (Ahmad qtd. in Ávila 222).

² Here I use Hayden White’s concept of the emplotment of history (see section 2.3).

³ The concept of imagined nations will be explored later as well (see section 2.1).

⁴ By “myth, I use Richard Slotkin’s definition: “*Myth* has to do with the continuity of meanings: the transmission from generation to generation of a characteristic ideology system of beliefs and values, embodied in a continuously evolving set of narrative fictions and a language of symbols” (*Continuity* 01 author’s emphasis).

2.1. The Question of Nationness

Nations are not eternal, timeless, or inherent to a population within a limited territory. They have not always been there, although they seem to have. They are actually constructed, cultural. Ernest Gellner, in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), defends that nations are derived from nationalism,⁵ and not the other way around, as we usually believe. He writes that nationalism does make use of “the pre-existing, historically inherited proliferation of cultures or cultural wealth”. However, this use is selected and “most often transforms them [such pre-existing cultures and cultural wealth] radically” (55). His most important point is that, differently from what is usually believed, the so-called age of nationalism, which took place during the passage from agrarian to industrial societies in Europe, does not represent the awakening of previously dormant nations or the political self-assertion of such nations. He defends that, “[r]ather, when general social conditions make for standardized, homogeneous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading entire populations and not just elite minorities, a situation arises in which well-defined educationally sanctioned and unified cultures constitute very neatly the only kind of unit with which men willingly and often ardently identify”. Moreover, he writes that “[t]he cultures now [in the age of nationalism] *seem* to be the *natural* repositories of political legitimacy” (55, my emphasis), but they are actually constructs.

Up until now, I would say that Gellner’s argument is aligned with Benedict Anderson’s, regarding the nation as a construction. However, their theories start colliding

⁵ By “nationalism”, Gellner means “the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population” (57).

when the former uses the word “inventions” in order to refer to nations.⁶ He says, for instance: “[t]he cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical *inventions*” (56, my emphasis). Anderson even acknowledges such difference in opinion in his *Imagined Communities* (1983). He mentions Gellner’s *Thought and Change* (1964), where the latter defends that nationalism “*invents* nations where they do not exist” (qtd. in Anderson 6). For Anderson, however, the notion of invention is not appropriate because it leads to the thought that the nations we know are false, forged, fabrications, whereas true nations would be found elsewhere. Anderson argues that nations do exist, and that they are not to be judged whether they are genuine or false, but “by the style in which they are imagined” (4).

Anderson, therefore, defends that nations are “imagined communities”. A nation is imagined because “the members never know all of its members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). There is also the idea of simultaneity in the members’ lives, who all live independently but are joined in this same community, which is “always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (6). According to Anderson, nations are imagined as eternal too, inherent to a society.

The conception of nation gained strength only in the 18th century, influenced by the decline of Catholicism (and of Latin), and by the rise of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French and American revolutions, the press, print languages,

⁶ Here it is important to note that Gellner shares the same view as that of Anthony Smith, in *National Identity*. Smith also defends the word “invention” when it comes to the nation: “Nations and nationalism are no more ‘invented’ than other kinds of culture, social organization or ideology [. . .] for what we call nationalism operates on many levels and may be regarded as a form of culture as much as a species of political ideology and social movement” (71). The difference is that for Gellner, national identity is created exclusively by nationalism, whereas Smith believes that nationalism merely helps in the creation of the nation, just as ethnic identity does as well. (71)

industrialization. Finally, the concept was greatly influenced by the very development of capitalism.

2.2. The US as a Nation

The US, as all other nations, is an imagined community. Anderson writes about the rather favorable confluence of elements for the formation of the US:

The Protestant, English-speaking creoles to the north [of the American continent] were much more favourably situated for realizing the idea of 'America' and indeed eventually succeeded in appropriating the everyday title of 'Americans'. The original Thirteen Colonies comprised an area smaller than Venezuela, and one third the size of Argentina. Bunched geographically together, their market-centers in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were readily accessible to one another, and their populations were relatively tightly linked by print as well as commerce. The 'United States' could gradually multiply in numbers over the next 183 years, as old and new populations moved westwards out of the old east coast core. (64)

Nevertheless, the author points out that although the US presented all these factors contributing to its formation, it still had to surpass some obstacles in its trajectory:

Yet even in the case of the USA there are elements of comparative 'failure' or shrinkage—non-absorption of English-speaking Canada, Texas's decade of independent sovereignty (1835-46). Had a sizeable English-speaking community existed in California in the eighteenth century, is it not likely that an independent state would have arisen there to play Argentina to the Thirteen Colonies' Peru? Even in the USA, the affective bonds of nationalism were elastic enough, combined with the rapid expansion of the western frontier and the contradictions generated between the economies of North and South, to precipitate a war of secession *almost a century after the Declaration of Independence*. (64, author's emphasis)

Finally, Anderson suggests that even in its independence, the US still did not think of itself as a nation. He points out to the fact that in the very Declaration of Independence there is "no reference to Christopher Columbus, Roanoke, or the Pilgrim Fathers, nor are the grounds put forward to justify independence in any 'historical', in the sense of highlighting the antiquity of the American people. Indeed, marvelously, the American nation is not even

mentioned” (193). At the time of the American Revolution, which Anderson refers to as “first-generation nationalism”, there was the feeling that something new was being created, of rupture. That was similar to what happened in the French Revolution in the *Convention Nationale* of 1793, in which the revolutionaries began a new calendar and considered Year One starting from the abolition of the ancient regime and the proclamation of the Republic, which had happened in 1792.

However, some decades later, there was the rise of what Anderson calls “second-generation nationalism”, which was “a new form of consciousness—a consciousness that arose when it was no longer possible to experience the nation as new, at the wave-top moment of rupture” (203). Nations, then, began to be conceptualized as we know them now: eternal, inherent, unquestionable, a matter of pride, almost running in the veins of their members. Anderson observes that “[v]ery quickly the Year One made way for 1792 A. D., and the revolutionary ruptures of 1776 [in the US] and 1789 [in France] came to be figured as embedded in the historical series and *thus as historical precedents and models*” (194, author’s emphasis). Indeed, the feeling of continuity of a shared memory is one of the key aspects to nationalism. Smith writes about this phenomenon as well:

Collective cultural identity refers not to a uniformity of elements over generations but a sense of continuity on the part of successive generations of a given cultural unit of population, to shared memories of earlier events and periods in the history of that unit and to notions entertained by each generation about the collective destiny of that unit and its culture. (25)

2.3. US Cultural Identity as Based on the Myth of the Cowboy

Having exposed the argument of the US as an imagined community, I now turn to some of its specificities. As I will argue in this section by bringing evidence from historical

articles, books, the media, films, and even speeches of presidents, I defend that the US was imagined as a nation whose cultural identity became (rather essentially) associated with the myth of the cowboy, and that is due to the way its history was emplotted.

In his chapter “Memory and Forgetting”, Anderson refers to Hayden White’s concept of emplotment of history in order to construct the nation (198). Such reference is quite pertinent, in my opinion. In his book *Metahistory* (1973), White defends that historical narratives are actually fictive, written by historians, who, given certain (neutral) events, select and emphasize some, and omit others, thus emplotting such narratives and giving meaning to them. He writes, for instance: “by the very constitution of a set of events in such a way as to make a comprehensible story out of them, the historian charges those events with the symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot structure” (1392). For White, history could be emplotted according to, for example, the following historical myths suggested by Northrop Frye: romantic, comic, tragic, and ironic (1385).

For Leslie Fiedler, the history (and specially, the literature) of the US or the “West”, as he refers to it (in relation to Europe, which would be the “East”), has been emplotted, or, as he calls it, “mythologized”. This has been happening even before the discovery of Christopher Columbus, in the minds of the Europeans. He writes that

though the Europeans were content [. . .] to think of their private lives and common history as acted out in a tripartite world [divided by Europe, Asia, and Lybia], in dreams they sought from the start the forbidden and impossible fourth quarter of the globe. Excluded from geography and history, the West persisted as fantasy, legend, a place to be sought inside the skull of ordinary dreamers or inspired poets. (30)

Fiedler defends that when it comes to the US, history is never apart from myth.⁷ For that, he refers to Edmundo O’Gorman’s *The Invention of America*, in which the author writes that “the myth of the penetration of the West, the emergence of Europe into a realm of freedom it had long feared, is not less mythically potent when converted from poetry to history” (qtd. in 36). Fiedler, then, adds that myths even provoked historical events in US trajectory:

[c]ertainly the same myth that moved poets to verses moved Columbus to action. He liked to speak, in the days when he walked the world trying to stir up support for his expedition, of tales of the West told him by old sailors; but what seems really to have fired his imagination were the same sources which Dante had drawn on for his Ulysses Canto: Plato’s pseudo-remembrance of Atlantis; the half-mythological speculations of those early geographers, Macrobius and Isidore of Seville; as well as the verses of earlier poets. (36, 37)

He defends that US history, even after the discovery, has been built as a myth, but not specifically of the cowboy, as I defend in this chapter, but that of the encounter of the Wasp (White Anglo-saxon Protestant) colonizers at large with the Native-American Indians, a phenomenon that has been widely explored in North-American literature.⁸ One thing that

⁷ Actually, myths are quite important for any nation. Smith writes about that: “in many ways, national symbols, customs and ceremonies are the most potent and durable aspects of nationalism” (77).

⁸ The myth of the confrontation with the Indian was crucial for the formation of US identity, for Fiedler. He writes: “[h]ow the Indian in his ultimate otherness has teased and baffled the imagination of generation after generation of European voyagers and settlers. How they have tried to assimilate him to more familiar human types, to their own mythologic stock-in-trade” (22). For him, four main myths have been explored to account for this phenomenon. He ironically summarizes them: “the Story of Pocahontas deals with the encounter of Red Woman and White Man, that of Hannah Duston [white child kidnapped by Indians] with the conflict of White Woman and Red Man; the tale of Wawatam [white man and Indian who become friends] treats exclusively the confrontation of White Man and Red, that of Rip Van Winkle [the ‘runaway male’ who sleeps for 20 years only to find his wife dead] the conflict of Man and Woman” (52). Fiedler, however, writes that such myths have not been enough to sustain America’s mythologization (and, consequently, American history as a whole). That is why there has been the rise of the “New Western”, in which there is a subversion of the “oldest American myth of the encounter between Whites and Indians as face: to replace nostalgia with parody, sentimentality with mockery, polite female masochism with gross male sadism” (150). In the “New Western”, there was the creation of anti-characters of Pocahontas and of John Smith, for example, because “super-Pocahontas” or the “Pocahontas as Native Earth Goddess” could not satisfy North Americans’ “deepest mythical longings”, for Fiedler. He writes that “anti-John Smiths and anti-Pocahontases are neither fictional embodiments nor dream-projections of our presently developing life-style, but only cartoon versions of what we find unviable in our legendary past” (165). Moreover, all of those ways to deal with US

Fiedler does acknowledge, though, is the importance of the West (this time not in the sense of the US as a whole, but the West of the country, the frontier) in order to imagine all those myths:

we know, too, that at the moment of looking into the eyes of the Indian, the European becomes the ‘American’ as well as the Westerner [. . .] And who has more right than the man from the farthest West to be called both new and American, since before a single White man had set foot on American soil, the whole continent had been dreamed by Europe as “the West”: a legendary place beyond or under the ocean wave, a land of the dead or those who rise from the dead. And it needed only the invention of the name American to set up the equation *America equals the West*. (25)

The west as a myth embodied in the frontier and, later, in the figure of the cowboy has been, in fact, a quite important element for the emplotment of US history. Such emplotment has began, officially, with Frederick Jackson Turner’s essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”,⁹ which was originally a paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, on July 12, 1893. The text was first published on the *Report of the American Historical Association for 1893*, and then in many other publications, such as the *Fifth Year Book of the National Herbart Society* and Turner’s collection of essays *The Frontier in American History*. In this essay, Turner

mythologization somehow flirt with madness, which is, for Fiedler, the only way to account for the past of the US (185).

⁹ I argue that the tradition of associating the frontier with US identity and development has begun only *officially* with Turner because such idea had actually been explored over a century before Turner’s reading of his famous essay. Richard Slotkin, drawing from much literature on the westward expansion, writes that such association “can be traced back to Puritan concepts of the ‘Errand into the Wilderness’, and secular anticipations of continental empire and Manifest Destiny in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the 1820s it was already commonplace to see the expanding frontier as the basis of ‘democracy in upward mobility’; as a missionary expansion of civilization against savagery and democracy against tyranny; and as a ‘safety valve’ for social and economic discontent which made European-style class struggle unnecessary. Even the prospect of closure was part of the tradition. The Jacksonians had taken the idea quite seriously in the 1830s, before the acquisition of California and Oregon and the development of practical continental transportation systems. By the mid-1870s many journalists and politicians were speaking about the Great Plains as our ‘last frontier’” (*Nostalgia* 609). Catherine Gouge, in “The American Frontier: History, Rhetoric, Concept”, writes that Turner’s ideas can be traced back to Jeffersonian agrarianism. In his 1853 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson writes that “[t]hose who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (176).

defends that the colonization of the West has played an enormous influence on the country as a whole. He writes, for example, that it was the “existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward” that “explain American development” (1). For him, it was through the wilderness of the frontier that the colonizers became “true” North-Americans:

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shoots the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion [. . .] Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe [. . .] The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. (4)

Turner claims that US “character” (2) was influenced much more by the expanding frontier—the “meeting point between savagery and civilization”—than the Atlantic Coast. He writes, for example, about the “striking characteristics” of the “American intellect” being influenced by it:

that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (37)

For this scholar, the frontier was important to the US in five main aspects. The first is the formation of a “composite nationality” (by different groups of immigrants). The frontier was colonized mainly by non-English, such as the Scotch-Irish, the Palantine Germans, and the “Pennsylvania Dutch”, besides the “freed indented servants” who searched for a new life of the wild land. It was in such wild land that “immigrants were

Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics” (23).

The second aspect is the fact that the frontier—due to its expanding colonization—caused the decrease of US dependence on England, especially in relation to trade and commerce. In the Atlantic coast there was still much business with Europe, but not in the interior. There, the simple crops gradually gave space to more diversified agriculture (24).

The third main aspect that was influenced by the frontier, according to Turner, refers to the writing of legislation of the country. In this point, Turner disagrees with Hermann von Holst, or “Dr.” von Holst, as the former refers to him. von Holst, in his six-volume *Constitutional History of the United States*, defends that it was *slavery* that drove the passing of legislation in the first few centuries of the republic. Turner, in turn, writes that “[t]his is a wrong perspective” (24). For him, legislation was influenced by the “internal improvement” and railroad legislation, protective tariffs and ruling over the disposition of the public lands, in this order of importance. He defends that the endlessly-developing frontier consumed much (and the majority) of the administration of the government as a whole (25).

For Turner, the fourth aspect in which the frontier was quite important to the US was in the development of nationalism. The question of whether or not to maintain slavery could have been a decisive issue to separate the country, for example. It was in the frontier, however, that the fierce opinions on slavery could not be easily distinguished between sections, it was there that “North and South met and mingled into a nation”. There was much interstate migration, “a process of cross-fertilization of ideas and institutions” (29). Turner claims that “[m]obility of population is death to localism, and the western frontier worked irresistibly in unsettling population” (30).

Finally, Turner defends that one of the main accomplishments of the frontier experience was its influence on the development of democracy. The frontier, which was constantly expanding, offered free land for those who were dissatisfied with the system. Therefore, the system had to adapt in order to encompass everyone, even the dissatisfied, so that they would not run away, into the lawless wild. In his other essay “Contributions to American Democracy”, also compiled in the anthology *The Frontier in American History*, he writes that

[w]henver social conditions tended to crystallize in the West, whenever capital tended to press upon labor or political restraints to impede the freedom of the mass, there was this gate of escape to the free conditions of the frontier. These free lands promoted individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy. (259)

Turner evidences his idea on democracy by bringing up the fact that western states were the most active on the universalization of suffrage in the US. He argues that

[i]t was *western* New York that forced an extension of suffrage in the constitutional convention of that State in 1821; and it was *western* Virginia that compelled the tide-water region to put a more liberal suffrage provision in the constitution framed in 1830, and to give to the frontier region a more nearly proportionate representation with the tide-water aristocracy. (30, 31)

Ultimately, he defends that the frontier, along with its values of individualism, democracy, and nationalism, “powerfully affected” not only the West itself but also “the East and the Old World”, as in England. For example, the Eastern states and the English government did try to “control” the country, by attempting to limit boundaries, restrict land sales and settlement, and deprive the West of political power. However, these were “all in vain” (35). The West had already acquired too much political, economic, social importance and could not be taken for granted any longer, according to Turner.

Not surprisingly, Turner's thesis, which even gets to compare the frontier with "[w]hat the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks" (38), has been highly criticized, especially by more recent scholars. Nevertheless, some historians still acknowledge the importance of his argument. Back in 1950, in the article "The Frontier Hypothesis and the Myth of the West", Henry Nash Smith, another quite famous scholar of the frontier, did find inconsistencies in the "Turnerian myth", mainly with regards to economic aspects. Still, he recognized that "[w]hatever the merits or demerits of the frontier hypothesis in explaining actual events, the hypothesis itself developed out of a mythical conception of the West as the Garden of the World that had slowly taken form through many decades as an imaginative interpretation of the westward movement" and that such myth of the Garden "was still true to their [the frontierpeople's] experience in the large, because it expressed beliefs and aspirations as well as statistics" (4). More than three decades later, Russel Martin, in his *Cowboy: the Enduring Myth of the Wild West* (1983), wrote that, despite the criticism to Turner's thesis, Turner was "somehow mythically accurate. He understood that in the process of westering, Americans had discovered a means of self-identification and self-explanation" (106). Finally, in 1993, Robert Kyff tried to draw a cause for the impact of Turner's ideas in the population. For him, such ideas

so captured the imagination of the American people [. . . because they] suited perfectly the temperament of the 1890s. The rapid rise of industrialism, immigration, and urbanization, the greed and corruption of the Gilded Age, the economic depression of 1893, and farmers' revolts and labor unrest such as the Homestead, and Pullman strikes, had created a widespread feeling of anxiety in the nation, triggering a nostalgic longing for the agrarian past. (qtd. in Gouge par. 5)

The question whether Turner's thesis is accurate or not, whether it addresses invention or reality, does not matter much. What should draw attention is its impact. The text is quite relevant historically because of its date of publication (right after the official

“closing” of the frontier)¹⁰ and because it is one of the first essentialist attempts to associate Americans’ identification with the frontier. Many other scholars have tried to establish such relation as well, such as William Graham Sumner and Walter Prescott Webb, who were Turner’s contemporaries.¹¹ Turner, Sumner, and Webb, even without dialoguing among themselves (they either read one another’s papers only after finishing their theses or did not consider one another’s arguments much), came, in different ways, to similar conclusions regarding the influence of westward expansion in the US. According to Donald K. Pickens,

[f]or champions of Manifest Destiny and nationalism, westward expansion as the instrument of exceptionalism removed economic scarcity and social conflict from men’s history in the New World. Sumner, Turner, and Webb made this exceptionalism the essence of their philosophy of American history. (414)

Beginning especially with Turner, the idea of the importance of the frontier and, later, of the myth of the cowboy to the development of US cultural identity has been one of the greatest themes of study in American history.¹² In the words of Catherine Gouge,

Turner’s claim that the frontier created “Americans” had a strong impact on twentieth-century American historical debates which for a long time meant that frontier historians had to position themselves in relation to Turner’s ideas. (par. 5)

¹⁰ The frontier, according to the government that time, was the margin of the area of settlement with density of two or more per square mile. Its official “closing” was declared in 1880, when the superintendent of the Census wrote in a bulletin: “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it [the frontier] cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports” (qtd. in Turner 1). Westward expansion had officially reached the Pacific coast, representing the end of the frontier.

¹¹ Other scholars who wrote about these ideas were, for example, Marshall W. Fishwick, in his “The Cowboy: America’s Contribution to the World’s Mythology”, and Tristram P. Coffin, who responded to Fishwick’s essay. In this response, Coffin wrote that “the cowboy myth is no more than a natural cultural manifestation of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century trends toward love of nation and glorification of everyday man on one side and of individual expression and lawless violence on the other” (292).

¹² It is interesting to note that Anthony Smith attributes a great deal of the construction of nationalism and the concept of nations to intellectuals. He writes that “it is the intellectuals [. . .] who have proposed and elaborated the concepts and language of the nation and nationalism and have, through their musings and research, given voice to wider aspirations that they have conveyed in appropriate images, myths and symbols. The ideology and cultural core doctrine of nationalism may also be ascribed to social philosophers, orators and historians [. . .] each elaborating elements fitted to the situation of the particular community for which he spoke” (93).

Nowadays, this theme still remains central within American studies, and that is reflected in the great number of publications on the American West and the cowboy myth,¹³ and even on the many university courses dedicated to the theme.¹⁴

Scholarly articles about the cowboy's influence on American identity have been published even in the beginning of the 21st century. Jennifer Moskowitz, in a 2006 article, defends that it was Turner who opened up the possibility for the mythologization of the cowboy, since he brought about the spirit of nostalgia and of historical reconstruction towards the frontier by alleging that it was gone. And such nostalgia and need for reconstruction would be responsible for the myth: "Turner's rhetorical moves [that of alleging that the frontier was gone] open a space for the mythologization of the American West and one of its primary inhabitants: the American cowboy" (par. 2). Moskowitz draws a parallel between the cowboy and the knight, alleging that both, as archetypes, "evoke images of what the nation should be and appeal to disparate [. . .] cultural factions and economic classes" (par. 4). In order to explain the importance of the mythologization of the knight in England, she relies on Gellner's *Nation and Nationalism*, where he states that nationalism "imposes homogeneity", and that it must come with "hegemonic tools" (qtd. in par. 6) such as the figure of the knight. Moskowitz defends that the US after the Civil War, just as England in its pre-industrial period, needed nationalism. England had the knight.

¹³ Just by searching the webstore *Amazon.com*, for example, there are 8,864 occurrences of books which have the expression "American frontier" in their title. Looking up the expression "cowboy myth", there are 261 results, and "myth of the cowboy", 145 results (access on 16 June 2008). Surely many occurrences may not have a direct relation with the theme I am working on, but just these numbers show the interest the frontier and the figure of the cowboy still arise in readers.

¹⁴ Courses such as "The American Frontier as Symbol and Myth", taught at the California State University (CSU, Spring 2007) and "Readings in Frontier and American History", taught at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA, Winter 1998), are quite common in US universities, especially in graduate programs. Even in the United Kingdom there are such courses, as in "Constructing a Myth: the Frontier in American History and Culture", taught at the University of York (Summer).

The US, in turn, already possessing the right ingredients for a national movement—which are, according to Gellner, the “angry national sentiment” and the “national pride”—, had its “unifying, nationalist icon” embraced by the cowboy (par. 14-16). She attempts to prove that the mythologization of the cowboy in the US was essential for two main reasons. First, because the cowboy supported nationalism, by evoking a “neutral” land which was the frontier, space that could bring the North and the South together so they could create new memories and experience what Gellner and Ernest Renan call “collective amnesia”. Second, because the characterization of the cowboy helped the development of industrialism and, more importantly, of capitalism in the US, just as the English knight of the Middle Ages was important for the construction of Modern England. This would have happened because both figures, the cowboy and the knight, represented loneliness and individualism and, paradoxically, the domestication of space as well. Such myth of individualism and domestication, responsible for masking the “violence of the West, class and racial unrest in America, and capitalism’s control over American culture” (par. 27), would have allowed for the capitalist order to establish itself in the US (par. 19).

There is also Sophie Dye’s article “Saving a Nation: Cowboy Myth, Reality, and its Effect on American Culture”, in which the author defends the importance of popular culture and film in order to maintain the identification of the US with the myth of the cowboy. She writes that “[i]f the history of America’s western frontier is the nation’s story, then the cowboy must be its central character” (pars. 1 and 2). Dye argues that, even though the image of the cowboy in popular media has changed much—from the outlaw to the hero, and then to tough John Wayne—and that today this character is a “corny, kitsch symbol that has come to represent a time when Americans were adorably idealistic and innocent to a fault” (par. 3), Americans need myths in order to make out their collective heritage. She

concludes her essay by writing that “[d]uring times of great national struggle and uncertainty—in times such as the Depression, World War II, and the Seventies—Americans need a reminder of why they are Americans”, and that, therefore, “[i]n times of trouble, we [North-Americans] look to our cowboys to save the nation” (par. 26).

The theme of the myth of the cowboy has been explored in the area of education not only in the academy, but also in kids’ schools. Raymond Starr published an article in 1973 defending the use of Webb’s “Great Frontier Thesis” in history courses for secondary schools. Starr defends that the question whether the thesis is valid or not does not matter. What matters is its contribution to teaching kids and teenagers. He proposes a two-semester inquiry method in which the history of the US is evaluated according to Webb’s thesis. Some of the questions to be posed in the beginning of the course are whether the frontier has influenced American ideas and character, economy, social structure, democracy, religion, racism, wars, and also about the influence of the end of the frontier in expansionism, the urban-industrial revolution, the weakening of democracy and greater dependence on the government, protection of the environment, and, finally, in new values and attitudes supplanting the frontier ideals of individualism, self-sufficiency, and independence. For Starr, the advantage of using such method is because it is practical (history events become embedded in the search for answers to the hypothesis), it provokes students’ desire to learn (since there is a hypothesis they need to analyze and not just the memorization of facts) and, finally, because students can gain consciousness of “a new view of American experience”, that one based on the frontier (230).

Moreover, the frontier hypothesis is studied across US borders as well. Even a quite basic book on American culture for ESL students, with language exercises such as vocabulary checks and reading comprehension tasks, has an entire chapter on the influence

of the frontier in American history. The referred chapter is entitled “The Frontier Heritage”, published in Edward N. Kearny’s *The American Way: an Introduction to American Culture*. The text, which brings an epigraph by Turner, begins by already stating the importance of the colonization of the West: “[a]lthough American civilization took over and replaced the frontier almost a century ago, the heritage of the frontier is still very much alive in the United States today. The idea of the frontier still stirs the emotions and imaginations of the American people. Americans continue to be fascinated by the frontier because it has a particularly important force in shaping their national values” (59, 60). Then, the chapter goes on by addressing the relevance of frontierpeople’s traits (mostly related to individualism and manliness), violence, inventiveness, and equality of opportunity.

The media has played a quite important role as well in the construction of US identity as based on the cowboy. Martin drew a trajectory of the myth of the cowboy, beginning with Buffalo Bill Cody’s traveling Wild West show. Cody presented William Levi “Buck” Taylor, whom he called “the King of the Cowboys”. With his impressive riding and roping maneuvers, Buck Taylor quickly became the first popular and recognized cowboy, not only in the US but in Europe as well. “The American Cowboy was now not only a national icon, but an international one as well”, writes Dye (par. 6). His fame even increased with the publication of *Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys*, in 1887, by the Beadle Half-Dime Library. For Dye, it was Cody’s Wild West show, along with the publication of the novel, that allowed for the mythic cowboy to be born (par. 6). The Beadle Half-Dime Library also published many other “dime novels”, mostly featuring cowboys. However, “it was the short, sensational novel about Buck Taylor that focused immediate attention on a

new kind of frontier figure—a mounted fighter and adventurer who rode nowhere without his six-shooters strapped to his hips” (Martin 31).

Another novel that was quite important to the construction of the myth of the cowboy is Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, published in 1902. It was “the first full-length, ‘serious’ saga” which depicted a cowboy who was “handsome, strong and stoic”, but, differently from Buck Taylor, “silent and essentially mysterious” (34). For Moskowitz, the novel “serves as a primary organizing figure of the myth”, especially because of its popularity and of the author’s status in North-American culture in the late 19th and 20th centuries (par. 22). It was dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, and, for Moskowitz, the protagonist echoes the president’s “ideal man, a man expected to exude all of the strength of body and character that embodies the unique man of the American West” (par. 24). Other writers on the cowboy, who relied on “formulaic Westerns”,¹⁵ were Zane Grey,¹⁶ Max Brand, Ernest Haycox, Clarence W. Mulford, among others (Martin 34).

Literature has, in fact, helped much in the construction of the myth of the cowboy; however, it never got close to the influence of western film. If “[i]t is through the movies that the myth has become part of the cultural language by which America understands itself” (Wright qtd. in Vugman 27), then the country certainly understood itself through the western, commonly known as “the American film par excellence”, ever since André Bazin. The first western is considered to be Edwin Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903),

¹⁵ In his work on the evolution of the western genre *Six Guns and Society* (relating to film—but which can also be applied to literature), Will Wright draws basically four kinds of western, each following a different formula: the classic one (hero aligned with society, as in *Shane* and *Duel in the Sun*), the transitional one (in which the hero leaves society but for greater causes, such as in *High Noon*), the professional plot (the critique to society, the inversion from what happens in the classic plot, as in *The Wild Bunch*), and a variation of those formulae, the vengeance (as in *The Searchers*) (paraphrased in Graeme Turner 87-89).

¹⁶ Grey has written so much that even after his death, in 1939, at least one of his books was published every year until 1963, almost 30 years later (Dye par. 11). Many films have been based on his novels too, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

though at the time it was not considered a western, but a crime film, since the genre had not been “invented” yet.¹⁷ Ever since then, cinema industry (mostly Hollywood, though there are also Italian and Spanish westerns) has embraced the cowboy, releasing a great number of films depicting this character.¹⁸ According to Dye, from Porter’s film up until the late 30s, hundreds of westerns have been released, often two or three per week (par. 7). Just the novels by author Zane Grey, for instance, have originated over 100 films. With simple plots and plain characters for the “unsophisticated masses” (Dye par.11), his stories soon reached the hands of the studios. The singing (and rather moralist) cowboy Gene Autry has been in 90 films in 20 years. A little later, Roy Rogers starred in 105, half of these in the 1940s alone (Dye par. 15). “Eternal” cowboy John Wayne, who has been in more than 170 films, has played the cowboy in 86 of them (Mattos 94).

A filmmaker who has greatly contributed to the genre is John Ford, the director of numerous “classic” western productions. Ford directed over 140 films, belonging to various genres (*The Grapes of Wrath* and *How Green Was my Valley* are drama, for instance). But it was with the western that the public instinctively associates him, because of productions such as *Stagecoach* (1939), *Fort Apache* (1948), *Rio Grande* (1950), *The Searchers* (1959), *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), among many others—not coincidentally, all the films cited above starred John Wayne, Ford’s “partner” in many productions. But apart from Ford, the western has been depicted by prominent directors as well such as Howard Hawks (*Red River*, *Rio Bravo* and *El Dorado*), Budd Boetticher, Anthony Mann, Raoul Walsh, Fritz Lang, Arthur Penn, Sam Peckinpah, and more recently, Clint Eastwood,

¹⁷ The western genre would only appear formally in 1912, in a review of the film *The Fight at the Mill*, cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It was only when Hollywood started producing many films and releasing them as westerns that *The Great Train Robbery* was considered the first in the genre (Neale 163).

¹⁸ The genre is highly popular among the public, even nowadays. According to Jim Kitses, this might be so because “audiences have found the form a dependable source of aesthetic delight” (312).

among others. From Broncho Billy, William S. Hart, Tom Mix, Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, American cinema has revealed John Wayne, in *Stagecoach* (1939).¹⁹ Tough, strong, dirty and virile, he played the “American hero” in many classic western productions. Who does not recall young John Wayne defending prostitute Lucy at a dining table in *Stagecoach*? Or the bloodthirsty cowboy returning home with little Debbie in his arms in *The Searchers*? Better yet, the altruist sheriff who renounces the fame of killing the terrible villain Liberty Valance and the love of his fiancée in *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance*? John Wayne was so popular that between 1949 and 1968, a period of 20 years, that his films have received a Top Ten place in the box office polls every year but 1958—most of these films being westerns (Dye par. 16). For Dye, both Frederick Jackson Turner and John Wayne have exemplified North-American values, whether through the frontier or themselves, in the case of the latter. She brings a quotation by Wayne’s friend and biographer Ronald Reagan: “there is no one who more exemplifies the devotion to our country [the US], its goodness, its industry, and its strength than John Wayne” (qtd. in par. 20).

According to Sophie Dye, North-Americans “quickly became obsessed with the Old West” because they identified with the cowboy from film (par. 8). She makes a bridge between Turner’s argument and her own, on the influence of the cowboy from popular culture and film:

Americans have found a way to hang on to that spirit of nostalgia—by living that experience vicariously through film and pop culture. Just as Turner believed the existence of a Western frontier helped form American identity a century ago, popular images of the American West have determined national identity since. (par. 1)

¹⁹ The film was a success and became one of the most classic western productions. Orson Welles has admitted watching it 40 times before making *Citizen Kane* (Brito 159).

Kids and teenagers, the majority living in rural areas from North to South and dissatisfied with their lives in the country, “restored their senses of confidence and self-identity” through the image of the cowboy hero (par. 9). Adults were affected too. They, who suffered from economic and political problems due to the Great Depression, “yearned for a simpler time, as well”, and also looked up to their own cowboy, Theodore Roosevelt (par. 10).

Theodore Roosevelt has, indeed, made use of US identification with the cowboy in his political trajectory. In the turn of the 20th century, he gave speeches such as “What Americanism Means” (1893) and “Manhood and Statehood” (1901), in which he proclaimed that “more and more as the years go by this Republic will [would] find its guidance in the thought and action of the West, because the conditions of development in the West have steadily tended to accentuate the peculiarly American characteristics of its people”. He added that such “peculiarly American characteristics of place and people” were the “iron qualities that must go with true manhood” (qtd. in Moskowitz par. 20). Indeed, Roosevelt elaborated on the influence of the cowboy not only in his speeches but also in his academic work, since he was a historian as well. He wrote a four-volume history of the frontier entitled *The Winning of the West* (1889–1896), in which he postulated over Turner’s thesis.²⁰ According to Moskowitz, “[t]he man of the West became for Roosevelt, and by extension the nation, the icon of the desired image of America” (p. 20).

²⁰ In fact, Theodore Roosevelt had been one of the first scholars to endorse Turner’s thesis, and congratulated the latter for “put[ting] into shape a good deal of thought that has [had] been floating around rather loosely” (qtd. in Slotkin *Nostalgia* 608). Slotkin writes that both scholars shared the most important assumptions around the frontier thesis, which were the belief that the frontier shaped national institutions and “that mystical entity they both called ‘national character’” and that North-American society had to look up to frontierpeople in order to face the democracy crisis they were undergoing in the late 19th century (*Nostalgia* 608).

Another president who has appropriated the image of the cowboy was Ronald Reagan, 80 years after Roosevelt. Dye believes that Reagan's government, which was full of controversies, was not ruined only because of the own president's association with the figure of the cowboy: "people heard in his tone the message of the American cowboy, an image that Reagan embraced" (par. 24). Though Reagan only acted in few *unpopular* Western films, before becoming president, he liked to maintain his image as a cowboy. He was from a ranch town in the Midwest, and was close friends with John Wayne. And he expressed this on speech as well: he once said that it was "the life of the cowboy that has [had] shaped my [his] body and mind for all these [those] years" (qtd. in Dye par. 24). Because of these, for Dye, "the public was [also] quick to embrace his image" as a cowboy (par. 24). As Kearny finished the chapter on American culture for his aforementioned ESL book, "when times are hard, political leaders like to remind Americans of the frontier heritage and the tough determination of their pioneer ancestors" (66).

2.4. *Brokeback Mountain* and the Queering of US Identity

What I defend in this thesis is that *Brokeback Mountain* can point out to the fact that US cultural identity is a construction/imagination, (rather arbitrarily) based on the myth of the frontier and of the cowboy himself. The film is such a great example for this thesis because it subverts the myth, since it depicts the protagonists, cowboys, rupturing the heterosexual norm.

2.4.1. The Cowboys

The protagonists of *Brokeback Mountain* are definitely cowboys. Although they do not herd cattle, do not get involved in shootings or duels, and do not drink at saloons, they

still herd sheep, handle their horses, and do get to have drinks at rodeo and community parties. As the characters say in the first conversation they hold in the film, they both come from “ranch people”.

It all begins with their clothes. They wear leather jackets, leather boots, striped or checked shirts, belts. They always wear hats, too. Their habits also resemble those of cowboys, especially due to the fact that they drink. There are many scenes at bars. Jack meets his wife Lureen at a rodeo bar, and so does Ennis meet his girlfriend Cassie also at a bar, where she waited tables. Even Lureen verbalizes this habit of drinking referring to Jack, when she says over the phone to Ennis, in the only conversation they hold through the film, that Jack used to drink much. The protagonists’ means of transportation are horses, as aforementioned, and also pick-up trucks or just hitchhiking—which can be argued as an allusion to the cowboy spirit of adventure, of diving into the unknown. And they do get, both, to manipulate a shotgun, Ennis even shoots an elk for them to eat. All these elements can be traced back to the figure of the cowboy, the pioneer, the adventurer who is myth to the US.

As Roger Clarke writes, the protagonists are “working alone together in *deepest* Wyoming in 1963” (my emphasis par. 3). They are there, up the mountain, exploring the wilderness, eating their hunt, sleeping in tents, being threatened by bears and having their sheep killed by coyotes. The place is Wyoming, one of the least populated states of the US even now, a region where conservatism is still rather present, where the roots of the rather conservative side of the American dream remain as strong as ever. The decade is the 60s, yes, but the protagonists are somewhat isolated not only in space but also in time, they are apart from society. They do not watch TV (unless in a scene in which Jack’s son watches a football game), do not read the newspapers, do not listen to the radio. They dropped out of

school, when adolescents. And even when they did go to school, they did not care for it much—at least this is the impression they give in one of their first conversations. Ennis says that he liked school, but not with much enthusiasm.

They are cowboys, also, because they represent almost completely the stereotype of North-Americans. They each build their own classic American family (parents and children dining in front of the TV and going to church just to socialize with neighbors), they hold Thanksgiving dinners, go to July 4th parades, work as cowboys but also as road pavers, tractors sales representatives, bullriders. The girls they marry are pretty, somewhat submissive (although Lureen does not seem so, she agrees to holding an unhappy relationship, without love, just for the sake of being married and raising her son with his father), and soon give them American children. They are white, probably protestant (although this is not mentioned in the film, except for Jack's fanatic mother), and definitely Anglo-Saxon. Jack and Ennis could be argued, then, as one of the best examples of the Wasp tradition and as one of the best examples of the continuing cowboy tradition as well—again, the key to an arbitrarily constructed national identity.

2.4.2. Queering the Cowboy and the Nation

The protagonists are not pure Wasp, though. Actually, nobody is; this is an essentialist construct that is impossible to be reached. But particularly in *Brokeback Mountain* the characters are more evidently not the example of the stereotype of North-Americans because they rupture the heterosexual norm (see chapter III). Even if they do perform just like the rule, work, marry, have children, act masculine, punch people, and say their prayers, they will always be outside the norm.

Such deviance of the norm by Ennis and Jack could represent the fact that US cultural identity can no longer be mythologized/imagined in the figure of the cowboy, or of the frontiersman, or of Pocahontas, or of the Pilgrim Fathers. There was a time when the imaginary of the population did share this unconscious sense of identity, of belonging. Maybe not anymore, though. In this sense, *Brokeback Mountain* not only queers heteronormativity but also the US as a monolithic, imagined community.²¹

There are many indications to this queering of US identity, which becomes more and more evident now. One of them are the social movements of the 70s, which contested the government, authorities, the rules. All of these—which were quite positive—came along with the “times of trouble” of the 20th century. There was the end of the Cold War, which suddenly gave space to a series of nations, not just the US (and the old Soviet Union) any longer. There was the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, also contributing to the emergence of various powerful countries. After that, the US did still possess economic, cultural, and political power. But along came the wars, in the Gulf, in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Afghanistan, in Iraq. There was a rupture in the public opinion of US population: some supported the wars, many others did not. Ultimately, the attacks of 9/11 have evidenced

²¹ Here I would like to note that although the film queers the US as a nation, the country is still essentialized and superior in hierarchy in some moments. This happens when Mexico is depicted in opposition to the US. It is only in Mexico where Jack can satisfy his sexual needs with no restraint. He can hire a male prostitute out of the street. To the same extent that Mexico is the place where deviance can exist, it is depicted pejoratively. At night, the border is shown as a crowded place, full of bars, neon lights, drinking, to the sound of the stereotyped tune of Osvaldo Faress’s “Quizás, Quizás, Quizás.” Such is the place where Jack drives to. The prostitute greets: “Señor?” and they disappear into the darkness, in stark contrast with the bright shots back in Wyoming, in the US. According to Manalansan IV, in the film, “Mexico stands in contrast to the whiteness and serenity of *Brokeback*’s mise-en-scenes, which are full of light and visually expansive. Not only is it racialized as brown, it is chaotic, dirty, dim, narrow, and claustrophobic, brimming with history’s detritus” (99). When Ennis learns of Jack’s going there, he says: “I hear what they got in Mexico for boys like you”. This example is important because it calls attention to the fact that it is impossible to be essentialist, to affirm that *Brokeback Mountain* either subverts or co-opts, to decide whether the contemporary US is queered or as strong as ever. Cultural productions, just like countries, just like life, are always relative, changing processes, that present no definite answers.

how the country, although seeming strong, is still quite vulnerable. Its members can have airplanes falling over their heads and die.

Such instability in US power, and therefore in its national identity, can be observed in the population as well, although this may not seem as evident. Certainties have opened up space to diversity, to difference, to the end of tradition. There are many men like Jack and Ennis coming out of the closet. Women have long gotten out of their houses into the job market, working side by side with men. Children are leaving their homes and often contesting parents, school, the system. Religious groups are more united than ever, singing, praying, helping their members, giving them, yes, a sense of collective identity—nevertheless, a collective identity that is no longer “national” but based on religion. Native-Americans, Hispanics, Islamics, Asian-Americans, and in a much great proportion blacks are gradually consolidating their presence (in social, economic, and political space) and forming a species of smaller imagined communities within the US, putting in check the WASP tradition. Democrat Barack Hussein Obama, whose middle name echoes the last name of one of America’s lifetime enemies, black, born in Hawaii and raised in a small village in Kenya, has taken over the White House. As US 44th elected president, he will have to deal with not only the contemporary economic crisis and the political one (finding a solution to the Iraq war) but also with the crisis of the country itself, in the sense of its national identity as a community. Summing up, I believe that it is no longer possible to think of the US as having a monolithic, essential identity, especially not one based on the myth of the frontier or of the cowboy. Just as the protagonists in *Brokeback Mountain*, the US has become queer. In the next chapter, I attempt to explain the queering of the protagonists not in terms of its influence on US national identity, but in terms of the rupture of the heterosexual norm in the film.

CHAPTER III

YOU KNOW I AIN'T QUEER (OR AM I?)

It has been claimed, as I will expose in this first section of the chapter, that *Brokeback Mountain* should not be politicized, since the story, as it has been defended, would be universal. The plot of the film would be a love story after all, no matter whether between man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, prince and princess, ladybug and male ladybug. An evidence of such fact would be the film's marketing towards women and not the queer public.¹ Although B. Ruby Rich warns that the film has been *misleadingly* labelled as a "chick flick" by many heterosexual men who did not want to watch it on dates (par. 13), for other scholars, the production has indeed been made for women. Joshua Clover is even more specific, when he defends that the film was targeted for what he calls "the fourth quadrant" of the public: older women. In a scene in which Jack cries over a ballad, the western genre would have been confronted with a "woman's weepy" (par. 2). Chris Berry endorses Clover's opinion: "it [the film] stages a gay male love story for female audiences", he writes (par. 11). He argues the following: "when a straight couple is deciding which film they will go to see on a Saturday night, who do you think decides they will see *Brokeback Mountain*? The man or the woman? The answer is obvious" (par. 11). Such scholars' opinion is shared by critics from the conventional media as well. A reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* wrote, for instance, that the film was

¹ Another cause for the targeting of women would be the film industry's general marketing strategy for generating more revenue by aiming its productions towards the greater public, in this case, women instead of the queer audience. Despite the causes for this strategy, the fact is that the film was made primarily to target women, and, due to that, it may have been projected to look more universal.

marketed “by surgically targeting where the movie would play in its initial release; selling it as a romance for women rather than a controversial gay-bashing tale; and opting out of the culture wars rather than engaging them” (qtd. in McBride 95). Moreover, MSNBC reviewer Erik Lundegaard believes that much of the film’s financial success is due to its popularity among women. He writes: “It’s women who drive [. . . love] stories, after all. They had to twist their boyfriends’ arms just to see *Titanic*—and that one offered a topless Kate Winslet” (qtd. in McBride 95). In fact, producer Focus Films admitted that their strategy in *BM* involved targeting the female audience by, for example, using an official poster that resembled the one used for *Titanic*. Both posters feature the faces or the upper part of the lover protagonists on most of the space, with them facing different directions, although they are very close to each other.

In Cooper and Pease’s scholarly article “Framing *Brokeback Mountain*: How the Popular Press Corralled the ‘Gay Cowboy Movie’”, they analyzed 113 conventional media reviews of *Brokeback Mountain*, which appeared in 117 US newspapers and magazines over a four-month period, from November 2005 to February 2006 (during the time of the release of the film). In their work, they found that, although 101 out of the 113 reviews were “overwhelmingly positive” (255), they still held an underlying “universal love” discourse:

From Los Angeles to Bangor and from Memphis to Minneapolis, as movie critics worked to fit their reviews into a familiar discursive space, the overwhelmingly dominant frame underlying their reviews was that *Brokeback Mountain* was a universal love story like any other, even a uniquely “American love story” [as it has been put by critic J. Richardson in 2006 to the *Telegraph Herald*]. Not only did reviewers praise the film’s universal appeal, but many seemed eager to assure readers that *Brokeback Mountain* was, in fact, not attempting to promote a homosexual agenda. (257)

For Cooper and Pease, the media critics tried to liken the protagonists to John Wayne and to aforementioned *Titanic*'s Rose and Jack, "trying to 'normalize' the two men and to overlook their queer story" (258).

Therefore, as media critics, the public, and even the producers of the film argue, the story of *Brokeback Mountain* would be about universal love. Even director Ang Lee would have admitted such fact, in his Oscar acceptance speech for best director,² when he said: "They [Ennis and Jack] taught all of us who made *Brokeback Mountain* so much about not just all the gay men and women whose love is denied by society, but just as important, the greatness of love itself".³ Also, in many interviews given by Lee to the media, the director would have alluded to the universal aspect of the film. An example would be his interview to the website Hollywood.com, in which Lee proclaimed, right at the beginning, that the film is "a unique, very universal American love story". *Brokeback Mountain*, then, would be about love, and love only.

However, in this chapter I defend that the story of *Brokeback Mountain* is not universal, not about just love, at least not about love as we commonly see it on the screen, which means heterosexual love. The story brings two men engaged in homosexual practices, breaking heteronormativity in mainstream cinema of "traditional" Hollywood. The production brought the homosexuality debate into the media, scholarly journals, secondary school classrooms, families' dinnertime, the Oscars Night. In this chapter, I defend that the film should be politicized since it is an example of what Judith Butler calls "parodic performativity", which, according to her, is one of the main instruments to

² The extract was quoted in the piece of news "Chinese TV cuts Ang Lee's speech", published in the BBC News website <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4781586.stm>>. Access on 24 June 2008.

³Published in <http://www.hollywood.com/feature/Ang_Lee_The_Director_Scales_the_Heights_of_Brokeback_Mountain/3473444>. Access on 22 May 2008.

promote agency (see section 3.3). In fact, Hollywood has come from a long way to finally being able to produce a film such as *Brokeback Mountain*.

3.1. (Homo)sexuality in Hollywood film

The documentary about the trajectory of the depiction of homosexuality in Hollywood film *The Celluloid Closet*, released in 1995 and based on the homonymous book by Vito Russo, states very clearly, since the beginning of its narration, that homosexuality is not common in film. In its opening lines, the narration says:

in a hundred years of movies, homosexuality has only rarely been depicted on the screen. When it did appear, it was there as something to laugh at, or something to pity, or even something to fear.

The documentary shows how, in the very beginning of Hollywood filmmaking, movies relied on homosexuality as a “sure” source of humor. In the early 30s, there appeared the figure of the sissy, the effeminate man. He could prevail on the screen to the extent that he did not seem to have a sexuality. However, the public knew he was gay, only that was not depicted explicitly. This figure was so well-accepted that, in the film *Call Her Savage* (1932), there were even sissies singing and dancing around tables, in the first gay bar scene produced in Hollywood.

Then, when films began to show more explicit sequences of even heterosexuality, the Catholic and Protestant churches started protesting and began to influence public opinion. As a response to the risk of audience dropping, movie barons decided to “save Hollywood” and volunteered to obey the “Production Code” (also known as the “Hays Code”), enacted in 1930, which supposedly set “high standards of performance for motion picture producers”. What happened in fact was that the Hays Code prohibited the depiction

of many practices such as open-mouth kissing, lustful embraces, sex perversion, seduction, rape, abortion, prostitution and *white* slavery, nudity, obscenity, profanity.

The Code, which had been at first received with pleasure by Hollywood, later became a source of distress. Code director Joe Breen was authorized, for two decades, to change dialogues, personalities, and plots. Therefore, the depiction of homosexuality suffered much from censorship. For example, the production *The Lost Weekend* (1945), based on a novel about a sexually-confused alcoholic man, became a film of an alcoholic with a writer's block. At the time, when homosexuality did manage to appear on the screen (quite rarely), it was only in a subliminal (and often rather pejorative) way, such as in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936—film in which a *vampire* might be read as lesbian), *Rebecca* (1940—there is the depiction of the *crazy* governess' obsession towards character Rebecca), and even in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), when Joel Cairo enters Sam Spade's office by using a visiting card that smells of gardenia, and a slight oriental and feminine soundtrack begins. In the original novel, Cairo was explicitly depicted as queer. Another significant example of subliminal homosexuality is Hitchcock's *The Rope* (1948), which depicts *gay murderers* and lovers.

According to the documentary, homosexuality appeared in-between the lines not only in drama but in other genres as well. There were sex comedies with gay connotation, such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959), which features cross-dressing and even an ending that suggests homosexual love. Moreover, even the Western, not only the “American film par excellence” but also the “masculine genre par excellence” (Horrocks 56), has not escaped from depicting homosexuality, always subliminally, of course. In *Red River* (1948), there is a widely discussed scene in which cowboy Matt (Montgomery Cliff) and colleague Cherry Valance (John Ireland) ask to see each other's guns and compare them with good-looking

girls and Swiss watches. In *The Celluloid Closet*, screenwriter Arthur Laurents comments that the actors of *Red River* “knew what they were doing”. He adds: “I think that is why the scene is, I think, funny, because they are delighted in playing with the sexuality of the gun”.

Towards the 60s, the Hays Code was gradually abolished and homosexuality started being more explicitly depicted; however, it was still “nothing decent people could talk about”, fact evidenced in *The Children’s Hour* (1961), *Advise and Consent* (1962), and *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962). Screenwriter Barry Sandler says that for those who have grown up in the 60s, all they had were images of homosexuals who were either suicidal, unhappy, or desperate. For example, in *The Detective* (1968), the first-person narrator says, in voice-over: “the fact of turning involuntarily into one of them [homosexuals] frightened me and made me sick with anger [. . .] I looked at them. Was this what I was like? Twisted faces, outcasts, lives lived in shadows, always prey to a million dangers. People don’t realize what we go through”.

The Celluloid Closet discusses how, in the 70s, there was a turn. *The Boys in the Band* (1970) represents such change: it is a drama where gay people analyze themselves at a party, show camaraderie and understanding among themselves, and, surprisingly, all manage to survive in the end. There was also *Cabaret* (1972), with a man, Maximilian (Helmut Griem), keeping relations both with a woman, played by Liza Minnelli, and a man, played by Michael York. Parallely, there were films that depicted homosexuals as good guys and not just villains—still, they faced many difficulties and, often, a tragic end, such as in *Vanishing Point* (1972). Nevertheless, this was not often: in *Freebie and the Bean* (1974), a transvestite *killer* is violently shot. Screenwriter Ron Nyswaner thinks that two things happen in the latter film: “people were applauding the death of the villain but they were also applauding the death of the homosexual”. According to J. Esposito et al. in an

article for the *Educational Studies*, from the 32 films with major gay or lesbian characters released between 1961 and 1976, 13 depict characters who committed suicide and 18 depict characters who were murdered. That leaves only one film in which there was no violence towards homosexuals. For Esposito et al., “the general premise of these films was such that being gay could be dangerous to one’s life” (par. 2).

Homosexuals have also, in the 80s, become “victimizers” instead of victims, such as in *The Fan* (1981) and *Cruising* (1980).⁴ And when Hollywood finally decided to depict homosexual *love* and not just sex, in *Making Love* (1982), it had to warn the public about its content in the opening credits:

We believe MAKING LOVE breaks new ground in its sensitive portrayal of a young woman executive who learns that her husband is experiencing a crisis about his sexual identity. MAKING LOVE deals openly and candidly with a delicate issue. It is not sexually explicit. But it may be too strong for some people. MAKING LOVE is bold but gentle. We are proud of its honesty. We applaud its courage.

It was only in the 90s that films which were more openly homosexual were released. The narration of *The Celluloid Closet* proclaims: “the long silence is finally ending. New voices emerged, open and unapologetic”. For scholar Richard Dyer, it is quite important to take films into account when analyzing culture, especially when it comes to sexuality issues. He says, at one point in the documentary:

Your ideas about who you are don’t just come from inside you, they come from the culture. And in this [western] culture, they come especially from the movies. So we learn from the movies what it means to be a man, or a woman, or what it means to have a sexuality. (qtd. in *The Celluloid Closet*)

⁴ Throughout that decade, the Aids crisis became alarming in society as well, though it was only more openly depicted in films in the 90s, for example, with the release of *Philadelphia* (1993), and of Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993).

These examples brought by the documentary show us that Hollywood was quite important for the construction of gay identities through popular culture. Again, the narration of the documentary states, in its opening lines:

These [depictions of homosexuality in film] were fleeting images, but they were unforgettable and they left a lasting legacy. Hollywood, the great maker of myths, taught straight people what to think about gay people, and gay people what to think about themselves.

3.2. The talk around *Brokeback Mountain*

Brokeback Mountain, as practically all (if not all) films discussed in the previous section, has provoked great controversy because of its depiction of homosexuality. Such controversy took place in Hollywood itself, in the conventional media, and among the public at large.⁵ Director Ang Lee, widely recognized internationally, had already been responsible for other successful productions, one of them which also features homosexuality as one of its main themes: *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) tells the story of a gay man who marries a woman just to please his family. The film does not depict homosexuality as explicitly as *Brokeback Mountain*, but still, it was object of great controversy at the time. It was the first film in China to feature a kiss between two men.

Nevertheless, *Brokeback Mountain* can be considered the greatest success of the director, at least in terms of awards (it won three out of the eight Oscars to which it was nominated: best original music, best adapted screenplay, and best direction; four Golden Globes, among many other awards) and of box-office,⁶ despite the controversy originated

⁵ It is important to emphasize that although I refer to the public at large, I have information mostly on the North-American public and that I do understand that the reception of any piece of art / culture happens differently in each cultural context. However, I believe that it is possible to affirm that *BM* has caused some controversy globally, at least in countries where the film has been released and watched by the great public.

⁶ In the US, the film obtained US\$ 547,425 in its opening weekend on Dec 11, 2005. It was kept in theaters until April 16 2006, obtaining in total US\$ 83,025,853 only in that country. In Brazil, it was kept in theaters

by the film. The production of the film, including the marketing, cost only 14 million dollars (out of which nothing was spent on TV ads, as *Variety* magazine points out), sum which is considered strictly “art house”, according to Roy Grundmann (par. 3). Analysts of Hollywood industry were caught by surprise in its opening week and posterior time.

Scholar Graeme Turner already states that

[w]hen we want to deal with bodies of films, film movements, or even a single text, we need to look at the specific relations established between one film and the whole context in which it is viewed. This context will include other films as well as the full range of media constructions, advertising strategies, and so on that frame the particular film. (64)

I shall look at the context of production and release of *Brokeback Mountain*, then. By keeping track of the numbers of the film, it is hard to imagine that it took much effort in order to produce and release it in Hollywood. Right after the publication of Annie Proulx’s short-story which originated the film in *The New Yorker*, in 1997,⁷ screenwriter Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry, also author of the so-called twilight westerns,⁸ bought its adaptation rights with their own money. However, it took them eight years to get the shooting of the film started—the story had already been known in the backstage of Hollywood as “the best impossible screenplay to be shot” (Garrett 59). The obstacles surpassed ranged from the financing of the film, whose responsibility belonged to producer James Schamus, to the hiring of people for the production: other directors had been

from Feb 5 2006 through March 19 2006, and during this period it was watched by 757,953 people. In the theaters of France, it was watched by 1,044,624 people, and in Germany, by 1,371,668 people. Information found in the Internet Movie Database website: www.imdb.com. Access in May 2007.

⁷ The story was first published in the 13 October 1997 issue of *The New Yorker*, and later was collected in Proulx’s anthology *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, published by Scribner, in May 1999 (hardback) and February 2000 (paperback).

⁸ Twilight Westerns are westerns that are placed in the end of the colonization of the Old West (1890-1910), or in the post-civil war period, in which the lifestyle of the frontier began to distinguish itself day by day from the contemporary North-American society. McMurtry’s novels, more notably *Horsemen Pass By* (1961), *The Last Picture Show* (1966), and *Lonesome Dove* (1985, winner of the Pulitzer), all adapted either for the cinema or for TV, are considered twilight westerns. It is highly probable (although McMurtry has not admitted it) that such style has influenced the screenplay of *Brokeback Mountain*.

temporarily assigned for the film (Joel Schumacher and Gus Van Sant, for example, gave up on it) and there were even problems in finding actors to interpret the protagonists, since most professionals did not want to be associated with homosexual characters. Even Jake Gyllenhaal himself, who plays Jack Twist, refused the first offer he got for the part, when he was only 16 years old, by alleging at the time that he felt “uncomfortable” with the character. Years later, after reading the screenplay and the original short-story, he changed his mind: “I couldn’t not do it”, he said (qtd. in Garrett 54). Only when Schamus got promoted to a leadership position at Focus Features, could he finally finance the film. Schamus and Lee announced the project in 2002 and, a year later, Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal got their parts. It was only then, according to B. Ruby Rich, that “*Brokeback Mountain* became real to the press, launching the tag ‘the gay cowboy movie’ into the American vernacular” (par. 1).

When the film was finally released, in December 2005, it caused great controversy, most of it reflected in the media. Hollywood, again, was divided: although pending for the side of the film, there was still some controversy raised by more conservative groups. Already in January of the following year, a month after the film’s release, conservative US filmmaker Michael Class started gathering support for the institution of what he named the “American Values Awards for Movies and Television”, in order to reward films that contained “moral” values. Inspired by his “anger” towards *Brokeback Mountain*, the filmmaker defended that it was better to skip films released that year such as *Syriana*, *Munich*, and, of course, *Brokeback Mountain*. He stated: “they [such films] are morally

confused—I don't want my kids seeing them". He added: "*Brokeback Mountain*? What's positive about a film whose main character's sexual behavior destroys a family?"⁹

Apart from Hollywood, the Catholics were one of the first groups to manifest themselves, through rather controversial (and often contradictory) opinions. Some entities actually defend the film, such as the United States Conference of Bishops Office for Film and Broadcasting (USCCB) in their review of the production. On the first paragraph, they write that the film "turns out to be a serious contemplation on loneliness and connection", for instance.¹⁰ However, USCCB changed the rating of the film from "L" (limited adult audience) to "O" (morally offensive), after a series of complaints from Catholic groups. Moreover, some examples of great opposition to the film can be found in the LifeSiteNews.com website, which, according to the own site's description, "emphasizes the social worth of traditional Judeo-Christian principles". In an article, columnist Hilary White writes: "The film offends not only Christian moral sensibilities, however, but those of anyone who believes in the sanctity of marriage".¹¹ Furthermore, in the website MovieGuide.org, "a ministry dedicated to redeeming the values of the mass media according to biblical principles", movie reviewer Tead Behr describes more accurately the violations of *Brokeback Mountain* by counting them:

[It contains] about 58 obscenities (including many "F" words), 15 strong profanities, one light profanity, and references to urinating; two extreme scenes of bloody violence include shot of castrated man and man's head is beaten bloody until he is dead, and scenes of violence where men fight and wrestle in a rough way, and homosexual sodomy scene plays almost like a

⁹ Information from the news article "American Values Awards for Movies and Television", from the website Chasing the Wind: News, Nonsense, Faith. <http://chasingthewind.net/2006/01/24/american-values-awards-for-movies-and-television/> Access on 21 Aug 2008.

¹⁰ Extracted from the USCCB official website: <http://www.usccb.org/movies/b/brokebackmountain.shtml>. Access in May 2007.

¹¹ From an article entitled "US Bishops' Organization Gives Glowing Review of Homosexual-Sex Propaganda Film", published on December 15 2005, in the LifeSiteNews.com website: <http://lifesite.net/>. Access in May 2007.

homosexual rape; very strong sexual content includes depicted homosexual and heterosexual sodomy (with a hint of sadomasochism during one or more homosexual scenes), depicted homosexual kissing and groping, depicted intercourse between married couple, and implied intercourse and almost intercourse with women who are shown topless; upper female nudity in several scenes, full male nudity in bathing scene, rare male nudity, and upper male nudity; alcohol use and drunkenness; smoking; and, lying, men cheat on wives, sexual ‘repression’ is seen as evil, family arguments, divorce, and negative portrayal of heterosexual fathers.¹²

Finally, the newspaper *The Catholic Register*, Canada’s largest national Catholic paper, illustrates the controversy of the film for the Catholics. In the same issue of the paper, while in a cover article the film is said to be “filled with lush Christian imagery which recalls Jesus the good shepherd”; in another review, it is considered “a tale about the infinitely sad outcome of sexual obsession, and about the havoc that disordered passion can wreak on sinners and the innocent alike”.¹³

Michael Cobb, in a review for *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, explains the reception of the film among religious groups. He writes that part of such manifestations tried to be cautious when criticizing the film, so that there is not greater talk towards it and a larger public going to the movies to watch it out of curiosity, phenomenon that has been observed with the release of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). However, in general, even the religious reviews that follow this trend of thought (not criticizing the film much as not to induce people to watch it) still characterize homosexual behavior “as bad for you as other negative, addictive *behaviors*” (author’s emphasis 104). Cobb writes that such reviews, when attributing homosexuality to an addiction—practice that is abandoned with difficulty and only through individual struggle—, suggest that individuals should seek the Church in order to become “cured” from their homosexuality. And that

¹² From religious MovieGuide.org website: www.movieguide.org. Access in May 2007.

¹³ Extracted from the issue of February 19 2006 of *The Catholic Register* website: www.catholicregister.org.

would be the reason why, for Cobb, the film is at the same time gay and a “Christian cowboy movie”, because it reminds the Christians that they still have much to do—help homosexuals to abandon their “addiction” (104).

Such tendency of criticism coming from religious groups was practiced by other segments of society. Whereas part of the public walked out of theaters during the exhibition of the film, usually after the scene of the sexual intercourse between the protagonists, or refused to watch the film at all, some theaters in the US decided not to exhibit the film: a theatre complex in Salt Lake City, for example, changed its screening plans all of a sudden, leaving out *Brokeback Mountain*, with a sign over the ticket window simply stating: “There has been a change in booking and we will not be showing *Brokeback Mountain*. We apologize for any inconvenience”. Later on, the management of the theater alleged that the change was “due to the actors’ gay sex scenes”.¹⁴ Outside the US, criticism was much more intense, to the extent that the film was prohibited in China (Ang Lee’s homecountry) and in the United Arab Emirates. In Malaysia, the distributors of the film have not even tried to sell it, foreseeing that the country would not agree to exhibit it.¹⁵

The production has also generated many jokes in the media, related to its homosexual theme. For scholar Corey Creekmur, despite the ideology of the film, the production promoted a great revival of jokes on the “fag”. The film was edited into many parodic trailers, such as “Brokeback to the Future”, “Brokeback of the Ring”, “Harry Potter and the Brokeback Goblet”, and “The Empire Brokeback” (parodies of the popular *Back to*

¹⁴ The film was supposed to be played at a 17-theatre megaplex at Jordan Commons in Sandy, in the suburb of Salt Lake City, complex owned by Larry H. Miller—the famous businessman behind the basketball team Utah Jazz. According to Cooper and Pease, Miller knew nothing about the film until a radio interviewer told him that *Brokeback* was a love story between two cowboys. Initially, he said would not “act as a censor and would let the market decide whether the movie was worthy,” but a couple of hours later he ordered the film to be drawn out of his theatres (“The Mormons vs . the ‘Armies of Satan’” 135).

¹⁵ Information from “Brokeback Mountain Banned in China, Middle East”, published on Feb 10 2006, in the LifeSiteNews.com website: <http://lifesite.net/>. Access in May 2007.

the Future, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Star Wars: the Empire Strikes Back*), among others.¹⁶ The film also originated many parodic posters, including the cover of a 2006 *The New Yorker* edition, illustrated by Mark Uricksen, which features president Bush and vice Dick Cheney dressed as cowboys, positioned similarly to the protagonists in the official poster of the film. There was also a theater adaptation entitled “Brokeback! The Musical”, produced for the *David Letterman’s Show*, program which also created a list called “Top 10 Signs You Are a Gay Cowboy”. Item 8 of the list, for example, says: “You enjoy ridin’, ropin’, and redecoratin’”. Creekmur writes about the phenomenon of the jokes on *Brokeback Mountain*:

The early decision [and absurd] that *Brokeback Mountain* could be summarized as a “gay cowboy” movie established the basis for all subsequent jokes [. . .] The challenge that homosexuality may have posed to the ideology of the Western genre was gutted by the emphatic assertion of how hilarious the gay cowboy must be: the jokes are thus more effective at affirming the Western’s essential heterosexuality than humorless denunciations of the “rape” of the traditional cowboy. (106)

Joshua Clover finds another explanation for the parodies:

The film has real emotional power; for us it’s the power of having exhausted itself exactly such that it enabled the surrounding culture to reach through it, past it. The parodies, mocking up other narratives with the movie’s iconic fragments, are laden with the urgency of this reach. (par. 23)

The film was object of much discussion in the mainstream media, for example, in vehicles such as *CNN.com*, *USA today*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *People Magazine*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Details*, just to mention a few. The production was also popular in minority literary arenas, such as the gay magazine *Homo Xtra (HX)*, besides gay chatrooms such as *The Datalounge* (Herring 94).

¹⁶ All these parodic trailers can be found at the YouTube website: www.youtube.com.

For B. Ruby Rich, however, the great exposure of the film to the media has not generated positive consequences or agency. She brings the following discussion:

Instead of fretting over whether the film would be heterosexualized, though, the mainstream press focused attention on how the film would do: would it make much money? Would anyone who wasn't gay pay to see it? Would anyone outside major cities go to see it? Would it break any box-office records? In other words, the anxiety had moved from whether the film was gay enough to whether it was too gay. The breathless coverage seemed to increase with every benchmark that was passed. Watching the reports and opinion pieces mount up, I became convinced that the unprecedented coverage, in terms of both column inches and speculations, represented a form of heterosexual panic. The language of economics and market forces masked hysteria and homophobia. (par. 5)

At least one group of publications has not concentrated its discussions on the film only on “economics and market forces”, as Rich puts it: scholarly journals. Many of them have dedicated at least one review for the film, for example, the cinema journals *Sight and Sound*, *Jump Cut*, *American Cinematographer*, *Film International*, *Cineaste*, *Senses of Cinema*, and *Crítica Cultural* (the latter edited at Unisul – Santa Catarina, Brazil), and journals on gender and sexuality, such as *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* and *Revista Estudos Feministas* (the latter edited at UFSC – Santa Catarina, Brazil). Two journals have actually compiled special issues on the film, such as *Film Quarterly* 60.3 (Spring 2007) and *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.1 (2007).¹⁷

3.3. The Concept of Parodic Performativity

I defend, in this chapter, that *Brokeback Mountain* has caused such great controversy (as discussed in the previous section) because it promotes what Judith Butler calls “parodic performativity”, which is, for Butler, one of the main tools for agency, especially when it

¹⁷ Most of the scholarly articles were analyzed for this thesis, but I chose not to review them as a group, but to include them when pertinent throughout my discussion.

comes to gender and sexuality relations. In this chapter, I will first discuss Butler's theories, and then I will analyze the film. My aim is to show how the intense performativity in the film is totally subverted when confronted with the fact that it is performed by characters who have homosexual practices.

Butler appropriates Gayle Rubin's sex/gender system to point out to what the former entitles the "sex/gender/*desire* system". Rubin's ideas, from her 1975 essay "The Traffic in Women", symbolized a breakthrough in feminist theories due to the sex/gender system, which is the rather essentialist link imposed by society as a norm through which one who is born of a sex must belong to a predetermined gender. Butler goes further in the argumentation: she defends that the norm rules also one's sexuality. For instance, for (normative) society, when one is born with female genitalia and body, one should have feminine gender and should desire men. Butler argues that the system is so powerful that it rules one's identity as well, the sense of being a "person":

The "coherence" and "continuity" of "the person" are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (*Gender Trouble* 17)

Although Butler identifies the existence of such normative system, she denaturalizes it, demonstrates that all of it is constructed. To begin with gender, whose construction is already a consensus among feminists at large: she defends that gender is indeed a construction, but not necessarily constructed by someone, an "I" or "we". Butler says that it is in gender itself that this "I" or "we" *emerge*. And since they emerge within gender, it is impossible for them to be responsible for the construction of gender. That "I" and "we" do

not precede or come after gender, they are built *within* gender (*Bodies* 07). Identity and gender would be intrinsically intertwined.

Moreover, Butler argues that biological sex is a construction as well. Needless to say that such statement came as a great surprise for feminists at large.¹⁸ For Rubin, in her classic 1975 essay, for example, sex was biological, fixed, a natural fact. *Gender* was clearly a cultural construction. Not for Butler, though. When the latter published *Gender Trouble*, in 1990, there was much controversy over her ideas. She wrote, for instance, that “sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along” (*Gender* 07). For her, it is culture which acts upon a neutral body, which is materialized according to gender norms.¹⁹ In *Bodies that Matter*, published three years after *Gender Trouble*, she continues her argument:

“Sex” is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize sex and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms... materialization is never quite complete,

¹⁸ Up until Butler, sex would represent anatomy, the physiologic functioning of the body—as in nature—, whereas gender would represent the social forces that shape behavior—as in culture. One of the first theorists to proclaim such trend of thought were sexologists John Money and Anke Ehradt, in 1972, in *Man and Woman, Boy and Girl*. They believed that sex was just one out of the many factors that influenced gender identity, along with hormonal influences, innate behavioral differences, parental attitudes, and bodily sensations and imagery. Such tradition of the separation between sex and gender was very well received and echoed by the second-wave feminists of the 70s. This is why Butler’s defense of sex as a construction came to them as a surprise.

¹⁹ Anne Fausto-Sterling has developed a very persuasive argument on the construction of sex. By bringing up examples of athletes in the Olympics who were submitted to committees’ (largely arbitrary) decisions on defining their sex, her article “Dueling Dualism” (translated into Portuguese as “Dualismos em Duelo” and published in *Cadernos Pagu*) defends that sex is “simply too complex”. For her, there is no this or that, but a continuum of differences. Labeling someone as man or woman is a *social* decision. It is possible to utilize scientific knowledge (biology or genetics) in order to help us make this decision, however, only our *beliefs* with regards to gender—and not science—can define our sex. Besides, our beliefs about gender also affect the very production of scientific knowledge on sex. She exemplifies: if a child is born with two chromosomes X, ovaries, an uterus in the inside of the body, and a penis and a scrotal bag on the outside, for example, is that child a boy or a girl? The majority of doctors will say that it is a girl, despite the penis, because of the child’s potential to give birth, and they will make a surgery intervention and apply hormones to confirm their decision. The choice of criteria for determining sex and the very act to determine this sex are social decisions for which scientists cannot offer absolute rules. The fact is that scientists create truths about sexuality, truths that are incorporated by our bodies and truths that are sculpted by the social environment, truths which shape our culture (20, 21).

bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. (*Bodies* 1-2)

Then, she reinforces it: “‘sex’ is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all” (*Bodies* 2).

Furthermore, she goes on to argue that gender is always constructed within heteronormative structures, which are, as the concept already announces, effects of cultural norms. She explains how heteronormativity fits well in the sex/gender/desire system:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire. (*Gender* 23)

The whole system, as a construction,²⁰ is maintained through performativity. Ever since the beginning of people’s lives, the “regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality” forces the production of sex, and subjects have the need to perform according to gender norms and heteronormativity. It is important, for the functioning of the system, that individuals repeat,

²⁰ Here it is important to note that the notion of sexuality as a construction echoes Michel Foucault. In his three-volume *History of Sexuality*, published from 1976 to 1984, he defends that sexuality is historically constructed through relations of (micro)power. He writes that, to study sexuality, “we must immerse the expanding production of discourses on sex in the field of multiple and mobile power relations” (1630). For him, sexuality (or, better yet, the “technology of sex”) is just another (quite powerful) instrument of power relations, by artificially creating and legitimating “strategies”. For example, he points out four of such strategies from the beginning of the 18th century: the hysterization of women’s bodies, the pedagogization of children’s sex, the socialization of procreative behavior, and the psychiatrization of perverse pleasure. New types, derived from these strategies, began to appear at the time as well: the nervous woman, the frigid wife, the indifferent mother (or with murderous obsessions), the perverse husband, the hysterical girl, the precocious child, and the young homosexual. Foucault argues, nevertheless, that it is not that these strategies controlled sexuality. They were actually involved in the very *production* of it. He defends his thesis on the construction of sexuality: sexuality is “not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power” (1634).

reiterate the norm, cite it, put it in movement. Only this way can the system be maintained (*Bodies* 12). In her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, she writes that performativity is needed because the whole system is quite fragile. She argues that homosexuality—i.e., “being” a lesbian—is *not* the copy or the shadow of the original—i.e., “being” a heterosexual. In fact, the very being a lesbian *constitutes* heterosexuality:

the origin requires its derivations in order to affirm itself as an origin, for origins only make sense to the extent that they are differentiated from that which they produce as derivatives. Hence, if it were not for the notion of the homosexual *as copy*, there would be no construct of heterosexuality as *origin*. Heterosexuality here presupposes homosexuality. (“Imitation” 1714)

In order to explain this, she draws from Derrida’s “The Double Session”, in which he defends that the imitation does not copy from the original, but constitutes it performatively, and that the original becomes phantasmatic. Derrida writes, for instance:

we are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing: faced, so to speak, with a double that couples no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double. There is no simple reference... This speculum reflects no reality: it produces mere “reality-effects”. (qtd. in Butler “Imitation” 1713)

Butler defends that in order to allow agency, there is a need for permanent performance, to produce “reality effects”. So that the supposed copy might become closer to the original and the original can become phantasmatic. Every performance has reality effects, not reality, only reality effects. So it should always be repeated.

The subversion would be promoted through the very performativity of the system, but as parody, though. Butler proposes how such action should take place: “the parodic or imitative effect of gay identities works neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and *panicked* imitation of its own

naturalized idealization” (“Imitation” 1713). She explains parodic performativity further in *Bodies that Matter*:

If there is agency, it is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation and identification with those normative demands. The forming, crafting, bearing, circulation, signification of that sexed body will not be a set of actions performed in compliance with the law; on the contrary, they will be a set of actions mobilized by the law, the citational accumulation and dissimulation of the law that produces material effects, the lived necessity of those effects as well as the lived contestation of that necessity. (*Bodies* 12)

3.4. Parodic Performativity in *Brokeback Mountain*

The film *Brokeback Mountain* does contain much performativity. That could be evidenced in formal and narrative aspects. The formal aspects that I discuss are point of view and editing (these concepts will be explained later in this section). In relation to narrative, I argue that there is much performativity through the way the characters deal with homosexuality, and especially through the rather intense performance of the sex-gender system by Jack and Ennis—since they have male genitalia and bodies, and (hiper)masculine gender. But my main argument is that such performativity that is so greatly played throughout the film even enhances the subversion of *Brokeback Mountain*, when confronted with the homosexual desire and practices experienced by the protagonists. What I intend to say is that despite this intense performativity, despite the story looking like *Romeo and Juliet*, it is not and it will never be such universal story, and this fact is due exclusively to the rupture of heteronormativity. It is not enough, for normative society, to simply play by the rules—sex, gender, family, religion, jobs, beautiful house, children, Thanksgiving lunches and July 4 parades—when desire/practice is same-sex. An apparently

“simple” rupture of the rule is always considered different, abject, break, and therefore always brings implications to it—prejudice, non-acceptance, often violence.

As aforementioned, I will discuss first the elements of the film that suggest *performativity*. Relating to form, there are some moments in which the point of view and the editing of the shots might be argued as subjective and heterosexual. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson explain the subjective shot, also called as “character camera”, “point-of-view shot” and “first-person camera”: “sometimes the camera, through its positioning and movements, invites us to see events ‘through the eyes’ of a character” (243). It happens when the camera is positioned in the place where the character’s eyes are supposed to be, so that the images shown represent the optical field of the character. The sounds are also those which are heard by the character only. Such resource could be used in order to make the audience identify with the character through which the subjective shot is taken.²¹

There are two scenes in which the use of point-of-view camera could be argued as heterosexual. The first one is in which Joe Aguirre, the employer of Jack and Ennis, observes them together through the use of binoculars. First, there is a subjective extreme long shot²²—its corners a little darker and shadowy, enacting the view from binoculars—with a traveling camera accompanying the two cowboys, half-naked, running and embracing in camp. Then, there is a medium close-up shot of Aguirre looking through his binoculars, and then just of the eyes of Aguirre (when he puts down the binoculars). Finally, there is an open shot revealing the position of Aguirre, hidden in the woods. It

²¹ The theory on the subjective shot is still controversial. On the one hand, there are theorists, such as François Truffaut, for instance, who still defend that the audience only identifies itself when the character speaks directly towards the own audience, looking at the camera. On the other hand, the theory of the subjective camera is still defended by many scholars, especially the aforementioned Bordwell and Thompson.

²² Here I use Bordwell and Thompson’s nomenclature of shots: extreme long shot, long shot, American shot, medium shot, and close-up shot, all defined in *Film Art*.

could be argued that this sequence asks the audience to identify with the heterosexual gaze, which is, in Aguirre's case, homophobic. Some scenes later, when the characters are counting the sheep, Aguirre comments that the sheep were mixed with another flock and says: "you ranch stiff, you ain't never no good". Later in the film, when Jack comes to his trailer to ask him for another job, Aguirre makes it clear that he does not approve his employees' sexuality, when he comments: "you boys sure found a way to make time pass up there" and "you guys wasn't getting paid to leave the dogs baby-sit the sheep while you stemmed the rose".

The second scene that could be argued as to hold a heterosexual point-of view is the one in which character Alma discovers her husband's sexuality, when she sees Ennis kissing Jack in front of their house. There is a close-up shot of the two cowboys kissing passionately after years without seeing each other. Right after that, there is a medium shot showing Alma seeing them kissing through the glass front door. Later, there is a subjective long shot of Alma seeing them kissing, again through the glass door, this turn from the inside of the house (the camera is positioned where her eyes should be). There is a close-up shot of Alma's face, in shock, and a medium close-up shot of her closing the door and walking around the house. Some scenes later, after being presented to Jack and being left alone in the house, there is a shot of her, alone, hearing the click of the front door of the house being closed. It could be argued that the whole sequence makes the audience identify with the betrayed wife, who is being cheated on, who was misled about her husband's sexuality. In both scenes, Aguirre's and especially Alma's, one can argue that there is the identification of the public with the heterosexual gaze, which observes and disapproves of the deviance of the heterosexual norm.

Still with regards to formal aspects, there is one instance in the editing of the film, in particular, that may be argued as performativity of the heterosexual norm. Right after the scene of the two cowboys making love for the first time, the film depicts Ennis finding, the next morning, a dead sheep, bloody and dilacerated by a coyote. The cut from the scenes of them making love to the scene of the dead sheep may represent that something bad has happened or is yet to happen, since the protagonists have transgressed the norm. The red blood of the sheep may be argued as to foresee the tragedy tone of the protagonists' lives throughout the rest of the film.

Furthermore, now in relation to narrative, the film brings performativity by its depiction of the characters' dealing with homosexuality, often through acts of homophobia. Most characters around the protagonists are indeed aware of the cowboys' sexuality; however, they either pretend they are not or they disapprove of it. Eventually, they commit crimes. Whereas Jack's father keeps distant from his son, Aguirre makes pejorative comments, and Alma only confronts Ennis years after their divorce; Ennis's father and Jack's wife Lureen may have committed crimes.

John Twist, Jack's father, knows all about his son's sexuality and about what happened in Brokeback Mountain. It is impossible to tell, though, *when* John discovered about Jack's sexuality. It is quite explicit that father and son have never held a good relationship. In the beginning of the film, Jack already announces that he prefers to work for Aguirre than with his dad, even though Aguirre is not a good employer. Jack recognizes that working for Aguirre is not a good option; however, he says: "but best than working for my old man. Can't please my old man, no way". Another evidence of their distant relationship is the fact that, although John was a bullrider—activity that Jack was willing to follow—, he never encouraged his son in the profession. Jack states once, in a conversation

up the mountain: “he kept his secrets to himself. Never taught me a thing, never once come to see me ride”. Finally, there is the conversation between Ennis and John, in the end of the film, when Ennis wants to take Jack’s ashes to be buried in Brokeback but is stopped by John, who wants to bury them in the family’s plot. For scholar Daniel Garrett, John’s attitude towards Jack’s burial wishes “may be an affirmation of family, but it is a denial of Jack’s individuality, a denial of Jack’s ambition, love and spirit; and, again, Jack—once full of yearning, and who said nothing came to his hand the way he wanted, in the right way—had been denied” (56). And for Richard Miskolci, John is the decadent patriarch whose speech describes the failure of his son (562).

Aguirre and Alma, as aforementioned, hold their heteronormative gaze towards the protagonists. Eventually, they confront the protagonists about their sexual life. That happens when, as aforementioned, Aguirre refuses to give Jack another job on Brokeback and utters pejorative comments about his sexuality. Alma, who is target of much misogynist depiction throughout the film (see chapter 4), only confronts Ennis years after their divorce, when she is already married to someone else. In a Thanksgiving dinner, she yells at him, saying that she knew that Jack was his lover.

Ennis’s father has gone much farther in his homophobia than the characters already discussed. At one time, Ennis tells Jack the story of the death of Earl, which happened when the former was only eight years old. Earl and Rich were homosexuals who lived together in a ranch, in his neighborhood. They were violently murdered and Ennis’s father took him and his brother by their hands to see Earl dead. There is a flashback in the story, showing the father and the two sons watching Earl dead in an irrigation ditch, with Ennis’s narration in voice-over: “they took a tire iron to him, spurred him and dragged him around by up his dick ‘till it pulled off [. . .] my daddy, he made sure me and my brother seen it.

Hell, for all I know, he done the job”. It is very likely that, indeed, Ennis’s father is the one who committed the crime. Even if it was not him, he still took his sons to watch it, proud, teaching them such horrible lesson. For John Howards, this is “the only episode outside the narrative arc, but fundamental to it. A very particular view of the past. The lessons of history” (100). This is so, that Ennis is emphatic when echoing the impossibility of a homosexual steady relationship: “Two men living together?” he asks, and then immediately answers himself: “No way!” Grundmann also writes about the episode: “His [Ennis’s] father’s cynical act of pedagogy has come full circle: he had dragged little Ennis before the remains of a homophobic murder, which made his son internalize society’s every creed about queers and, tragically, kept him from sharing his life with Jack. It is hard not to be affected by the character’s deep sense of grief” (par. 17). Finally, Justin Vicari gives his opinion: “They [Ennis and Jack] were emotionally gutted, early in their lives, by the recognition that, to be themselves, they would have to fight *to the death* against the entire world—a world who would always fight back harder, and would always win” (my emphasis par. 2).

Jack’s wife Lureen may have committed a crime too, against Jack himself. It is not possible to tell whether Jack actually died as she described it or as the images shown on the screen. While she is giving her version of Jack’s death over the phone to Ennis, in voice-over, the film shows images of men beating up Jack severely with a piece of tire. It is not possible to say whether this is true or just Ennis’s imagination. It could have been a homophobic crime, Lureen could have hired the killers, when she found out that her husband was leaving her for a man (their neighbor Randall) in Lightin’ Flat. Or yet, this could be just Ennis’s mental subjectivity. Bordwell and Thompson explain this phenomenon: “We might hear an internal commentary reporting the character’s thoughts,

or we might see the character's 'inner images', representing memory, fantasy, dreams, or hallucinations" (78). Nevertheless, for Howard,

whether Jack's death is an accident or a murder, whether the gay bashing is interpreted as an inevitable invention of Ennis (as the story leaves open) or is, in fact, the work of nasty rural vigilantes (as everyone I've polled says the movie suggests), the moral remains the same. Ennis's moral: "Bottom line is, we're around each other and this thing grabs ahold of us, in the wrong place, wrong time, we're dead". (101)

Finally, there is performativity in the own protagonists' dealing with their very sexuality. Andrew Holleran writes that the film

indicts both kinds of homophobia: the external and the internal. As awful as the homophobes are who litter the film (from their first boss, to the rodeo clown who rebuffs Jack's offer to buy him a drink, to his father in the final scene), it's equally about gay men's self-censorship, their internalization of what is expected of a man. (par. 15)

Indeed, the performativity in the film is much intensified by the protagonists' staying in the closet. The only time when Ennis starts a conversation (which he almost never does, as will be discussed later on in this section) is to make it clear that he is not gay. He begins his talk by saying: "It's a one shot thing we got going on here". Jack replies: "it's nobody's business but ours". Ennis, then, continues (fact that is incredible due to his endless silence through the film): "you know I ain't queer". Then, Jack ends by saying: "me neither". Just these four lines of dialogue define the protagonists' actions throughout the film: of staying inside the closet. In fact, never do they assume to society or even to themselves of their queerness (at least Ennis, since Jack would be willing to come out of the closet if Ennis would)²³ and live apart through their lives. Moreover, they are quite afraid that society will

²³ For Grundmann, "Ennis has so thoroughly internalized his hardscrabble existence that he has no clue how to break from his bone crunching seasonal work as an unskilled ranch hand. Jack, by contrast, would be all too happy to trade his golden cage for a more honest, if modest, smalltime farm life with Ennis" (par. 9).

find out about their sexuality. Ennis says, at one point: “you ever get the feeling, I don’t know, when you’re in town and someone looks at ya’ suspicious, like he knows, and then you go out on the pavement. And everyone’s lookin’ at you like they all know too”. For Esposito et al., because of the fact that the protagonists remain in the closet, having to run away in order to be together, using “their private time together at Brokeback Mountain as a place of refuge” (par. 11), *Brokeback Mountain* associates homosexuality with “shame and fear” (par. 3). Whereas author Annie Proulx affirms that the story is of “destructive rural homophobia” (qtd in Esposito et al par. 8), Esposito et al. add to such statement, by affirming that this happens mainly because the protagonists remain in the closet.

The closet gains material presence in the end of the film, which can also be argued as performativity of the heterosexual norm. Jack dies—the tragic ending still pursues homosexuals in film, even in the 21st century. The last scene is of Ennis alone, living in a trailer, at a place he has just moved in (since he is gluing identification numbers in his new mailbox). He is poor, he is not even sure he will be able to attend his daughter Alma Jr’s wedding, because he has got to work. All he has are the two shirts and the postcard of Brokeback, in the inner part of his wardrobe door—inside the closet. This fact may allude to the protagonists’ keeping themselves in the closet until the end: even the shirts remain in the closet.²⁴ Miskolci writes about the many closets in the film: “from one closet to another, their love is kept secret for 20 years” (563). Howards writes about the end of the film as well, specifically with regards to Ennis: “and he’s the last man standing in the end. Alone. At the closet; his lover dead [. . .] His trailer a closet; Wyoming, too. Gay love, there, untenable” (100).

²⁴ In this sense, the shirts become motifs, which are elements from the setting and part of the costumes that are integrated in the narrative (Bordwell and Thompson 150).

Furthermore, one of the main aspects of *Brokeback Mountain*'s performativity can be found in the film's very sex-gender system. First of all, the protagonists present male genitalia and bodies which are (very much) masculine.²⁵ Californian Jake Gyllenhaal, who plays Jack, and Australian Heath Ledger, who plays Ennis, are actors of Hollywoodian beauty, whose bodies are very much aligned to the aesthetic standards of contemporary (Western) society.

In fact, beauty, more specifically classic beauty, is an issue discussed in relation to masculinity by many theorists, out of who I can draw George L. Mosse, in his *The Image of Man: the Creation of Modern Masculinity*, published in 1996. In this work, Mosse discusses the ideal of masculinity pursued by men ever since the second half of the 18th century, ideal which he entitles "modern masculinity", which attributes masculinity directly to physical beauty based on the Greek ideal of bodily aesthetics. He explains that along with the emergence of the bourgeoisie, aristocratic ideals of masculinity were put aside: although attributes such as courage, nobleness, and compassion were still maintained as desirable characteristics in a man, physical appearance began to gain importance. At that time—during the emergence of "modern masculinity"—, sciences derived from the Enlightenment believed that the body was directly connected to the soul (25). For example, both John Locke and Rousseau thought that a physically fit body was essential for a

²⁵ In this point, the film differs much from the Annie Proulx's original short-story. The protagonists, in her story, are quite ugly. Here are their descriptions: "At first glance Jack seemed fair enough with his curly hair and quick laugh, but for a small man he carried some weight in the haunch and his smile disclosed buckteeth, not pronounced enough to let him eat popcorn out of the neck of a jug, but noticeable. He was infatuated with the rodeo life and fastened his belt with a minor bull-riding buckle, but his boots were worn to the quick, holed beyond repair and he was crazy to be somewhere, anywhere else than Lightning Flat. Ennis, high-arched nose and narrow face, was scruffy and a little cave-chested, balanced a small torso on long, caliper legs, possessed a muscular and supple body made for the horse and for fighting. His reflexes were uncommonly quick and he was farsighted enough to dislike reading anything except Hamley's saddle catalog" (pars. 7 and 8). The choice of beautiful protagonists for the film is evidently because of marketing reasons. Still, this marketing choice ends up contributing to the subversion of the film, in my opinion. Very beautiful and masculine men depicted as gay comes as a much greater shock than ugly men being gay. Beauty, as discussed here, is very much related to the ideal of normative masculinity.

“proper moral posture” (27). This ideal body was inspired by Greek art, more specifically, Greek sculptures, those that praised balance and proportion of figures. For Mosse, such ideal “was so powerful precisely because unlike abstract ideas or ideals it could be seen, touched, or even talked to, a live reminder of human beauty, of proper morals, and of a longed-for utopia” (06). Mosse points out that transformations in society have put “modern masculinity” in check, but not succeeded in destroying the homogenizing notion of this ideal masculinity. In the 19th century, besides the emergence of the countertypes and the changing role of women, there were economic crises, advances of technologies, and new diseases. In the 20th century, “modern masculinity” was threatened by the image of the socialist and fascist men, and decades later, by the Beat Generation, by the hippies and punks, androgyny, and also by women and homosexuals rights’ movements. Nevertheless, Mosse concludes: “Maybe now there is a blur in the stereotype of men, but the ideal of masculinity still prevails” (192), that is, men still have to be beautiful in order to be considered masculine.

In relation to gender, the protagonists of *Brokeback Mountain* are, still, very much in the sex-gender system (therefore, in performativity), as they follow almost blindingly the attributes of hegemonic masculinity.²⁶

²⁶ Here, I do understand that the term “hegemonic masculinity” is controversial and should be used with much caution (for this discussion, see Connel and Messerschmidt, 2005). For working reasons, however, I will not problematize it in the present thesis; I will use Michael Mangan’s definition: “that form or model of masculinity which a culture privileges above others, which implicitly defines what is ‘normal’ for males in that culture, and which is able to impose that definition of normality upon other kinds of masculinity” (13). Moreover, I still would like to emphasize the influence of hegemonic masculinity over society, which is very powerful especially in the formation of stereotypes of the ideal. Andrew Kimbrell has drawn a list of stereotypes about men compared to women, collected from surveys and research conducted in the US. Here is his complete list: “More self-interested, very competitive, needs less intimacy, needs less approval, very active, very objective, more independent, more logical, often detached, strong drive for power and money, more manipulative, more machine-oriented, never cries, very ambitious, talks mostly about things [and not people, as compared to women], takes things literally [not looking for hidden meaning, like women do], engages in put-downs, less responsive listener, less apologetic, less willing to seek help, less interested in arts and religion, often intimidates others, often seeks conflict, thrives on receiving [instead of giving], more

Protagonist Jack does not quite fit the hegemonic masculinity stereotype. Differently from what would be expected of a man, he is the first to look at Ennis, *another man*, when they meet. He is the first to talk, always, not conforming to the stereotype of men's silence. He is the one who introduces himself first and who asks Ennis's last name, when Ennis introduces himself only through his first name—scholar Joshua Clover, in his analysis of the first scene of the film, discusses how Jack has a more “aggressive” and “active” posture towards Ennis when they first meet. Then, in the following scene, at a bar, he is the first to talk again, blabbing about his previous experience working on Brokeback. Already up the mountain, he is the one who advises Ennis to stay in camp when he is too drunk to go sleep with the sheep. And he invites Ennis to sleep in the tent with him when it is too cold. It is he who takes the initiative of their first sexual intercourse. On the second night, it is he who kisses Ennis, although it is Ennis who comes to the tent out of his own will. Ennis is confused, though, and Jack comforts him: “it's alright”, he says. He actually wants to build a life with Ennis, proposing several times for them to live together in a ranch, during the many years they spend on and off. He demonstrates feelings too, by confessing to Ennis the popular sentence of the film: “I wish I knew how to quit you”. Chris Berry writes about how Jack is not only feminized because of his pursuing of Ennis, but also in many other ways:

For example, at first it is Jack who goes up on to the slopes to tend the sheep and Ennis who keeps the campsite. But it turns out Ennis is not much good in the “domestic” role and so they swap. When they do have sex, although Jack initiates, the film makes it very clear that from the start Ennis is the active partner. Later on, when Jack gets married, even his wife is the boss in the family. She is from a rich family and runs the business, while he does as he is told as her salesman. (par. 6)

polygamous, more sadistic, more sex-oriented, worries less about others, more aggressive, initiates war” (17). Kimbrell comments on his list: “no matter how varied each of our individual responses, our collective masculine images are firmly stereotyped and have been for decades” (17).

Jack also flirts with other men, and even intends to have an open relationship with another man in his father's ranch. Scholar Carlos Hünninghausen writes that "Jack Twist blatantly plays according to the 'feminine' norm" (par. 12). In my opinion, there is another aspect of Jack that reflects such "femininity": his inclination towards art, more specifically, music. In many scenes, he plays the harmonica, although not well, according to Ennis. And he sings too ("I know I shall meet you on that final day") at one point of the film. Howard summarizes a description of Jack: he would be "the more definitively queer bottom boy, a showy, singing, rodeo cowboy, raised Pentecostal, prone to wearing purple" (101). An interesting fact is that he is the one who gets killed in the end. This may happen because he is the one who more openly confronts normative society.

Although Jack can be argued as having a feminized role, as in the discussion above, he still plays according to hegemonic masculinity.²⁷ First of all, because he is a cowboy, just as Ennis is. They deal with animals, ride horses, sleep in tents, shoot to eat (although it is Ennis who shoots the elk), cook only out of tin cans, and only a couple of dishes: beans and soup—at one point Jack says: "I warn ya', I can't cook worth a damn. I am pretty good with a can opener, though", and Ennis replies: "you can't be no worse than me then".

²⁷ Not only the protagonists but also other characters of the film perform according to the masculine norm, in fact, they are even hypermasculine, according to Justin Vicari. He defends that the sexuality of the male characters of the film in general, not only of the protagonists, which is kept apart from women and from society, is also "hyper-masculine", "with the men performing male rituals not out of necessity but only to prove that they still can" (par. 14). First of all, there is Aguirre, who swears much, has brute manners, is always yelling and smoking. As a "macho", he disapproves of his employees' sexual practice and does not give Jack a job again. Then, there is the priest who marries Ennis and Alma. In the end of the ceremony, he says: "you may kiss the bride. And if you don't, I will". Finally, there is Lureen's father, who tries to affirm his masculinity (and his wealth) by showing that he is superior to Jack. When Lureen has a baby, he keeps saying that the baby is "the spittin' image of his Grandpa", instead of Jack's; he wants to do the carving of their Thanksgiving turkey, and finally, he has an argument with Jack over his grandson watching TV while eating dinner. At last, he wants the grandson to watch football: "you want your boy to grow up to be a man, don't ya, daughter? Boys should watch football".

For Dennis Grunes, “these [Jack and Ennis] are ‘Marlboro men’, not [stereotyped] queers, after all, in their boots and jeans, puffing on cigarettes underneath their cowboy hats” (par. 2). Even the excuse they use to meet and cheat on their wives is fishing, considered a man’s activity. For Vicari, the film “does not comfortably wear the label ‘gay’ any more than its protagonists, who shun the idea that they could ever be ‘queer’” (par. 2). For Hünninghausen, “director Ang Lee jumpstarts all conventions right from the beginning: as a ‘gay’ couple, Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar’ performance is remarkably *masculine* and *virile*. Their chores, all tasks traditionally assigned to heterosexual males (herding sheep, riding, chopping down wood, tending a camp, hunting down coyotes), are performed effortlessly” (author’s emphasis par. 4). After all, even if Jack gets to play a musical instrument—activity which is commonly attributed to a feminine role—, it is, still, the harmonica, primarily a man’s instrument.

The more masculine protagonist is definitely Ennis Del Mar. Even Heath Ledger, the actor who played Ennis, admitted, in the December 2005 issue of *Variety*, that Ennis was the most masculine character he had ever played (Garrett 60). For one thing, Ennis does not admit that he is “queer” at any moment throughout the film, not to anybody, especially not to himself. One of the first full sentences he delivers to Jack after their first sexual relation is the aforementioned “You know I ain’t queer.” Indeed, in spite of being gay, he does not act less masculine in the story: he is tough, for he does not mind sleeping near the sheep, in the cold and wilderness of Brokeback. He wants to live isolated: does not want to go to the city, only does so after much insistence from Alma, and later in the film does not want to live with his daughter Alma Jr., and, in the last scene, ends up living in a trailer by himself, in the desert. He never shows his feelings, not when his daughter announces she will marry, neither when he is first separated from Jack: though he feels awful and cries in an alley, he

does not signal anything to the latter. Even when he is suffering terribly in the alley, he yells at a passerby: “What the fuck you looking at?,” never losing his stereotyped masculine posture. Moreover, when he does show his feelings—only in moments of desperation—, he does so through violence, maybe the strongest masculinity stereotype:²⁸ the first time coming down the mountain, he punches Jack; when insulted about his sexual life in a July 4 parade, he initiates a fight with two bikers; and when confronted about his sexuality by pregnant Alma, he grabs her arm and threatens her, after that, he punches a stranger on the street.

But most of the time Ennis simply does not talk. The first time he meets Jack, none of them talk, although Jack keeps staring at Ennis through the rearview mirror of his truck. They do not even talk to Aguirre when the employer comes and enters his trailer. They only accompany Aguirre when the latter calls them and offers them jobs. At one point already on the mountain, when Ennis utters only a few sentences about his life story, Jack says, surprised: “man, that’s more words than you’ve spoke in the past two weeks”. Ennis answers: “hell, that’s the most I’ve spoke in a year”. The next morning after their first sexual relation, Ennis is about to leave without even waking his partner. When Jack runs over to meet him and says: “see you for supper”, Ennis only answers, without looking: “yeah”.

For Ang Lee, the wordlessness of these men is “something I [Lee] originally thought was down to the writer, but found to be true among men of this kind” (qtd. in Clarke par. 14). The protagonists are closed specially towards women, as Edward Buscombe puts it:

²⁸ This is so that a common saying in North-American society is “Boys will be boys”, referring to men’s supposed propensity for violence.

Central to this conception of masculinity is the notion that real men don't talk, they act: if emotions are expressed they are of anger or hatred and love cannot be readily articulated. For this reason it is easy to assume either that love is absent (where women are concerned), or that if present it is the love that dares not speak its name. (par. 4)

But, also, the protagonists are closed towards other men, as Vicari puts it:

if the men speak a language that is closed to women, it's also closed, for the most part, to other men. The brilliant opening scenes are completely wordless [. . .] Even when a genuine social purpose is established (hiring someone for work), reluctance to speak to other men is deeply conditioned within the male psyche. (par. 19)

Moreover, Vicari writes that "Ennis is a man afraid of his own voice, afraid of revealing any internal part of himself. But his unwillingness to exist goes deeper; in any room with other people, he often doesn't seem to even be there at all" (par. 22). The silence of the protagonists, therefore, would have a greater function than just not talking. Colin Johnson writes about such function: "it's the deafening *silence* that Lee's film associates with open spaces that seems to point to the site where intimacy's potential might be realized. Talk, by contrast, maps its very limitations" (par. 4). Finally, for Miskolci, the constant presence of silence would represent the protagonists' social obligation of invisibility due to their sexuality. For him, that happens because the silences characterize the relationship between subaltern individuals (562).

Summing up, it is possible to say that the protagonists of the film are very clearly inside performativity when it comes to their sex, body, and gender. Hünninghausen writes about this: "by effortlessly performing masculinity and submitting to compulsory heterosexuality while, at the same time, carrying on their attachment, Jack and Ennis reveal the performative aspects of gender" (par. 6). One could argue that the protagonists' gender performance, their masculinity, somehow legitimates their homosexuality. After all, times are changing, so one could be gay, as long as s/he did not look or act like one. Only this

way could gays be taken seriously in cinema, to the extent that they performed according to gender norms, as long as they played by the rules. Eliana Ávila defends such argument:

The film legitimates homosexuality in the sense that it shows gay cowboys who, despite being gay, are still masculine. The fact that they are masculine would somehow make everything okay. Homosexuality has been beginning to be tolerated. The two protagonists are “victims” of Western colonization, but they also benefit from it. Because since they are masculine, they are allowed to be homosexual. This is a great problem in the film. *BM* naturalizes homosexuality, by reinforcing masculinity [. . .] the film is, at the same time, transgressive, since it troubles sexuality and genre [the Western], but also conservative, since it does not rupture gender. In this sense, the film somehow continues tradition. (oral communication)

However, such “tradition”—as Ávila entitles it—is only apparent. There is never tradition in homosexual practices. The tradition is only in heteronormativity. When there is rupture of the heterosexual matrix, it is not tradition anymore, but something else. It is subversion. What I defend here is that the sex, body, and gender performativity of the protagonists even enhance the subversion in the film, to the extent that it promotes Butler’s parodic performativity. The parody, in the film, would be in the characters’ homosexual practices and desire. They look and act masculine, but they desire and practice same-sex relations. That would be the latest instance of parodic performativity, in my opinion.²⁹ For Butler, a great instance for agency is precisely the parody of normative *sexuality*, since the latter is always hidden, mysterious, and cannot be seen or perceived so easily as sex or gender. She writes, in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, that “perhaps this will be a

²⁹ The protagonists’ homosexual practices are not only an example of parodic performativity but they also evidence quite clearly the performativity within the categories of sex and gender, which are subordinated to the heterosexual matrix. Hünninghausen writes about this: “My argument is [. . .] that *Brokeback Mountain*’s apparent lack of visibility is exactly the point in discussion as it brings the performative of both categories to the front. The problem right now is not to tell stories of ‘openly’ gay characters, but to demonstrate very precisely how the heterosexual matrix naturalizes sex and gender. And this is exactly what this film does. Because the film’s main characters never fully resume their queerness (except for Jack’s more overtly ‘feminine’ routine made explicit in his longing for Ennis, his more compliant role in the story), they never live together, and they never succeed in developing a fully homosexual identity. Both norms are evaluated, leveled by the same principle, the performative” (par. 15).

matter of working sexuality *against* identity, even against gender, and of letting that which cannot fully appear in any performance persist in its disruptive promise” (author’s emphasis 1718).

Homosexuality is quite explicitly depicted in the film, in the protagonists’ first night together. Howard writes about it:

not since the fleeting fisting scene in *Cruising* has a major motion picture depicted such a hot queer sex act. Can’t you just see Lee and the camera tight in the tent with Heath and Jake? *Okay, spit on your hand now. Take him from behind. Act as if you’re ramming your cock up his ass. Try not to think about sheep. Brokeback* admits associations of homosexuality and bestiality. Animal passions. Rural queers ostensibly closer to nature. Grunting, squealing, if not exactly like a pig. (101)

Homosexuality is not only explicit in the film but it is also the center of the narrative, as Hünninghausen puts it:

In *Brokeback Mountain* homosexuality is not shy, happens in passing or subsides to the background: it is at the center of the stage, and it is played by two male characters who also happen to be attracted (but more than that) to each other. Jack and Ennis’ attraction is placed as center stage as possible in the film. (par. 5)

Jenna Ng writes about this as well, and points out that the awards won by the film should be considered from a different perspective than those won by other films depicting homosexuality:

Homosexuality has been represented before in many mainstream and acclaimed films, but the issue in those precedents remains one used as a plot device—such as *The Birdcage* (for comic effect)—or else essentially fringe in a panoply of larger themes [. . .] *Brokeback*, on the other hand, is a drama that is steadfastly, unwaveringly, fixedly about a gay relationship. To that extent, *Brokeback* is perhaps not unlike Wong Kar-Wai’s *Happy Together*, yet the latter remains, to the Western world at least, an art film, an auteur work, and it certainly did not open to the publicity, mainstream acceptance and award glory that *Brokeback* is currently basking in. And perhaps that is the difference I sense: for once, these were award wins accomplished *despite* of controversy rather than *because*. (my emphasis par. 1)

Finally, Hünninghausen believes that the film might put heterosexuality in check, or even re-construct heterosexuality as having its basis on homosexuality. He writes:

Eventually, because Jack and Ennis end up so miserably lonely and, even after years of complete immersion in heterosexual performances, still hunger for one another, heterosexual culture itself ends up being questioned as an undisputed norm by this romantic couple. (par. 8)

This is why, I believe, *Brokeback Mountain* is not universal, not about just love, not simply performativity, neither hipermasculinity legitimizing homosexuality. I defend that it is subversion. Moreover, I believe—and I echo scholar Hunninghausen here—that because the film promotes parodic performativity of the sex/gender/desire system so intensely, it actually shows how not only sexuality but also sex and gender are constructed, performed, reiterated according to the norm.

CHAPTER IV

BEYOND THE MOUNTAIN: FINAL REMARKS

As already discussed, the story of *Brokeback Mountain* does seem to be a personal yet universal love story, which could happen to any couple, anywhere, at any time of history. Some theorists have argued that the plot of the film is apolitical because its narrative develops in a context devoid of time and history, although it is clearly set in chronological time (it begins, as the credits attest, in 1963). Irini Stamatopoulos, for example, defends that it is possible to affirm that the story is timeless because of two main reasons, related to formal aspects. The first is the fact that the duration of time in the film is divided unequally. Half of the film is dedicated to the one first summer the protagonists spend together, whereas the other half has to encompass the twenty years which followed that summer. Stamatopoulos writes that “the ‘realistic’ [i. e., naturalistic] effect of the first part’s temporal structure corresponds to the boys’ sense of living their ‘true’ life, which is in opposition to the second part’s falsifying time-constructing decoupage” (par. 11). The second reason for the timelessness of the film would be the fact that the characters do not age much in appearance, although more than two decades go by in the story. They grow mustaches, gain a little weight, but still wear the same clothes and keep a boyish face. Stamatopoulos writes:

We can gather by the plot’s development the passage of time, but we are unable of feeling it as do the characters. Time passes around the edges of characters, leaving the two boys in a deep engagement of time-revolving repetition, actual or illusionary, of their blissful days of beatitude on Brokeback. (par. 11)

Many other theorists argue that the story is ahistorical as well. Martin F. Manalansan IV writes, for instance, that “Jack and Ennis exist not in historical time but in romantic time. The *Brokeback* lovers do not need to follow a specific chronology or developmental trajectory” (99). Roger Clarke states that “universality and timelessness make *Brokeback Mountain* feel as if its story could have happened anywhere around the world in any era since the bronze age” (par. 12).

Adding up to the story’s timelessness, the characters would be unaware of any historical event which took place during their time. Even though the story started in “a kind of no-man’s-land between the drably conservative 50s and the still-to-come sexual revolution” (Vicari par. 4), a lot has happened afterwards—and all of it was ignored by Jack and Ennis. For Patricia Nell Warren, “the romance takes place in a vacuum, with no reference to anything outside the relationship” (par. 14). There was the Vietnam War, rock and roll, the civil rights movement, the exploration to the moon, the sexual revolution, the hippie movement, the beginning of the yuppies time, among many other events. “But by the end of the film we have passed through the 70s and entered the 80s, and still nothing has changed in Ennis’ Wyoming”, writes Vicari (par. 4). In fact, Daniel Garrett points out that the protagonists, by being ignorant and poor, “are men largely unconnected to the progressive movement of culture or history” (54). Finally, Garrett asks: “is Jack aware of the changes in society that have given some support to love between men? Have Jack and Ennis heard of concepts such as bisexuality or the political movement of gays?” (54). The answer to both questions is no.

The film would also be apolitical because the characters could only live their love freely up the mountain, in the wilderness, in isolation. It would be only up the mountain, away from society, that they could be their true selves, with no restraint. Theorist Jim

Kitses ponders: “In open range, feelings, gender, and sexuality cannot be fenced in or legislated. What is sinful or perverted or deviant in the natural world, the world of the sublime?” (par. 15). The mountain is even compared to the Garden of Eden, and employer Aguirre to a God-like figure, by Stamatopoulos (par. 14, 16). Vicari writes about that too: “[s]ome genuine religious feeling—without dogma or judgment—is evoked by the landscape, the tranquility and majesty of *Brokeback* itself serving as a kind of Eden myth” (par. 20). Manalansan IV writes that, up the mountain, “literally and figuratively, Ennis and Jack are away from it all, from the turmoil of everyday life [. . .] and from the messiness of history. This historical and cultural isolation is at the core of the narrative” (98). And, as the cowboys leave the mountain, in their “fall”, “[t]heir life of ‘exile’ within their family, independently of social class or economic status [. . .], or social and professional routine [. . .] is described as their own tortured nightmare” (Stamatopoulos par. 16).

What I have tried to argue here, however, is that although *Brokeback Mountain* may look like universal, ahistorical, apolitical, isolated in time and space, it in fact is not. No story ever is. The protagonists may be, as they are, unaware of historical events, even of the passing of time. Maybe that means something, though. Perhaps such events are not mentioned just so that the public notices their absence. The story begins in 1963, less than a decade before “everything” happened, before the 70s. It is almost impossible not to think of the social movements, of sexual liberation, of the wars, and of the struggle for love and peace. Just because all of these are not mentioned in the film it does not mean that they are not there. Otherwise, the production would not even have bothered to place the story in time, through calendar years. Why would they bother if not to tell the audience: “look, this is when it happened, does not that mean anything to you?” I believe that the filmmakers wanted to call attention to the very fact that these intense historical changes taking place

then, so powerful in some social and cultural contexts, have not reached other places, i.e., they have not gotten all the way into Wyoming. Besides, if all politically engaged films accounted for history the way some theorists want them to, they would not be fiction any longer but almost documentaries.

For Dana Luciano, a reviewer for *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, the film *is*, although in a more indirect way, placed in history, not only in terms of its narrative but also as a cultural production itself: “the film tells a specifically historical story, one that illuminates above all the violent inscriptions of homophobia: a narrative that, once marked and recognized as such, may well become history” (107, 108). I agree with this statement, for I believe that not just the narrative within a film but any cultural artifact cannot be dissociated from its context of production and from its social context at large. Graeme Turner writes something similar: “[w]hen we want to deal with bodies of films, film movements, or even a single text, we need to look at the specific relations established between one film and the whole context in which it is viewed” (78).

Moreover, the mountain does look isolated, sublime, away from everything and everybody else. It is not, though.¹ No place ever is. Even the term “place” already means that there is something there, in opposition to the noun “space”. Theorist Krista Comer brings a discussion of how Western landscapes, commonly regarded as empty space ready to be explored, are actually places full of conflict. She writes that

landscape is not an empty field of vision (the premise of perceptual geography) but rather a brimming-full *social* topography that creates and

¹ Colin Johnson even defends that the open shots of the mountain, which can represent freedom for heterosexual couples, may be the opposite for homosexual ones. He writes that “the kind of big-sky rural vistas that Lee captures quite superbly on screen have tended to engender feelings of exposure and vulnerability in lesbians and gay men more than freedom and openness, two symptoms of affective privilege that heterosexual Americans have traditionally felt in connection to the great outdoors though rarely regarded as privilege per se” (par. 3).

enacts the various cultural assumptions and power struggles of the age. (13, author's emphasis)

For Comer, it is important not only “to evaluate the ways that landscape embodies social conflicts over time” but also “to be alerted to landscape itself as a social player, a protagonist, a dynamic form of cultural practice” (13).

Comer's reflection on the West can very well be applied to the notion of the mountain *Brokeback* as a place full of conflict and not just the Garden of Eden or the sublime. The mountain is not isolated, firstly, because of the material presence of employer Aguirre, who observes the protagonists through binoculars (the scene is discussed on Chapter 2), who comes to talk to them. It is Aguirre who also, a year later, refuses to give Jack another job and comments pejoratively on his sexuality. But more relevant than the employer's physical presence on the mountain is the abstract presence of fiancée Alma, Jack's parents, Ennis's siblings and homophobic father, Lureen and her father, and society at large. Although all these characters are not physically there, in the mountain, they haunt the protagonists' minds all the time. In the conversation the two protagonists keep the morning after their first lovemaking, for example, Ennis states firmly to Jack that they cannot be together, that society will never accept them. In fact, when their romance extrapolates *Brokeback*, they are discovered by parents, interpellated by wives, and Jack even loses his life on it. The mountain, in this sense, is not neutral. It is the exact starting point to conflict, to something much bigger, impossible to be controlled, which will clash against society's quite conservative values.

The film can also be discussed politically in relation to class, to gender, and to many other axes of (conflictuous) subjectivity. For example, it brings a rather misogynist representation of women. This happens also in the short-story which gives origin to it,

especially in the depiction of Ennis's house, which was "full of the smell of old blood and milk and baby shit, and the sounds were of squalling and sucking and Alma's sleepy groans" (par. 38). In the film, women almost never appear, and when they do, their depiction is negative. The only scenes in which Alma appears are, for example, getting married, putting Ennis's hand on her pregnant belly, washing clothes by the sound of two babies crying, begging Ennis for them to move to town, having sexual relations, working and taking care of their daughters. The first sentence she delivers in the film is when answering how she is to Ennis. Instead of expressing love or simply talking about herself, she answers: "Alright, but Jenny [their daughter] still got a runny nose". The second sentence is, again: "Ennis, could you wipe out Alma Jr's nose?" Later she is shown finding out about her husband's hidden relationship with Jack and only confronting the former about it many years afterwards, long after their divorce. Moreover, Lureen, Jack's wife, is depicted as a cold woman, indifferent to her husband and to her son. She is rich, Jack only marries her for the money. She is ambitious, wears makeup—bright red lipstick and blush—and expensive clothes. She is more liberal, since she is the one who approaches Jack and wants to have sex on their first night. It is evident that she does not care much about their son, when she tells Jack that she'll call his teacher "later". Jack describes her at one point: "Lureen is good at making hard deals in the machinery business but as far as our marriage goes, we could do it over the phone". There is also the possibility that she may have hired Jack's killers (see Chapter 2). Moreover, the other women who appear in the film are either needy (Ennis's girlfriend Cassie), superficial (Randall's wife, the one "who talks a blue streak"), and passive towards their husbands (Jack's mom).

Another issue that can be discussed politically in the film is the role of class conflict, especially in terms of the financial constraints for the protagonists to come out of the closet

and leave their families (mainly in Ennis's case). Ennis's parents died in a car accident, leaving the family with only "24 dollars in a coffee can". He had to live with his siblings, the bank took their farm, then he attended high school until their pick-up car broke down. When his siblings got married, he explained: "there was no room for me". He has a job in which he is exploited by brute Aguirre, who does not pay them well. He has to sleep either in a very thin and dirty tent, in a camp, or with the sheep, a place which smells like "cat piss". Jack and he have to break the rules of the federal guard, which does not allow people sleeping in the place where they herd the sheep. They eat horribly tasting food, mostly beans and soup. They do not even get the food they want, the powdered milk. When they lose their food because the mule carrying it drops the packages, they have to eat beans through an entire week. They are so subaltern that they are afraid of killing one of the sheep to *eat*. Ennis argues: "what if Aguirre finds out, huh? Supposed to guard the sheep, not eat them". Eventually, they only eat meat because they kill an elk. When Aguirre sends for them to come back from their jobs a month earlier, because of a storm coming, Ennis does not worry about being separated from Jack, at least not at first. All he cares about is the one salary that he will not receive because of this.

Jack is luckier than Ennis in financial terms. After Brokeback, he starts participating in rodeos for money but nearly starves, until he marries Lureen. He only talks to her when he hears from a bartender that her father sells "big farm equipment". At this point, his relationship with Ennis becomes uneven: Jack wants to meet him much more often, and eventually live with Ennis, but the latter cannot fulfill his wish because he has to work for money. The first time Jack proposes for them to be together, Ennis answers: "I'm stuck with what I got here. Making a living is about all I got time for now". This happens throughout their relationship. In their last encounter, they have a terrible fight when Ennis

cannot see Jack as often as they want to. Ennis explains himself: “you forget what it’s like being broke all the time”. The issue of class, money is present in the story as well, and should be taken into account when analyzing the film.

The story, therefore, seems personal, or even universal, but should be taken into account in political terms as well. Graeme Turner points out that ideology² in film is commonly placed in the personal level and not the political one. It comes disguised, especially in realistic films. Nevertheless, it is always present. He writes:

[i]t is characteristic of the workings of ideology that they express social or political differences as personal and individual, therefore to be resolved at the personal not the political level, and a sign of *individual* weaknesses, not the weakness of the social or political *system*. (151, author’s emphases)

What I try to argue here is that *Brokeback Mountain* has a great number of elements which can be discussed in political terms, arguments that go much further than the question of sexuality (see Chapter 3) and the question of US national identity (see Chapter 2). There are the questions of history, the mountain as a conflictuous place, gender, and class. It is also possible to discuss issues such as race (the fact that there are no blacks in the story, that cowboys should maybe be a little darker, and that Jack, the brunette protagonist, and not blond Ennis, is the one more willing to come out of the closet), postcolonialism (the already mentioned depiction of “dark” Mexico in opposition to the bright US), among many others.

I should also note that films are a medium that can bring agency to the extent that they are quite powerful cultural products. As Graeme Turner points out, “film is a social practice

² By “ideology”, Turner means “the category used to describe the system of beliefs and practices that is produced by this theory of reality”, the latter which is the order of reality into good and bad, into simplistic binaries. Moreover, he writes that “although ideology itself has no material form, we can see its material effects in all social and political formations, from class structure to gender relations to our idea of what constitutes an individual”. He adds that “[t]he term is also used to describe the workings of language and representation within culture which enable such formations to be constructed as ‘natural’” (131).

for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself” (xiv, xv). He defends, maybe echoing Derrida’s classic “there is nothing outside the text”, that “our only access to reality is through representation” (157). And he adds that films are “saturated with ideology”, just like any other language system (157) and like the narrative structures formed by cultures for them to make out their world (132). When a film depicts gay cowboys, therefore, does not that do away with (or at least shake) old-fashioned ideologies?

It is obvious that *Brokeback Mountain* does not rupture with everything, it is not all revolutionary, it is not a political manifesto. Indeed, it may be argued as conservative, especially due to the fact that the protagonists never come out of the closet and do end up in tragedy (with one of them actually dying). Nevertheless, I must point out that the film is a *Hollywood* production. If its filmmakers actually wanted financing, and even awards, they could not have gone much further. As shown in Chapter 3, through the discussion of the documentary *The Celluloid Closet*, Hollywood has come a long way into finally being able to depict sexual “deviants”. In this sense, *Brokeback Mountain* is a significant contribution to a more reflective and politically engaged film industry. After all, as J. Esposito ponders, “at the very least, [. . . it] brought to the silver screen a loving sexual relationship between two men. It brought homosexuality into many mainstream conversations” (par. 10). Hopefully, soon enough, whether through films, literature, individual or collective struggle, political discussions, activism, the academy, homosexuality and all diversity (not just related to sexuality) will be brought not only into conversations but into the streets, into the public arena.

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