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Boys and Brokeback: American Attitudes towards Gays

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I. Introduction – The Hollywood Mirror

Movies, like television, literature and music, reflect a society's standards, values, trends, and anxieties. When Elizabeth Taylor wore a slip in the 1960 movie *Butterfield 8* and Clark Gable went without an undershirt in 1934's *It Happened One Night*, each movie indicated a shift in social mores, a reflection of a change of attitudes in clothing styles. Movies have also reflected changes in political perspectives: The wave of alien invasion movies of the 1950s (*Attack of the Flying Saucers*, *The Atomic Submarine*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and more) revealed the American psychological paranoia of the Cold War, just as numerous movies of the late 1970s/1980s that dwelt on Vietnam (*Apocalypse Now*, *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, etc.) demonstrated a collective attempt to come to psychological grips with the loss of that war.

As standards shift movies can become embarrassing reminders of past social norms that make contemporary viewers justifiably uneasy: Witness Kate Smith singing "Pickaninny Heaven" to children of color in the 1933 movie *Hello, Everybody!* Contrast this with a movie produced decades later like *Crash* (2005), which attempts to address racism in 21st century America. As American society changes, movies are the lenses through which we see our altered values. Movies give us the opportunity to see ourselves as we were, as we are, and in some cases as we would like to be, but always through the prism of the values existing at the time the movie is made.

In the Hollywood mirror LGBT people have been depicted as something to be laughed at (*Wanderer of the West*, a parody of a western in which the "sissy" was the joke), or pitied (*The Children's Hour*), or feared (*Cruising*)(Russo, 1989). Only recently have mainstream movies begun to depict LGBT people as simply *people* (ex. *Silkwood*'s character of Dolly Pellicker as played by Cher). When we consider two landmark movies that depict gay men, 1970's *Boys in the Band* and 2005's *Brokeback Mountain*, we can see evidence of how American society has

progressed – to a degree - in acceptance of LGBT people. To quote a deplorable cigarette company ad, “You’ve come a long way baby,” but our culture still has a long way to go.

II. Gay Life In Cinema: *The Boys In The Band* and *Brokeback Mountain*

The Boys in the Band and *Brokeback Mountain* have many similarities. Both are set in 1960s America. Both are ground-breaking movies for their times that dealt with the subject of homosexuality. Both have gay main characters. Both movies were intended for wide distribution to large audiences. In a way, these two movies form “bookends” for the genre of films with gay male protagonists.

Where the two movies are different is a product of when they were made. *Brokeback Mountain* is set in rural Wyoming in 1963 while *The Boys in the Band* is set in New York City in 1969, one year after the Stonewall riots. Consider these locations and times. The New York City of *Boys* would have been one of the few places in America where gay people could live relatively un-molested, particularly a year after the Stonewall riots kick-started the nascent gay rights movement. Wyoming, on the other hand, remains a hostile place for gay people even into the 21st century (Brooke, 1998). Clearly, living in 1960s New York City versus 1960s Wyoming would have been quite different for the average gay person.

Yet when we view both movies we see that the characters of *Boys* (Michael, Harold, etc.) express significantly more self-hate and loathing than *Brokeback*’s two men (Jack and Ennis). Although Jack and Ennis struggle with their sexuality we still see in the film moments of tenderness, happiness, pleasure and longing. Both men make references to the dangerous society they live in, yet they rebelliously continue their love affair in spite of the risks. The open spaces of *Brokeback* seem to reflect the love between Jack and Ennis, a love that is larger than the society around them that attempts to stop it. Conversely, *Boys* is set in a claustrophobic

apartment, seemingly set apart from the rest of the world. The apartment belongs to Michael, the movie's main character, and it comes to symbolize his and his friends' psychological constriction. The apartment is, for them, the "closet" – an obsessive rigidity of personality (Graham, 1980). The men in *Boys* express their self-hatred by inflicting psychological pain on each other while the men in *Brokeback*, even through disagreements, struggle to support each other against a hostile world.

Social standards at the time of *Boys* resulted in a movie about gay men, set in one of the most comfortable locations for gay men in the 1960s, in which the characters are largely alone, miserable, psychologically constricted and self-loathing. By 2005, *Brokeback* could be a movie about gay men, set in one of the most hostile locations for gay men in the 1960s, where the characters have moments of happiness and are sympathetic, even as they struggle against the homophobia of the world around them. *Boys* channels homophobia through the gay men it depicts. For *Brokeback*, the blame for homophobia is laid squarely on society as a whole.

Both films were intended for wide distribution to audiences, yet *Boys* is significantly more geared at easing heterosexual anxieties than *Brokeback* is. As none of the characters in *Boys* is particularly sympathetic, heterosexual prejudices about gay people remain unchallenged, even in a film ostensibly about gay people (Carrithers, 1995). On the contrary, *Brokeback* presents characters that are sympathetic and identifiable, demonstrating not only that heterosexual prejudices have waned but also providing gay audiences with the profound experience of viewing a presentation of gay lives that more accurately reflects inner selves (Snider, 2008). Part of what made *Brokeback* ground-breaking was the depiction of societal homophobia in a harsh light while the gay characters were depicted positively. When Jack dies, the possible victim of a deadly gay-bashing (this is not clear in the film), the scene of the attack is interspersed with Ennis' intense heartbreak upon learning the news. The sequence is a

profound condemnation of the brutality of homophobia that contrasts starkly with the general acceptance of homophobia in *Boys*.

Unlike *Boys*, *Brokeback* won numerous awards including three Oscars and the Golden Globe for “Best Picture”. *Brokeback* also grossed \$83 million dollars in the United States in 2006 (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). Although awards and financial success indicate widespread popularity, *Brokeback* couldn’t entirely escape the effects of lingering homophobia in contemporary American culture. *Brokeback* may reflect that American culture of the early 21st century is more accepting of gays than American culture of early 1970s, but there is still evidence of homophobia, albeit a more subtle homophobia than before.

It can be argued that part of the wide-spread acceptance of *Brokeback* is that Jack and Ennis are undoubtedly masculine. The implication of this is complex: On the one hand, contrary to the complaints of conservatives that the figures of Jack and Ennis were “unbelievable” precisely because they were so masculine, there are undoubtedly gay people that are very much like both men (Warren, 2006). On the other hand, what does it say about American views of gender that in order for a love story between two men to be accepted neither of the men can be in any way “feminine”? While *Brokeback* is ground-breaking in that it is to-date the most honest portrayal of gay people as *people*, issues of gender conformity remain problematic.

Brokeback also reflects our culture’s “two steps forward, one step back” shuffle on gay acceptance in that it famously failed to win the Oscar for Best Picture, in spite of numerous factors in its favor, including best picture wins in other awards and the Best Director Oscar win for director Ang Lee. While some would argue that the *Brokeback* loss in the Oscar Best Picture category wasn’t based on homophobia, a clear and vocal part of the Hollywood community felt very threatened by the prospect of a gay love story winning Best Picture of the Year and some ascribe the *Brokeback* loss to those attacks (Democratic Underground, n.d.). For many people,

Brokeback's critical and financial success but high-profile Oscar loss indicates improvement in American society but also remaining resistance to full acceptance of LGBT Americans.

III. We're not in Kans—no wait, we're still in Kansas

Films are intertwined with our culture and a reflection of it (Powdermaker, 1947). Social values and mores are functions of social control. The depiction of values and mores in film – whether sympathetic or not – reveal how the contemporary society in which the film was made views them. Movies then aren't just reflections of current social norms when it comes to cultural debates but also something of a re-enforcement of them as well.

For LGBTQ Americans the differences between *Boys* and *Brokeback* can be like night and day, yet for being such a step forward *Brokeback* still reminds us of the difficult reality faced by LGBTQ citizens in today's culture. In 2011, sodomy laws criminalizing homosexuality have been unconstitutional for only the last eight years. Although in six states LGBTQ couples have the same (statewide, not federal) legal rights as their heterosexual counterparts, in 29 states marriage is defined constitutionally as a heterosexual union and in another 13 states there exists a statutory ban against same-sex marriage. Less than half the states (21 of them) ban discrimination against LGBTQ people in employment. Most heartbreakingly of all, our culture is experiencing an epidemic of suicides among LGBTQ youth as our schools fail to protect them.

Brokeback Mountain showed us a world in which homophobia was common, but that world was indicted by the eye of the camera. The indictment of homophobia is the piece of *Brokeback* that gives us the most hope. When the camera looks unsympathetically upon the hostility leveled against *Brokeback's* cowboys, we have hope that our culture may have a chance to someday outgrow its juvenile homophobia. In the meantime the "It Gets Better" project, the Respect for Marriage Act, and the continual push for LGBTQ equality from people from a wide-

range of the political spectrum provide hope that someday *Brokeback* may look like as much of an anachronism of its time as *Boys in the Band* does now.

IV. Conclusion – A letter to Congress

Senator Durbin/Senator Kirk/Congressman Johnson:

In our zeal to heal our economy (well among the Democrats anyway, I can't see the Republicans doing anything about the economy at all) we sometimes forget other matters that are even more important.

I'm writing to you to urge you to support the Respect for Marriage Act and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. Both acts are vital for the equal rights of our LGBTQ citizens.

The only rationale against equal rights for LGBTQ citizens is based entirely on a religious context, and I would remind you, it is a *limited religious context* at that. Many religions do NOT support discrimination against LGBTQ citizens, and it is expressly forbidden by our Constitution to uphold one religious ideal over another.

We are facing an epidemic of suicides among LGBTQ young people because of the prejudice and hostility they face. LGBTQ people pay taxes, are good citizens, serve our country in the military, and are parts of our communities all across the country. Government has no business enforcing religious minority-based discrimination against these citizens.

I look forward to your support of both the Respect for Marriage Act and Employment Non-Discrimination Act bills.

Sincerely,

Todd Bruns

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