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"When This Thing Grabs Hold of Us...": Spatial Myth, Rhetoric, and Conceptual Blending in *Brokeback Mountain*

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In a highly moving moment in *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis del Mar explains to Jack Twist that any open commitment to the sexual love the two men share is impossible: "When this thing grabs hold of us, at the wrong place, the wrong time, and we're dead" (SP 52). The "thing" here, of course, is a placeholder for the emotional, sexual, and psychical bond between the two men, an attempt at verbally encapsulating all the socially illicit elements of their relationship that put them at danger in a homophobic environment. Yet "this" also carries with it one of the central problems of the film itself. What are the verbal and visual descriptors that can adequately signify what the film is about? What is the "this" that forms the aesthetic and social message of *Brokeback Mountain*, and to what extent is the film made legible to both a marginalized and a mainstream audience?

Critics and audiences alike have struggled, on the one hand, to define *Brokeback Mountain* as a progressive film that challenges conventional biases and assumptions about homosexuality, and on the other, to claim it as a "universal" space, a story that transcends the bounds of any particularized sexual or social identity. The vigorous debate that has ensued over what rhetorical spaces to attribute to the film is as interesting and layered as the film's narrative elements. This essay, then, offers a reading of the film's cognitive and rhetorical structures, which refer to the film's expressive and persuasive forms rather than its more immediately recognizable representational or thematic

content. The focus is on how forms — genre, spatial metaphors, and rhetorical and conceptual framing — inform the film's power as a cultural event. These are forms that produce meaning that supplement the narrative elements of the story. In the case of *Brokeback Mountain*, for example, the Western genre evokes a relationship to space and nature that has the power to transform the emotional identifications made with the characters and storyline. To this end, the work of two theorists who take up the issue of how social power and aesthetic power emerge within cognitive and rhetorical locations is of importance here. Both Bryan Reynolds, cultural and performance theorist, and Mark Turner, cognitive linguist, provide bases for thinking about cultural change in terms of cognitive and rhetorical spaces — spaces that augment the more legible and transparent elements of representation and audience identification (character, action, and authorship). Turner's thoughts on "conceptual blending" in storytelling will help to illuminate how *Brokeback Mountain* functions as an experiment with cognitive and rhetorical structures and how this experiment plays out as a transformative filmic and social experience. This essay concludes with a consideration of whether these rhetorical and structural aspects of *Brokeback Mountain* reinforce more familiar ideological perspectives — perspectives that reinforce subjective categories of meaning through identifications with individual character, identity, and emotion — or challenge the viewer to inhabit a space of "transversality," an active performative space that plays off the intersection of text, culture, and identity to produce "fluid and discursive phenomena." Transversal events allow for movement beyond one's "subjective territory," a "conceptual and emotional spatial range from which a given subject perceives and experiences the world."[1]

The debates surrounding the film's meaning give us some insight into how a critical approach grounded in cognitive and rhetorical space differs from, say, a discussion of the film's representations of identity in terms of character or social context. In April 2006, the *New York Review of Books* (*NYRB*) published a lengthy exchange between Daniel Mendelsohn, author and reviewer of the film for the *NYRB*, and James Schamus, one of the producers of *Brokeback Mountain*. In the editorial exchange, Schamus takes issue with Mendelsohn's criticisms of the film's marketing campaign, a program of advertising that Mendelsohn claims rhetorically frames the film as a "universal love story," in effect minimizing any appeal to the film's gay themes and content. Schamus counters with his own charge of "rhetorical shortcuts" being taken by Mendelsohn, pointing out what Schamus characterizes as a far more complicated layering of "universal appeal" and the "gay story" at the center of the film's narrative structure. Where Mendelsohn observes equivocation around gay issues on the part of the film's producers, Schamus insists that the "universal" space and

the space of "gay identities" are not registers — "sites," as he phrases it — that can be maintained as easy oppositions once there is an attempt to bring gay knowledge out of the closet. Two quotes from the exchange, one from Mendelsohn and one from Schamus, offer clear examples of the rhetorical locations that each takes up in criticizing and defending the film. James Schamus writes:

> One thing this means is that we solicit every audience member's *identification with* the film's central gay characters; the film succeeds if it, albeit initially within the realm of the aesthetic, *queers* its audience ... as a profound and emotionally expansive experience, understandable by all. The power of a cultural moment such as that signaled by the reception of *Brokeback* is that in shattering the "epistemology of the closet" we run the risk of destroying the nonuniversal, specifically gay knowledge previously hidden inside it. Think of it this way: if the phrase "You wouldn't understand — it's a gay thing" is now met with the retort "But I think I *do* understand!" what, we need to ask, becomes of "the gay thing" itself? ... [I]n the process of removing gayness from the closet and "mainstreaming" it ... *Brokeback* appears in the midst of new, and confusing, displacements of the sites of gay and, more broadly, GLBT identities — in the vast and disorienting space between the closet and the wedding altar.

And Daniel Mendelsohn replies:

> Simply because a narrative has universal appeal, however, doesn't mean that the story it tells is universal.... To say the story of *Brokeback Mountain* is universal because in some general way it concerns "love" is to say nothing at all; it's like saying that *Schindler's List* is a universal love story because we all know what it's like to lose a family member. (And imagine the response if critics were to claim that the Holocaust were incidental to that movie, or slavery to *Beloved*).[2]

The exchange between Schamus and Mendelsohn is instructive. In particular, because it mirrors in form many of the difficulties in locating meaning within the film itself. The rhetoric that figures most prominently in their exchange is structured around the "sites" of the "universal" "love" story and "the gay thing." Interestingly, the seemingly most elusive aspects of the film for a mainstream audience — its gay content and representation of gay experience — find expression in both the film and the *NYRB* exchange as a "thing." It is unclear, however, whether the thing in question here is an act (sexual or otherwise), an identity, a social event, or a broader abstraction.

The rhetorical phrase set in opposition to the "gay thing" is a bit less vague, yet no more transparent in detail: the "universal love story." The two contested sites here are framed as generic rhetorical and cognitive structures. The "universal love story," while lacking any specificity as to what actions and characters inhabit such a story, still appeals to a fairly ubiquitous pathos of human emotional and sexual success, an imaginative space where one finds their soul mate within the vastness of the universe. The "gay thing," though

it lacks the immediately recognizable pathos of the universal love story, also serves as a spatial and rhetorical construct for the social identifiers of gayness within non-gay mainstream culture. Neither Schamus nor Mendelsohn seems particularly interested in exploring in any depth what the gay "thing" and "universal love" might actually look like, and indeed how they may constitute and reinforce one another. Instead, these shorthand phrases are invoked as placeholders for what both clearly find to be more substantive components of their argument; namely, in what way and to what extent can the gay thing and universal love be *represented* together. The unrepresentable space between their arguments is ultimately that "disorienting space between the closet and the wedding altar," as Schamus terms it. This unrepresentable space is between two conceptual paradigms that do not directly speak to or for one another. What sort of "thing" is this, then?

Spatial Rhetoric and Conceptual Blending

What emerges within this debate between film producer and film critic is an example of the difficulties that ensue when two rhetorical sites intersect yet do not quite overlap in a way that would allow a separate conceptual site or identification to emerge. This point requires an introduction to the recent work of Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier on "conceptual blending."[3] Conceptual blending is the process by which two very distinct conceptual sites are blended together to take on an entirely different form. According to cognitive theorists like Turner and George Lakoff (with whom Turner has collaborated over the years), metaphor serves as an example of how conceptual blending takes shape in the formation of new knowledge.[4] A summary example provided by Joseph Grady, Todd Oakley, and Seana Coulson is the following:

> The Committee has kept me in the *dark* about this matter.[5]

This statement seems unremarkable at one level since it is so familiar as a colloquial analogy or metaphor for being isolated from information in a given social context. Yet, according to Lakoff and Turner, it is precisely the familiarity of this analogical device that exemplifies the power of conceptual blending for innovations in thinking. While the statement itself is a familiar colloquialism, the conceptual operations implied in being able to make sense of such an analogy are really quite formidable. In this instance, there is a "source" domain and a "target" domain that are blended to alter knowledge. The source, the experiential immediacy of the visual domain, is here mapped onto a source domain; in this case, information in a given social context. A compelling transformation occurs, according to conceptual blending, when

something as abstract as being kept in ignorance in the context of a committee meeting is integrated with the very visceral experience of standing in the dark, cutoff from a visual interplay with one's environment. As Grady et al. describe the process, "[T]he relevant conceptual metaphor [is] a 'mapping'—presumably stored as a knowledge structure in long-term memory—which tells us how elements in the two domains line up with each other. In this metaphor, knowledge structures that concern seeing have been put into correspondence with structures concerning knowledge and awareness.... In fact, thanks to the general mapping between visual perception and intellectual activity, nearly any concept related to the experience of vision is likely to have a clear counterpart in the realm of knowledge and ideas."[6] The most relevant aspects of this cognitive phenomenon can be summarized as follows. First, dramatic shifts in the deep structures of knowledge are made possible through this mapping. While the example above employs a fairly general metaphoric construct, as Fauconnier, Lakoff, and Turner have discussed elsewhere, this kind of conceptual integration informs many different kinds of aesthetic, rhetorical, and social reformations in accessible knowledge.[7] Second, while the operations involved appear rather simplistic with respect to their familiarity as rhetorical devices, they imply a fairly complex array of operations at a cognitive level between linguistic and conceptual orders of meaning. This last point should be stressed, as the theory of conceptual blending asserts that the mapping of two domains typically involves a spatial or experiential pattern in relation to a more abstract set of concepts. In the example above, for instance, a mental "space" that imagines standing in the dark serves as a surrogate for the visual experience of darkness. This last point opens up a space for us to think differently about the function of rhetoric in these examples.

Conceptual blending is a means for understanding what is at work in the example of the rhetorical exchange between Schamus and Mendelsohn. As Schamus indicates, the real "thing" in thinking about the film's social location is not the oppositional registers of the "gay thing" and "universal love," but that "disorientating space" in between them. Yet, according to conceptual blending, it may be that the cognitive and rhetorical spaces of the "gay thing" and "universal love" form the outline of a third conceptual space that manages to blend and integrate the experiences surrounding both. We can proceed, then, to consider how such rhetorical effects provide another way of thinking about the representational efficacy of the film (character, plot, and action, for example). Thus, rhetorical space becomes a means for investigating both the film's communal persuasiveness and the film's potential impact on cognitive associations of myth, rhetoric, and space.

As Gilberto Perez has argued, the power of rhetoric in filmic experience is often overlooked in favor of more directed instances of individual

identification.[8] Perez asks us to think beyond a model of identification in film-going experience which emphasizes an individualized experience that is informed by identifying *with* a given character in a given set of circumstances. Building off of Kenneth Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives*, Perez takes up the issue of how films function rhetorically, and, in particular, the way in which films and their persuasive constructs imply a more varied and nuanced engagement with identification.[9] Moving away from personal identification, Perez draws on the cognitive theory of Murray Smith to explore how the persuasiveness of character and context in films is about both "alignment" and "allegiance." Alignment refers to a spectator's experience of the actions and feelings of a given character and context, without necessarily feeling a strict allegiance to a character. Allegiance is a feeling *with* experience that "pertains to the moral and ideological evaluation of characters by the spectator."[10] The approach to rhetoric as a communal phenomenon is helpful in that it allows some interpretive room that takes us beyond thinking of the social power of texts (visual and verbal) in terms of character identification amid conventional (or counter-conventional) moral or ethical evaluations. By expanding this a bit further, we can look specifically at how the communal, very public rhetorical effects of a film like *Brokeback Mountain* are further mapped onto various cognitive sites. Focusing on rhetorical space and conceptual blending in *Brokeback Mountain* takes us between communal space and cognitive space, in such a way to steer clear of questions of individualized identity. This makes the "gay thing" and "universal love" at once ideological, rhetorical, and identity spaces, and sites perpetually in process of re-constituting and instituting the origins and meanings of the "gay thing" in relation to ideological, rhetorical, and biographical spaces.

To really get a sense of how relevant this process is for the film as a cultural event, we need to look more closely at the movement between experiential spaces in *Brokeback Mountain* and the rhetorical operations within the film. As Perez has noted, the rhetorical persuasiveness of a film is bound up in a combination of verbal and visual spaces and gestures—natural environments, camera angles, speechmaking, implied myths, and iconic scenes, sounds, and objects—that combine to inform a film's persuasive affect. Perez offers the example of two young lovers in a meadow as a demonstration of how this works. A young couple seen walking in a meadow are at once a romantic cliché and an embodiment of a rhetoric that asks the viewer to see the couple as part of nature, and thus their heterosexual love becomes aligned with the beauty and simplicity of nature. The two dominant rhetorical structures in *Brokeback Mountain* are the Western/Frontier genre, with its attendant myths, scripts, and spaces, and, to a lesser extent, the romanticization of nature.

Romanticizing Nature

Looking first at the romanticization of nature as rhetorical structure, we can identify a pretty clear message about the natural environment in *Brokeback Mountain*, one aligned neatly with the general myths and ideological stirrings of a romantic view of nature. Jack and Ennis discover an almost Edenic pastoralism in the natural environment of the mountains of Wyoming. We have the one scene right before the two initiate their sexual connection, where the camera lingers on a full moon nightscape that serves as a kind of foreboding of darkness and danger, but even in this instance, the scene is ambiguous as to whether we are to align ourselves with the nightscape as a sign of bad omens or as a symbol of the inexorable changeability of both social and natural order. Aside from this moment, where attention is directed to the rhetoric of nature in relationship to a key moment in the narrative, Jack and Ennis, along with the audience, are treated to a visual feast reminiscent of every aspect of pastoral simplicity: caring and productive labor amid the unfettered landscape; the discovery and re-creation of social, natural, and domestic order; and the promise of plenty inherent in the depictions of vast, unclaimed natural expanses.

At one level, this myth of natural simplicity is not as naïve as it might seem — indeed, the filmmakers seem perfectly aware of our potential responses to the rhetoric of a romanticized nature. While we are being swept up in the mythos and spatial rhetoric of the natural expanse, we are also being asked to follow the social and domestic evolution of Jack and Ennis's relationship. To this end, the Edenic myth is pushed into terrain it is not conventionally asked to inhabit, queer partnering and domesticity. The rhetorical mapping of domesticity onto the natural landscape is fairly forceful. From the earliest shots of Jack and Ennis heading up the into the mountains with their herd of sheep, we see an aspect of this pastoral labor that is not typically emphasized in Western fiction: the nurturing and caring that accompanies the tough, virile activities of cowboying. Indeed, much of what we see of both amid the iconic portrayals of pastoral herding is Jack and Ennis carrying smaller and less able-bodied sheep in their arms or over their saddles, and even the mending and caring of wounds and injuries.

We are from the outset being persuaded to connect the natural pastoralism of the film with the underlying domestic and caring labor of both Jack and Ennis. This association is pushed further with the negotiations that occur between Jack and Ennis over "home" labor — cooking, cleaning, and mending — and the "public" labor of caring for the herd. The genre of pastoral is in itself a potentially ironic set of constructs, to the extent that pastoral draws attention to nature not as a romantic backdrop to the emotional life of fictional characters, but as a means for critically investigating how nature is deployed in constructions of idealized emotional and physical space.[11] Indeed, some of the more interesting historical and contemporary work with the genre uses the conventions of "pastoral" and "urban" space to draw attention to how these categories are both fictionalized and redeployed to critique social hierarchies. Such appropriations of the pastoral employ the conventions of this mode to raise questions about our cultural assumptions about nature and the origins of human social organization. Along these lines, there is a rich tradition, from Virgil's *Eclogues* to John Milton's *Lycidas*, of using the pastoral to explore homoerotic desire and its communion with the instituting of "civilized" forces that "naturalize" heteronormative sexuality.[12] And while *Brokeback Mountain* does present a subtle exploration of the dialectic between "home" and "public" labor via its use of pastoralism, there is still a predominantly romantic connection established between the pastoral life and a simpler, less complicated "original" mode of existence.

At one level, we could say that the rhetoric of landscape and domesticity function as an implied critique of the ideology surrounding the naturalization of gendered social and sexual relationships. That is, the relatively socially neutral and natural setting for the initiation of their relationship serves as a kind of blank canvas for painting the division of labor as a function of practical, context-driven choices rather than essentialist traits linked to one's gender or sexuality. Yet, at the same time, the appropriation of the more subtle and experiential rhetoric of the natural landscape carries with it some fairly fraught mythical terrain — mythical constructs that are bound to the most prominent rhetorical construct in *Brokeback Mountain*, the Western/Frontier genre.

Spatial Myth and the Western/Frontier Genre

As Richard Slotkin has illuminated, the Western landscape is one of the most powerful American mythic spaces. Slotkin, in his exhaustive study of the complicity between Frontier and Western myths and the colonial imperialism of American culture, traces the significance of spatial setting and genre to a comprehensive visual rhetoric that becomes a surrogate for a complex intersection of national, personal, and historical myths:

> When fully developed, the mythic space of a genre invests even the sketchiest characterization or setting with resonance, as if it were part of a larger culture, with its own spatial architecture, manners, folkways, and politics.... Genre space is also mythic space: a pseudo-historical (or pseudo-real) setting that is powerfully associated with stories and concerns rooted in the culture's myth/ideological tradition. It is also a setting in which the concrete work of contemporary myth-making is done. This is particularly true of the Western, whose roots go deeper into the American cultural past than those of any other movie genre.[13]

The rhetorical flexibility of the Western genre as both a personal experience and as a space that is transformed into a hybrid of myth and history is central to its power as a cultural experience. That is, the Western is a communal experience in American culture, a recognizable frame for masculine, self-sufficient world making, which also serves as rhetorical shorthand for an imagined history of the progress of American culture. The progressive myths that emerge within the Western assimilate social, economic, and racial conflicts and re-frame them as problems to be resolved within the Western formula. The effects of building upon a collective rhetoric of personal value, mythology, and history made possible by a genre space like the Western allow for "a complex system of historical associations by a single image or phrase."[14] "Pearl Harbor," "The Frontier" (we can now add "9/11" to this list) permit a complicated and divergent set of emotional, political, historical, and cognitive sites to become compressed into a single rhetorical, mythical entity: "myth expresses ideology in a narrative, rather than discursive or argumentative structure.... The movement of a mythic narrative, like that of any story, implies a theory of cause-and-effect and therefore a theory of history (or even of cosmology)."[15]

On a rhetorical level, Turner would refer to this phenomenon as "cognitive compression."[16] In other words, the historical and mythical elements of the Western become conceptually blended with an experiential and cognitive immersion in the "openness" and "freedom" of the unfettered, natural landscape, and further, those visual signifiers for progressive freedom then become affixed to the biographical details of the cowboy as a form of authentic American consciousness. This form of conceptual blending, which is heavily dependent on the rhetorical structure of a genre, points to a different form of character identification. Here, the issue is not a projection of personal judgments or morals in order to identify *with* a character, but a more subtle systemic alignment of personal consciousness, historical and political ideology, and, moreover, a blending of historical and mythic narratives with "biographical performance."[17] Biographical performance in this context draws attention to "identity" as a function of conceptual and linguistic blending weaved into the fabric of historical and cultural myth.

This form of blending may seem auspicious in the case of *Brokeback Mountain,* where queer love and sexuality are mapped onto idealized pastoral and Western rhetorical settings. Yet, these multi-layered associations, while pointing to a subtle re-ordering of the terms of audience identification, can carry with them the accumulated mythic spaces of the genre. It is certainly the case, as Slotkin has described it, that "as stories accumulate and are mnemonically linked to a particular visual setting, the imaginative possibilities of the generic terrain are both expanded and mapped for future reference."[18] It

is equally the case, however, that reliance on the rhetoric of genre "invokes a set of fundamental assumptions and expectations about the kinds of events that can occur in the setting, the kinds of motives that will operate, the sort of outcome one can predict."[19] It is these less transparent alliances that should draw our attention along with the potential for *Brokeback Mountain* to re-institute a connection between American myth and biographical performance.

Brokeback Mountain's force, then, is derived less from its promotion of individual identification with a viewer than it is a communal form of persuasion that draws on queer biography mapped onto the Western genre and the rhetoric of the romanticization of nature. Yet, there is a rhetoric of individual "authenticity" that is evoked in the film. The success of taking something as conventionally scripted as the Western genre and fusing it with queer space is contingent upon the film's convincing depiction of the authenticity of the genre. In order to be persuasive, the film must be viewed without too much irony. To achieve as much, Jack and Ennis must register as authentic embodiments of the most persuasive elements of the genre. And here again, we are asked to immerse ourselves in some powerfully persuasive aspects of the Western/Frontier myth. Throughout the film, Jack is linked with the desires of the rodeo cowboy. Specifically, Jack's struggles to embody the masculinity associated with the cowboy become projected onto his performances *as* a cowboy on the rodeo circuit. Jack's persona increasingly becomes tied to both the authentic measures of the cowboy (roping and riding) and the performances necessary to maintain the illusion of Western, masculine ideals. Ennis, on the other hand, is more closely aligned with mastery over the techne of guns and vehicles. Our very first introduction to both characters, and indeed the opening frames for the movie, bring us from a wide-angle shot of mountainous landscape — pierced by the lights from a truck moving slowly over the landscape — to our first look at Ennis. We see Ennis making his way from the truck that has brought him to Signal for work, and then propped against a trailer, his body occluded in montage by a passing train. When Jack arrives on the scene, he stumbles from his truck, offering a swift kick to the tires of a vehicle whose clutch has obviously given him grief. This imbrication of rural landscape and the technologies of mobility and transportation returns throughout the film as a kind of sub-narrative. Indeed, the truck(s) becomes a kind of scenic backdrop throughout the film, overshadowed only by the landscape of the mountain and the claustrophobia of domestic spaces.

Jack has pursued the life of rodeo cowboy. Ennis can shoot an elk and fix a truck. Both registers of authenticity, modes of being that connect with the autobiographical myths of the authentic Western cowboy as self-sufficient and ruggedly individualistic (not to mention masculine) create an opening

for the audience to develop an allegiance with Jack and Ennis as iconic representations of the Western mythos. But it is also through the play with technology, mobility and transportation, and rural self-sufficiency that another set of autobiographical and historical myths are aligned within the film. Both Jack and Ennis are caught within a kind of dialectic of rural, pastoral simplicity and the advent of mid-twentieth-century American values. These are not just the emergent American values associated with the nuclear family and compulsory heterosexuality. Throughout the film we catch glimpses of the progressive machinery of American life (literally and metaphorically) amid the cultural transition from the 50s into the early 60s, and alongside a very understated back-story on the Vietnam War. Jack even makes reference at one point to the Army getting hold of him. Exposed to the pressures of being caught between American "progress" and pastoral simplicity, both characters evolve into virtual embodiments of Teddy Roosevelt's rough-riding ethos of "regeneration through regression."[20]

Regeneration through regression refers to a political and historical ideology based in the desire to return to the plebian roots of American democracy to recapture the simplicity of the "democratic life of the cowboy."[21] As Slotkin demonstrates, cowboyism represents the entitlement of a "successor class" in American consciousness, a place where competitive, imperialist motives of Frontiersman can be rescripted as the "stages of civilization," drawn down to an autobiographical experience. In this sense, we can re-conceive Jack's and Ennis's development in the film as characters who have discovered a map of an earlier stage of history, an earlier phase of civilized life where they are free to create a world of their own. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that this "contract," if you will — the promise contained in the rhetoric of the Western/Frontier mythos — is inseparable from its history as a genre that justifies and rationalizes the ascendancy of white, American men taking control of savage terrain for their own economic and social advancement. Entitlement becomes the subtext for Jack and Ennis' freedom in the landscape of Brokeback Mountain, a directed line of metaphoric and real descent that implies that men who can aspire to the authenticity of the Western are entitled to their place as members of the successor class — the "gay thing" aside. The merging of spatial and experiential immediacy of the Western landscape with these historical and class accumulations allows for Jack and Ennis to emerge as powerful icons of American imaginative space.

The mythos of the "democratic life of the cowboy" is a framework as linked to the complicated history of American colonialism and manifest destiny as it is to any reification of self-sufficiency, individualism, and democratic values. In a fascinating redirection of the pastoral simplicity of Ennis and Jack's earlier moments on Brokeback Mountain, their return to "modern" social life

becomes a rhetorical scene of frustrated love and obstructed progress toward the full realization of the myth of Western progressivism. The association of the images of the Western landscape and all its attendant mythologies of social, historical, and individual progress have prepared us for a connection with Jack and Ennis as representatives of Western, progressive ideals. The nostalgic rhetoric of such ideals sets forth the expectation that Jack and Ennis, as representatives of the "authentic" Western hero, will be allowed to realize the simplicity and progressive energy of their earlier pastoral existence as a way of life, as a new form of social order. The further play off of mobility and Western landscape, juxtaposed with the suffocating and static energy of modern social life, instill in us a sense that what Jack and Ennis are being asked to sacrifice is not "universal love" so much as the interrupted progress of the Frontier myth.

Remaining mindful of the fraught ideological underpinnings to the Western/Frontier mythos, we are confronted with the possibility that apart from projecting the simplicity and democracy of Western individualism onto two queer characters (that is, the familiarity and purity of the Western ethos cast onto the private, individual pathos of two men in love), we are asked to re-imagine the sexual and emotional bond of these two men as embodiments, indeed avatars, of American social and economic progress as distilled through the lens of the Western genre. Jack and Ennis's obstructed love story is rhetorically fused with our own collective history with Western progressivism (race wars on the Frontier and failed wars, Vietnam in particular). We are being nudged toward the cognitive and rhetorical compression of our own nostalgia for and frustration over the fulfillment of Western progressivism vis-à-vis the impeded love of Jack and Ennis.

This alignment between historical and social ideology and homosexual love is reinforced in even more direct ways within the representational economy of the film itself. The most prominent example is Ennis's connection with the artifact of the horse. Amid the pastoral simplicity of the two men's slowly evolving love, Ennis clutches and whittles away at a small woodcarving of a horse. The object is a kind of fetish that mediates the psychical and emotional complexity of Ennis's growing desire for Jack, but is also an icon of the horseman and cowboy in the larger cultural sense. We know as well that the figure of the horse represents Jack's struggles with his authenticity as a cowboy; a point made salient by his settling for the life of the bull-riding, rodeo cowboy. Ennis's love for Jack is imperceptibly mapped with one of the most powerful signifiers of Western authenticity. Jack and Ennis's failed love becomes our loss as well. A further implication of this rhetoric is that permitting the narrative of their love to advance unimpeded might re-generate those lost idealizations of Frontier consciousness, that it just might put the West right with itself again.

Ang Lee's extensive use of Fordesque sky panoramas raises the question of the extent to which *Brokeback Mountain* is attempting a more reflexive, critical appropriation of aspects of the Western genre. John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) is well known for its very self-aware engagement with the Western as a genre and its concern with democratic ideology and social progressivism. *Stagecoach* employed the vast skyscapes of Monument Valley as a way of drawing attention to the emblematic power of open landscape in reinforcing the stereotypes and myths of the Western. As Slotkin argues, Ford employs the vastness of the open sky and terrain of Monument Valley to invent such landscape "as a cinematic (and American) icon."[22] The power of authenticity that prevails in Ford's film is generated out of the landscape's familiarity as a space representative of "the West," but also from its very strangeness and alien form. Ford combines these elements into a film experience that simultaneously generates the myths of the Western and critiques them, drawing attention to the mobility and openness of the stagecoach journeys as a way of inducing reflection on the "civilized," democratic spaces of the town and way station scenes in between. The "narrative of the journey"—a progression through "stages" and stations—across the open Western landscape serves as an "archetypal, ... allegorical movement" that becomes a "tool [for] ... exploring and questioning the fundamental assumptions about American communities that underlie self-congratulatory formulas of the epic Western and the history textbook."[23]

Enough similarity with Ford's stylized techniques is seen in the use of sky panoramas in *Brokeback Mountain* to suggest that the film is rhetorically aligning itself with Ford's critical engagement with the Western genre. Yet, the open-sky landscape scenes in *Brokeback Mountain* are frequently used as transition shots that rapidly move the viewer into close-up and framing angles indoors within domestic space. Domestic space in *Brokeback Mountain* is representative of limiting, claustrophobic environments where characters are trapped and constrained. Where Ford uses the way stations along the stagecoach journey as microcosms that parallel the emblematic and ideological spaces associated with the open landscape scenes, Ang Lee uses the skyscapes in *Brokeback Mountain* as a space that resists or contrasts with the closeness and even stifling atmosphere of domestic space. In this case, we are not asked to think critically about the iconic, emblematic function of open Frontier vistas and how they reinforce or challenge our assumptions about social communities, but to embrace these vistas experientially as spaces that give both viewer and characters relief from the oppressiveness of domestic heteronormativity. As *Brokeback Mountain* progresses, open landscapes are increasingly used as still shots set in stark contrast with the confinement of domesticity. This is an appropriation of Ford-like big-sky vistas that further idealizes the

notion that the Western genre offers a form of escape from the restrictive conventional expectations of normalized American social communities. The rhetoric of "openness" that serves as a metaphor for an idealized American way of life is re-formed as a space of confinement. In this context, the physically "open" spaces of the big-sky panorama promise relief from such confinement.

Interestingly, the way in which space prevails as a metaphoric encapsulation of the closet in *Brokeback Mountain* actually further reinforces Western individualism in fraught terms as well. Ennis in particular is a character who comes to embody the epistemology of the closet, and this embodiment is further caught up with Western individual authenticity. Ennis' individualism is made nearly impossible by the social scripts he is worked into upon his return from Brokeback Mountain, and throughout the remainder of the film we see the oppression of indoor, domestic spaces begin to materialize as an internal psychology. The cloying effect of domestic space is absorbed by Ennis to the point where the claustrophobia of the physical spaces becomes a troubling feature of Ennis' character. Behind such compression, the self-sufficient cowboy is literally transformed before us into a caricature of the trapped gunfighter of earlier "B" Westerns. The trapped gunfighter is a figure whose personal struggles are always tied up with history. The gunfighter is a character whose drive to embody the Frontier myth has put him at odds with his own comfort and progress. "Despite his discipline and skill," the trapped gunfighter is "vulnerable" and "trapped by his history and his identity."[24] This character type enters the narrative of the Frontier as "limitless in its possibilities for social and personal perfection," and comes to the realization that it is a "mirage."[25] Yet, in the case of Ennis, this inner pathology and suffering is romanticized as a kind of ethos of self-repression that betrays moral steadiness.

Western Myth "In" and "Out" of the Closet

We can have little doubt, however, that there is an active appropriation of the visual rhetoric of expansiveness juxtaposed with the oppressiveness of domestic space in *Brokeback Mountain* and that much of this is meant to invoke a visceral experience of "the closet." The concept of the closet conventionally refers to the state of being either "out" with one's minority sexual practice or identity, or "in the closet" and thus hiding one's sexual identity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's foundational queer theory text, "Epistemology of the Closet," expanded the discussion of the closet to include a more encompassing exploration of the categories of knowledge versus ignorance within Western epistemology. That is, Sedgwick focuses on how the rhetorical interplay between knowledge and ignorance informs Western knowledge production

in a much broader context. The closet is certainly about the explicit and implicit signifiers of homosexuality and heterosexuality, but it is also about the productive confusion that emanates from within the dialectic of two oppositional categories of meaning. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are not clear markers or limits on experience or identity, much in the same way that the "universal love story" and the "gay thing" lack delineation and relief. Yet, as Sedgwick points out, it is the play between seemingly fixed, transparent categories of meaning that informs our sense of the very possibility of making meaning in the world. For example, gay versus straight and black versus white, masquerade as knowable entities even though they are nebulous, contingent, and fluid rhetorical constructs. The binaries that inform how we come to knowledge are conceptually incoherent, then, but yet give the appearance of a kind of progress inherent to coming out of ignorance and into knowledge.[26]

The difficulty, of course, in bringing the closet forward as an experiential and visual rhetoric in *Brokeback Mountain* is that the spatial immediacy of being "in" the closeted spaces of heteronormative domesticity and "out" in the expansive Western landscape is infused with the ideologies of the Frontier. Ang Lee's framing of this dialectic aligns the Frontier-scape with the promise of being "out," of being brought from ignorance into knowledge, in Sedgwick's terms. Thus, being part of the progressive mythos of the Frontier offers an escape from the limiting spaces of modern domesticity and heteronormativity. A further problem here lies in restraining meaning within *Brokeback Mountain* to the very epistemology of the closet that Sedgwick identifies. That is, beyond the rhetorical and mythical accumulations attendant upon the Frontier and Western myths, there is rhetorical affirmation of the closet itself as a conceptual structure leading to personal liberation. This space offers the promise of release from closeted homosexuality, which is then translated into the liberating idealizations of a pastoral and re-purified American normativity. Indeed, the film ends with Ennis standing before the closet in his trailer, adjusting the buttons on Jack's shirt, caught up in bitter nostalgia and pain over the constraints on his emotional life, of being trapped in the closet for so many years. The final shot takes us away from the closet and back outside to bask in the spatial rhetoric of big sky and mountainous landscape. The conceptual blending at work here creates nostalgia in us for the possibility that Jack could have been allowed to "come out," allowed to map his identity onto the promise of the unclaimed Western expanse. The danger implicit in this formulation is the further reinforcement of a collective belief in the possibility of a liberating transparency that follows "coming out." As Sedgwick has described this phenomenon, "the image of coming out regularly interfaces the image of the closet, and its seemingly unambivalent public siting can be counterposed as a salvational epistemologic certainty against the equivocal privacy afforded by the closet."[27] Salvation in these terms results in an untenable paradox: on the one hand, the reaffirmation of "knowing" as a function of moving from secrecy into the supposedly clear, transparent space of the "gay thing"; and on the other hand, assimilation into the communal rhetoric of Western, American Progressivism. Not only is "identity" in *Brokeback Mountain* hinged to the closet door, it makes the possible siting of the "gay thing" an experiential and mythical space located between an over-idealized romance with Edenic origins, authentic individualism, and Frontier consciousness.

In many senses, the rhetoric of the film is quite effective in moving mainstream audiences into a communal space that is framed as a complex layering of historical, cultural, and biographical registers. Moreover, the films's social and historical associations are merged with both the immediacy of the spatial rhetoric of the natural Frontier and the very visceral experience of the closet. *Brokeback Mountain* is an example of how fluid conceptual blending is in restructuring the relationship between biographical narratives or performances and larger historical and mythical ideologies. The film is successful as well, one could argue, in shifting audience allegiance around issues of morality and character in the conventional sense of those terms into more generic alignments of biographical performance, history, and myth.

Bryan Reynold's concepts of "subjunctive space" and "transversal performance" create another set of questions about *Brokeback Mountain*'s capacity to challenge some of the ideologies it regenerates. Subjunctive space is a performative and discursive space that allows for a form of "hypothetical ... empathy" where "as if" and "what if" become sites for considering experience beyond one's cultural or personal comfort zone. Subjunctive space can emerge in response to a traumatic or moving experience through "emotional, conceptual, and bodily performances" that follow from historical, cultural, or aesthetic events.[28] We can hear in Reynolds' descriptions of the subjunctive categories of "what if" and "as if" echoes of the categories of "allegiance" and "alignment" in thinking about audience identification. The power of Reynolds' formulations along these lines is in their embrace of cultural change in terms of performances that operate simultaneously at the level of cognition and communal experience. Rather than envisioning *Brokeback Mountain* as an experiment with identity and the individual viewer, we can broaden our understanding of the film's import as an event capable of re-constituting the "gay thing" as part of a much broader collocation of historical, mythical, and biographical performance.

Yet, transversal performances, while capable of re-forming individual and collective knowledge and experience, must give way to "self-activating"

movements that "work to stabilize, empower, or disempower the subject."[29] Certainly, on the one hand, the film evokes the spatial myths of the Western/ Frontier genre for its persuasive power and conceptually blends these myths with the rhetorical spaces of the "gay thing" and "universal love." Moreover, experientially, it activates a visceral experience with these rhetorical spaces that becomes linked to the epistemology of the closet. On the other hand, the performative and rhetorical "text" of the film leaves space for the possibility for differing and more interesting *alignments* of autobiography, myth, and experiential space to emerge. Indeed, the very "transversal" act of bringing queer desire into contact with more conventional genres and spaces creates an unstable cultural site where these rhetorics may be read differently, may be "activated" along more critical and expansive lines. Perhaps the "thing" that best describes *Brokeback Mountain*, then, is a performance in progress between text, rhetoric, and American myth.

Notes

1. Bryan Reynolds, *Performing Transversally: Reimagining Shakespeare and the Critical Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3.

2. James Schamus, Daniel Mendelsohn, "'Brokeback Mountain': An Exchange," *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 6 (Apr. 6, 2006), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/18846> (accessed Aug. 18, 2006). Schamus wrote in response to Daniel Mendelsohn's review of *Brokeback Mountain*, "An Affair to Remember," in *NYRB* (Feb. 23, 2006).

3. Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Mark Turner, "Compression and Representation," *Language and Literature* 15.1 (2006), 17-27.

4. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

5. Joseph E. Grady, Todd Oakley, and Seana Coulson, "Blending and Metaphor," on Mark Turner, 2006, <http://markturner.org/blendaphor.html> (accessed on May 15, 2006).

6. Ibid.

7. See Lakoff and Johnson; Turner, "Compression and Representation"; Turner and Fauconnier; Gilles Fauconnier, *Mappings in Thought and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

8. Gilberto Perez, "Toward a Rhetoric of Film," *Sense of Cinema* 5 (April 2000), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/5/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2006).

9. Gilberto Perez. "Saying 'Ain't' and Playing 'Dixie': Rhetoric and Comedy in *Judge Priest*," *Raritan* 23, no. 4 (2004): 34-54.

10. Perez, "Toward a Rhetoric."

11. Both Paul Alpers and, more recently, Thomas Hubbard offer extensive treatments of how the pastoral is a mode (or theme) used as a means not only of idealizing nature, but of drawing attention to how the pastoral serves as an ironic set of conventions to critique the concepts of origin (including authorship) and the instituting of "civilized" settings against "natural" environments. See Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), and Hubbard, *The Pipes of Pan: Intertextuality and Literary Filiation from Theocritus to Milton* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

12. See Stephen Guy-Bray, *Homoerotic Space: The Poetics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Paul Hammond, *Figuring Sex Between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Valerie Traub, *The Renais-*

sance of Lesbianism in Renaissance England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Rictor Norton, "The Homosexual Pastoral Tradition," *Rick Norton Homepage*, 1974/1997, <http://www.infopt.demon.co.uk/pastor01.htm> (accessed, July 1, 2006).

13. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 233-234.

14. Ibid., 286.

15. Ibid., 6.

16. Ibid.

17. Turner, "Compression and Representation."

18. Slotkin, 233.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 305.

23. Ibid., 309.

24. Ibid., 390.

25. Ibid.

26. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Epistemology of the Closet," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993).

27. Ibid., 48.

28. Reynolds, 5.

29. Ibid.