

## PERFORMING MASCULINITY: QUEER PERFORMANCE'S LAST FRONTIER IN "BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN"

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**Abstract:** "*Brokeback Mountain*" goes beyond the frontiers ordinarily established by Hollywood in relation to gender questions. The main reason for this, although quite simple, isn't obvious. Judith Butler writes: the category of gender cannot be understood and referred to as a biological destiny but as a performance which evokes the constitution of gender as a cultural category. Having this in mind, my idea in this paper is to show how every social drama lived out by the main characters in this film are caused by the inability of the heterosexual stage to recognize discreet performances which deviate from its regulatory practices of gender coherence, the "gender as destiny" norm of compulsory heterosexuality. In the specific case of Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar, the main characters in *Brokeback Mountain*, the attraction, the pleasure and the growing affection for each other as two individuals of the same biological sex.

**Keywords:** cultural studies; cinema; performance studies; queer studies.

### 1 Introduction

The main reason why *Brokeback Mountain* represents Hollywood's boldest incursion into an (almost) intact frontier, although simple enough, is not very obvious. Let me propose one tentative account along the following lines:

...(G)ender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. (Butler 24-25)

In *Brokeback Mountain* every subject matter that the film just as much as touches, from Jack and Ennis' (the film's two main characters) failure to secure full grip of their lives to the relentlessness of their behavior, can (and is) explained by the film in terms of their (and everyone else's) cultural inability to make out, accept, and, then, further extend on performances that are not promptly handled as valid and are never fully legitimized in the terms typically laid out by the regulatory practices of gender coherence in a heterosexual context. In the case of Jack and Ennis, the pattern of behavior in question is their "queer" sexuality: the attraction, the pleasure and the building affection they feel for one another as two, gendered, male individuals.

Based on Annie Proulx's short story of the same name, which appeared in *The New Yorker* some years ago, *Brokeback Mountain*'s tells a fairly simple tale: two ranch hands, Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar, are hired to herd sheep. They are both young, forlorn and have led quite miserable lives. Up on *Brokeback Mountain* one night (which I'll describe later in more detail) they engage in sexual intercourse. Soon after that, their job in *Brokeback Mountain* done, they separate and resume their lives. They both marry, have children, work. Four years after the job in *Brokeback Mountain*, Jack writes Ennis a "general delivery" postcard asking Ennis if he can come over to visit him. Ennis' answer is a scant but assertive, "You bet!" From then on they continue seeing each other, rather scarcely, for the next twenty years until Jack Twist is killed in, to Ennis' mind, obvious circumstances and for obvious reasons.

Wisely, instead of resorting to the now expected and almost reactionary telling of a "small" "gay" "story" of "love among human remains" that slowly (but surely) moves from periphery to center stage while, in the process, building up on a conflict between heterosexual and homosexual codes which then culminates generating minimal acceptance among the two orders, 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. Judith Butler writes:

"Physical features" appear to be in some sense "there" on the far side of language, unmarked by a social system. It is unclear, however, that these features could be named in a way that would not reproduce the reductive operation of the categories of sex. These numerous features gain social meaning and unification through their articulation within the category of sex. In other words, "sex" imposes an artificial unity on an otherwise discontinuous set of attributes. As both discursive and perceptual, "sex" denotes an historically contingent epistemic regime, a language that forms perception by forcibly shaping the interrelationships through which physical bodies are perceived. Is there a "physical" body prior to the perceptually perceived body? An impossible question to decide. (Butler 114)

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. *Brokeback Mountain* then, strikes as Hollywood's first and, for the time being, foremost gay movie as it places queer performance right at the center of the heterosexual stage even while it manages to replace (switch) one for the other. In other words, Jack and Ennis are so masculine, they are queer. Such variation is, I believe, central to the film's successful deconstruction of heterosexuality as it reveals two important points about performance and the performative. As Jack and Ennis' "unnatural" "pretentious" and "deviant" relationship progresses, they carry on performing manliness and heterosexuality to everyone's satisfaction, even if everyone's "idea" of male heterosexual behavior is a bigoted, often prejudiced performance which includes the telling of lies, frequent outbursts and fights, being at times compliant, at times maniacal, not wanting to use anti-conceptive means, filing for a divorce, never marrying again, not being able to expose your feelings, and, last but not least, veiled sexual acts between two males. Except for the fact that Jack and Ennis are also romantically and sexually involved, in *Brokeback Mountain* practically every single code from which the heterosexual imperative is construed is performed to "perfection" by Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar. That seems to show that compulsory heterosexuality and the regulatory politics of gender coherence, not manliness, are at stake.

In the process, we witness that--the years passing by and the growing un-functionality (Ennis) and dissatisfaction (Jack) these characters experience performing masculinity and, thus, gender coherence, in the heterosexual stage--the very core upon which notions of heterosexual behavior (Butler's "regulatory fiction of sexual coherence" 136) are built and conveyed in social terms get exposed for what they are, a series of conveyed, fabricated and rehearsed terms that are not more conspicuous or more relevant than the *deviant* behavior of these characters. However, 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:

If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (Butler 141)

Thus, heterosexuality only happens to be the more readily available, thus, easier grasped than homosexuality, performative norm. A norm that, because it is so readily available, nevertheless cannot be taken for what it is not because "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 33) or:

On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on

anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny. (Butler 8)

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 as Butler explains:

If the body is not a "being," but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender that constitutes its "interior" signification on its surface? Sartre would perhaps have called this act "a style of being," Foucault, "a stylistics of existence." And in my earlier reading of Beauvoir, I suggest that gendered bodies are so many "styles of the flesh." These styles all never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "performative" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning. (Butler 139)

## 2 The way we used to live

Conversely, and this may be the trickiest part of my argument, the destruction of the codes upon which the heterosexual imperative rests also (and necessarily) implies the destruction of the codes upon which an uncomplicated homosexual performance rests too. Once we realize Jack and Ennis can (and will) perform—effortlessly—according to the acceptable and recognizable norms of manliness and heterosexuality whilst being drawn to each other, these characters actually bring the two loose ends of heterosexual and queer performance together. In fact, the film not only brings these loose ends closer but succeeds in merging the two. This, however, is something new: although we may be used to read homosexual performances from bits and pieces of a heterosexual one, we are definitely not used to having to fully construct homosexuality from *within* the patterns of compulsory heterosexuality. What's much more acceptable is that a few discreet homosexual conventions will be made visible here and there from largely heterosexual performances that, because they represent the norm, usually read as peripheral, deviant from the normative context. Such patterns, usually played on the level of sexual desire, for instance, for the same sex body, can be (and will be) instantly recognized by both homosexual and heterosexual audiences exactly because they are so markedly divergent from the dominant "gender coherent" norm. In *Brokeback Mountain*, Jack and Ennis don't as much as look at each other, much less seem to explicitly desire each other's bodies. In fact, their first engagement, only happens once every sign of a homosexual, thus deviant, performance had consistently been excluded from the horizon.

After a drinking brawl, being too late for Ennis to go up to the sheep, he sleeps outside the camp's tent. Later, triggered by very cold weather, Jack, drowsing, invites Ennis in so he can quit his "hammer." It is in these dreamy, small hours, circumstance that Jack places Ennis' hand over his own cock. Thus, by removing "homosexuality" from "same sex intercourse" and, thus, the necessity for stepping outside the heterosexual matrix, the two characters can perform homosexual sex. Yes, much to everyone's surprise, this is a film that constructs "gayness" from scratch, that is, from a performance that excludes almost all "visible signs" of homosexuality but one: the solace (both physical and emotional) these two characters find in the company of each other, away from the heterosexual stage that refuses and fails to admit another practice, their "same sex" mutual fondness.

*Brokeback Mountain* is, first, heterosexuality's (but also homosexuality's) catch 22: if heterosexuality, the dominant norm, the regulatory fiction, is at the opposite side of homosexuality, excluding a plethora of conceivable variations, then how can homosexuality and queerness be, equally, construed from the very codes which are used to give heterosexuality its coherence? That is to say from the same performance that constructs heterosexual behavior? Catch 22: because gender is an act, from *within* the very norms that are used to construct heterosexuality there is room for homosexual performance. Theoretically, then, it is possible to construct homosexuality from *within* manliness and a largely heterosexual stage because both are, *equally*, culturally construed performances:

In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established: and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential: indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame—an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject. (Butler 140)

The fact that Jack Twist blatantly plays according to the "feminine" norm only helps increase such notion: in the absence of visible signs of "queerness", one must construct one's behavior from the codes made available by the dominant norm and its fabricated imperatives. That alone, in addition to undermining heterosexuality as an imperative performance for male individuals, helps create a homosexual performance that, unscathed by "queerness", is, then, *intrinsic* to heterosexual performance, *intrinsic* to manliness and heterosexuality. Eventually, both merge and are dissolved. But because heterosexuality, the dominant norm, normally construed as a biological, gender-related imperative, is played to perfection by two males who also engage in sex, in doing this, the film successfully criticizes its unwritten laws. At times, as when Jack Twist, having received Ennis' note on his divorce, comes to see his friend, it seems that all the weight of compulsory heterosexuality and biology as destiny hangs on Ennis del Mar's shoulders.

Masculinity and heterosexuality, then, instead of a biological destiny for male individuals get exposed for what they are, socially constructed performative acts. In this manner, both heterosexuality and homosexuality are leveled by the same principle, the performative. Consequently, anyone, not only heterosexual males and heterosexual partners, can assimilate and reproduce its codes to perfection. The only difference being, namely, one of availability and domination: heterosexuality, performed much more often than homosexuality, dominates the social stage whereas all other variations have to be "fabricated", that is, performed from the margins. Such is not the case of *Brokeback Mountain's* romantic couple: queerness for Jack and Ennis, is absolutely not dependent on the norms (and now clichés) of queerness, much to the contrary, and this may be a truly breakthrough from the norm, it is center stage, constructed from *within* the very norms provided by heterosexuality. This, to me, represents precisely the film's strength: depriving both heterosexuality and homosexuality of its imperatives and *equally* reconstructing them again as learned, rehearsed roles.

However, this presents audiences with several problems. If queerness can be constructed from within the heterosexual stage, how can we make out or establish regulating differences? First notion to go is the belief that visibility is the only means to recognize performance and, thus, build acceptance and correspondence. Recent years, which have witnessed queer studies and queer performance privilege stories and writing that choose to "tell", that is, affirm homosexual roles and stories from the borders of a, mainly, heterosexual context, may state otherwise. Let us call that a movement towards visibility and acceptance. For the many who have endured the risks and penalties of being exposed or for those who have been fighting for visibility, *Brokeback Mountain* may be justifiably criticized, as it seems to lack exactly that upon which queer performance has built its most fertile performances: the construction of a myriad of peripheral, queer roles that could then be used as behavioral pattern generators by other individuals.

My argument is, however, 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. What matters to Jack and Ennis is not fact that they both belong to the same biological sex but the heartfelt communication they once discovered in *Brokeback Mountain*. The romantic commitment of *Brokeback Mountain's* main characters, I believe, may constitute the ultimate queer performance, one that eventually succeeds in "contaminating" heterosexuality's "regulatory fiction of sexual coherence" (Butler 136) to the point of fully deconstructing its fixed codes. Every possible pattern of queerness is subverted in this movie, that is, queerness, although construed on the basis of heterosexual performance is queerness nevertheless. That alone makes the film stand out as the ultimate "queer visibility" performance: one which completely inscribes (wraps) itself in heterosexual terms, thus defying the very basis upon which notions of heterosexuality, as a compulsory norm for male individuals, are understood.

Even if we are now more used to seeing "queerness" being performed *Brokeback Mountain* stands out as a film that reminds one of how intricate it has always been to escape compulsory heterosexuality and its regulating norms. Much of Jack and Ennis' appeal lies in that they remain forever in an interstice, a position where they find themselves at odds with the norm but embarrassedly happy with each other. Between a heterosexual performance and the homosexual one which is never fully performed at all they find solace in the memento: *Brokeback Mountain*. At one point in the film, for example, Ennis inquires Jack on the possibility of being uncovered, as if homosexuality, like the sheep they once herded, had been branded on them. At another, Ennis del Mar realizes in full the extent to which this "thing" that grabs holds of them (homosexuality barely has a name) can be (and will be) performed within the heterosexual stage. He says: "Two guys living together? No way. We can get together every once in a while hell out in the middle of nowhere." For Ennis, whose compulsory heterosexuality had been "engendered" from childhood, the penalties for "deviant", homosexual behavior are very clear: "The bottom line is, we are around each other and this thing grabs hold of us again, in the wrong place, in the wrong time, and we're dead." If Jack and Ennis' lives seem pointless and untrue, it is chiefly because a performance (their mutual fondness) is exhaustively and repeatedly ruled out from the social stage by the dominant norm.

Jack and Ennis' passion ends up destroying the very core upon which both heterosexuality and homosexuality are constructed and

conveyed. In doing this, the characters of Jack and Ennis show, first, to what extent our beliefs and values are performances determined by convention; second, Jack and Ennis' growing dissatisfaction seems to show how stirring and dramatic the results of an absolute absence of correspondence between performative terms can be. The worst result being, however, the creation of a performative void that does not function socially: the void created by compulsory heterosexuality in Jack and Ennis' lives. The tragedy and misery of performing compulsory heterosexuality lies in that, by naturalizing gender, heterosexual imperatives rule out (exclude) a plethora of alternative performances.

### 3 Concluding remarks

*Brokeback Mountain's* commercial success (various Oscar and Golden Globe awards) in appealing to both gay and heterosexual audiences is somewhat of a surprise. One glimpse at audiences watching the film in Brazil may enlighten the issue: Can this heterosexual couple sitting in front of me feel the same social chains that bind Jack and Ennis around their own necks? What are all these grey haired ladies doing here? Do they recognize their own husbands in Jack and Ennis? Perhaps it is not their husbands: they were once lovers themselves. The answer to all these questions, obviously, touches the points I have tried to delineate above. As I have stated, part of my premise asks: Haven't homosexuals (but also blacks and wiymin) been forced to construct their identities from the images shown on the heterosexual stage? Haven't we created our performances from, mostly, invisible bits and pieces? What's wrong then with heterosexuals witnessing, for once, their own performances being smashed from within? And, isn't it about time?

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**Título:** Performance da masculinidade: a última fronteira da performance *Queer* em "*Brokeback Mountain*"

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**Resumo:** "*Brokeback Mountain*" vai além das fronteiras estabelecidas por Hollywood em relação à questão de gênero. A razão, ainda que simples, não é óbvia. Judith Butler, afirma que a categoria gênero não pode ser entendida como um destino biológico, mas sim como uma performance que evoca a constituição cultural da categoria gênero. Tendo-se isso em mente, minha idéia é tentar mostrar que no filme "*Brokeback Mountain*" todos os problemas, todos os dramas vividos pelos personagens, dependem da inabilidade cultural dos mesmos em reconhecer, aceitar e desenvolver performances que não são imediatamente constituídas como legítimas nos termos habitualmente propostos (e aceitos) pelo contexto heterossexual. No caso específico de Jack Twist e Ennis del Mar, os personagens principais de *Brokeback Mountain*, a atração, o prazer e a crescente afeição que ambos sentem pelo outro como dois indivíduos do mesmo sexo biológico.

**Palavras-chave:** Estudos Culturais; cinema; *performance*; Estudos de Gênero.

**Titre:** Performance de la Masculinité: la dernière frontière de la performance *queer* dans "*Brokeback Mountain*".

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**Résumé:** "*Brokeback Mountain*" dépasse les frontières établies par Hollywood par rapport à la question du genre. La raison, malgré sa simplicité, n'est pas évidente. Judith Butler dit que la catégorie genre ne peut être comprise comme un destin biologique, mais au contraire comme une performance qui suscite la constitution culturelle de la catégorie genre. Ayant ceci dans la pensée, mon idée est celle d'essayer de démontrer que, dans le film "*Brokeback Mountain*", tous les problèmes, tous les drames vécus par les personnages résultent de l'inhabileté culturelle des mêmes dans le fait de reconnaître, accepter et développer des performances qui ne sont pas tout de suite constituées comme légitimes dans les termes habituellement proposés (et acceptés) dans le contexte hétérosexuel. Dans le cas spécifique de Jack Twist et Ennis del Mar, les personnages centraux de *Brokeback Mountain*, l'attrait, le plaisir et l'attachement croissant que chacun éprouve mutuellement tout en étant des êtres du même sexe biologique.

**Mots-clés:** Études Culturelles; cinéma; *performance*; Études de Genre.

**Título:** Performance de la masculinidad: la última frontera de la performance *queer* en "*Brokeback Mountain*"

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**Resumen:** "*Brokeback Mountain*" se instala más allá de las fronteras establecidas por Hollywood con relación a las cuestiones del género. La razón, aunque simple, no es obvia. Judith Butler dice que la categoría de género no puede ser entendida como un destino biológico y si como una *performance* que evoca la constitución cultural de la categoría género. Con eso en la mira, la idea es intentar mostrar que en la película "*Brokeback Mountain*" todos los problemas, los dramas vividos por los personajes, dependen de la inhabilidad cultural de los mismos para reconocer, aceptar y desarrollar *performances* que no son inmediatamente constituídas como legítimas en los términos normalmente postulados (y aceptados) por el contexto heterosexual. En el caso específico de Jack Twist y Ennis del Mar, los personajes principales de *Brokeback Mountain*, la atracción, el placer y el creciente afecto que sienten en tanto dos individuos del mismo sexo biológico.

**Palabras-clave:** *performance*; estudios de género; cinema; estudios culturales.

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