The Social Impact of "Brokeback Mountain:" A Reception Study

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THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*: A RECEPTION STUDY

By

Pilar Aurelia Bermudez Emmanuelli

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
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THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN: A RECEPTION STUDY

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The film *Brokeback Mountain* was released in December of 2005 into mainstream theaters and to general audiences. Director Ang Lee, screenwriters Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry, and actors Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal made this film in which the storyline revolves around two men falling in love and how this forbidden love would affect the rest of their lives. The shock of having a film with two men kissing and having sex in the theaters seemed to have struck a nerve with many viewers. Some were very positive, hailing the film as a new step in mainstream films to show a queer relationship, others were negative, criticizing the film even at times condemning what was shown on the screen. The impact of the film made debate and conversations about queer content available to a public forum, in this case newspapers from around the country.
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Introduction

In December of 2005, Ang Lee’s Brokeback Mountain was released to theaters in cities across the nation, and it became one of the most controversial films of the year. Confronting mainstream audiences in brand new ways, two straight male actors were not only going to kiss on the big screen, they were going to be seen making love in a graphic manner. This was a first for a film that was a wide release with big box office stars in the sense that the public would be seeing gay men as the main characters instead of the cliché sidekicks, or the comic figures, the AIDS victims, or murderous villains. They would be seeing two people, specifically two men, and fall in love in the same manner as men and women do on the screen every day.

My interest in the film came about because of my own personal experience in the movie theater. Thirty minutes after the film started, a graphic and sudden love scene appeared between the two main male characters. The scene did not last for more than two minutes, but apparently, that was enough to upset some moviegoers, who proceeded to leave the movie theater at this point in the film. The image of two men having sex caused a strong reaction from those moviegoers who left the theater as well as those who chose to stay. In this thesis, three aspects of the film will be analyzed: first, I will examine popular opinion which discusses how people reacted to the film and how the film itself affected popular culture. Next, the genre of the film will be discussed, which presents debates on whether the film is labeled as a gay, straight or queer film. After, Philadelphia is examined as the precursor to Brokeback Mountain and how its same-sex relationship themes still echo 12 years later.
Chapter 1 will discuss public opinion about the film as well as the impact it had on popular culture. In the first section, I will discuss the challenges of making this film in Hollywood: the production delay, and the fact that no one wanted the project. Then, public opinion will be discussed, which will show how general audiences reacted and how they vocalized that opinion, ranging from very positive to indifferent to highly negative. Then, we see how the film had an impact on popular culture by the time the film was released, including catch phrases and word association. I will also discuss the bad reviews and how they contrast with the more popular good reviews. In the last section, I will reveal how much box office the film grossed and how many awards it garnered.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss how the movie was labeled. There was heated debate over how to classify the film; some said queer cinema, others gay cinema, and some that said straight cinema. The debate for straight film was an issue because of the involvement of straight moviemakers in the film as well as the intended audience of the film. The gay cinema debate discusses how the film can be perceived as gay because of the main relationship between the two main characters, Ennis and Jack. I will also discuss how people decided to label it as “gay” because it was an easy term to describe the film for some. The last section looks at why the movie is also considered queer, in which B. Ruby Rich is the main commentator behind this claim, but she is not the only one.

In Chapter 3, Brokeback Mountain will be compared to 1993’s Philadelphia. The comparison between the two is a main issue in the reviewers’ minds. Both of the films were considered groundbreaking, important in their subject matter, and both equally
praised and condemned for their themes. The reviews are quite similar, and the 12-year separation between the releases of both these films seems to be a very small divide.

*Brokeback Mountain* features two well-known actors who project themselves as straight in real life: Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger. Gyllenhaal plays Jack Twist, a talkative and optimistic man, who falls in love with Ennis Del Mar, played by Ledger, while they herd sheep on Brokeback Mountain, however, Ennis is afraid of his sexuality. The isolation from the real world makes it possible for them to carry on a passionate love affair. After the job is over, they go on their separate ways; they each marry and have kids. But four years after they leave Brokeback Mountain, Jack writes Ennis a letter to meet again. Ennis’ wife Alma, played by Michelle Williams, becomes an unwitting witness to a not-so-discreet kiss between the two men. They decide to go back to Brokeback Mountain to rekindle the romance, where Jack tells Ennis that he wants to have a normal relationship with Ennis, but Ennis refuses after he reveals how, as a child, he saw how a man was brutally murdered for living with another man, and how the brutal act may have been perpetrated by his own father. They continue the affair in secret for almost twenty years, causing strife in their respective families, including wives and children. One day, Ennis receives a postcard that says Jack is deceased, so he calls Jack’s wife to find out what had happened. As she explains how his death was a result of an accident involving a tire blowout, in Ennis’ mind, Jack is killed by a group of kids because of his sexual orientation, allowing his imagination to fuel his fear of his own feelings.

One other film which was almost as commercially and critically successful, and almost as controversial as *Brokeback Mountain*, is the 1993 film *Philadelphia*, directed
by Jonathan Demme. Here, Tom Hanks, a likable actor who is seen as a straight man in real life, played a gay man named Andrew Beckett, who had a life partner named Miguel (Antonio Banderas), also considered a straight man in real life. Beckett is fired from his firm because of his AIDS diagnosis as well as his sexual orientation, so Beckett decides to take the issue into court to battle for his civil rights alongside a homophobic lawyer who has a change of heart after witnessing the extreme prejudice Beckett faces. In the end, they are both successful in the trial, but Beckett succumbs to the devastating effects of the disease. There are many similarities between the two films: the actors are considered straight in the public forum, homophobia is presented in a blunt and brutal way, and a gay character dies in the end in very nonconventional ways. Both films received strong reactions from both the heterosexual and homosexual communities, and the responses were both positive and negative.

For Brokeback Mountain, the reactions were very varied. There were some who praised the film for an honest portrayal of a homosexual relationship and the homophobia that keeps the relationship closeted, while others found it unacceptable and even ‘disgusting’ for representing homosexual behavior at all. Such reactions bring about questions about what intentions the filmmakers had in mind, such as if their intention was to bring about a shock value for the film, or if they wanted to bring forward an issue which is still being debated in popular culture, even if they have a political agenda. Questions were also raised in respect to the authorship of the film since the film was made by mostly heterosexual members of the industry, such as if the film is a gay film if the filmmakers are straight, or why was the film created by straight filmmakers. It is always safer for heterosexuals in Hollywood to make these kinds of films, whereas gay
filmmakers might offend the heterosexual majority. Furthermore, a lot of reviewers questioned the nature of gay representation that was shown in the film, such as if the film was a queer film because of Jack and Ennis’ choice to have sex with both men and women, or if the film is a gay film since it is about the love affair between the two men, or is it a straight film since the filmmakers involved are all considered straight in the public eye. All of these questions will be addressed in the following chapters.

**History of Censorship in Hollywood**

In Hollywood, censorship became an important and present force as film became a mass medium. Today, censorship is not as blatant as it used to be years ago, but to some degree there is still a conscious effort to avoid alienating filmgoers who might find certain portrayals on film unacceptable. It all dates back to the Production Code, which was first enforced in the 1930s. This code made sure that behavior that was looked down upon in society at that time, such as adultery, robbery, murder, or homosexual behavior was not displayed in movies. And, if someone did display what they called “abhorrent” behavior, it had to have consequences: ruined lives and reputations, disease, or death. This has not changed, not even in modern cinema, for example, in the film *The Children’s Hour* (1962), two female teachers were accused of having a homosexual relationship. In the end, even if it was a rumor, their lives would be irreparably ruined because of association. Another example of punishment would be *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), where James Dean’s friend, Sal Mineo, who has a seemingly obsessive infatuation for Dean, would go to jail for defending Dean in the end in an act of self-sacrifice.
Brokeback Mountain seems to be no exception to the rule, even if it came out as recently as 2005. The character of Jack Twist dies in the end after all, coincidentally the extrovert of the twosome. He seems to be more accepting of who he is in terms of his sexuality, and makes it clear that he wants nothing more than to live with Ennis happily ever after as a couple. Even though his death is displayed as an act of hate by local teens in Ennis’ mind, Jack’s wife explains his death as an accident, drowning in his own blood after he gets hit on the face thanks to a blown tire, but this is not one hundred percent clear to the audience. The filmmakers decide to show the more violent version of Jack’s death, which provides a more punishing ending to his story as well and a discreet way for the audience to choose which one is the accurate ending.

Misrepresentation of minorities in film is not reserved for queer characters in Hollywood history. For example, women have also been shown as characters who meet demise in the end of a film, and the best example of those women is the dangerous femme fatales. In the 1940s, film noir was a popular film format, and one of the main elements of film noir is the femme fatale, a dangerous woman who will kill those who will stand in her way even if it is her own husband or lover. One example of these films is Double Indemnity (1944) with Barbara Stanwyck (Phyllis) and Frank MacMurray (Walter). When Phyllis meets Walter, the insurance agent, she concocts a plan to kill her husband so she can get his insurance money, so she seduces Walter in order to drive him into the plot and become the one in charge of killing her husband. When they succeed, though, Phyllis threatens Walter, but they both manage to shoot each other when the film is about to end, and Phyllis, of course, is the one that dies. Walter is allowed to live long enough to tell his side of the story; in this case, the man is the victim. After film noir,
there have been more modern instances when women have been seen as merely sex objects or dangerous minxes, such as *Basic Instinct* (1991), where Sharon Stone plays a bisexual seductress.

The African-American community, another minority in American society, has also been a victim of misrepresentation on the silver screen. One of the first examples of this is *Birth of a Nation* (1915), in which the film presented black characters as evil and out to harm those from the Caucasian community. Some of the African-American characters were played by white actors with painted faces. Afterwards, the African-American character has been the servant, the entertainment, and recently, they have been seen in many films as “the token black guy,” which is the characters that appears in the film to make it seem as if the cast is more of a diverse crowd, but they hardly have any screen time.

Altogether, this suggests that Hollywood films often give voice to the Caucasian middle-aged male majority and expose anxieties about “the other,” whether this means gays, lesbians, women, or African Americans. This project is significant, then, because it is interested in examining prejudice and how it occurs in both general and specific ways. By better understanding the reception of *Brokeback Mountain*, the history of misrepresentation might also be better understood, and maybe place an end to misrepresentation in films, especially mainstream films which deal with homosexuality.

**Literature Review**

Discussions about queer images in film did not seem to be a part of the film discussion for a long time. The subject of homosexuality has remained a quiet and taboo
theme until the 1980s when *The Celluloid Closet* (1987) by Vito Russo was published. It was one of the first books to be published on the subject of gay representation in film. Russo covers the early years of cinema all the way to 1987 in the most recent version, and he divides his book into five chapters. The first chapter is titled “Who’s a Sissy? Homosexuality according to Tinseltown,” and here he reveals how Hollywood has concealed gay themes resulting in subliminal messages, background actors and changed lines instead of a mainstream focus on the screen. One example of the “sissy” is the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*, the image of an effeminate man (or lion) who provides comic relief, but seems to be closeted. The second section, “The Way We Weren’t: The Invisible Years,” shows that fear of homosexuality would result in other kinds of films; in other words, homosexuality would be misrepresented. For example, close male relationships might be seen in “cowboy” films, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, where two men have a strong bond, but the relationship is seen as purely platonic. These kinds of films, in which homosexuality was there but “invisible” are important because they show how the representation of homosexuality has changed from being disguised in the past to open and exposed as seen in *Brokeback Mountain*.

Russo goes on to discuss how homosexual themes were slowly but surely “coming out” in the 1960s in his chapter, “Frightening the Horses: Out of the Closets and Into the Shadows.” Russo mentions *The Children’s Hour* and *The Boys in the Band* as examples of films that came out at this time. *The Children’s Hour* is about two teachers who are put in the spotlight because of their unusually close relationship and public opinion about the two women, and *The Boys in the Band* shows gay characters that are self-loathing of their own desires. Both of these films present sexual ambiguity and
confusion as a “sin” or as a disease of some sort. “Struggle: Fear and Loathing in Gay Hollywood” is the fourth part, and it reveals how homophobia surfaces strongly in the films of the 1970s and the 1980s. Cruising is one of the films mentioned, and is about a cop played by Al Pacino who goes undercover in the gay underground scene to find a serial killer, but, in the process, he finds himself examining his own sexuality, he becomes violent and kills his prospective lovers. American Gigolo is another film mentioned, where Richard Gere plays the main character, and is very clear about not having sex with male clients by saying the phrase “I didn’t do fags.” These and other films are mentioned as representing the queer or gay characters as violent threats. Russo also reflects on the difference in gay filmmaking and homosexual acceptance since 1981 in the section called “Taking the Game Away from Hollywood: Finding a Voice and Facing a Backlash.” AIDS is mentioned as a scapegoat for misrepresentation of homosexuals, but he explores the ways gay filmmakers are making their own films and not depending on the Hollywood machine. At this time it seems as if gay and queer cinema might be free from repression and show a story that the filmmaker wants to make. But, even now, the widely released Brokeback Mountain faced resistance in terms of censorship, shock, and public scrutiny.

This book is important to my research in terms of queer and gay cinema analysis because it provides a useful background on queer representation in film history. It suggests things have changed from the past to the present, but it has not been as progressive as it is perceived to be today. Also, Russo’s book provides an extensive list of films for thinking through images of gay representation, although it does lack an extensive explanation of audience perception. One of the few examples mentioned,
though, was *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), in which he mentions that mass audiences might have felt safe with the relationship between William Hurt and Raul Julia because it isn’t a story of two men who fall in love and have sex; they get together for political reasons, not because they genuinely feel something for each other. The fact that the two actors were perceived as being straight in real life is also attributed to the acceptance of the relationship shown onscreen, which seems to be a succeeding formula even today: place two male actors who are perceived as straight in their private lives, and mass audiences will accept it more.

Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin discuss homosexuality in film history with their book, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, which is an excellent continuation of *The Celluloid Closet*. Their book is divided into 12 chapters, and Benshoff and Griffin cover as much as Russo does, but their book was published in 2006, which gives an even more up-to-date gay and queer cinema history lesson, beginning where Russo leaves off, in the AIDS crisis, with chapter 9 called “A Matter of Life and Death: AIDS, Activism, Film and Video.” They make it clear that the late 1980s and early 1990s were a very important time in both mainstream and counter cinema. For example, Hollywood films such as *Basic Instinct* and *Silence of the Lambs* created controversy for showing a bisexual woman or a very confused transvestite as serial killers. At the same time, gay filmmakers were helping to launch the “New Queer Cinema” genre, a phrase coined by B. Ruby Rich to describe films with new and daring queer content. Benshoff and Griffin also mention that Philadelphia was a turning point for mainstream Hollywood by pointing out that it was very late in its arrival, considering that made-for-TV movies had been dealing with gay and lesbian characters—and the
AIDS crisis—throughout the 1980s. They argue that the gay relationship was “asexual,” since it was intended for mainstream audiences, not for the underground circuit.

The book, like *The Celluloid Closet*, gives a very detailed and chronological film analysis, but audience reaction was not in the main arguments. Still, it is helpful because they continue with Russo’s analyses for the modern queer cinema. They did, though, mention protests by gay and lesbian audiences for the films *Cruising* and *Basic Instinct*, as both present queer characters as violent, a stereotype which has frequently appeared in Hollywood films. Benshoff and Griffin also point out that, despite the protest for *Cruising*, 1,600 gay men participated in the filming, showing that some gay men just wanted to be represented on mainstream film, regardless of how gay men were represented.

In another study, entitled *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media*, by Stephen Vaughn, notes how both *Cruising* and *Basic Instinct* were both edited to make an R rating instead of an X or NC-17 rating not to appease the protests, but for more economical reasons. The director and producer of *Basic Instinct*, Joe Estheras and Irwin Winkler, decided to cut a lesbian love scene because of the rating. Furthermore, many film theaters do not like to carry films above an R rating, so the same-sex love scenes were cut, fearing an unwanted rating and alienating other audiences, adding to the argument that gay content is still seen as a reason to alienate the content into an X rating and push the content into secluded theaters that are willing to show X rated films, which are not many and seemingly inaccessible to general audiences.
Another useful work is Benshoff and Griffin’s anthology *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, which has a collection of important and informative essays on old and new gay films. In the introduction, Benshoff and Griffin mention how Hollywood still has a closet mentality, regardless of how much more open it appears to be today. They also mention that Hollywood’s liberal reputation has not caught up to that of television, noting that shows such as *Ellen*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and others, were out years before *Brokeback Mountain* was released. It may seem as if Hollywood decided to wait for the public’s reaction to shows with gay content in order to produce more gay-friendly films. In Part I, the authors discuss the auteurs of queer cinema, where they admit there is an issue with the authorship of some films. The auteur theory determines the person responsible for the content in a film, making it his own, maybe even with his or her agenda attached to the project. There have been many instances where the filmmakers declare themselves straight, yet the film has been classified as containing queer content, and for many, a film is not queer if the filmmakers are queer as well. This dilemma is apparent for *Brokeback Mountain*. One of the book’s most important articles is Thomas Waugh’s “Physique Cinema, 1945-1969: Hard to Imagine.” Here, Waugh discusses mail-order physique cinema, in which the films showed men standing in different poses with jockey shorts and, in some instances, even naked. Sexual acts were not represented, but the wrestling-themed films showed two men in violent yet pleasurable physical activity. This kind of film was underground “gay porn” that had a limited audience, but its imagery would come to be seen later in more mainstream images of gay men.

Benshoff and Griffin challenge the gaze theory of film in part four. Gaze theory is a psychoanalysis term in which the relationship between the spectator and the film works
upon the subconscious of the spectator; in other words, the film viewer creates its own meaning of the film. According to Benshoff and Griffin, the gaze theory itself is queer in this text. When someone sees a film and perceives it as queer, that is what makes the film queer. For example, if a moviegoer sees *Psycho* and understands that the character of Norman Bates is a man who is dressed in drag and is more comfortable in doing so, for the moviegoer, the film can be considered queer. This is why Alexander Doty’s *Flaming Classics* examines queer themes of popular films, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Red Shoes*, and *Psycho*. Doty analyzes the films in a queer point of view, looking at the “hidden meanings” of these films. This is probably why there were differing opinions about *Brokeback Mountain*, ranging from very positive to extremely offensive.

*New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michele Aaron, carries the definition of the word “queer,” which has taken on important significance in film studies in recent years. In the first chapter, “New Queer Cinema: An Introduction,” by Michele Aaron, the word “queer” is defined as a derogatory term leveled at the non-hetero-seeming. It was re-appropriated in the late 1980s and early 1990s by its victims as a defiant means of empowerment. The re-appropriation of the word is compared to how the African-American community uses the word “nigger,” another derogatory term which the African-American population took as their own. On Chapter 2, B. Ruby Rich defines “The New Queer Cinema” in her essay. The term New Queer Cinema was introduced by Rich in the early 1990s in queer film festivals to describe the wave of queer films that gained critical acclaim and represented the prospect that lesbian and gay images and filmmakers had turned a corner. According to this definition, *Brokeback Mountain* can be defined as queer cinema, as it presents a visual of two queer characters as main characters
that fall in love. In the research, there was a huge debate over the sexuality of the two main characters. After all, Ennis and Jack did have a love affair, but they still married women and had children by them. The debate got really heated in both the heterosexual as well as the homosexual community.

In Chapter 4 of *New Queer Cinema*, audience reception is pointed out by Harry M. Benshoff in his essay “Reception of a Queer Mainstream Film.” His essay examines how people reacted to the film *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), in which the character Tom Ripley, played by Matt Damon, is obsessed with Dickie, Jude Law’s character, in a seemingly homoerotic manner. His reception essay is almost the exact analysis made in this thesis, but with *Brokeback Mountain*. He starts with the quote from Cosmo Landesman, who is a film critic for *The Sunday Times*, in which he describes the film as “queer cinema for a straight audience.” Benshoff reveals how the story was meant to be a mainstream version of New Queer Cinema, although it was widely misunderstood by the mainstream. There also were debates on whether Tom Ripley was actually gay, or a repressed homosexual, or just another killer, when the film was supposed to be a thriller about how closeted homosexuality can lead to a violent result. But half of the reviews didn’t even mention Tom’s sexuality, and the other half who did bring up his sexuality, saw it as a threat. Instead of understanding it as “Tom is gay and he kills,” it was more perceived as “Tom kills because he is gay.” Also, Benshoff mentions how bloggers described the film, for example, he mentions a 16-year-old girl’s experience in the theater, which closely echoes the experience I had with *Brokeback Mountain*:

‘… whenever Matt Damon stared at Jude Law, I heard people say ‘oh, God’ and when I looked back, I saw some men rolling their eyes.’ When homosexuality is made
manifest onscreen and cannot be denied, audience members frequently ‘act out’ in some way (groans, moans, and homophobic comments) to announce to those around them that they are indeed straight. (179)

This proves that homosexuality and on-screen queer characters have brought up strong reactions by the audience like the one I experienced in *Brokeback Mountain*.

In the next chapter, Michele Aaron writes about “The New Queer Spectator.” She writes about audience reception regarding *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Chicago*. Even though *Boys Don’t Cry* is more direct in its message about queerness, *Chicago* is more implicit of the female characters’ involvement in the story.

*Boys* re-scripts the classic cross-dressing narrative to avow the queerness not just of the characters in the film but of the firmly implicated spectator. (189)

Aaron points out that the spectator is very important in terms of queer context and storyline. If a queer theme is implicit, the spectator is the one who has to decipher the information presented on the screen. Otherwise, explicitly queer themes are “out,” for the public to see, and *Brokeback Mountain* is a mainstream film with explicit queer content, so translation seems to be unnecessary yet debate still ensued over the labeling the film. Aaron describes how the film intends to keep the audience involved; the fact that Brandon Teena was actually born a female and she is dressing as a man keeps only the audience aware throughout the whole film, giving it a very explicit meaning of Brandon’s experiences. Yet *Chicago*, a wide release, still keeps the ‘lesbian’ relationships implicit, with glances, sly touching and code words to keep the spectator guessing.

Some of the existing literature of *Brokeback Mountain* focuses on the production of the film and the role it has played in film history. In the book *Brokeback Mountain*:
Story to Screenplay, Annie Proulx discusses how and why the short story was written, explaining how she was fascinated by the “cowboy” way of life, and she was also intrigued by a man in a bar looking at other men play pool. She became curious about how he was so attentive to these men, and a week before the bartender started to complain over two queer men being at the same bar. He explained how, if other people were there, they would have been in trouble, meaning they could have faced a violent exit. The homophobia that she saw in country land affected her in the sense that she deemed it heartbreaking that two men could not be free to love, yet they are persecuted in the eyes of their neighbors. She also mentions how, since the short story is sexually graphic, it surprised her that someone wanted to write a screenplay. It was strange for her that someone wanted to write the screenplay of a love story between two men, so she was skeptical, and did not expect the reception it got in the end. Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry discuss why they felt the need to write the screenplay. It was fascinating to see how a story that is no longer than 29 pages has inspired the film and the need to present such a tragic story to audiences in America, but they also discuss how difficult it was to make the film. It got the reputation of being the most unwanted film in history; no one seemed to want to produce the film since the script hit the screenplay circuit. It took 6 years from the time the script was submitted for the film to be made and how they needed so-called “brave souls” to tackle the theme of the film. Apparently, there was resistance in presenting the story of the two men on the screen, and the only ones to do it were those who dared to.

In an article, B. Ruby Rich argues that Brokeback Mountain is a revolution in gay films and writes that: “Every once in a while a film comes along that changes our
perceptions so much that cinema history thereafter has to arrange itself around it… to signal a new era.” Rich expresses her excitement at seeing gay themes move on from the independent line of films to the mainstream, to the “outside world” and to the consciousness of the masses. She is impressed with the film’s accessibility, therefore, according to Rich, film history will never be the same. It is the goal of this thesis to further understand how a film such as this leaves a mark on this “outside world,” as Rich calls it.

What does Queer Mean?

The definition of the word “queer” is varied and still widely discussed. Many seem to grasp a common definition, but the debate lingers on, with different authors offering their own definition of the word. The term ‘queer’ is an umbrella term which covers homosexuality, both male and female, bisexuality, transgender males and females, and transvestites; in other words, an identity that is not uniquely heterosexual or labeled as heterosexual by society. Queer is often defined as any sexual identity that exists outside the norm, or “normal.” The word “normal” is in quotes because today it is hard to tell what is, even what seems to be the norm to the outside eye could be exposed as a façade. There have been instances of men who have been married to women and had children who later in life come out of the closet after years of being married to a woman, so the marriage becomes a statement to the rest of the world that they are of a heterosexual orientation instead of a queer one. In fact, in the real life section of Chapter 1, Brokeback Mountain viewers discuss how the film parallels their own lives in terms of being in the closet, being married to homosexual men, and how some homosexual people have been seen to be forced to hide their sexuality for fear of persecution. But that
“normal” lifestyle is now challenged by those who want to be themselves, be out of the closet and break away from the norm. So the term “queer” covers everyone and everything that takes place outside the heterosexual lifestyle taught since childhood. Both terms “gay” and “lesbian” are seen as limited to describe men who only date men and women that only date women. They are also the most comfortable label for those who do not understand the queer identity, so having the labels so fixed that there is no confusion whatsoever. For these individuals, sexually speaking, there is only “straight” or “gay.”

Alexander Doty in Flaming Classics offers a definition but it is not specific either; this is why Doty says that just using the word “queer” can cause nervousness in using it, even for those who deal with queerness every day. He describes it as a suggestive rather than a prescriptive concept, so the fact that the term ‘queer’ is still being defined today makes people nervous; labels seem to make the unknown more comfortable because it is defined and someone who does not live in that way of life can understand better (7). Benshoff and Griffin agree that the term “queer” is a new concept, but have a simpler definition for the word, saying it is a term to describe non-straight sexualities, and the term is merely the beginning of further analysis over a person’s sexuality. But they do point out that, during the 1960’s, the term “queer” was also used as an insulting term such as “faggot” or “dyke,” so the term has been seen as a derogatory term. But the term was re-appropriated in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s by its “victims” according to Michele Aaron (2004), and is now used to describe those with alternative sexualities besides heterosexual behavior, and to define a new genre for film, queer cinema.
Acting Straight

For the purpose of the thesis, I will not refer to certain individuals as strictly straight or heterosexual. For decades in the film industry, homosexuality has been very well hidden from the public eye, including legends like Rock Hudson and Tab Hunter, to modern supposedly closeted actors such as Jodie Foster. Since their sexuality can be varied or, dare we say, queer, I will describe the actors or the directors as heterosexual-acting, or being perceived as heterosexual. This by any means is not a way to question someone’s sexuality, but in order to be sure, heterosexual or straight will not be used as a definitive.

Resources

In order to have an understanding of the reception of the film, I compiled and read numerous newspaper and magazine articles with LexisNexis, which was the main database for collection of the articles. The publications ranged from popular nationwide releases such as Time and Newsweek, to niche publications such as The Advocate, to small, local magazines such as New Times from Miami, Florida and The Times Union from Albany, New York.
Chapter One: The Impact of *Brokeback Mountain* in Popular Culture and Public Opinion

When *Brokeback Mountain* first came out in December of 2005, it was highly publicized because it was hard for the media to believe that the film would be widely released and contain two men having a very intimate scene together, which in turn propelled *Brokeback Mountain* into becoming a publicity phenomenon. It seemed that everyone had an opinion on the film’s content once it became public knowledge, and it seemed for some unnecessary to even see the film because of wide discussions in the media spectrum. Christine Spines described the film’s discussion best when she describes *Brokeback Mountain* as playing “like a story that’s been stamping in its stall, waiting to be let loose into the rodeo ring of public opinion” (2006).

**Before its Wide Release**

Even before the movie was released, the film received media attention as a new and different project for Hollywood, even though it was still riddled with an unsure future. When casting was out for *Brokeback Mountain* in 2004, the *Chicago Sun-Times* made a point to reveal that this film was actually being made. They made the point of bringing up what happened socially the year before:

Welcome to Gay 2004. It follows Gay 2003, when sodomy became legal in all 50 states, gay marriage or “civil unions” became a possibility in three, and the media pulled a muscle patting itself on the back for accepting a fistful of swishy television characters (Traister, Cowboys in Love, 2004).

The article was discussing *Brokeback Mountain* as an illustration of a reflection of an overall acceptance of homosexuality in American culture and maybe this was a catalyst for a project like *Brokeback*.  

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The sex scene involving two straight actors was one of the biggest reasons people talked about the film. For all audiences, a scene like this would take place between a man and a woman, so this was a way to bring something different and even shocking to the mainstream audience. It was described as graphic and it was compared to other films in terms of how far it went: “Without spoiling any of the cow poking – and really, not since *The Crying Game* have genitals played such an important and odd role in a plot – it’s safe to share that it’s really fairly graphic and accurate” (Sicha, Chokeback Mountain, 2005). Regardless of the shock and awe the scene was bringing about, it was still well received in some film festivals. Before the film had a wide release, the film was submitted to several film festivals, including the Venice film festival. Ang Lee described the reception as “warm” and received mostly rave reviews before the film had a wide release (Dudek, 2005). Thanks to its screenings in multiple film festivals, the word-of-mouth came out and gave plenty of buzz to the film, but the film was banned in the Canes as well as the New York film festivals. According to some, they were not accepted because the film festivals already had enough entries, but for a few, it looked like a form of censorship.

**Hollywood Shaking in its Cowboy Boots**

In the film industry, making money seems to be very important. The average film does cost about $35 million, and releasing a film without a proper economic return could prove a disaster and a reason to shelve films with similar content. For many people in Hollywood, *Brokeback Mountain* was seen as a huge risk; the storyline involving two men falling in love seemed like a sentence to fail. Traister mentions in her article the different attempts in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, including *Making Love* in 1982, with an on-screen kiss, but “people ran screaming out of the theaters” from the film making this
the reason why people were reluctant to try to make *Brokeback Mountain* and hold off on any projects involving queer content (Traister, *Cowboys in Love*, 2004).

As mentioned before, 1982’s *Making Love* was one of the first films to be released and have two men as the romantic leads in an illicit affair. For the screenwriter Barry Sandler, the experience inside the movie theater was tense and unpleasant. When the stars of the movie, Harry Hamlin and Michael Ontkean, were seen getting too close for comfort on screen, what was supposed to be a groundbreaking movie about two men falling in love became a film in which people reacted with “discomfort, then nervousness, and then something akin to panic.” It was even worse when they kissed on screen:

> When the two actors kissed, much of the audience burst into gates of derisive laughter or shrieks of anger and disgust. “People were actually storming up the aisles to get out,” Sandler recalls. “It was like there was a bomb in the theater. People just didn’t want to deal with two men having sex.” (Nance, *Is a kiss just a kiss?: Gay love goes mainstream in 'Brokeback Mountain',* 2005)

Because of this reaction back in 1982, the effort to put any type of queer romance in mainstream film was ceased. Thankfully, the reaction to *Brokeback Mountain* in 2005, 13 years after *Making Love*, was much different. According to moviegoer Mark Cirillo described it as a ‘wow’ that went through the audience, a significant shift in audience perception from 1982.

> When the screenplay was written and waiting to be picked up, it was followed by a bad reputation, being called one of “Hollywood’s great unproduced screenplays,” making it nearly impossible to be touched by potential producers, directors, and actors for eight years (Covert, 2005). Even on the film’s DVD featurette “Making Of *Brokeback Mountain,*” it was also called the most “un-producible” film. This makes Hollywood’s
reputation as liberal seem like a lie because “the eight years it took to make Brokeback
suggests something else: Hollywood isn’t leading, it’s lagging.” They are accused of
staying behind the times when the business likes to think of itself as catching up with the
times, making the whole waiting around to make the film a waste of time: “If
Hollywood’s so damn liberated, what’s everyone so worked up about?” (Sicha,
Chokeback Mountain, 2005). There seemed to be no reason for the film industry to be
afraid; television was way ahead of the film industry in terms of having queer characters.
Ellen DeGeneres came out of the closet in her ABC prime-time show, a network owned
by the family-friendly Disney Corporation, and even though the Religious Right did
boycott Disney for the outing, the boycott died and DeGeneres is still one of the most
popular television personas in television history (Rich, Two gay cowboys hit a home run,
2005).

Even though Hollywood hasn’t shied too much away from sex between a man and
a woman, apparently it is sex between two men that became the problem. The sex scene
in the script was seen as the biggest obstacle to making the film: “Gay sex… continues to
make filmmakers as nervous as it ever did” (Taylor, Presto Chango, 2005). But still, it
was also a different direction for Hollywood to go: “it brings to life a love story that, after
all these years of love stories, is essentially new to mainstream movies, and it does so
without pleading or sentimentality” (Rainer, Cowboys saddled with a secret, 2005). The
release of the film in American movie theaters was a big worry, so the film was released
slowly. As the film had a gradual wide release, many were worried about how the film
would play for audiences:
A question lingers. Will *Brokeback Mountain* – a star-crossed love story about two cowboys... -- be embraced by the vast chunk of Middle America known as flyover country? Will a cowboy romance play in Peoria? Or right here in metro Detroit? Focus Features... plans to find out slowly. The movie is getting a staggered release, which means it’s being rolled out to theaters gradually, with a wide release expected in January (Hinds, Will gay play?: 'Brokeback Mountain' has already won raves. How it does at the box office remains to be seen, 2005).

Its reputation as an un-producible film was a big fear because of how it would play in conservative populations, including the heartland of America. For some, it was seen as impossible that people from conservative states would be open to witness a queer love story (Nance, Is a kiss just a kiss?: Gay love goes mainstream in 'Brokeback Mountain', 2005). Regardless of how it would eventually play in certain theaters, the marketing was seen as the key. The Hollywood business publication *Variety* was skeptical about the marketing of the film: “Focus should have little trouble stirring interest among older, sophisticated viewers in urban markets, but trying to cross the risky venture over into wider release reps a marketing challenge for the ages” (Grant, 2005). Yet, some were hopeful that if the film is successful, it would inspire others in the Hollywood industry to make more films like this:

While moviegoers may have different viewing plans, most agreed that the success of *Brokeback Mountain* will likely spur other filmmakers to put out shows with gay themes. “I’m sure that the success of *Brokeback Mountain* will make producers feel more confident about making these kinds of movies,” said Paul Peanick of south St. Louis. “And that’s what Hollywood is really interested in: the money” (Holleman, 2006).

This may be the drive that Hollywood needed to expand on films with queer themes.
The business of public relations for *Brokeback Mountain* was mostly done by word-of-mouth, but its reputation was brought about mainly because of its controversial themes. The film was being talked about all the way back to January 2004 in *Daily Variety*. Because of the free press it received, it did well even though the film took a mere $13 million to produce when the typical average of a Hollywood film is $35 million (Covert, 2005).

**A Groundbreaking Film (for Some)**

Many writers described *Brokeback Mountain* as a groundbreaking film because of its content. It is considered one of the first films to show two men kiss, make love, and fall in love on screen. For some, this is a true statement, for others not so much, and they present the evidence. For the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, or GLAAD, “this is the first one I’ve seen about two men in love, told in a way that straight people can relate to… a film that has tremendous potential to reach and transform mainstream audiences” (Thompson, 'Brokeback Mountain' Charts New Territory, 2005). Jake Richardson agrees with Thompson; for him, the film is groundbreaking in terms of being a mainstream film with two men falling in love (Richardson, 2006). It is a departure from previous stereotypes: “For many years, Hollywood held gay characters up only as either broad comic caricatures or as vessels of sin and perversion, suitable only for unfortunate endings” (Keogh, 2006). While he is right in terms of changing the way the characters are represented, unfortunately, the tragic ending is still present in *Brokeback*. In fact, a 75-year-old, self-proclaimed gay moviegoer is upset about the ending:
...there is the obligatory unhappy ending. I’m hopeful I last to see one where they fall in love, get married and live happily ever after... just like in the movies (Foley, 2005).

And, of course, when he says “the movies,” he means all of the films that seem to present a much more positive outlook on the relationship between a man and a woman, the endings we are exposed to most of the time.

There have been other films with gay characters in them, but *Brokeback Mountain* is seen as different for some because of its focus on the feelings of the characters, not just on the stereotypes:

While movies containing homosexual themes, or at least having gay and transgender characters, have become more prevalent, never before has a film so steadfastly focused on the basic emotions of homosexual lovers as has *Brokeback Mountain*. This has been as a very positive thing for the gay and lesbian communities, who applauded the film for its portrayal of a relationship between two men.

Paul Schneider is the publisher of the *Vital Voice*, a newspaper for gays and lesbian, and he has this to say about the film: “This movie was clearly about the relationship and not about the sex... I think it shows that homosexuals have relationships like everyone else” (Holleman, 2006). It is also seen as a film that breaks away from the common queer characters presented in previous Hollywood films: “There is a solid argument to be made that *Brokeback Mountain* is the first mainstream American film to portray gay love straightforwardly not in the context of an issue film about AIDS, not as a campy side plot, but as old-fashioned melodrama, complete with moony eyes and explicit sex” (Weiss, Considering the source; 'Brokeback Mountain' turns a short story into a Hollywood first, 2005). Because of the focus on the relationship, anyone regardless of
sexual orientation can relate to the story; this is what makes *Brokeback Mountain* a breakthrough in the sense that it does not aim to alienate anyone.

It has even been compared to other breakthrough films in cinematic history. For a reviewer in *The Washington Times, Brokeback Mountain* is in the same category as *From Here to Eternity* (1953), in which life in the Army was depicted with sexual content, strong language, violence, prostitution and adultery, all themes that seemed taboo before the film was released. Another film it is compared to is the film *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), in which an interracial romance was shown even though it was considered a controversial subject at the time (Top 5: Entertainment taboo breakers, 2005).

But even though some are convinced the film is groundbreaking, for some, the film is not groundbreaking at all:

Gay and Lesbian characters are nothing new on the cinematic and television landscape. Yet *Brokeback Mountain* is being called groundbreaking for the way it treats the relationship at its core (Hinds, Will gay play?: 'Brokeback Mountain' has already won raves. How it does at the box office remains to be seen, 2005).

The storyline can read out as a relationship between a man and a woman, yet this film was praised as well as condemned for the relationship between the two men. Others point out how *Making Love* (1982) was more groundbreaking, in fact, Dan Craft praised it more because no one dies in the end and the love between the men is not as graphic (Craft, 2006). Another writer agrees in terms of the groundbreaking aspect of the film, but with the fact that this is not the only ‘gay’ cowboy movie. Thomas Conner mentions five western films that have homosexual undertones, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and *Lonesome Cowboys* (1969) (Conner,
Since the film was a success in many categories, especially at the box office, this was a milestone for the making of more queer themes in mainstream cinema. The possibility of more films with queer themes is seen as a good sign for more queer filmmakers to appear on a regular American movie theater instead of corralling it in a gay and lesbian film festival, away from the masses. From this point of view, then, the film is groundbreaking, a door or a window for more films to be made with such content, hopefully desensitizing resistance to a queer love story, no matter what the backdrop is.

**Public Opinion – The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

Filmgoers had very strong reactions to the film; some were very positive, some were negative, and some were cries of protests against the film, and these reviews given by the public could be due to the perception of homosexuality at the time the film was released. For Kevin Nance of the *Chicago Sun Times*, the shift of audience perception from 1982’s *Making Love* to 2005’s *Brokeback Mountain* is attributed to one thing: the disapproval of homosexuality in American society is less than before. Nance points out that in 2003, the Supreme Court struck down state laws that criminalized gay sex. Also, states, cities and corporations prohibit discrimination based on sexual preference, and a Gallup Poll done in 2005 show that most Americans between the ages of 18 to 35 support gay marriage, regardless of President Bush’s plan to ban gay marriage. He also attributes the tolerance of the big screen romance to the small screen successes of gay characters: *Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk* and other shows with queer characters, desensitizing the public towards...
queer content through the small screen first (Nance, Is a kiss just a kiss?: Gay love goes mainstream in 'Brokeback Mountain', 2005).

In Detroit, Julie Hinds interviewed several people who reacted to the film after a screening of *Brokeback Mountain*:

“I know a lot of people who are really excited about seeing it,” said Marysol Villanueva, 21, of Farmington Hills.

“I don’t think it will do very good, I don’t imagine, said Jeff Durica, 31, of Livonia. “For one, it’s more of a chick flick, I think. I don’t think a lot of women can get their husbands to come see it.”

Jason Morse, 33, who recently moved from Phoenix to metro Detroit, said he was encouraged by the crowd’s reaction. “They laughed where it was funny. You heard people snuffle where it was sad. It was a great movie.” Morse says he hopes people will understand it’s a love story between two human beings. It’s not just a gay movie (Hinds, Will gay play?: 'Brokeback Mountain' has already won raves. How it does at the box office remains to be seen, 2005).

This gives an overview of the general reactions people had in just one screening, and it becomes even more diverse when all publications are put together, but not all viewers were vocal with the press. For one specific moviegoer, the reaction was more like unwanted noise in the movie theater:

Those who are immature, purchasing a theater ticket for no reason other than to giggle, laugh or make jeering remarks throughout the movie, would be doing all of us a favor by avoiding theaters for this feature and waiting for the DVD… One couple walked out immediately following a sexual scene; they were undoubtedly more considerate than the so-called mature adults who stayed to jeer, make unwelcome, distracting comments or continuously utter disapproving assertions (Roper, 2006).
As a response to the usual clichés that Hollywood had thrown around in previous films, some were relieved to see that this film had a different take on homosexuality:

“It was nice to see a movie with two gay characters and no drag queens,” said Bill Lucki, 49, of Monroeville, after seeing the 1 p.m. show at Loews Friday with his partner, Ronald Weber. “America needs to see that they’re real people.” “The gay characters weren’t psychotic, pathological serial killers or the gay best friend who decorates,” added Mr. Weber, 42.

There were others who were comparing the story to Romeo and Juliet and how the film affected them on a deep level, even bringing them to tears: “The lady sitting next to me was literally an emotional disaster at the end of the movie; she was sobbing,” said another moviegoer (Johnson, 2006). Many people were seen reacting with tears to the tragic finale of the film.

For some heterosexual men, it seemed like a bad idea to go see this film in the movie theater. Andrew Sterling of The Columbus Dispatch asked himself “Why do gay cowboys make some straight men quake in their boots?” The image of two cowboys making out seems to be the biggest problem, as one man gave his expressed opinion about seeing Brokeback:

A typical reaction comes from Tom Barnidge in the Contra Costa (Calif.) Times: “There are so many things I’d rather do than see this film. Clean the garage. Paint the house. Resod the neighborhood. Of all the mental images I will allow to claim space in my head, broad-shouldered cowboys cuddling in a bedroll is not one” (Sterling, 2006).

It is noticeable how Barnidge mentions “manly” chores like work on the garage or the house to make it look as if he is a tough straight man. Also, to this, Sterling replies that it’s a double standard to not watch a well-made film yet see men in spandex hugging and
slapping each other’s butts in a football field. For Clint O’Connor, his friend was baffled at why he would bother watching the movie, let alone like it as a film about intimacy between two men:

I ran into an old friend right after I saw it, and he was so disappointed that I liked it. “No way. No way,” he said shaking his head. “I will never go see a movie about two guys going at it”…

Thanks to this strong reaction, O’Connor stated without a doubt that half of the country will never see it, regardless of how positively he reviews the film (O’Connor, Ang Lee's breakthrough movie is a love story, plain and simple, 2005). An explanation for the straight guy’s evasion is explained by Abigail Garner: “Homophobia dictates that if he’s not squirming in his seat or running for the exit when two men start kissing… he must secretly want some man-on-man action” (Campanelli, Straight man's horror show? Despite the movie's critical success, some men seem to be staying away from 'Brokeback Mountain', 2006). One writer admitted to the squirming of the seat in the movie theater and he says he was not the only one, but after admitting how uncomfortable he was during the scene, he reiterates that he is not a homophobe:

Oh, it’s more than a little awkward. And I mean awkward for all the hetero squirming uncomfortably in their seats in the movie theater. It’s only a minute-long scene when Jack and Ennis go rodeo, but I must have switched arm rests at least six times. Hey I’m no homophobe. I’ve got one gay friend, and I know another guy who accidentally made out with a transvestite once in Vegas (Kane, 2005).

The possibility of being seen in the movie theater can be translated as a type of betrayal to their sexuality, a heterosexual man who has no need to see two men fall in love.

Comedic actor and writer Larry David satirized these fears in an article published in The New York Times. David was a writer for the hit series Seinfeld and acts and writes in the
HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. He joked that the only way to go see the film was for cowboys to lasso him in the theaters, drag him and tie him up to the chair, where he would proceed to close his eyes and cover his ears. He claimed that he refused to see two men get together and fall in love, especially when the two men on screen are cowboys, male icons to the comedian. David wrote:

My wife won’t let me watch infomercials because of all the junk I’ve ordered that’s now piled up in the garage. My medicine cabinet is filled with vitamins and bald cures. So who’s to say I won’t become enamored with the whole gay business? Let’s face it, there is some appeal there… I just know that if I saw that movie, the voice inside my head that delights in torturing me would have a field day. “You like those cowboys, don’t you? They’re kind of cute. Go ahead, admit it, they’re cute. You can’t fool me, gay man. Go ahead, stop fighting it. You’re gay! You’re gay!”

He ends his fearsome rant with: “Not that there’s anything wrong with it” (David, 2006). He taps into the fears of being turned gay after watching the film, and that same reason can be attributed to other heterosexual men who refuse to watch the film. David seems to be aware, with a sense of humor of course, that the film can challenge sexuality. Heterosexual men’s fear over how they’re going to react might keep them away from watching the film.

But not every heterosexual man is upset about watching the movie, including Eric Bruger, a 22-year-old college student, who watched the film with his girlfriend. After he watched the movie, he said it was a good movie and it was “tastefully done.” Another heterosexual man who watched it was Wisconsin senator Fred Risser, understood why some people would be uncomfortable watching the film, but he gave the film a rave
review (Derby, 2006). Other heterosexual men might be too shy to admit they liked the film.

The Religious Right had an even stronger reaction, especially those which consider themselves part of a religious organization that condemns homosexuality. In order to express their opinion about the film, some people went as far as to write hate mail towards the director, Ang Lee. He admits he received correspondence from both sides of the spectrum: the “very right” and the “very left,” but this did not upset him: “No movie can please everybody” (Meyer, 2006), still he was not the only one getting hate mail. A letter to the editor by Brenda Oty in The Columbus Dispatch brought out the wrath of a woman who felt that no one should see the film:

Men and women alike won’t see this movie because it portrays a gross, perverse act between two men, not a love scene! Think about it: who really has the problem here? (Oty, 2006).

Homophobia is explored in a scene which presents physical violence as a violent response to this fear. Jack is seen, through the eyes of Ennis, being brutally murdered by three young men because of his sexual orientation in the early 1980s. Ella Taylor referred to this scene as “witnessing a homosexual love affair imperiled by a cruelly inhospitable culture” (Taylor, Lonesome Doves, 2005), pointing out that this way of thinking is still predominant in American culture. Another angry filmgoer had no qualms ranting against the film:

This country has seen a tremendous decline in its moral structure over the past 50 or so years. God help us if this reckless trend continues. What horrors await the U.S.A. of 50 years in the future (Bordell, 2006)?
After this letter was published, there was tremendous backlash against Bordell and his comments. The editor received many letters condemning the man of homophobia; one even compared him to a man living in a cave, and one proceeded to point out that he had a right to not attend the film: “And I must ask, if he is so opposed to such a “horrific” identity, why would he go to see the movie in the first place?” (Simon M., 2006). One woman, though, agreed with Bordell with everything he said. She wrote to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* the cliché phrase: “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” She also said that the acceptance of homosexuality points to the lack of God in society (Freker, 2006). But not all self-proclaimed Christians hated the film. A man who wrote a letter to the editor in a Pennsylvania publication went as far as to quote the Bible itself: “there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)” (Spedden, 2006). He also protests the image of bigots that most Christians have to endure, thanks to people like Bordell. This suggests that the film not only generated a discussion on what it means to be gay, but also what it entails to be a good Christian. For the Christian high school Michelle Williams (Alma) used to attend, her presence in the film was too much, so they disowned her as one of their graduates:

“We don’t want to have anything to do with her in relation to that movie,” Jim Hopson, headmaster of the posh Santa Fe Christian School, told the San Diego Union Tribune. “Michelle doesn’t represent the values of this institution… *Brokeback Mountain* basically promotes a lifestyle we don’t promote” (Bible-belted, 2006).

They do not specify exactly if it is because of her topless sex scene or because of the queer themes of the film; they just publicly denied having anything to do with the actress.
Besides extreme Christian groups, though, some in the gay community were also upset at the film. For one specific writer in Massachusetts, the reactions were mixed:

Surprisingly, while some of them were moved, many of the gay men expressed disappointment with the film. It seems they had expected more from the main characters – more romance, more passion, more… something. “You could hardly tell they were in love with each other,” one man said later. “They barely even spoke. The love scenes were weak and uninspiring.”… I believe much of their disappointment was grounded in inflated expectations, as it’s hard to watch a film that’s been so highly praised for so long without feeling a bit let down… My friends in 2006 wanted to relate to them somehow, and discovered they could not (Williamson, 2006).

The gay filmgoers were also confused about what the “message” of the story was supposed to be. But Williamson found the lack of an overt message “refreshing,” making the story specifically about the relationship.

Watching the movie has presented a conundrum for some. Since it has earned many strong reactions because of its strong content, how does viewing the film affect those who watch it? O’Connor brings about this dilemma:

If you like it, are you kind of gay? If you hate it, are you homophobic? If you’re gay and diss it for not going far enough, are you just being a petulant noodge? (O’Connor, Telling a Love Story: Ang Lee talks about the making of 'Brokeback Mountain', 2006)

This could present a problem when it comes to presenting an opinion about the film: the perception other people can have when you express that opinion. So this public opinion may be influenced by how people want to be perceived, for example, for the heterosexual men, it seems to be mandatory to not want to watch the film because liking it would invite taunts about their sexuality.
The Bad Reviews

*Brokeback Mountain* received many great reviews, some even calling it the most romantic movie ever made, but this did not guarantee that the film would receive only praise. CNN conservative talk show guest Michael Mendev criticized *Brokeback Mountain* for its images of adultery and homosexuality, and said that people will feel uncomfortable seeing two men share intimate moments together: “Many Americans, especially here in the middle, haven’t seen two men or two women hold hands on the sidewalk, let alone kiss,” said Susan Ager from the *Detroit Free Press* (2005).

A writer from the *Chicago Sun Times* refuses to go see the film, not because of the queer relationship per se, but because, for him, it “ridicules Western. It ridicules Westerns by saying they’re gay.” The Western is seen as a straight man’s way to see machismo in its purest form. Seeing *Brokeback Mountain* would demystify the image of Clint Eastwood as a symbol of what a heterosexual man looks like and how he should behave (Steinberg, 2005). This could be a way of denying something that most people already know: the Western in itself can have queer subtexts. By denying this fact, Steinberg might be reflecting his own homophobia by establishing the cowboy as strictly “macho.” The fact that the film was considered a Western for some seemed like a blasphemy against the genre itself:

Consider yourself warned: This film is an outrage! This film is a disgrace! This film has nothing to do with cowboys... There’s not a single gunfight, faro game or stagecoach robbery in sight. Shame on you, moviemaker Ang Lee (Kane, 2005).

For a few writers, the image of John Wayne would be forever tarnished as a man’s man because of this film, in fact, just thinking about it made the macho image a blur and an
insult to all other Westerns ever produced. For Annie Proulx, she found that she had to clear the air in terms of labeling the film as a cowboy movie; they are just “beguiled by the cowboy myth” (Dargis, Masculinity and its discontent in Marlboro country, 2005), meaning that their actions might have been inspired by images past of Western films. After all, we see Ennis in a drive-in movie theater with his wife Alma.

For other viewers, it was just not a movie that deserved such attention, some called it nothing more than a “chick flick,” others said the film didn’t live up to its hype. The oversimplification of labeling the film the “gay cowboy movie” or a “chick flick” shows how desperate reviewers and moviegoers were to determine a genre for the film, to try to put it into a category that seems like a trivial genre. One reviewer admitted to dozing off a couple of times, and one just condemned the film for mainstreaming the behavior presented in the film (‘Brokeback Mountain', 2006). For one Boston writer, the film is just not a good way to spend $9:

The movie has its moments of unintentional hilarity, that is. Starting with Ledger’s dead-on George W. Bush imitation, proceeding through the pretentious, useless soundtrack, directly to this Great Moment in Movie Dialogue: “I used to wonder how come you never brought any trouts home,” Ledger’s screen wife says of her husband’s regular creek side rendezvous with Gyllenhaal. Silly girl; she thought they went on those trips to go fishing… So endure the heavy-handed morality play; just don’t plan on having a good time (Beam, 2006).

The “moments of unintentional hilarity” were also pointed out by a few other writers, especially how the romance between Jack and Ennis seemed too sentimental. For Jake Richardson of the Telegraph Herald, his experience in the screening of the film was the
same as several people, including myself, so he gave out a warning to avoid the same thing from happening in future screenings:

A note to moviegoers: If you are uncomfortable with this subject matter, don’t see Brokeback Mountain. While viewing the film, people were walking out and voicing their displeasure. I found this rude and astounding considering the national media attention surrounding the movie (Richardson, 2006).

He then goes on to defend the film and reaffirm the accolades received about the film.

The Christian groups were widely expected to not only criticize the film, but to also condemn it. In fact, Robert Johnston, a theology and culture professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, said: “Christian groups would have ignored a sexually explicit movie like Brokeback Mountain, except to protest it.” But film reviewers for Christian sites have been usually good. The Office for Film and Broadcasting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said that “while the actions of Jack and Ennis cannot be endorsed, the universal themes of love and loss ring true,” bringing in a review that seems shocking to many. Still, the film was rated “O” for offensive, so that film viewers would know that the gay behavior on screen was something the church did not condone. The reason the reviews were not as negative as first thought was because they want to give the choice to the moviegoer to object to it or accept it, but not all Christian sites gave good reviews. Movieguide.com, which is “dedicated to redeeming the values of the mass media according to biblical principles,” the film was described by reviewer Tom Snyder as “too long and at times twisted, laughable, frustrating, sadomasochistic, plotless and boring.” Unlike the “O” rating given, Snyder rated it “abhorrent.” One writer pointed out that he went to the American Family Association Web site to see the review of the film.
The headline read “Gay love story carries a high ‘ick’ factor.” It then continues on, saying that people will leave the theater vomiting, so to see if this is in fact true, Pitts went to see the film. “Nobody threw up,” he says (Pitts, 2006).

Even though the film did receive a few bad reviews, it did not hinder the film’s success in many ways. The film grossed plenty of money to recover the investment (over $76 million in the first two months), it received many awards, and it has a place in the popular culture lexicon. These negative reviews did not impact the numbers of filmgoers who were interested in seeing the film.

**Popular Culture Phenomenon**

Since the film seemed to be in everyone’s conversations by the time the film was released, it was bound to become a cultural phenomenon. As a source for jokes and catch phrases, *Brokeback* became part of the common language and a form of dialect in the country.

In one scene of the film, a heartbroken Jack tells Ennis that seeing him sporadically has become too painful. In order to vent his pain, he yells at Ennis with the view of a wilderness right behind him. So he delivers the following line with both sadness and frustration, with a hope that the statement will come true: “I wish I knew how to quit you.” For many who have seen the film, this line had become a classic in 2005; it was even compared to “you had me at hello” from *Jerry Maguire* (Wilson, 2006) which also became a core phrase in current lingo. The phrase has been heard all over the country since the film was released. For one writer, he cited multiple occasions when the phrase was used in the real world. He witnessed an avid smoker take a drag of his
cigarette, look at it and yell out the phrase from his apartment window in New York. Countless workers have been rumored to have said to their bosses “I know how to quit you – and I do!” in order to end their current job, and then there was another incident that took place in a retirement home, when a wife turned to her husband and said:

“Oy, I vish I knew how to quit you! But I don’t, so please stop picking your teeth at the table, boobelah!” (Shein, 2006)

This shows that even the elderly were using the phrase in everyday conversations.

Alongside the phrase, the term “Brokeback” became an adjective to describe something with gay overtones, becoming a part of the lexicon at the time (Noveck, Gay groups hope to capitalize on Oscar night, 2006). The honor of the Oscars was overshadowed by the fact that the film had another honor: “a place in the pop culture language.” The website Urbandictionary.com is a site containing pop culture definitions; it had 12 entries on the word “Brokeback” two months after the movie was released. The word was a way to describe homosexuality or a lack of masculinity, and it includes the phrase “don’t go Brokeback on me,” which means “don’t go gay on me.” The creator of the site has a good reason for why this word was very popular at the time:

“It struck a nerve with people,” said Aaron Peckham, Urbandictionary.com’s creator. “It’s a shared piece of our culture, and those are things that are easiest to make fun of” (Price, 2006).

Jeff Simon described it best after he saw the film: “I have seldom seen a movie that’s easier to mock” (Simon J., 2006), so, naturally, this was an opportunity for some to make satires about the film. Joe Blundo from The Columbus Dispatch came up with several ideas of spinoffs of the film, such as Brokeback Mount Rushmore, about Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt falling in love. David Letterman made a joke about the
film when he mentioned the ‘gay cowboy movie’ ad ran a clip of the high-stepping lumberjacks from 1954’s *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. (Blundo, 2006). Letterman also made a Top Ten list based on the film, titled “Top Ten Signs You’re a Gay Cowboy,” in which one read “Native Americans refer to you as ‘Dances with Men’,,” while Letterman’s competition, Jay Leno, made at least 15 Brokeback jokes in the month of January 2006. On the Internet, many film spoofs were born, and one of the most popular ones was *Brokeback to the Future*, which presents the main characters from the film *Back to the Future*, Marty and the Doc, falling in love. Poster imitations were also made including one featuring lobbyist Jack Abramoff and Rep. Tom DeLay superimposed over Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger. Regardless of the film’s target for jokes, some say this has been extraordinary publicity and further dissemination of the film as a conversation piece or a punch line (Noveck, *Did you hear the one about ‘Brokeback Mountain’?*, 2006).

Even the 2006 Oscars started the show with *Brokeback* jokes. Billy Crystal and Chris Rock came out of a pup tent in a video showing past Oscar hosts who did not want to host that year, then Jon Stewart, the host for the evening, showcased clips from other Western films as homoerotic predecessors for *Brokeback Mountain*, saying “There’s nothing remotely gay about the classic Hollywood westerns” in a cynical tone (Larsen, 2006). Jokes even came out from those belonging to the gay community, including actor Nathan Lane, who spoke of the film while he was being interviewed in the “Today” show, talking about how Ennis’ concerns for being caught is seen as silly since the affair took place in the mountains. Regardless of how many jokes came out of the film, the filmmakers and the public relations people couldn’t be happier. For Simon Halls, who did
PR for the film, said: “This is a little independent film, so any chance to be talked about on national television is a great thing,” and as for Lee, he “gets a kick out of this kind of humor” (Grove, 2005). The jokes that were fueled by the film were a way for one specific writer to weed out homophobes:

Everybody else is either taking to the rooftops to proclaim this the Greatest Thing Ever, or they’re making fag jokes. Lots and lots of fag jokes. If nothing else, Brokeback Mountain has certainly been effective in flushing out America’s secret homophobes” (Stacy, 2006).

For Stacy, the jokes regarding Brokeback were an outlet for frustration over the queer identity. In fact, he accused the late-night talk show hosts of having a level of homophobia, indicated by their obsession to make jokes regarding the film.

The effect of the popularity of the film was even felt in the political arena, especially for President Bush, where he was surprised at a question-and-answer session at the Kansas State University when one of the questions was about Brokeback Mountain. In a format that was supposed to be about political issues, one question brought about how much impact the film had on viewers and the President himself:

Last week, Bush was clearly take aback when a questioner… said, “You’re a rancher. A lot of us here in Kansas are ranchers. I just wanted to get your opinion on Brokeback Mountain, if you’ve seen it yet... You would love it,” the man enthused. “You should check it out.” Bush, America’s Rancher-in-Chief, looked like his skin itched. As he hesitated, audience laughter bridged his discomfited silence. Finally, the President responded, “I’d be glad to talk about ranching, but I haven’t seen the movie,” Bush added, “I’ve heard about it” (Marin, 2006).
The Bush Administration is known for its eagerness to pass an Amendment that will make gay marriage unconstitutional, so the fact that *Brokeback Mountain* was mentioned in a Presidential news conference gives an indication of how topical the film was in 2006.

One story focuses on a prop that symbolizes the mixture of Ennis and Jack’s bodily fluids! A man went so far as to buy the shirts worn on the set by Ledger and Gyllenhaal. Ennis and Jack are involved in a scuffle the first summer they are together, where Jack managed to hit Ennis on the nose and made it bleed. The blood is wiped away by Ennis’ and Jack’s sleeve. The shirts would then be discovered by Ennis after Jack’s death, intermingled, one inside the other, symbolizing the love Ennis had for Jack. Tom Gregory of Los Angeles, California, now owns the shirts immortalized in the film and paid $101,100 for them through eBay: “They are the ruby slippers of our time” (Daily dish, 2006); the comparison between the shirts and the infamous ruby slippers from the very popular *The Wizard of Oz* shows yet another way that the film has become such a popular trademark.

Even the state of Wyoming was enjoying newfound fame as a vacation destination. The film had scenes with beautiful and bountiful Brokeback Mountain panoramic views; those scenes represented an escape for both Ennis and Jack, and it seemed that other people wanted that same escape as well. The Wyoming tourism board received hundreds of calls asking about the scenery that was shown in the film, and, even though some know it was filmed in Canada, they still wanted to go to Wyoming. Chuck Coon, who was the Wyoming Business Council spokesman in 2006, said that he didn’t know the film would generate so much interest, and they actually saw a boom in tourism.
But not everyone in Wyoming was happy about that. One ranch hand was very vocal and displeased:

You’ve taken the last thing we had… We don’t get any money, you work us like dogs – then you take our image and gay it up” (On the trail to 'Brokeback', 2006).

Regardless, this did not stop the phone calls; Wyoming saw a rise in tourism by almost 50% by that time.

But not all associations to the film are positive and funny because they are used in a way to demean others. Unfortunately, *Brokeback Mountain* was even used as a gimmick for hazing in a fraternity. This took place at the University of Vermont’s Phi Gamma Delta house. Four fraternity members made pledges wear cowboy clothes while the rest of the fraternity brothers insulted them with homophobic remarks. The homophobic nature of the hazing, though, brought negative attention, and the four members were fined $1,000 each (Fraternity members fined for 'Brokeback Mountain' initiation ploy, 2006).

Thanks to its role as a popular culture staple, though, people who have watched the film hope this might be what can change minds about homosexuality and homophobia. One writer hopes that

It could be a movie that changes minds, opens hearts, even indirectly affects the law of the land. It could be the movie that finally, courageously, lifts a veil of secrecy on the era’s most sensitive, most controversial issue.

Moviegoer and homosexual man Chris Lodewyks agrees:

“I think this will change people’s minds, Lodewyks says. “It will help John Q. Public to perhaps see gays and
lesbians in a different light, as just people who want to fall in love. That’s all anybody wants to do in this movie – fall in love” (Beckerman, 'Brokeback' begins its breakthrough bid, 2005).

For a few writers, the film is not trying to change minds; it is still seen as just a story:

Ang Lee’s Brokeback Mountain doesn’t preach, politicize or deliver a “message.” It simply tells a story, and its stark, unfettered simplicity allows the story to resonate in ways that haunt you long after the credits have rolled… the simple power of the story, along with the extraordinary performance by Heath Ledger, is what stays in the memory (Everhart, 2006).

One writer from New York agrees that popular culture is a way to reflect the times as well as change minds about certain topics. So the fact that Brokeback Mountain has been accepted in the popular culture of the time, even if it is for a joke, it means more than just a punch line:

People often complain that mainstream media doesn’t reflect our values. Actually, pop culture both reflects and shapes our values at the same time. It often introduces us to ideas at the precise nanosecond we’re ready to take it. Pop culture helped allow the self-erected barriers we put between different categories of human beings to tumble down. And before we know it, we realize “those people” aren’t much different than we are. It’s almost like we have to see it happen on TV (or film) before we can accept it in real life (McLeod, 2006).

The possibilities for social change are strong, but the film is also seen as just another love story. The political sense that some had with the film could be relatable to what is happening socially at the moment, but for most writers, such as Everhart, the film is just a powerful love story. Another writer points out that the film “doesn’t tell you how to feel about its protagonists; it trusts you to make up your own mind” (Lee's 'Brokeback' reveals remarkable range, 2006).
The fact that *Brokeback Mountain* became such a popular culture phenomenon made it a film to invest in for social change. Regardless of whether people saw the film or not, they would be exposed to it through humor in television shows and commentaries, letters to the editor, even from someone’s grandmother in a retirement home; it still became part of the social dialogue, even if it was or was not for debating.

**Brokeback Mountain Censored?**

For some exhibitors, carrying the movie in their theaters was too much, especially for Utah Jazz owner Larry Miller, who banned the film from his movie theaters. Miller is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has spent millions of dollars campaigning against gay marriage and considers homosexuality as grounds for excommunication from the Church. He decided to pull the film hours before its debut, taking it upon himself to show what he deems decent enough for propagation. For one *Chicago Sun Times* reader in particular, it is an attack on the First Amendment of the Constitution: “The message I get is that our First Amendment rights are under attack not only from the government, but from individual Americans who own media outlets and use their personal bias to dictate what is available for broad audiences to see, hear and read” (Jedlinski, 2006). The fact is the First Amendment right is technically not broken because Miller does have a right to censor a film he does not feel belongs at his movie theaters, and Jedlinski exercises his right for protest by criticizing Miller, who is, after all, the owner of that theater, and he can choose to show it or not. Words of protest were written against the movie theater owner by others as well. A 16-year-old writer said: “Although the cinema owners would rather not watch this controversial film, does that mean it’s right not to allow any citizen to view it?” (Lerario, 2006). She points out that
banning the film will not eliminate homosexuality; it will eliminate the ability for other people to watch it and keep homophobia alive and well. In another movie theater, there was a misconception that they had decided to ban the film, since the film did not open until late January. Everyone in West Virginia, including Heath Ledger, thought that they banned it on purpose, but it turned out the theaters did not get a copy of the film until then. Still, the paranoia of having the film banned was in people’s minds and there was fear of not having the choice to go see it (Robinson, 2006). For Wal-Mart, there was a moment when they thought about not selling the *Brokeback Mountain* DVD in their stores. The American Family Association was petitioning Wal-Mart customers to boycott the store if they sold the DVD, but the corporate magnate went about their business, even placing the film poster at the entrance, where Randy Sharp, the director of special projects of the American Family Association, said it was visible to children. The boycott, apparently, seemed to fail and have no effect on business (Bosman, 2006). Even in a Norfolk prison, the censoring of the film caused problems, when disciplinary measures were taken against a Massachusetts correctional officer for showing the film to inmates. The correctional officer was accused of showing a film with explicit sex. Other films that are banned from screening in prisons include those with excessive violence, nudity or sex, and scenes that involve assaults on correctional personnel. Diane Wiffin, the Massachusetts Department of Correction spokeswoman, said: “I want to make it clear, it wasn’t the subject matter; it was the graphic nature of the sexually explicit scenes” (Gelder, 2006).
Real Life outside the Ranch

In the film, after leaving their job and each other on the wilderness and the open air of Brokeback Mountain, Ennis and Jack come back to “real life.” They marry women, have children of their own, and are cooped up in small enclosures. For Ennis, it’s a small apartment above a Laundromat, and Jack is in Texas just selling farm equipment with a marriage that seems to be long distance even though they live in the same house. This is why they look forward to leaving everything behind for several trysts in the mountains, an escape from the civilized world. When we see the scenes of Ennis’ house and Jack’s life with Lureen, the shots are very closed in. For example, the scene when Jack has his boy and they are in the hospital is mostly medium shots and indoors. In another scene, when Ennis is outside his house feeding the cattle in one of his jobs, the shot is over his shoulder and aiming to the ground. When they are together in the mountains, the shots seem much more open, a visual deep breath. Ang Lee was very gratuitous the first 20 minutes of the film with shots of the open range, the mountains, rivers, and blue sky. This is nothing compared to the feeling of claustrophobia felt in their lives back with their wives and children. This claustrophobia captures a sense of “reality” for many gay men living under oppression, that is why, for many, Brokeback Mountain mattered because it provided a place where reality and Hollywood representation came together, often in difficult ways.

There have been people who have compared their own life to the life reflected on Brokeback Mountain. One such person is a 61-year-old amateur cowboy and rodeo competitor from Michigan. For him, the struggles of being gay and a cowboy seems eerily similar to the lives of Ennis and Jack in the film (Noveck, Gay groups hope to
capitalize on Oscar night, 2006). For Chuck Colbert, the film was also a reflection of his own struggle with his homosexuality; he was once married to a woman even though he knew he was gay, and years later, he would confess his real identity to his wife, so he understands why the characters had to keep the relationship under wraps:

For me, movie scenes from *Brokeback Mountain* flash bigger-than-life reminders of time I spent on that lonely hilltop. My Brokeback occurred 20 years ago in San Francisco… Many of us have been there… Words can’t quite bridge the disconnection and loneliness many of us feel – imprisoned behind walls of stultifying silence and denial. But you don’t have to be a cowboy to feel the pain of the ill-fated love story of Ennis and Jack (Colbert, 2006).

He is also convinced that everyone, straight or gay, has had a lost love like the one in the film. Derrick Glover is another gay rancher, who saw the film and remembered his past as a closeted gay man. His fear is the same one that Ennis has in the film: the fear of not only being shunned by his neighbors, but of physical harm: “It wasn’t accepted in the past, it’s still not, and I don’t think it ever will be,” he said with the same pessimism shown in the film by Ennis, even in 2005 (Trebay, 2005).

For a woman, the movie also echoed a moment in her past. For Amy Jo Remmele, her story was reflected on Alma. When Jack comes to visit Ennis after not seeing each other for four years, Ennis and Jack have a very passionate kiss, with Alma becoming the unwitting witness to this embrace. For Remmele, the pain and confusion that Alma portrayed was too real. She discovered her husband was gay when she saw her husband’s profile in gay.com, but unlike Alma, who lived in a time when “gay” meant “happy,” Remmele confronted her husband. He then left her for his male lover (Butler, 2006).
Jack Twist enjoyed the perks of being in a rodeo. For gay cowboys, there is such a thing as a gay rodeo, calling the contestants “real, out-and-proud versions of Jack Twist.” The International Gay Rodeo Association has more than 4,500 active members, and the rodeos are three days long and they include the same categories as regular rodeos, but men and women are allowed to compete in every category, and contestants are also allowed to choose what gender they’d like to compete as. Thanks to the popularity of *Brokeback Mountain*, the association has garnered more publicity and, as a result, more people attend the activities (Greenfield, 2006).

An eerie incident happened in 1998 in Wyoming, a year after the short story of *Brokeback Mountain* was released. It seemed to be a reflection of Jack’s tragic end in the film, being beaten to death, as well as the old man Ennis witnessed dead in a ditch. College student Matthew Shepard was beaten up and strung up on a fence by two local men. The murder was brought up by many writers who see the homophobic similarities depicted in the film and an unfortunate real-life crime, and it is still a ghastly reminder of how homophobia can trigger a violent, even deadly resolution.

For heterosexual male writer Jim Stingl in Wisconsin, watching the film raised concerns relevant to 2005. One issue was that the state Legislature was eager to vote against gay marriage. For him, the film can present a consequence of making gay marriages illegal, presenting unhappy husbands and wives. He also mentions that he would rather not let Republicans watch the film since, in an exaggerated moment; they might ban campfires and sheepherding. This sounds funny, yet it raises the issue of how activities linked to homosexuality can be seen as threatening to the “straight” way of life (Stingl, 2006). Some disagree however, being vocal and adamant that gay marriage is a
bad idea. Rose Mitchell from Duluth, Minneapolis, wrote to the editor of the *Star Tribune* that “the damaging effects of gay marriage on our society and youth will show up in the future, when it’s too late” (Mitchell, 2006). As one reviewer pointed out that the film is a “manifestation of social relevancy of a particular work of art” (Hayes, 2006), a reflection of social movement that might bring about a political and social movement of change, of acceptance.

**Award-Winning and High-Grossing Film**

In addition to remarkable accolades, the film did really well at the box office as well as garnered many nominations and awards in the United States. Even though the film was released in December in limited release, it earned $2.4 million at the box office with only 69 theaters playing the film during the week of December 19, 2005, the numbers were still impressive, making a total of $7.1 million at number 9 during the week of January 17, 2006, and earning $7.8 million the next week and grabbing the #5 spot at the box office. And by March 1, 2006, the film had grossed a total of $76 million in the United States alone, recovering by a lot the $13 million it took to make. When it was released on DVD in April, it was #3 on the Top Rentals list according to Billboard Magazine.

*Brokeback Mountain* received a cavalcade of awards and nominations as well. It received a total of eight nominations at the 78th annual Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Original Score, and Best Adapted Screenplay, and was seen as a strong competitor against all other nominees. The film won Best Director for Ang Lee, Best Screenplay and Best Score. It was the favorite for Best Film by many, but the honor went to the film
Crash which, for most, was a big upset. For Nikki Finke from L.A. Weekly, this was an act of hypocrisy: “For a community that takes pride in progressive values, it seemed shameful to me that Hollywood’s homophobia could be on a par with Pat Robertson’s.” (Ebert, 'Crash' backlash: 'Brokeback' lovers can't quit griping about Oscar choice, 2006). Some even blamed the Crash win on homophobic members of the Academy. Bob Bartosch from Somerville, Massachusetts, asked Roger Ebert if it was true that certain members of the Academy refused to watch the film because of its content, and Ebert replied that there were two members who did: Tony Curtis and Ernest Borgnine, who publicly admitted to refusing to watch the film. Plus, according to the Academy rules, the members are required to watch all five documentary nominees and all five foreign film nominees. It does not require them to watch all films in other categories (Ebert, Voter fraud? Academy members are not required to see nominated films, 2006). There were few who were not surprised by the decision; in fact, they admitted that Crash seemed like the better choice, including Roger Ebert himself, who said it was a better film.

Regardless, the film did win other awards, including the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival as well as winning four Golden Globes out of seven nominations. There was also protest there when the actors from the film were refused at least one win. The Screen Actors Guild nominated Heath Ledger, Jake Gyllenhaal, Michelle Williams and the cast. The New York Film Critics Circle awarded it Best Film of the Year, Best Director, and Heath Ledger won Best Actor. The Los Angeles Film Critics Association and The Boston Society of Film Critics voted for Brokeback as Best Film of the Year and Ang Lee won for Best Director in each association. The Producers Guild of America named the film Best Picture. GLAAD honored the film with the top film prize. The
Southeastern Film Critics Association (SEFCA) named it best film of the year, Lee as best director, and best screenplay. The MTV Movie Awards gave the Best Male Performance award to Jake Gyllenhaal as well as Best Kiss to both Gyllenhaal and Ledger. It also won other smaller awards, including the St. Louis Gateway Film Critics Association award for the best film of 2005. All of these awards are a reflection of how mainstream audiences and film societies were eager to have a film of this nature released and shared with the world.

**Conclusion**

Even though *Brokeback Mountain* did receive many great reviews and awards, it still garnered something stronger: a place in the American dialogue. The fact that the film became such a social phenomenon says that the film can affect the way of thinking of the movie-going audience. The film that was seen as something that might never be produced became the source of popular jokes, of ire, of real-life reflections. The film proves that an interesting and different story can affect many of those who are exposed to it. Film can be seen as a source of entertainment, but *Brokeback Mountain* proved to be more than that: it was a conversation-starter for many issues, especially gay marriage which was brought up in many articles. But it was still mainly one thing: a starting point for an opinion, even a debate, with others, or with oneself. The best part was that the conversation was varied; it ranged from very positive to very negative, it even brought up confusion about how watching the film can define the person just by watching it.
Chapter Two: Is *Brokeback Mountain* a Gay Film, a Straight Film, or a Queer Film?

Films have been labeled as a certain genre: western, action, romantic comedies, and many others. For *Brokeback Mountain*, though, it was difficult to determine what kind of film it turned out to be. For many, the film was basically a gay film, meaning the characters and the content is gay and nothing else. But for others, the film was a straight film, since even though the content of the film was seen as queer; it was still made by filmmakers who proclaim themselves straight, and the intended audience turned out to be heterosexual women, not homosexual men as previously believed. The film *Brokeback Mountain* has been labeled as all three: a gay film, a straight film, and a queer film. But which one is the correct label for the film? Many people debated the film’s genre and for very distinct reasons.

**Straight Film**

For *Brokeback Mountain* to be nominated for so many awards, it received a lot of attention about its political correctness. Nominating the film, for one writer, was “a safe way for the Academy to say, ‘We love gay as long as it’s done by heteros.’” The film’s director, Ang Lee, is married with a woman and has two kids, screenwriters Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry are life partners, and Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal are both seen as straight in real life. Does this mean that the film is a straight film because of its authorship? This sparked a lot of questions about whether the love affair between two men can and should be told by straight filmmakers.

In the casting process, most people were adamant about the fact that no straight actors would ever play characters that are required to kiss and have a love scene with
each other. Yet Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger were chosen, and they have been
deemed by the media and gossip columnists as straight. Rebecca Traister from the

*Chicago Sun-Times* discusses a dilemma the film might present:

> But not everyone is confident that bona fide movie stars would risk their straight cred by mounting steeds and locking lips. One Hollywood executive, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, says, “Realistically, let’s talk about the giggle factor. I mean, it is a story about gay cowboys! That is the most daring thing you can do. If the i’s get dotted on Gyllenhaal and Ledger contracts, both will run less of a risk of being “taken for gay” than many of their colleagues; Gyllenhaal dates. Kirsten Dunst, While Ledger squires Naomi Watts (Traister, Cowboys in Love, 2004).

Even though these two actors are said to be dating women, Hollywood was still skeptical over how the films would be received. But heterosexual actors playing homosexual characters are nothing new. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* had heterosexuals William Hurt and Raul Julia, *Philadelphia* had Tom Hanks, *Boys Don’t Cry* had Hilary Swank, and *Monster* had Charlize Theron. This did not diminish the speculation that Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal’s reputations as straight men would be tarnished. But this did not mean that both Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal were scared of the intimate scenes they had to do together. Ledger himself admitted that doing the love scene “scares the hell out of me,” according to the *Chicago Sun-Times* (Pearlman, 2004), and Gyllenhaal admitted that his friends made fun of him for being in a film where he had to kiss another guy, but he was attracted to the film because of its universal message: the struggle with love (Lumenick, 2005). For the time it took to make the film, no actor could commit to the story, and before Ang Lee was chosen as the director, director Gus Van Sant and producer Scott Rudin were on board to make the film, but gave up when they couldn’t find actors who would play the two main characters. The agents were to blame:
They’d say it was the best thing they’d ever read, and they’d waver and anguish. Their agents were afraid and steered them away from it (Thompson, 'Brokeback Mountain' Charts New Territory, 2005).

Diana Ossana herself was witness to agents that actually discouraged their clients to take on the script because of the risk factor (Weiss, Considering the source; 'Brokeback Mountain' turns a short story into a Holywood first, 2005); this is one of the reasons cited for the delay in making the film. For Ledger, this was not a career risk; on the contrary, he said it felt like an opportunity to take on a different role than those he had taken before. When asked about the sex scene, he was not worried at all during the filming:

Of shooting sex scenes with costar Jake Gyllenhaal the most striking one, violent and unflinching, was filmed in one morning, in 13 takes Ledger is almost perfunctory. “I hate to break it to you, but it really wasn’t [difficult],” Ledger says. “Once you do the first take, you’re kind of over it” (Weiss, Considering the source; 'Brokeback Mountain' turns a short story into a Holywood first, 2005).

The risk paid off, since one writer praised his role by saying: “who knew he could act?” Ledger’s choice of roles before *Brokeback* seemed to be too easy, and for one writer in particular, his performance was paralleled to a Hollywood legend: “Mr. Ledger’s portrayal of the taciturn, tormented Ennis Del Mar, who marries and sires two daughters while carrying on a secret homosexual affair, delivers the kind of devastating performance James Dean might have given had he lived long enough” (Holden, 2005).

Comparing Ledger to Dean was a good contrast, since James Dean, in his time, was subjected to people questioning his sexuality, and this was without him acting as a queer man in a film. For Ledger, challenging his sexuality would be a lot easier. Regardless of how scared they both were to take on these characters on screen, their performances received praise and applause from moviegoers, especially for Ledger:
The movie belongs to Ledger, who turns in an astonishing, Oscar-worthy performance as a man who knows he’s drowning but won’t swim. His words choke in his throat from fear of what they might express (Bernard, 2005).

Peter Sarsgaard, a straight actor as well, also points out the fear in the actors of playing a gay character and expresses why some straight actors would be adamant about playing a gay character:

“I think what really scares most actors personally about gay roles is the fear that they’ll be turned on,” says Peter Sarsgaard, who was Oscar-nominated for playing a bisexual in last year’s Kinsey and who plays a gay screenwriter in The Dying Gaul. “America is pathologically uptight about sex, so it stands to reason actors will be, too,” he told Variety. “I’ve been doing nothing but kissing men in movies lately. It’s acting” (Lumenick, 2005).

Yet, for Ang Lee, this was a risk he was willing to take: “I don’t care if this movie dooms the rest of their careers… all I cared about was that they performed for me” (Outtakes, 2005). Lee also mentioned that gay actors did not want to be in a gay role; he had the dilemma of having both gay and straight actors not wanting to be cast in the film (Berlin, 2005). In fact, other prospects for the leads in the film included Colin Farrel, Josh Hartnett and Billy Crudup, all of them heterosexual-acting actors as well (Helmer lassoes duo for gay oater, 2004). The biggest challenge for most of the critics was to make a gay love story believable with two straight actors. One writer had a theory: “As far as big-name stars playing gay, historically it helps if their characters die. Or kill” (Murray, Portrayal of gays in new film breaks with over-the-top image, 2005). He then mentions Tom Hanks in Philadelphia, William Hurt in Kiss of the Spider Woman, Hilary Swank in Boys Don’t Cry, and Charlize Theron in Monster.
The filmmakers’ sexual identity was not enough to label it a straight film. For some people, the film was not made just for a queer audience. Ellen Huang, a former movie industry executive, was convinced that the main audience was not going to be gay men, but heterosexual women: “women have the ability to see the transcendent aspects of the love story.” This is also seen as a benefit, because the heterosexual women were likely to drag their heterosexual boyfriends to the movie theater (Nance, Is a kiss just a kiss?: Gay love goes mainstream in 'Brokeback Mountain', 2005). This is why Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal were cast: sex appeal to women as much as gay men and one female writer agrees:

And so, like Titanic, doesn’t Brokeback Mountain have more to do with their ever-strengthening audience of women? This isn’t really about gay sex at all in some ways. It’s emotional porn, an array of hot, spread-eagled men with feelings. You could make the oh-so-late-90’s case that our gay cowboys are just women being battered by the mean man of Homophobic Society. In any case, it’s men being victimized by society for being gay (or, at least, of being in love with a man), which superimposes an eroticism of powerlessness on the chiseled rodeo riders (Sicha, Chokeback Mountain, 2005).

Put simply, boy-on-boy is the new girl-on-girl, but she’s not the only one (Sicha, Chokeback Mountain, 2005). Producer James Schamus in a Q & A at the University of Chicago compared Brokeback Mountain to The Bridges of Madison County, and proceeded to point out why women were such an important demographic:

“Like all great love stories, our first, but not only, audience is women,” Schamus elaborated later. “For upscale movies, it is often women who are the arbiters of what to see – which doesn’t mean men don’t like movies like Titanic and Casablanca, just that they initially watch them often at the behest of their wives and girlfriends” (Edler, 2005).
So the film was aimed at what is called the “fourth quadrant,” which is the “women 35 and older” demographic. As a result, though, the film has also been labeled as a ‘chick flick,’ and for some, it is worse than a ‘chick flick;’ “It’s a chick flick without chicks.”

Colin R. Johnson, an assistant professor of Gender Studies at Indiana University, says that straight men watching *Brokeback* are probably going through “divine revenge for heterosexual women having to contend with their heterosexual boyfriend’s fascination with lesbian pornography.” One self-proclaimed heterosexual man admits this hypocrisy:

> When it is women, we – meaning straight men – tend to find it titillating, exotic, and arousing in its very forbiddance. When it’s men, we – meaning straight men and women – ten to react as if somebody dropped a snake in the bed (Pitts, Why 'Brokeback Mountain' is so frightening to many people, 2006).

By pointing out this type of double standard, it can be understood why taking a boyfriend or a husband, who probably does have a stash of girl-on-girl action hidden under the bed, would be dragged in as a form of vengeance: “You make me watch two women hook up, now I will show you two men hooking up.” Yet this type of “punishment” is also a way to attract the women. Author Abigail Garner reveals that the film is a way to show the women in their lives that they are secure in their relationship, so the heterosexual men can see this as an advantage instead of running away from the film. Plus, since the film is seen as an attractor of straight women, this is also an opportunity to meet new people: “perhaps THE reason for straight guys to go see the gay cowboy movie is… to pick up chicks” (Campanelli, Straight man's horror show? Despite the movie's critical success, some men seem to be staying away from 'Brokeback Mountain', 2006). Others disagree, though, saying they insist that the core audience is gay men. This will be discussed in the next sub-section.
Gay Film

For many reviewers, the two main characters are essentially homosexual men. The two men are in love with each other, but are forced to live a lie and marry women. Marrying a woman seemed more like an obligation than actually wanting to so they can hide their real sexuality from the outside world, which is described as “the cost inflicted on entire families, not just on Ennis and Jack” (Rich, Two gay cowboys hit a home run, 2005). And, according to one writer in particular, “we are apparently not asked to weep for either woman, and certainly not for Alma’s two daughters or Lureen’s son” (Sarris, 2005). The two “gay” male characters are seen as the victims of society in the plot.

The classification of *Brokeback Mountain* as a gay film was pretty cemented after someone called it the ‘gay cowboy movie’ after its first public screening at a film festival. But thanks to the phrase ‘gay cowboy movie’ the film critics and writers alike took it as a starting point to explain exactly why this is an oversimplification of the theme of the film. For one writer in particular, this meant more than just an overview; it “speaks to the unease surrounding the film’s subject” (Dargis, Masculinity and its discontents in Marlboro country, 2005). Some film critics were not hesitant to call it a gay film, and compared it to other films with gay content. For Joe Williams, *Brokeback Mountain* was released at the same time as other films, such as *Rent* (Williams, Hollywood's Holiday Heavyweights While It's Donning Gay Apparel, The Movie Industry is Delivering a Sleigh Full of Seriousness, 2005). Even Larry McMurtry, one of the screenwriters of the film, says the film is:
Clearly about two homosexual men. It’s also a story about the women who marry homosexual men (Thompson, 'Brokeback Mountain' Charts New Territory, 2005).

For filmgoers, it was also seen as a gay film: “Morse says he hopes people will understand it’s a love story between two human beings. It’s not just a gay movie” (Hinds, Will gay play? 'Brokeback Mountain' has already won raves. How it does at the box office remains to be seen., 2005). Joe Williams called it “a turning point in the history of gay cinema” (Williams, The many faces of gay Hollywood, 2005) because, for him, the two characters represent how future gay characters will be represented. Since for some the film was considered a gay film, this had a certain effect on heterosexual men. For many, the gay theme seemed to be a reason to stay away from the movie theater, as it is explained in this quote: “No problem with gay people; just don’t force me to watch two hombres locking lips” (Campanelli, Straight man's horror show? Despite the movie's critical success, some men seem to be staying away from 'Brokeback Mountain', 2006).

The outrage between straight men is the fact that they do see the film as “gay.” Some correlate the film to the gay lifestyle so strongly it is seen as having an impact for gay rights. The issue of gay marriage was a big political issue when the film was released: “(It) could be viewed as a strong argument in favor of legalized gay unions” (Beckerman, 'Brokeback' begins its breakthrough bid, 2005). But while the gay and lesbian associations might think this, there are others who think differently. For a few, this is propaganda for a lifestyle that they do not approve of. One anonymous blogger called the film “the next step in the Gay Left’s Indoctrination Program,” an outlet for promoting the gay identity (Kaufman, 2005). Stephen Bennett agrees. A former gay man who married a woman after changing his mind fought against all the good reviews Brokeback had received:
“We believe that this movie is homosexual propaganda,” said Bennett, who with his wife, Irene, hosts “Straight Talk Radio,” an anti-gay rights-themed program that airs in eight states. Once gay and now married for 13 years, Bennett says the movie promotes both homosexuality and adultery… “Homosexuals are playing the victim card again,” said Bennett, who has not seen the movie and doesn’t plan to. “These guys who are cheating on their wives, these adulterous guys, are being touted as modern-day John Wayne heroes” (Beckerman, 'Brokeback' begins its breakthrough bid, 2005).

While some insisted that the film was designed for a main audience comprised of heterosexual women, some disagree and say the core audience is gay men: “On the one hand, there are gay viewers – pretty much pre-sold, and judging by the number of same-sex couples in the audience Friday, Brokeback’s likely core audience” (Beckerman, 'Brokeback' begins its breakthrough bid, 2005).

The oversimplification of labeling the film as a gay film could be attributed to how simple it can be as explained in the introduction. For Michele Aaron, the term “queer” is a form of taking traditional sexual labels and going up against them, so this made it easier for reviewers to label it as a gay film. The familiarity of the term and cementing the orientation of the film seemed to bode well for most reviewers, but in the next section, that simple label will be challenged.

Queer Film

“Queer,” as said in the literature review, is a term still being defined and still looking for a place in the film genre, but as most authors who have dared to define it, some tried to label Brokeback Mountain as queer. As Doty explained, queer film can also be applied to gay films, but then why separate the two then to define the film? For many, placing the film under gay film is much easier than labeling it as queer, even though they can both
mean the same thing. But since the term queer can become somewhat intimidating because of its lack of sexual limits, the film was hardly called queer, but there are those who are determined to name it a queer film. Plus, the sexuality of both Jack and Ennis cannot be labeled specifically gay. After all, they do not only have sex with other men, they also have sex with other women.

After a passionate encounter on a cold night in a pup tent, Ennis starts gathering his things and puts them on his horse. Jack comes out and tells him “see you for supper,” but Ennis just looks at him and rides away. After discovering one of the sheep had been killed the night before, Ennis watches the sheep, then Jack joins him, and they begin a conversation which starts with Ennis saying “You know I ain’t queer,” to which Jack responds, “Me neither.” It is an interesting response to something that happened away from prying eyes, only between the two of them. Ennis’ concern over being perceived as being queer is very important to him whereas Jack is more nonchalant: he knows who he is. The fact that a sheep was seen killed the same night the sex took place is indeed queer, no pun intended. The sheep they were supposed to be watching was attacked that fateful night. The sheep seemed to be safe and sound when nothing was happening between the two men. All of a sudden, something changed. It seems that the fact the two men started to have an affair seemed like a dangerous feat, especially for Ennis, who is terrified of being seen as queer.

For a few people, the film is actually about two queer characters, because even though the men are obviously in love with each other, finding any means to meet as often as they can, they still did get married to two women. The sex between the men and the women does not seem uncomfortable for either. Ennis is capable of producing two little
girls in his marriage to Alma, and they are seen making love two times in the film. The first time, Ennis shuts off the lights and has anal sex with Alma, and even though Alma protests a little, she concedes. The second time, Ennis and Alma are both naked and he is on top and with the lights on. The reason the sex stopped is because Alma is trying to avoid having any more children, especially after she saw Ennis kissing Jack. In Jack’s case, when he meets his future wife Lureen, they dance and then proceed to have sex in the backseat of a car. The sex happens quickly, but Jack seems to throw no protests, and he also proceeds to have a child with Lureen. When this sexual situation is presented, the characters are not seen as gay, but as bisexual or queer.

B. Ruby Rich is an authority in queer cinema; she, after all, coined the term New Queer Cinema, or NQC for short, in the early 1990s, which reflected work from queer directors and writers in response to the AIDS crisis and the need to represent queer stories without the characters being sick or demented, and limited to art houses and queer film festivals. For Rich, *Brokeback Mountain* enters into the queer film classification in a different way. In an interview with a California newspaper, Rich explains why it is a queer film, and why it is also not:

>This is a completely different kind of film. *Brokeback* isn’t made by a gay director, [nor] is it coming out of a political movement. [The film is made] by Ang Lee who, to my mind, is one of the most mainstream and successful directors we have. What I think is very different from it – apart from its platform – is that *Brokeback* takes on genre. Genre is something that everybody else was turning away from – with the exception of romantic comedy… Certainly the Western, which is one of (if not the most) sacred genres in American Cinema, would have seemed like the last place to go looking for a queer story.

Still, she saw queer elements:
Brokeback isn’t just a western with a gay twist. This is a film that wraps genre around queerness and not the other way around. Brokeback not only queers the entire [Wyoming] landscape. In that sense Brokeback has raised the bar for subsequent films in terms of its platform, production budget, casting, and in terms of what’s possible for a gay love tragedy. Brokeback offers the potential of thinking in much bigger terms than people have felt was possible. I think the film permits a wildly expansive imaginary to sneak back in at a time when all the GLBT issues are being parsed so narrowly and bitterly.

When asked if the film itself was part of the NQC, she answered:

The movement of that moment is over, but this has been an exciting year for queer cinema…Brokeback is something very different. It’s not by a queer director. It’s not coming out of a queer community. It is, however, imagining a rural queer paradise.

Even though the film has a queer love story, for Rich it is hard to classify it as a definitive queer film. Regardless, the film is taking queer film to a whole new level, especially when it comes to mainstream audiences and taking queer themes outside the limits of queer film festivals. She also admits that placing the film in the queer genre could be coralling the film to a limited audience (Akers, 2006). For one particular critic, the answer to the film’s “identity” is: “It’s finally here and it is queer,” (Johnson, 2006) making a playful reference to the chant: “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!” Very few writers called it a queer film, even one writer who said the two cowboys on film are “bisexual,” which definitely fits under the umbrella term of queer since it is not strictly gay or straight sexuality (Blank, 2006).

Conclusion

The argument of whether the film is considered gay, straight or queer will be unending, because it can be considered under all of the classifications at once, or it can be seen as
just one. For a reviewer of *L.A. Weekly*, “*Brokeback Mountain* is at once the gayest and the least gay Hollywood film I’ve ever seen, which is another way of saying that Lee has a knack for culling universality from the most specific identities” (Taylor, *Lonesome Doves*, 2005). Another writer says: “On *Brokeback*, the two men are neither straight nor gay, much less queer; they are lovers, which probably accounts for the category confusion that has greeted the film” (Dargis, *Masculinity and its discontents in Marlboro country*, 2005). For another writer, labeling the film would be to waste the main point of the film, which is the romantic relationship of the film (Hershenson, 2006). But, still, the film seemed to have touched a common nerve with everyone, which is true love. It is also agreed that, no matter which type of film it is considered to be, it is a tragic drama: “*Brokeback Mountain* is a tragedy because these men have found something that many people, of whatever sexual persuasion, never find – true love. And they can’t do anything about it” (Rainer, *Cowboys saddled with a secret*, 2005). This true love could have been about any number of people in which love was prohibited:

> Interracial, a cop and a drag queen, or an older teacher and a younger pupil… Only a fool would try to analyze love (Reed, 2005)

Or even: “about two women or lovers from different religious or ethnic groups – any ‘forbidden’ love” (Ebert, *Forbidden attraction; Summer affair changes their lives forever*, 2005).

Regardless, the film is absolutely a new kind of queer cinema as Ruby Rich explains. It is a new way to explore sexuality in cinematic characters that are not bound by one preference of sexual partner. It is a new genre of queer cinema.
Chapter Three: *Philadelphia: Brokeback Mountain’s Historical Predecessor*

In 1993, the film *Philadelphia* was released to great reviews as well as backlash. Twelve years later, the same thing would happen when *Brokeback Mountain* would be released. In fact, many writers in the research were quick to compare the two and the similarities between them. Jonathan Demme directed *Philadelphia*. Demme directed *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), which was a film widely protested because of its queer serial killer. For some, *Philadelphia* was a way for the director to say sorry for the Buffalo Bill character in the 1991 thriller, hence the gay theme and gay rights film surfaced: “many observers think *Philadelphia* is his apologia to the gay community, which perceived homophobia in the thriller” (Connors, 1994).

*Philadelphia* is the story of Andrew Beckett, and the film begins by showing Andrew’s talents as a lawyer. After winning the case, Andrew is invited by the firm partners to join him in their office to share with him the good news: he became a partner. One of the partners, though, notices a kind of bruise on Andrew’s forehead that same night. After that, Andrew is fired, citing a missing brief for one of their cases. After a year, Andrew goes to Joe Miller, played by Denzel Washington, telling him he wants to sue the firm, insisting he was dismissed because he is gay and he has AIDS. Miller is reluctant to take the case, since he is afraid of getting sick. He also doesn’t agree with Andrew’s lifestyle, but eventually he gives in and takes the case. But, after Andrew’s testimony on the partners’ homophobia and fear of catching the disease, he wins the case and gets a settlement. Unfortunately, Andrew succumbs to the disease in the end, yet the film suggests he dies fighting for his rights.
Since this was considered one of Hollywood’s first films to bring the issue of AIDS to a mainstream audience, Demme decided to have the actors look directly in the camera to make a point. For example, Joe Miller goes into his doctor’s office to get an AIDS test after shaking the hand of a sick Andrew Beckett. The doctor looks into the camera, with Joe’s point of view, saying “you can’t get AIDS from a handshake.” This acts not only a scene made by a director who consistently uses this point of view angle, but it is also a way to educate his target mainstream audience.

**A Homosexual Protagonist – Played by a Heterosexual Actor**

Joe Miller and Andrew Beckett are the two main characters from the film. One is a gay man with AIDS, who has been discriminated against, and the other is a homophobe; both represent extreme sides of the issue of AIDS and homosexuality. In *Brokeback Mountain*, the two main characters are queer. Tom Hanks is seen as a heterosexual man in real life and he plays Andrew in the film. Like *Brokeback Mountain*, the queer characters are played by straight men. At the time the film was made, this is seen as a very risky decision for the actor.

One point that was prevalent in the articles was the fact that they were both groundbreaking as wide releases. *Philadelphia* was seen as a first of its kind, dealing with the AIDS epidemic for the first time in mainstream cinema. This brought relief for some reviewers and was also fascinating to audiences because a heterosexual man would “risk” his career playing a gay man in a film. In Missouri, a film critic was wary of Tom Hanks’ decision to play such a role:

> This is his most courageous and challenging movie role, and fans and critics are divided on how he will fare. People
are not sure whether the role will ruin his career or win him an Oscar. (Koltnow, Tom Hanks tackles his most courageous, but risky, role, 1994)

In the same article, it is revealed that Jonathan Demme picked Hanks for the role: he’s a likable actor, and the fact that reviewers and audiences were worried about his career with this film. Filmgoers are genuinely interested in what happens after the movie is released. So why pick a straight, likable actor for a role that seems like a risk for his career? Director Jonathan Demme said Hanks was the perfect choice for the role. With a downbeat subject such as AIDS, the studio wanted a likable actor in the lead, and Hanks is as likable as it gets in Hollywood: “We had to have an All-American boy in that role,” the director said. Since he is seen as a likable actor, it is seen as risky for audiences who have seen him in other films such as Splash and Sleepless in Seattle could see Hanks in such a role (Guthmann, 1994). Some credit Hanks for being the first actor to finally take the leap: “Everyone is calling it his dramatic breakthrough moment, an unprecedented act of career courage, and endeavor that could change forever Hollywood’s portrayal of gays” (Strauss, 1994). Brian Grazer, who is the co-CEO of Imagine Entertainment, points out that Hanks could have passed on the role if he wanted to, so it can be seen as brave, or an actor who wants to play different characters in films (Grazer, 1994). For his portrayal, Hanks won an Academy Award for Best Actor in the 1994 ceremony and a Golden Bear for best actor by the Berlin International Film Festival. He was also recognized by the Hollywood Women’s Press Club for taking socially conscious roles.

Regardless, Tom Hanks is not the first straight actor to play a gay man. Mal Vincent from The Virginia Pilot recalls on other actors from the past:
Those who think Tom Hanks is risking his career by playing a homosexual in *Philadelphia* may have forgotten that Al Pacino, as long ago as 1975, played a man who robbed a bank to get money for his male lover’s sex-change operation. The film was *Dog Day Afternoon*… William Hurt won an Oscar for playing a homosexual in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* in 1985. He kissed Raul Julia in the film (Vincent, Other Breakthrough Films Have Explored Gay Subjects, 1994).

Others have also been quick in mentioning the straight actors that have played gay roles, such as Edward Guthmann from *The San Francisco Chronicle*, who mentions Michael Caine and Richard Gere as well. The biggest fear, according to him, is the questioning of the actor’s own sexuality:

> Prominent screen actors, especially in the last decade, have played gay roles without serious jeopardy to their careers. And yet, the notion persists that gay roles leave a stain of identification on an actor – a lingering question of “Is he really…?” (Guthmann, 1994).

This might be why Hanks, as proud as he was of the role of Andrew, made it clear: “‘I HAVE NEVER had sex with a man,’ Tom Hanks said,” according to *The Virginian-Pilot* (Vincent, The Serious Side of Tom Hanks; Comic Star Breaks New Ground with Dramatic Role as an AIDS Victim in 'Philadelphia', 1994). He establishes that he is indeed straight, making sure everyone knows. The use of the caps in the article suggests Hanks said it as a statement and true fact, not as a part of the interview. For some, it doesn’t matter if the actor is gay, straight or queer:

As to what to make of all of this, perhaps it was best said by witty, on-a-roll writer Rudnick, who suggested, in effect, that everyone lighten up: “Gay people need to see their lives onscreen, gay kids need role models and the straight audience needs to accept gay characters without retching or crying depravity. Art, or even entertainment, exists on the whimsy of talent, not agenda” (Terry, 1994).
This illustrates the ways in which casting concerns were similar between *Philadelphia* and *Brokeback*.

**Presentation of Homophobia**

Homophobia in the film was presented through Joe Miller, Andrew’s lawyer, and the law firm’s partners. The firm partners are in a scene where they all admit that they fired Andrew because of his AIDS status, and Joe talks to his wife about how disgusted he is about the whole “homo” idea, making fun of gay men, including the swishing of the hips. But he seems to be a changed man at the end of the film after witnessing the discrimination and the pain Beckett has to endure while he is still alive. In his closing arguments, Joe looks at everyone and stands right next to the judge, since he himself has been a judge of Andrew at one time. He explains to the jury: “This case is not about AIDS. This case is about our hatred and fear of homosexuals.” He finishes and sits down next to Andrew, then tells Joe: “Very good.” In *Time* magazine, homophobia is described in a very brutal and frank way:

> That word—homophobia—has always seemed a misnomer. Many people don’t fear the gay culture; they simply and unapologetically hate it. The idea of same-sex gives them the creeps. They want homosexuals out of the barracks and boardrooms—really, out of American life.\(^1\)

The homophobia presented in the film is sometimes so blatant, some considered the film about that and not about AIDS: “This is a movie about justice, bigotry, fear, ignorance and love” (Strickler, 1994). For Joe Miller, “every second that he’s around Andrew is an exercise in revulsion,” as is described by Betsy Pickle (1994). Hanks admits that the Joe Miller character is the embodiment of homophobia: “So his character actually defines

the question that the story element of the movie is actually examining, which is our fear and loathing of homosexuals,’ says Hanks” (Blair, 1994). Joe’s character has been called the “man who represents the audience’s point of view” character (Verniere, 1994). Many other writers agreed, but not just about Joe Miller’s homophobia, but about his relationship with Andrew: “The uneasy relationship between Beckett and Miller becomes a metaphor for the straight population’s ‘fear, loathing and hatred’ of homosexuals” (Baron, 1994). Regardless of how heartless Joe has been throughout the movie, in the end, he feels sympathy for Andrew. No one is exactly sure if Joe changed his attitude towards gays in general, or just to Andrew. This might represent the change American viewers have gone through since the epidemic became public: “By the end of the film, he’s traveled the emotional distance in the space of two hours that much of the American public has taken 10 years to cover – from denial to revulsion to accusation to some tenuous sort of empathy” (Maccambridge, 1994). But the homophobia presented in the film by the firm’s partners is actually worse, since they actually act on their homophobia and pathophobia.

What Beckett’s former law firm – complete with obnoxious old-boy-network locker-room slurs – is really being tried for its shunning of him, a reaction whose homophobia, led by Jason Robards, is made clear when he and other partners show themselves genuinely horrified at the sight of a woman who got AIDS from a blood transfusion – in other words, a woman who in their eyes is innocent, as Beckett clearly is not (Carr, 1994).

Joe flatly condemns the lifestyle… steps back from it as though if he confronted it head on, someone might think he was gay (which is exactly what happens later when a young gay man makes a pass at him in a drugstore). He sounds like one of those shrill scaredy-cat military people who
sang their little chorus of panic for Congress (Janusonis, 1994).

Homophobia was one of the reasons the people involved in the filming were afraid to show the film to mainstream audiences. Hanks admits that “the expectations are so high for it and because there is a feeling that if it doesn’t do well, it might reveal the hatred and fear that many people in this country have for homosexuals” (Vincent, The Serious Side of Tom Hanks; Comic Star Breaks New Ground with Dramatic Role as an AIDS Victim in 'Philadelphia', 1994).

For very few writers, the homophobia presented could be seen as stereotypical. Jeff Millar from The Houston Chronicle accuses Demme and Nyswaner of using exaggerated characters to bring home the point of homophobia: “Their white males are irredeemable by definition” (Millar, 1994). For him, the white, middle-aged firm partners are a way to hit the audience over the head with extreme homophobia, so, for this reviewer, the filmmakers’ efforts to confront the issue head-on and bluntly mean they lose the subtleties involved.

**Hooray for Hollywood?**

For Brokeback, Hollywood was more than willing to give itself a pat on the back for having two men kissing and having sex on screen in a mainstream release, but the film took 7 years to make after the screenplay was done. No one wanted to touch it, and actors fled the idea. Philadelphia was also seen as a self-congratulatory project, a way for Hollywood to be politically correct and make sure everyone knew it, which made it a breakthrough film. But some people suggested it was too little, too late: the disease was in public view since the mid-80s, and this made Hollywood a suspect in why they took so
long to bring to the masses a film which addressed the disease. In fact, in many film reviews, it is referred to as “the first high-profile Hollywood AIDS drama”\(^2\), and some have deemed it as “long overdue” (Carr, 1994). In a *Newsweek* article, Mary Talbot and Jennifer Boeth did not mince words about how tardy the film was:

> Hooray for Hollywood! Twelve years after the outbreak of the epidemic, Tinseltown has mustered the courage, and the screenplay, for its first feature-length flick about AIDS.\(^3\)

And another film critic also “congratulated” Hollywood for the timeliness of the release:

“I’d like to welcome Hollywood back from its extraterrestrial journey – and also discuss *Philadelphia*, its valiant attempt to catch up with human history” (Howe, 1994). The *Chicago Sun-Times* was also quick in pointing out how late the film had come out:

> Hollywood is not fond of movies about diseases, especially those in which the patient is likely to die. Nor is it fond of AIDS as a story subject which is why 10 years passed between the time AIDS first entered the public consciousness and when a major studio with big bucks and big stars dared to make a movie about it. (Ebert, Question of Justice: Philadelphia Places Society on Trial over Issue of AIDS, 1994).

In the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, points out that the tardiness of the film might actually have affected public opinion in terms of bringing the subject to the audiences who might be eager to learn more about a disease they might not understand:

> If *Philadelphia* had been made 10 years ago, it might have been on the cutting edge, or even a controversial film. Certainly, it would have been of considerably more help than it is now. As it stands, Demme’s noble effort is too little, too late. Television has already gone where film

\(^2\) Miami Herald, July 1, 1994

\(^3\) Newsweek, “*Philadelphia* story, take 2” Mary Talbot, Jennifer Boeth, 1993
feared to tread, and we’ve seen AIDS dramas in almost every incarnation on TV. That Demme and his star, Tom Hanks, should be cited for their bravery in bringing AIDS to the big screen is perhaps the saddest commentary on the climate surrounding AIDS… Of course, just the opposite has happened (Uricchio, 1994).

In television, the AIDS virus was already a major topic. Made-for-TV movies were already ahead in telling a story about it. The New York Times mentions that Hollywood has taken the long road towards the AIDS storyline. The television drama An Early Frost came out in 1985, telling a story about a lawyer who has to tell his family he has AIDS and he’s gay. It won praise for its portrayal and the subject matter, but this movie was still presented 8 years before Philadelphia was released (Grimes, 1993).

Critiques were also expressed, as were concerns about losing money:

Hollywood’s past reluctance to take on AIDS isn’t strictly a matter of cowardice. This subject, with all its anguished inevitability, does not easily lend itself to run-of-the-mill movie methods… Conventional wisdom has it that a big-budget film needs reassuring familiarity if it means to play at the multiplex, even if Mr. Demme proved otherwise with his bracingly tough Silence of the Lambs (Maslin, 1993).

Even though Hollywood sees itself as liberal and open-minded, studio executives were still nervous about the release for the film:

“The perception was that it was risky and the studio was taking a gamble,” acknowledged Ron Bozman, one of the executive producers of Philadelphia. “The gamble would be how many people would go, knowing the subject matter had to do with AIDS and homosexuality?” (Matchan, 1994)

This concern surfaced before they knew how well the film would actually do. By February 4th, Philadelphia had grossed over $36 million at the box office.
For the gay film-going community, this was a first for them as well, who are “sick of Hollywood’s usual negative portrayals of homosexuals.” Ironically, one of the films mentioned as a main source for a negative stereotype is *Silence of the Lambs* (Anthony, 1993). Mal Vincent from *The Virginian-Pilot* mentions that the subject was untouched for years, thanks to the box office flop of *Making Love* in 1982. After this film was a failure, Hollywood refused to touch the subject for years, and this might explain why *Philadelphia* or any other mainstream film took so long to bring the subject of gay identity and the AIDS virus into the mainstream. Instead, television was the main outlet for AIDS films, such as *Longtime Companion* and *An Early Frost*: “For the most part, Hollywood has avoided the subject.” In fact, the only times gay or queer characters were mentioned in the mainstream were just neighbors or token characters in films such as *The Prince of Tides, Single White Female* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* for the films that came out in the 1990s (Vincent, Other Breakthrough Films Have Explored Gay Subjects, 1994). *Philadelphia* was also criticized for making Andrew a stereotype in Hollywood terms: “gay, male, wealthy, white, WASP.” For Steve Murray, the portrayal of Andrew is too cliché in terms of Hollywood leading men, in terms of Andrew’s life seeming as too perfect, with a perfect, forgiving partner, the perfect supportive family, and a perfect job, which he lost, but still part of a perfect upbringing. There were a few writers who were upset at the portrayal of Andrew as a martyr who shows his “Stations of the Cross” (Murray, A Reality Check for 'Philadelphia', 1994).

For the lack of serious content in films before, Demme was praised for his portrayal of AIDS:
Demme’s achievement begins to seem almost miraculous. In two hours, he does more than any filmmaker has ever done to undermine the homophobia that has riddled American movies for decades, and his compassionate treatment of AIDS is moving, not depressing (Mills, 'Philadelphia' Hits the Mark; Film Treats AIDS with Compassion, not Depression, 1994).

It seems that it did take too long to make the film. Rock Hudson died of AIDS in 1985, and this, for Michael Mills, *Philadelphia* shows how Hollywood has waited 8 years to make a film about AIDS. Homophobia in Hollywood is said to have been what fueled the late release of the film. Michael Goff said this about gay Hollywood:

“A lot of it has to do with the homophobia within the Hollywood community,” says Michael Goff, editor and president of the national gay and lesbian magazine *Out*…

“(Hollywood is) run by gay people who are afraid to do gay themes.”

The fear of the economic downfall of an AIDS film is also shown here:

The fear, not surprisingly, is at least partially fueled by economics. “Obviously Hollywood has never considered AIDS the most bankable subject,” says Michael Musto, a Village Voice columnist and freelance writer. “It took a lot of pressure and activism and dedicated people to really push the issue and get this done.”

As a result of this waiting, Mills says, “*Philadelphia* is faced with the impossible challenge of being all things to all people – it’s not just an AIDS movie, it’s the AIDS movie” (Mills, AIDS in the Movies: What Took So Long?, 1994).

Still, film critics have defended Hollywood in delaying the film in terms of expectations and worries of how it might be received: “It may be safe as milk in 1994, but one couldn’t imagine this film getting made five short years ago” (Maccambridge, 1994). Even people in the Hollywood community understand their dilemma; it is, after
all, labeled as the first of its kind for a mainstream film. Screenwriter Paul Rudnick understands the pressure of doing such a film that is associated with a social problem. He later wrote a screenplay for the film *Jeffrey*, also about gays and AIDS:

> “I feel sorry for people involved in a pioneer effort like that,” says *Addams Family Values* screenwriter Paul Rudnick... “They’re going to be so much more scrutinized. And that movie, because it’s the only gay film and the only AIDS film, will be forced to carry the burden of every political concern, every gay issue, and every AIDS issue. Nobody should have to do that” (Rea, 1994).

The film was seen as the “diving board” for future films, just like *Brokeback Mountain*, but *Brokeback* itself would be the film following *Philadelphia*, 12 years apart.

**A Relationship between Two Men: Andrew and Miguel**

In the film *Brokeback Mountain*, Jack and Ennis have a very passionate affair; it is obvious from the kissing scenes and the notorious love scene that made people jump off their seats, but it is shown in a graphic manner. In *Philadelphia*, the relationship between Andrew and Miguel is a serious one: they have been together for 10 years, but it is not as graphically shown as in *Brokeback*. There are two tender moments between Andrew and Miguel: one is a costume party where they both dress as men and Miguel puts his head on Andy’s shoulder in a slow song. In the other scene, Miguel kisses each finger on Andrew’s hand when Andrew is lying on his deathbed. It is the last affectionate gesture between the two before Andrew passes. It’s not as graphic as the scenes in *Brokeback*, and the irony is that the affair between Jack and Ennis occurred in a period of time and a place where queerness was not only taboo, it was punishable by violence. Still, *Philadelphia* got people talking about the relationship between the two characters. Some were offended by the idea of portraying the duo in an obscure manner, others didn’t care
as long as the message was being proclaimed, and, as in *Brokeback*, for others the relationship made people sick.

There were those in the queer community who were very upset at the image of the homosexual relationship between Andrew and Miguel. Actor Scott Thompson, who is gay, was upset at the ginger treatment of the relationship. In the film, Andrew and Miguel’s interactions were not seen as exactly “romantic.” In fact, the two most tender moments between the two were a slow dance in a costume party where Miguel puts his head on Andrew’s shoulder, and at the end when Miguel kisses Andrew’s hand as he lies on his death bed. For Thompson, this was unacceptable:

I am tired of the ginger treatment of homosexuality. It’s insulting to the public. It says they are so stupid they wouldn’t accept an honest portrayal. If Hollywood is using this movie to make America love us, they are making them love a false image. I don’t want that kind of acceptance.4

But Tom Hanks defended his stance on the relationship in *Newsweek*:

Q: *Philadelphia* has been faulted for its lack of explicit sexuality

A: Fine, you know. And if we had shot a love scene, they’d be saying “Are we supposed to applaud the fact that Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas dared to kiss each other?” These guys have been together for nine years. They’re once-a-weekers (sic) at best.5

Regardless of his effort to defend the relationship, some were not convinced this was a genuine relationship: “The lack of any real affection between these two is somewhat startling – they seem more like college roomies than lovers” (Evansen, 1994).

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Still, it did seem that, for some, the issue of the relationship was being pushed too far:

Even as it stands, Mr. Demme may be pushing the limits of tolerance for a mass audience. At an early screening in a working-class neighborhood near Baltimore, followed by a focus-group discussion, one viewer told Mr. Demme that the sight of the two men dancing together made him sick. Mr. Demme, somewhat surprised, asked, “You mean physically sick?” The man said yes, that’s exactly what he meant (Grimes, 1993).

The strong reaction from the man in the focus group was seen as the main reason why the relationship was “ginger.” It could be said that it was a decision to make it more marketable.

Letters to the editor revealed very unhappy moviegoers over the treatment of the two main characters: “Mr. Nyswaner has precious little to gloat over: After having created a sympathetic characters, he not only denies that character a loving moment alone on screen with his mate but forgoes affording the character the dignity of displaying feelings unfiltered through a haze of clichés,” probably referring to how the relationship is portrayed more as what American viewers would like to see as opposed to how a relationship between them would really be like (Hollenberg, 1994). For Donn Esmonde from New York, Andrew and Miguel “seem more like neighbors than lovers,” describing the relationship as the angle the film was chosen to be made in order to not offend. “It may be a while – it may be never – before most of ‘straight’ America can witness a homosexual screen kiss without cringing” (Esmonde, 1994). 12 years later, when Brokeback is released, people did still cringe and condemn the film as homosexual propaganda. Director and producer Robert Altman compares the relationship between
Andrew and Miguel with Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*. This film was released in the 1934, after the Production Code was established. The unmarried couple spent the night in a hotel, but places a sheet between the beds to make it an innocent evening. Even though Altman described *Philadelphia* as a “noble film,” the comparison with *It Happened One Night* is evidence that he thought the relationship was very little, and even described as fraudulent (Pacheco, 1994). Fact is, there was a scene in the film in which Andrew and Miguel are in bed together, but it was cut in post-production. According to Demme,

> It stopped the movie cold. It wasn’t needed. We needed to establish the affection in other ways (Vincent, 1994).

In other words, the relationship had to be shown in a more discreet way, trying to avoid any real interaction between the two men. Not showing the scene between Andrew and Miguel is called hypocrisy by some: “The argument, and it is a good one, is that if *Philadelphia* had centered on a heterosexual couple, the camera certainly would have caught them in bed together” (Carlton, 'Philadelphia' Succeeds as Human Story, 1994). Yet an AIDS victim speaks out on how the film did not need a love scene or to be too ostentatious: “It’s great to move people who are in tune already, but in Alabama, that’s the kind of movie that would not alienate people,” said Billy Cox after watching the film. Living in Alabama, Cox knows how people can be homophobic, so, for him, the film was just right in order to allure the Alabama residents to learn about the disease and about gay life, without placing a strong scene in their face (Carlton, Living in 'Philadelphia' Gay Men with AIDS Say Movie Aims for the Mainstream, 1994).
The nervousness of showing the relationship in a more graphic manner can be seen by a paper in Oregon which reviewed the film. It also recommends the film for family viewing. It divides what is seen in the film in different categories, including sex/nudity. In this section, it is mentioned that Miguel kisses Andrew once and dance together slowly. While it is neither sex nor nudity, it is highlighted in this section as something to watch for when taking the family to see a film. If this is the case, how would *Brokeback Mountain* have been received at this period of time? *Brokeback* came out in 2005, and it still caused a commotion, but for other media outlets, it was a trickling effect to see how far the American public can tolerate a gay relationship. After Tom Hanks won the Oscar, Ikea placed an ad with a gay couple shopping for furniture. The response was also strong; many congratulated the company, others were outraged (Horovitz, 1994).

**Art Imitating Life**

*Brokeback* receives many references to real-life cowboys who have been discriminated against and people admired how they can show it on screen; *Philadelphia* is no different. In *The Plain Dealer* from Ohio, an editorial by Brent Larkin shows how what happened on the screen is not fiction. He mentions how in 1991, a federal court ordered Hyatt Legal Services to pay more than $157,000 in damages to Clarence B. Cain, a lawyer in Hyatt’s firm who was dismissed after it was found out that he had AIDS. The big problem is that Joel Hyatt, the head of the firm, was a front-runner in the Democratic Party primary in Ohio⁶. He was forced to respond to the similarities between that specific incident: “Although the firing occurred seven years ago, the successful *Philadelphia*…

has put the case back in the spotlight,” so Hyatt plainly said “I made a mistake” (Theis, 1994). This gave sufficient ammo to political rivals to contrast the film with Hyatt’s real-life case. In fact, many of the details of Cain’s firing were particularly similar from the film. Because he was sick, Cain needed to take days off, he had to hook himself to an I.V., and was fired when he came clean not only about the fact he had AIDS, but was also gay. In one particular article, the writer explains how the film has been damaging to Hyatt’s election:

It sure doesn’t help that the critically acclaimed film has become a major hit. That, plus Hyatt’s high profile nationally, prompted a devastating re-examination of the Cain case last week in the Washington Post. The story, reprinted in Sunday’s Plain Dealer, was a scathing account of the shameful way Cain was treated by his employer after his illness was diagnosed in 1987. Within days, he was summarily dismissed – with the approval of Hyatt himself (Dirck, 1994).

In another very similar case, Lawyer Martin Caprow was fired from his firm in San Diego after the senior partner of the firm Frank & Freedus learned he was HIV-positive. Their defense was that Caprow was not as good as the other lawyers, an excuse that sounds eerily similar to Jason Robards in the film. The trial began in 1992, but, when Philadelphia came out, the case was heard without a jury because the defense attorneys were worried that jurors might be influenced by the movie (Perry, 1994). Another real-life drama that mimicked the film took place in a factory. Mike, one of the workers, was suspended without pay when Mike was missing days because he was too sick to attend, so he filed a discrimination complaint. Because of legal issues like Mike is and that on the screen in Philadelphia, the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted on July of 1993, the same year Philadelphia came out (Peterson, 1994). The American with
Disabilities Act requires that employers make reasonable accommodations for an employee with a disability, and that includes AIDS. According to the *Capital Times*, the Equal Rights Division of the Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations received 105 complaints on discrimination based on sexual orientation (Conroy, 1994).

In Alabama, there were 10 lawsuits pending that were very similar to the film by the time *Philadelphia* came out. One lawsuit involved Christopher Joy being fired from the Georgia Governor’s Mansion after he told his boss he was HIV positive. Another involved a McDonald’s restaurant. The John Doe who filed the complaint said his boss was so terrified of getting sick, he refused to shake his hand. In this same article, it is revealed that in 1991, the Center for Disease Control did a survey. 18% of Americans believed they could contract AIDS by sharing a glass, plate or fork with someone who tested positive for the disease. 5% thought they could catch it just by working next to someone who had AIDS (Scott, 1994). This could explain the amount of lawsuits and complaints that have been brought up in several states around the country. The film educates people on these facts that were not known back then, and hopefully bring a stop to unnecessary firings. There are so many similarities between real life and the film that one family decided to sue TriStar. The similarities between *Philadelphia* and AIDS victim Geoffrey Bowers were too close together. But TriStar denied that the film was a depiction of his life (Pristin, 1994).

The film was also harrowing to watch for people who had the AIDS virus and saw a special screening of the film: “I looked at that film and I saw my own death,” said John Gapsardi when he watched the film (Gaines, 1994). So it not only reflected real life in the past, but a horrific reminder for those living with the disease that no matter what happens,
they were going to die in an undignified, painful way. For one specific audience member, the experience of AIDS came after he watched the film. But he credits *Philadelphia* for exposing him to the disease beforehand:

AIDS touched me personally this week. For many years, I have watched compassionately from a distance as this horrible disease has decimated the art world, especially the film and theater worlds I love best. I’ve been incensed at the hatred and prejudice against gays. Then I learned someone I know has AIDS. The face of the disease is now a face I know. AIDS touched me this week. *Philadelphia* touched me first (Juell, 1994).

The film ranged from recounting past lawsuits such as the one shown onscreen to a foreshadowing of those who had the disease. The real life similarities became eerie to some, even taking legal action against the filmmakers for how the film had relayed a real-life story. Like *Brokeback*, many saw their own life on the screen, and thus became a medium of storytelling for those who have struggled with both the disease and the homophobia in their lives.

**Can Film Change Minds about Queer Life?**

B. Ruby Rich wrote in her article on *Brokeback Mountain* that she hoped it would change minds about queerness and homosexuality; the film *Philadelphia* was released in 1993 with the same hope. Denzel Washington confessed to Roger Ebert that he was hopeful this would be a film that could change minds:

The one thing I’ve heard about this particular film from people who’ve seen it is that it sticks with them... so maybe it will make them think about things, have discussions and talk. (Ebert, Question of Justice: Philadelphia Places Society on Trial over Issue of AIDS, 1994)
Jonathan Demme was a little less optimistic, but still hopeful in a smaller scale:

I don’t think that a film can create any kind of mass changing of minds, but I do think they have the ability to change us on a person-by-person basis. (Ebert, Question of Justice: Philadelphia Places Society on Trial over Issue of AIDS, 1994)

For Hanks, it was different. His answer was between optimistic and pessimistic:

“We’re not out to educate anybody with this film,” he says. “There are a jillion homophobic people out there – far too many to count – and I don’t know if a movie is going to change anybody’s mind. Yes, this is the first big-budget movie about AIDS made by a name director at a major studio, but I can’t say for sure that this is going to help other AIDS movies get made… I hope it does.”

A surprising supporter of the film was President Bill Clinton. He held a screening of the film in the White House and invited Hanks to spend the night. He responded and said the film could be effective in terms of popular opinion about both homophobia and the AIDS crisis (McKenna, Cover Story He's Serious About This One, 1993).

Most of the film critics in the reviews called Philadelphia a sermon, a preachy movie with a feel of a TV movie, so the film pulled through the fact that it was supposed to be a message film. For Boston Herald writer James Verniere, the film is designed just for that: to change America’s point of view on homosexuality and AIDS: “Philadelphia turns into a public relations campaign designed to tug at America’s heartstrings” (Verniere, 1994). For one viewer in particular, the film is believed to have influence. Thirty-seven-year-old AIDS patient Ken Dickerson watched the film and told a writer for the Boston Globe that “people tend to imitate what they see in movies,” and pointed out to the scenes where Andrew is surrounded by supportive family and friends. All of the AIDS and HIV-positive viewers that day said that Philadelphia was “the first big-budget
Hollywood film to challenge mainstream viewers to examine their own prejudices” (Gaines, 1994). For those without the disease, it was also a story to be taken into account. Letters arrived at TriStar explaining how the film has changed their points of view. Co-producer Edward Saxon read those letters from people “who have been moved by the picture because they felt their story was being told – people with HIV, gay men and women, or people who seem through this movie to have found a new sense of understanding and tolerance themselves.” He was fascinated that so many people wanted to see a film about something they were curious about, something happening in society at that very moment (Matchan, 1994).

Some even hoped that the film will not just influence people, it will influence Hollywood to make more films with this subject: “I hope it will inspire more films like this,” said Tim Boggs, the AIDS Action chairman after watching a special screening of the film (Stags, 1994). But for some, this is not the case, especially from the gay community. For them, the film is not gay or queer in any sense because of its portrayal of the gay relationship and because Hanks is straight. So it’s hard to believe for them that the film will help foment more queer films: “People say Philadelphia opened doors for gay films, but Philadelphia is not a gay film -- it’s a very tidy representation of gays, but that doesn’t make it a gay film” (McKenna, Crossover Hopes: Can 'Fish' and 'Priscilla' Find the Mainstream?, 1994).

After the film was released, it seems it worked in affecting moviegoers. In fact, for one specific audience member, it was audible how people responded. According to The Oregonian, people were heard crying at the end of the film. Graham Harriman, who
had tested positive for AIDS that year, was encouraged by the overwhelming response, and he agrees on the fact that the film is an outlet to let people know about the disease:

If there’s any way to reach people in this nation… it’s through the movies. If you want to reach people, you’re going to do it through Hollywood… It’s a great beginning (Turnquist, 'Philadelphia' Finds Hearts, Raises Hopes, 1994).

Some were so affected; they described how they themselves felt after watching it at the premiere of the film. Mike Myers said he felt like “a gelatinous lump by the end of the movie” (Higgins, 1993).

**Differences between Philadelphia and Brokeback Mountain**

Unlike *Brokeback Mountain*, which got mostly rave reviews from film critics, *Philadelphia* got about half good reviews. And the bad reviews were not shy about voicing their dislike for this film. One of the main points coming from the different reviewers was how important the impact had been: “It’s an unflinching film that has tremendous emotional and intellectual impact, as well as extraordinary performances” (Mills, Some Movies Earn Place in our Hearts, 1994). For many reviewers, *Philadelphia* was like a “starter kit” for heterosexual viewers. So this film can be seen as a first step towards the recent release of the queer film *Brokeback Mountain*:

One of the phrases Joe Miller likes to use in court is a variation on, “Explain it to me like I’m a 6-year-old.” At its most mundane, *Philadelphia* explains AIDS and homosexuality to us like we’re 6-year-olds. But despite its limitations, *Philadelphia* is one of the most significant movies in years (Turnquist, The New 'Philadelphia' Story, 1994).
Regardless of all of the reviews, the positive or the negative, *Philadelphia* made more money than was expected. It made it to #1 at the box office in its first weekend, earning $12 million (AIDS Drama Not Taboo at Box Office, 1994).
Chapter Four: Conclusion of *Brokeback Mountain* Reactions

*Brokeback Mountain* became a popular culture phenomenon, landing in almost everyone’s conversations whether in debates or jokes or as a way to vent frustration over the acceptance of queer members of society. It became a way to talk about certain issues, and for many, a more comfortable way of talking about an issue that is slowly becoming less taboo and more articulate in everyday conversations. *Brokeback Mountain* became the basic and sometimes crucial starting point to talk about homosexuality and queerness, and it still is in some instances. Since *Brokeback Mountain* was released and succeeded in catching great box office income, there was a hope that more films with queer content would be produced in the mainstream. But, unfortunately, a report came out not too long ago that said films with queer content have actually dwindled, and no one knows exactly why. The reactions to the film, no matter how positive or negative, were still very strong, bringing to light the identity that used to be considered unmentionable into the mainstream audiences.

The issue of gay marriage is still a hot button topic in politics as well as same-sex couples’s adoptions. So regardless of how many films come out with queer themes, the ballot will be a reminder of alternative identities in the United States. The fact that there are fewer films with this kind of content might make these issues seem less pressing, socially speaking. When the dialogue fades away, the issue might be put on hold while some other topic can take over everyday conversations. It seems to be a subject worthy of debate or dialogue, it becomes tomorrow’s news.
The popular culture impact of the film is still present. One horrid reminder that people are still not accepting of queer behavior and the film was when Heath Ledger died tragically in January 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2008. After his death, news outlets were revealing that several religious groups were planning to picket Ledger’s death because of his portrayal of a queer man in \textit{Brokeback Mountain}. The group even said that Ledger was finally burning in hell because of making a “vomit-inducing” film which promoted homosexuality. Even though the film was released two years earlier, the group still managed to recall the film and see the actor’s death as an opportunity to make their opinion about queerness known. But not all the recent recollections of the film are negative. When the film \textit{Night at the Museum} was released in 2006, there was a reference to the film. The cowboy character (Owen Wilson) and the Roman soldier character (Steve Coogan) in the film did not get along in the beginning. When they were emptying a tire from a van together, they were struggling (since they are very small). The cowboy, of course, says to the Roman soldier “I’ll never quit you!” The film is considered a children’s film, but the reference received laughs in the movie theater and pointed out by many reviewers as one of the funniest scenes of the film.

\textit{Brokeback Mountain} might have been just another film which garnered enough attention to be produced, but it certainly brought a sense of dialogue and yet another source of colloquialism into our cultural world. For many it was not even necessary to go see the film, since it seemed to be on everyone’s minds. Future films might have this impact and on other subjects as well such as the current war in Iraq or other areas of civil rights. For now at least, \textit{Brokeback Mountain} brought about much needed conversations and hopefully brought about better understanding about the queer identity.
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