

## "Americans Don't Want Cowboys to Be Gay:" "Brokeback Mountain" and the Oscars

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**SUMMARY:** When *Crash* was the surprise best picture winner at the 2006 Oscar ceremonies, a variety of explanations was offered for the upset over the pre-Oscar favorite, *Brokeback Mountain*. The purpose of the essay is not to evaluate the relative merits of either film as art nor to determine whether the Academy's rejection of *Brokeback Mountain* demonstrated Hollywood's latent homophobia, but rather to explore what the discussion over *Crash*'s victory on the internet, in blogs, and newspapers, reveals about popular attitudes and perceptions concerning the place of gays and lesbians in American society. It is intended to be a snapshot of a particular moment, and that picture, not surprisingly, reveals an America that is deeply ambivalent about homosexuality, even among the most politically liberal straight supporters of gay rights.

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When *Crash* (2005) was the surprise best picture winner at the 2006 Oscar ceremony, a variety of explanations were offered for the

upset over the pre-Oscar favorite, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Some suggested a *Brokeback* backlash occurred; that is, that *Brokeback Mountain*, which had won critical praise and awards from the time of its release and was the highest grossing picture of the five nominated, had worn out its welcome with the Academy voters. Others argued that the Academy got it right: *Crash* was the superior film. A few mentioned the massive marketing campaign by the studio on behalf of *Crash*, swamping the members of the Academy with free copies of the DVD. Another popular explanation was that since *Crash* was set in Los Angeles and since most Academy members live in Los Angeles, the voters chose the movie that reflected their experiences.[1] Larry McMurtry, one of the screenwriters for *Brokeback Mountain*, offered two of the more insightful explanations, both of which turned on prejudice. First he suggested that blue state Hollywood was not going to vote for a movie about red state life, even if the main characters were queer: "I've had four movies [nominated]. The three rural ones lost; the one that won was urban won. The members of the Academy are mostly urban people. We're not a rural nation." [2] Then he added that despite the perception of Hollywood as gay friendly, the root problem was that "Americans don't want cowboys to be gay" (quoted in "Plains Talk from 'Brokeback' Scribes"). Thus Hollywood may not be as different from the rest of America as right wing cultural critics have charged.

The purpose of this essay is not to evaluate the relative merits of either film as art nor to determine whether the Academy's rejection of *Brokeback Mountain* demonstrated Hollywood's latent homophobia, but rather to explore what the discussion on the internet over *Crash*'s victory and carried on in blogs and newspapers revealed about popular attitudes and perceptions concerning the place of gays and lesbians in American society. It is intended to be a snapshot of a particular moment, and that picture, not surprisingly, reveals an America that is deeply ambivalent about homosexuality, even among the most politically liberal straight supporters of gay rights. Gregory King in the gay newspaper *Bay Windows* observed, "the Academy's decision to award the Best Picture Oscar to *Crash* rather than *Brokeback Mountain* says that we have a way to go before films with gay characters at their core will receive Hollywood's highest honor. How far, it is difficult to say. The defeat of *Brokeback Mountain* was a serious blow, one that suggests that Hollywood feels unable to endorse a gay love story with its highest honor."

Over the last two decades, the movement for gay rights in the United States has progressed, depending on how one wants to count it, at a two steps forward, one and a half steps back pace. For each victory, there seems to be an almost equal number of setbacks. The same years that saw the passage of laws permitting domestic

partners to register or adding sexual orientation to the list of hate crimes, the elevation of an openly gay Episcopal priest to the office of Bishop, the Supreme Court's voiding of sodomy laws, the Massachusetts marriage decision also saw Bill Clinton's misguided "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue" policy for gays in the military and the Defense of Marriage Act, amendments to state constitutions explicitly defining marriage as between a man and a woman, Boy Scouts banning gay troop leaders, and the murder of Matthew Shepard. In its TV shows and movies, Hollywood has participated in this conversation about where and how sexual minorities fit in American society and has reflected a similar kind of ambivalence. Hollywood seems to have left behind the cruel and demeaning stereotypes that Vito Russo documented in *The Celluloid Closet* (1987), or at least balanced them with more sympathetic characters that won popular success and critical acclaim, like those in *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), *Philadelphia* (1993), *In & Out* (1997), and *The Birdcage* (1996). On the other hand, these characters were not fully developed in at least one crucial way; they all were neutered, desexualized to make them more acceptable to a larger audience. To be sure, these shows and films hinted at same sex affectional love and couplings, but they stopped short of showing, even in the most benign, PG-rated ways, how that love might be expressed in physical ways. Beginning with independent cinema in the 1990s and then cable television were much more willing to have scenes and

plots that developed this aspect of gay and lesbian life. From *Parting Glances* (1986) and *Desert Hearts* (1986) in the 1980s to independent films like Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995) in the 1990s to Showtime's *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and *The L Word* (2004-) in this decade, film makers and TV producers outside the Hollywood mainstream have portrayed a more complete portrait of queer desire in all its physical and emotional dimensions.

This social and cinematic context is part of what made *Brokeback Mountain* significant. As B. Ruby Rich argued in *The Guardian*, there has never been a film by a brand-name director, packed with A-list Hollywood stars at the peak of their careers, that has taken an established conventional genre by the horns and wrestled it into a tale of homosexual love emotionally positioned to ensnare a general audience.

She concluded that *Brokeback Mountain* destroyed the distinction between the New Queer Cinema, of which she was one of the earliest critical champions, and mainstream Hollywood, "creating something entirely new in the process." And audiences responded, if box office dollars are any measure. With \$83 million in domestic sales and \$179,000,000 worldwide, *Brokeback Mountain* was the champion of the five films nominated for best picture, and

a respectable monetary return in any year, even if it did not soar into *Stars Wars* and *Harry Potter* type numbers ("2005 Worldwide Grosses"). Winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and garnering positive notice from a screening at the Toronto International Film Festival, *Brokeback Mountain* went on to be named best film from over a dozen societies of film critics, including those from Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Vancouver, and London. Moreover, associations in Dallas, Florida, and the Southeast and in the red state strongholds of Iowa and Utah selected *Brokeback* as the best film of 2005 (Dave Cullen, 2006). *Brokeback* also won best film honors from the Golden Globes, the Directors and Writers Guild of America, and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts ("Awards for *Brokeback Mountain* "). In short, *Brokeback Mountain* was a clear favorite to take home the Best Picture Oscar, and maybe several more from its seven other nominations.

This pre-Oscar momentum explains why *Crash*'s victory was a true upset. Gregory King notes, No film in history that has won the best picture award from both the Los Angeles and New York Film Critics Association has ever lost the best picture Oscar, until *Brokeback Mountain*. No film that has won the producers', directors' and writers' guild awards has ever lost the best picture Oscar, until *Brokeback Mountain*. No film that has won the Golden Globe, the directors' guild

award and led in Oscar nominations, has ever lost the best picture Oscar, until *Brokeback Mountain* .

*Crash* was a fairly weak third in box office behind *Brokeback* and *Munich*, taking in only \$53,000,000 from movie goers worldwide ("2005 Worldwide Grosses"). It won a lukewarm critical reception, praise for its acting but criticism for being derivative of *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* and for its simplistic analysis of racism and overly structured, melodramatic plot. It did pick up the award from the Screen Actors Guild for ensemble acting, the Writers' Guild of America for original screenplay, and the Chicago critics selection for best film ("Awards for *Crash* ").

Not surprisingly, commenters on conservative blogs saw *Brokeback Mountain* as little more than propaganda for gay rights: mongoose at Little Green Footballs (LGF) argued that "the overriding motive of 'Gay America' in this decade is to mainstream their behavior and 'lifestyle' into our society" and this film contributed to that goal. At the Free Republic (FR), [3] catsandadog believed that *Brokeback Mountain* was emblematic of the "Hollywood mentality" that deliberately tries to "p!ss off Republicans, Christians, conservatives, and red states." One of the more revealing, if a little tinged with paranoia, comments along these lines came from zombie at LGF. Suggesting that the film makers' ulterior motive was

to take "revenge" not just on the murderers of Matthew Shepard but also "on the entire class of people who resemble the perpetrators," zombie said the film makers made "them all out to be repressed homos!... We will humiliate the entire western-cowboy culture by redefining it as ... a repressed gay culture." Thus for zombie, "the entire motivating force behind *Brokeback Mountain* was to avenge Matthew Shepard by culturally feminizing the entire 'wild-west.'"

This attack on one of the more iconic symbols of American masculinity may explain in part the pleasure conservative posters took in *Brokeback* 's defeat. Rodeo-mama at the FR gushed, "I'm so glad that *Crash* won, because it deserved to," while JRios1968 called the fact that *Brokeback* won only 3 Oscars "a moral victory for all of us who find the whole concept reprehensible." At LGF, Cato the Elder sarcastically answered his own question with another: "So, no 'Brokeback Paradise' this year? I'm shocked. Who passed out the brains in Hollywood?" In fact, this last comment points to a prominent theme in the conservative posts as an explanation for *Crash* 's victory: that Hollywood "chickened out" (The Foolkiller at FR), "panic[k]ed (longtermmemory at FR), "backed down from a full confrontation with the real America" (Nam Vet at FR), "feared the reprisal of millions of Americans who don't support the homosexual agenda" (InHisService at FR), and, most colorfully from JLAGRAYFOX at FR: "'Hollywood' got cold feet. At the end of

the day the liberal Democrat vermin pushed the fudgepackers of 'Brokeback Mountain' overboard." John at Libertas explains, "It was already conventional wisdom that this year's event was a big middle finger to the Red States, and they didn't want to push it any further during the show...." Others explained the Academy's timidity by pointing out the low box returns of the nominated films: "The middle class," according to Dan at Libertas, "does not want to go to movies about gay cowboys, watch movies' stating their government is evil, and ... you're a racist." Goldstategop at FR noted that "Hollywood realized a gay-themed movie wasn't exactly a box office draw," while InHisService added, "This movie winning may have started an all-out boycott of movies,... which would in turn harm the movie-making industry" thus "they went with a 'safer' movie."

For posters at Towleroad, a gay cultural blog, maybe a little surprisingly, a similar theme appeared: that the Academy chose the safer film for fear of retaliation at the box office, though they interpreted this decision as evidence of Hollywood's homophobia. Cafegogo concisely and emphatically made the point, "The fact remains that BBM was robbed by limo-liberals playing it safe with a safely didactic 'controversial' film. Period." Similarly, CK noted, "It was politics. Hollywood is very afraid of being labeled culturally foreign to America." Fred explained the reason for this fear, "...the members of the Academy decided this was not the year to push the

envelope with a gay theme when middle America is boycotting Hollywood as it is. After all, the film business is a business, and they voted to preserve their own interests." Fred continued, making this connection: "But I also know that such a vote is underlined by some sense of homophobia...." Indeed, this meme was hotly debated and revealed the extent to which some posters were deeply invested in *Brokeback*'s fate.[3] The reaction ranged from "upset" (cagego) to "furious" (Rob), from "disappointed" (TJ) to "stunned" (J Jude), from Logan whose "heart skipped a beat" to Steve who felt like "I'm grieving a death." Noah explained the significance of *Brokeback*'s loss in this way: "the anger here certainly speaks to the desire we all have, as gay men, to see ourselves on the screen-our stories told-our lives validated and although I am not a cowboy-I am a man in love with another man and all that that entails so bbm mean[s] a great deal to me."

Evidence of homophobia, though, was not difficult to find. A month before the Oscar ceremony, Nikki Finke of the *LA Weekly* reported hearing anecdotal evidence that some Academy voters would not see, much less vote, for *Brokeback Mountain* simply because of its subject. Confirming Finke's observation was the story about Tony Curtis telling a reporter, "This picture is not as important as we make it. It's nothing unique. The only thing unique about it is they put it on the screen. And they make 'em [gay] cowboys," and that therefore he

probably would not see the film (James Hiensen, 2006, brackets from the original).

Beyond these overt confessions of homophobia, other posters found subtler lines of evidence. For CJ, it was part of a pattern: "The only actors who won for playing gay are William Hurt, Tom Hanks and now Hoffman. Hurt played a drag performer, Hanks played an AIDS victim, Hoffman played a famously femme author. The Oscars only go the gay roles that are discernably 'other' and sexless." For Raymond, the awards that *Brokeback* won should have made this film a sure best picture winner "unless it's through people actively voting against it rather than for something else. Thus suggesting homophobia." But Charles believed that homophobia should come as no surprise:

I knew deep down that *Crash* would win and I just knew that some gay guys would knee jerk accuse Hollywood of homophobia. Well duh-\*America is homophobic\*, why would Hollywood be any different. Stop deluding yourselves. And stop deluding yourselves into thinking that an Oscar win will somehow lead us to the promised land.

On the other hand, Mark argued that winning was not solely about personal "validation" but also "about changing attitudes toward

LGBT people so that we may someday have the respect and rights that most people in society enjoy to greater degree than we do."

This idea that a movie, and a win at the Oscars, could advance the cause of gay rights also appeared in the comments at progressive blogs like Eschaton, TPMCafe, and Daily Kos. Vicki at Eschaton expressed her disappointment, "I just want it to be time. I want something to propel gay rights into a legitimate concern for most Americans." Humanadverb at TPMCafe believed that *Brokeback* did just that because it was not an overtly political movie rather "it was a movie which presented universal themes of romance in a homosexual context (almost certainly with the intension of humanizing such individuals and their relationships)..." But the fact that *Brokeback* lost to a film that addressed racial politics became the focus of some comments. A few were sarcastic, like ides at Kos who saw *Crash* 's win "as Hollywood patting itself on the back for acknowledging racial tension..... Down with racism! Pass the caviar!" Others were more thoughtful, noting the underlying connection between the two films: "Race is as potent and relevant today as it was twenty years ago," posted ecostar at Kos. "To be honest homosexuality as an issue is merely an outgrowth of the same kind of prejudices that people are more careful to hide when talking about race."

While several posters at each of these blogs discussed the meme of Hollywood playing it safe to protect its business interests and mentioned homophobia at the root of *Brokeback*'s loss, many respondents discounted the charges. Dpmaine at Kos asked, "Why assume bigotry? Isn't possible that people of an unbigoted nature disagree on the merits of the choice?" In the Eschaton thread, znulls pointed to the awards *Brokeback* won and the profits it garnered and suggested that "it's a huge mistake to grumble that the 'gay' film didn't win." On Kos, ollieb, a studio employee, said that he (she?) has seen "little anti-gay prejudice in Hollywood in general, let alone among Academy voters." Mason6883, also at Kos, posed this comparison:

I do not have a problem with gay films being acceptable. I just don't want to go see one, and neither does most of the people I know (my fiancée being the only exception). Does that make me a homophobe?? I also don't like rap music, it's just not my thing. Does that make me racist?? ... Unfortunately, just as I'm sure there is a lot of good rap stars I will never see, because I don't like rap, I will probably never see BBM, because I just plain don't want to see it.

In many ways, the debate over *Brokeback Mountain*'s defeat at the Oscars was a minor skirmish in America's culture wars, but a revealing one when viewed from the perspective of the blogs.

First, blogs are a rich source of material revealing many facets of a debate on a variety of topics. But at the same time, they are rather insular, repetitive, uncritical, and at times juvenile. In this case, what is interesting to note is how similar the comments were about Hollywood's place in American society. Whether liberal or conservative, gay or straight, all viewed Hollywood as a symbolic and powerful cultural institution. Of course the nature of that power depended on perspective; for conservatives it is a symbol of cultural decline while for liberals it is a conservative bastion intent on protecting its financial bottom line. For LGBT people and their straight liberal supporters, the picture is not as clear. Perhaps indicative of the divide (and in no way scientific) are the results of two polls. On the liberal blog site Daily Kos, a poll asked if *Brokeback*'s loss was "motivated by prejudice" or if "people really liked 'Crash.'" 42% of the respondents said prejudice while 58% ticked a preference for *Crash*. But according to a poll at *The Advocate*, a gay newsmagazine, 68% believe homophobia among Academy members contributed to *Brokeback*'s defeat. Thus alliances with liberal Hollywood and with liberal straights still need much careful work before they will produce significant advances, or even symbolic ones like a best picture Oscar. As one commenter on the Carpetbagger blog of the *New York Times* remarked, "As the [Oscar] show started last night a friend remarked that we've (gay and lesbians) come a long way. As the show ended we all realized

how much further we have to go."

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[1] See, for example, the analysis by Turan, Hartlaub and Zinko, Morris, Bates, and Ebert.

[2] The three rural films were *Hud* (1963), *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *Brokeback Mountain*, and *McMurty's* urban film was *Terms of Endearment* (1983).

[3] A rather stunning illustration of what *Brokeback Mountain* meant to some gay men is the thread "How *Brokeback* Affected Me" at the "Ultimate *Brokeback* Guide" on *DaveCullen.com*. As of early May, 2007, it had some 12,000 post with over 350,000 viewings. The posts describe not only the loneliness of living in small towns and the resulting sense of alienation, thus the profound identification with the story of Jack and Ennis, but feelings of luck and fortune at living with their life partners.

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