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

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

I Introduction

The main reason why Brokeback Mountain represents Hollywood’s boldest incursion into an (almost) intact frontier, although simple enough, is not very obvious. Let me propose one tentative account along the following lines: (…)Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performative produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherent discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. (Butler 24-25)

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

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

Wistfully, instead of resorting to the now expected and almost reactionary telling of a “small” “gay” “story” of “love among human remains” that slowly (but surely) moves from periphery to center stage while, in the process, building up on a conflict between heterosexual and homosexual codes which then culminates generating minimal acceptance among the two orders, director Ang Lee jumpstarts all conventions right from the beginning: as a “gay” couple, Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar’s performance is remarkably masculine and virile: Their chores, all tasks traditionally assigned to heterosexual males (herding sheep, riding, chopping down wood, tending a camp, hunting down coyotes), are performed effortlessly, Judith Butler writes:

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

In Brokeback Mountain homosexuality is not shy, happens in passing or subsides to the background: it is at the center of the stage, and it is played by two male characters who also happen to be attracted (but more than that) to each other. Jack and Ennis’ attraction is placed as center stage as possible in the film. Brokeback Mountain then, strikes as Hollywood’s first and, for the time being, foremost gay movie as it places queer performance right at the center of the heterosexual stage even while it manages to replace (switch) one for the other. In other words, “sex” imposes an artificial unity on an otherwise discontinuous set of attributes. As both discursive and perceptual, “sex” denotes an historically contingent epistemic regime, a language that forms perception by forcibly shaping the interrelationships through which physical bodies are perceived. Is there a “physical” body prior to the socially performed body? An impossible question to decide. (Butler 114)

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

On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on
anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant “culture” that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biological determinist, not biology, but cultural construction of the sex. In such a case, it follows that...

Eventually, because Jack and Ennis end up so miserably lonely and, even after years of complete immersion in heterosexual performances, still hunger for one another, heterosexual culture itself ends up being questioned as an undisputed norm by this romantic couple as Butler explains:

If the body is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender that constitutes its “interior” signification on its surface? Sartre would perhaps have called this act “a style of being,” Foucault, “a aesthetics of existence.” And why the sheep? Because the bodies are so vital and never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an “act,” as it would be, both intentional and performative, where “performative” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning. (Butler 139)

2 The way we used to live

Conversely, and this may be the trickiest part of my argument, the destruction of the codes upon which the heterosexual imperative rests also (and necessarily) implies the destruction of the codes upon which an uncomplicated homosexual performance rests too. Once we realize Jack and Ennis can (and will) perform—effortlessly—according to the acceptable and recognizable norms of manliness and heterosexuality, we assert that the characters actually bring the two lines of heterosexual and queer performance together, not once but twice, henceque-queer, and, thus, the necessity for stepping outside the heterosexual matrix. Yes, much to everyone’s surprise, they can perform sexual acts that completely escape the boundaries of this binary world, and further on, to such extent that we may be used to read homosexual performances from bits and pieces of a heterosexual one, we are definitely not used to having to fully construct homosexuality from within the patterns of compulsory heterosexuality. What’s much more acceptable is that a discreet homoeroticism between two men like those in Brokeback Mountain be, equally, construed from the very codes which are used to give heterosexuality its coherence? That is to say from the same performance that constructs heterosexual identity.

Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this is not enough to signal the cultural guidelines that define such performances, where performance are not only seen as a way to cope with the encroaching (heterosexual) world, but also as a means to experiment and challenge it. After a drinking brawl, being too late for Ennis to go up to the sheep, he sleeps outside the camp’s tent. Later, triggered by very cold weather, Jack, drowsing, invites Ennis in so he can quit his “hammer.” It is in these dreamy, small hours, circumstance that Jack places Ennis’ hand over his own cock. Thus, by removing “homosexuality” from “same sex intercourse” and, thus, the necessity for stepping outside heterosexual norms. Even so, the film’s protagonist still may be fully identified from scratch, that is, from a performance that excludes almost all “visible signs” of homosexuality but one: the solace (both physical and emotional) these two characters find in the company of each other, which is, so to say, the same sex mutual fondness.

Brokeback Mountain is, first, heterosexuality’s (but also homosexuality’s) catch 22: if heterosexuality, the dominant norm, the regulatory fiction, is at the opposite side of homosexuality, excluding a plethora of conceivable variations, then how can homosexuality and queerness be, equally, construed from the very codes which are used to give heterosexuality its coherence? That is to say from the same performance that constructs heterosexual identity.

At one point in the film, for example, Ennis inquires Jack on the possibility of being uncovered, as if homosexuality, like the sheep their peculiar physicality, can be (and must be) fully covered. Ennis asks Jack, who is clearly unsure of this idea, “is that possible? Of course, it seems to me, as if this question is raised, the whole question of the same sex body, can be (and will be) instantly recognized by both homosexual and heterosexual audiences exactly because they are so markedly different from the dominant “gender coherent” norm. In Brokeback Mountain Jack and Ennis don’t as much look at each other, much less seem to explicitly desire each other’s bodies. In fact, their first engagement, only happens once a sign of a homosexual, thus deviant, performance had consistently been excluded from the horizon.

Very much the opposite, after a drinking brawl, being too late for Ennis to go up to the sheep, he sleeps outside the camp’s tent. Later, triggered by very cold weather, Jack, drowsing, invites Ennis in so he can quit his “hammer.” It is in these dreamy, small hours, circumstance that Jack places Ennis’ hand over his own cock. Thus, by removing “homosexuality” from “same sex intercourse” and, thus, the necessity for stepping outside the heterosexual matrix, thus, the “queer” act can: perform homoerotic acts: Yes, much to everyone’s surprise, they can perform sexual acts that completely escape the boundaries of this binary world, and further on, to such extent that we may be used to read homosexual performances from bits and pieces of a heterosexual one, we are definitely not used to having to fully construct homosexuality from within the patterns of compulsory heterosexuality. What’s much more acceptable is that a discreet homoeroticism between two men like those in Brokeback Mountain be, equally, construed from the very codes which are used to give heterosexuality its coherence? That is to say from the same performance that constructs heterosexual identity.

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

3 Concluding remarks

The brokerage of performances evoked in Brokeback Mountain, as well as in other films, is a consequence of the social and cultural implications of compulsory heterosexuality. Heterosexual performances are determined by convention; second, Jack and Ennis' growing dissatisfaction seems to show how stirring and dramatic the results of an absolute absence of correspondence between performative terms can be. The worst result being, however, the creation of a performative void that does not function socially: the void created by compulsory heterosexuality in Jack and Ennis' lives. The tragedy and misery of performing compulsory heterosexuality lies in that, by naturalizing gender, heterosexual imperatives rule out (exclude) a plethora of alternative performances.

References