

University of Massachusetts Boston

ScholarWorks at UMass Boston

Political Science Faculty Publication Series

Political Science

Summer 2006

In Defense of Jack: Gay Cowboys and Fairy Actors in Brokeback Mountain and Will & Grace

C. Heike Schotten

University of Massachusetts Boston, heike.schotten@umb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/polisci_faculty_pubs



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

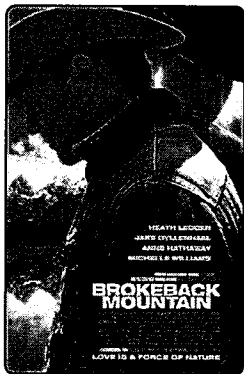
C. Heike Schotten. "In Defense of Jack," *LiP: Informed Revolt* (Summer 2006)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

Film in Review

In Defense of Jack *Gay Cowboys and Fairy Actors in Brokeback Mountain and Will & Grace*

by
Heike Schotten



Discussed in this essay:
Brokeback Mountain
Ang Lee
[FOCUS FEATURES, 2005]

Is *Brokeback Mountain* a gay movie or a love story? While one might initially be puzzled as to why it can't be both at the same time, the critical verdict is in: *Brokeback* is first and foremost a love story, and only secondarily—even forgettably—gay.

Indeed, the so-called “gay cowboy movie” has been repeatedly praised for portraying a love so pure it transcends the very identities of its parties, and for thankfully leaving all those tiresome political quarrels—about gay marriage, the military, or even the Boy Scouts—in the dust.

The reason such a debate is even possible—that there is some kind of mutual exclusivity between gay men and love—is due to the way we understand what it means to be a person, a human being who is equal to other human beings. To be an equal in US law and society means being the same as everyone else. It means being undifferentiated by any significant trait or characteristic (like race, sex, religion, or national origin). It means, in other words, being an average Joe White Guy who is affiliated with secular Christianity and has no significant handicaps. Insofar as people are different from the “human” norm (in a way they can't “help”), they are protected from discrimination and granted equal (i.e., human) status.

Becoming human by erasing difference is a goal that the left has come to embrace. Current LGBT activism often aims at achieving human status through the proof of “sameness” (as exemplified by the marriage debate), and it may be bolstered by the beauty and success of a film like *Brokeback Mountain*. Indeed, that is this film's success—the reviewers who love *Brokeback* (and they are legion) don't care that Ennis and Jack are gay, much less (gasp!) “queer,” because they have risen to the status of *human beings*. Their relationship is not about politics, and it is most certainly not about

sex. Unlike the tawdry and sex-obsessed flings that supposedly typify gay male culture, the relationship in *Brokeback Mountain* is a love affair between two *people*. It transcends both gayness (with its supposed accompanying promiscuity) and politics, making it appeal to a general audience through depiction of an eternal theme of art and literature—tragic love.

But in worrying too much about whether *Brokeback* is gay or not (it is, quite obviously, a love story), critics miss the more important and obvious point: *Brokeback Mountain* is a movie about *men*. That is the identity, the sexuality, *and* the politics of this film. While Ennis and Jack may have succeeded in humanizing gayness to American audiences through the (still marvelous) clichés of tragic romantic love, it is only because, in *spite* of their gayness, they remain unmistakably, overpoweringly masculine throughout the film.

The humanity potentially lost by being gay is re-gained through Ennis and Jack's formidable gender normativity—these cowboys are believed to be “human,” I submit, because they are masculine; they are “real men.” Although *Brokeback* has been (disparagingly?) referred to as a “chick flick,” these men's love for one another has more aptly been described by *Slate* as a “paean to masculinity.” Now, I concede that there is something subversive in seeing a couple of cowboys love each other the way only two taciturn Western dudes can do, in a way that simultaneously manages to elicit tidal waves of tears from both men and women alike. But I have to ask—would *Brokeback* have made it as an “old-fashioned weepie” (*Fresh Air*) if a different Jack had been the star? Not Jack Twist, from renowned Western writer Annie Proulx's short story; not Jack the cowboy, the inveterate charmer with puppy-dog eyes and an ass made hard from driving cattle. I mean Jack McFarland, from the NBC sitcom *Will & Grace*; Jack the faggot, the noisy, nail-painting, narcissistic fairy queen.

There is not a doubt in my mind that *Brokeback* would have been a total flop if it had paired Heath Ledger with someone like Sean Hayes, instead Jake Gyllenhaal—because the difference between Jack Twist and Jack McFarland, or even between Jack McFarland and Will Truman on *Will & Grace*, is the difference between being gay and being a faggot. Jack McFarland is a faggot—

flamboyant, frilly, silly, trivial. He is the very opposite of a "real" man like Ennis Del Mar or Jack Twist, or even that whiny Will. For all his many (many) faults, Will's masculinity is never called into serious question. It doesn't matter if he's cruising men or hiding in the closet, working out at the gym or living with his mother, kissing up to his boss or taking his pants off in front of FBI agents. (Well, there is that special love he has for gift wrap.) He isn't a faggot like Jack, who functions as the show's queer Kramer: the quirky neighbor who uses comedy to offset the relative normality of the primary household. Will is a pair with Grace because gender trumps sexuality. She's a feminine woman; together, Will and Grace get to be "just people." It doesn't matter that Will is gay, because the "human" category can accommodate him and his acceptable masculinity.

Just as important, Jack is an actor. This is no accident—Jack McFarland the actor represents what we already secretly think about effeminate men: Not only are they essentially comic figures, but they're fakes. Jack is the opposite of Will in a way Grace could never be, because as a feminine woman, she's *genuinely* gendered. In the world of mainstream media, it's not considered strange or

Birdcage" or "Will & Grace."...Without a single polemical speech, this laconic film dramatizes homosexuality as an inherent and immutable identity, rather than some aberrant and elective "agenda" concocted by conspiratorial "elites" in Chelsea, the Castro and South Beach, as anti-gay proselytizers would have it. Ennis and Jack long for a life together, not for what gay baiters pejoratively label a "lifestyle."

Although it is "anti-gay proselytizers" who supposedly harbor such dark thoughts about homosexuals, Rich's valorization of the "immutable" gayness of Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, which he explicitly contrasts with the "aesthetics" of *Will & Grace*, show that if gayness is "real," it is substantive, not fluffy or frilly; if it has an aesthetics, it is spare, dramatic, "austere," and "languorous," not overfull, comedic, decadent, or animated.

Moreover, only the "gayness" of Ennis and Jack Twist "dramatizes" the immutability of homosexuality, while the "aesthetics" of *Will & Grace* depict only a "lifestyle." It is not considered whether Jack McFarland can "help" being who he is, whether his "lifestyle" is in fact a life for him, whether aesthetics can be substantive, or whether a faggot might be able to "dramatize"

Make no mistake—while *Brokeback* is most certainly about love, it is not simply about gayness or even about sex, but about gender.

an act that Grace cares about her hair, her nail polish, or getting married—it's normal. It's real.

But when Jack does it, it's outrageous and over the top. Consider: When Guy Trebay of the *New York Times* acknowledges the narrow range of allowable masculine expression in rural Wyoming, he notes it is far from "the 'liberated' antics of the homosexual minstrels so often depicted on television." That (racially loaded) epithet is intentional: Being a faggot is an act, a falseness, a frivolous performance understandable only in terms of eliciting laughter and approval from an audience with the power to bestow both.

The need for gay authenticity is acutely on display in Frank Rich's fawning column on *Brokeback Mountain* in the *New York Times*. According to Rich, *Brokeback* is a gem of a film because it illustrates the holy grail of gay activism in the US—being homosexual is something you just can't help (thus rendering gay people eligible for human status, as you'll recall). Although he carefully qualifies his more problematic remarks by putting them in the mouths of "gay baiters," Rich loves the cowboys of *Brokeback* because they are real and serious—meaning, in other words, that they are manly men who love each other in a truly masculine way. They are not fabulous; they are not fops. Indeed, they have somehow managed, in this oozing display of manliness, to overcome the association of romance with frivolity and femininity in the first place:

Though "Brokeback Mountain" is not a western, it's been directed by Ang Lee with the austerity and languorous gait of a John Ford epic. These aesthetics couldn't be more country miles removed from "The

any kind of truth about either homosexuality or love (much less humanity). It is assumed that Ennis and Jack Twist are simply being and expressing their deepest selves in loving one another, primarily because they do so in a manly way, and in spite of their sex with women (an important detail that gets short shrift in most reviews). Ennis and Jack are "real"—really gay for Rich and really human for most audiences—because these gay cowboys are, in the end, still men. Male effeminacy—whether gay or straight—is not yet "real," either as gender or as larger truth. It is an act, probably something that can be helped, and honestly, something that really *should* be helped.

Feminists have repeatedly and persuasively demonstrated that the universality of the category "human" is and remains raced, classed, sexed, gendered, and abled. The follow-up to this analysis is too often forgotten, however: The logic of this category "human" is rotten and corrupt. Its enticements accommodate the marginalized only at the price of assimilation, leaving those who do not (or cannot) fit behind, and maintaining the existing structure of power and privilege intact. For gay men, it seems that attaining humanity for the cowboys comes at the expense of leaving their faggoty brothers by the wayside. But this is collaboration, not revolution. Make no mistake—while *Brokeback* is most certainly about love, it is not simply about gayness or even about sex, but about gender. It is an exquisite portrayal of the painful costs of same-sex desire for two men trapped in a suffocating and homogeneous culture. But it remains to be seen whether Jack McFarland could inspire such transcendental identification from audiences and reviewers, or if we would even care long enough to find out that he had ever loved and lost in the first place. **LiP**