



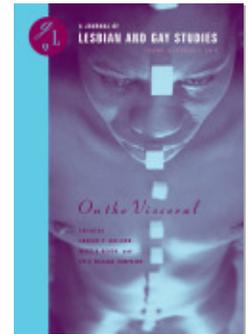
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Love's Measures

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lage People's cowboy, or of gay rodeo, one of the smartest jokes came from Conan O'Brien: "Today the controversial new movie *Brokeback Mountain* opens, about two gay cowboys. Apparently you can tell the characters are gay because they're dressed like cowboys." Perhaps all the jokes finally function as revenge against a gay narrative that completely disavows camp.

Intended as cowboy vernacular for declaring the pain of forbidden desire, "I wish I knew how to quit you" instantly became the film's most parodied line: even Ang Lee could not resist it when accepting his Oscar. But the film's other key declaration seems to desperately summarize its inevitable failure to control its popular reception: "You know I ain't queer." But no, we have decided, the film *is* queer, and hilariously so: better funny fags than tragic homosexuals.

Notes

1. Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York: Macmillan, 1902).
2. Oscar Wilde, "The American Invasion," in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 54.

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LOVE'S MEASURES

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There's been a lot of talk about those shirts, those touchingly intertwined, visibly bloodstained, achingly emptied shirts, liberated from the back of one closet only to be stashed in another whose door, in the film's elegiac final moment, stands open. This overdetermined metaphor suggests the contours of the current debate over what counts as the "achievement" of *Brokeback Mountain*. The shirts' poignant emptiness seems to permit a reading of "love" as a generic placeholder, an affective postulate that anybody might fill: everyone, everywhere, loves love, and this film teaches us, once again, how. On this reading, *Brokeback Mountain* transcends mere particularities to present a timeless, universal story. Yet others, in response, insist on a particular, indissoluble distinction that marks the film,

pointing toward the location of the shirts, in a reading that might be glossed: how exactly did you people manage not to notice the *closet*?¹ For these viewers, the film tells a specifically historical story, one that illuminates above all the violent inscriptions of homophobia—a narrative that, once marked and recognized as such, may well become history.

In either case, the closet cannot help but become the film's hope chest. And yet I remain puzzled by the tendency to suture this melodrama so quickly to these alternating modes of optimism, to assume that its pedagogy can be traced out so directly. My own attention has been fixed, instead, on a strange wrinkle in the lived time of the film, one that seems to mark our dependence on the fantasy of redemptive romance: the flashback that takes place during the scene that will prove to have been Jack and Ennis's final argument. As Jack looks through teary eyes at a weeping, humiliated Ennis, the present is suddenly replaced by an unexpected, tender moment from the *Brokeback* summer: Ennis, his arms wrapped around Jack from behind, croons a mother's lullaby in his lover's ear before riding off for the night. It is a moment that seems designed to take the full measure of what these two men might have had, but never did. This measure, the almost unbearable pain of loss, is how we know love in melodramatic time—as a value produced through the temporal incommensurability of a grammatical difference, the unbridgeable disparity between “might have been” and “is.”

What Jack sees at this moment may well look like “love” to us. Yet we have never seen anything quite like the flashback image in the lived time of the *Brokeback* summer—though we will see its emptied-out afterimage later on in the shirts. The flashback marks a moment that cannot be securely located within *Brokeback*'s sequence: we have no idea whether it is an “actual” memory or Jack's fantasy. In this sense, the flashback does not so much take as *make* the measure of love for Jack. It makes it, moreover, within a particular context that we will not recognize until after Jack's death—not the yearning toward an unbridgeable gap we call longing, but the attempt to move past that gap we deem mourning. We learn, from his sadistic father, that when Jack arrived, shortly after his argument with Ennis, at his parents' ranch for a visit, he had substituted another man's name for Ennis's as the partner he planned, some day, to ranch up with. This belated news makes the flashback reappear as a mourning sign, a hypercathected image that makes it possible to move on, predicting the role that the two shirts will play, in another form, near the end of the film. The touching image of the couple, in this sense, does not transcend time, it merely *suffices*: it “holds onto” love while bringing its endlessly deferred possibilities to a close.

But it is precisely in the compulsion to mourn love's loss that melodrama

passes on the fantasy of its rebirth in some other, idealized time, a time, perhaps, for *us* — a redemptive fantasy whose costs, however, it insistently registers against the social contradictions the tear cannot (dis)solve. So I'm left wondering where, in a debate marked out by the poles of a timeless universality called "love" and a historical specificity called "gay," one might find the place to articulate the class dimensions of a transaction in which Jack's mourning-image becomes the sign of Ennis's melancholy. At a point when the shirts themselves can fetch over a hundred thousand dollars in an eBay auction — a purchase that carried a frisson of activism for the buyer, on the grounds that he was preserving the prop from destruction at the hands of potential homophobes — it's worth asking what kind of cultural work, precisely, love's image is doing for us now.²

Notes

1. See Daniel Mendelsohn, "An Affair to Remember," *New York Review of Books*, February 23, 2006, for a particularly fine instance of this reading.
2. Thanks to William Cohen for pointing me to this story and to Patrick O'Malley for talking things through.