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A Touch of Brokeback Mountain in all Men

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**SPECIAL TO THINK & ASK
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If cowboys are the rugged, archetypal pioneers steeped in old Western folklore, how fitting is it that a movie about two cowboys and their life-long love for each other is one of the most pioneering works on the film landscape today?

It is nearly impossible to go anywhere without the subject of Ang Lee's cinematic interpretation of Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Proulx's profound short story, *Brokeback Mountain* arising.

Everyone has an opinion, an interpretation, and, although people may not always agree, it is extremely important that these discussions are happening if only because this film is the first major Hollywood movie to even come close to depicting the complicated and passionate way we men, love, fight, make love, bond, and betray.

Yes, *Philadelphia* was groundbreaking 13 years go, but Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas hardly touched, let alone, kissed, wrestled, fought, cried, bled, or loved with the passionate abandon Heath Ledger (Ennis del Mar) and Jake Gyllenhaal (Jack Twist) do in the film *Brokeback Mountain*.

Brokeback Mountain specifically shows us how men --all men-- struggle to connect, attach, and bond. In the spirit of this overarching theme, I hope straight men see this film. Jack and Ennis are accessible characters, and most men will find something in them they can relate to.



Actor Heath Ledger, director Ang Lee on the set of *Brokeback Mountain* in 2005.

The two men use sex and love to forge an intimate bond, yes; but they also use violence, intimacy's shadow side, to express closeness, foster distance, and express feelings for which they haven't developed a vocabulary.

It is crucial to underscore that violence, though usually destructive and maladaptive is, by its very nature, a primal way of attaching, and a passionate manner of connecting, not unlike sex. Jack and Ennis show us how we use sex and violence to both connect and push one another away. From the schoolyard to the graveyard, these are primary ways men in the United States have been taught to relate.



Actor Jake Gyllenhaal on the set of *Brokeback Mountain* in 2005.

Though it holds much for men in general, *Brokeback Mountain* contains themes that stroke deep chords with gay men specifically. Let's look for a moment at these men, and I use that term in its most culturally stereotypical definition.

Both Gyllenhaal and Ledger are exceedingly handsome and appealing, but they are also unshaven, unbathed, and more than a little rough around the edges. You can almost smell them. There bear no gym-buffed bodies, no tanning bed or bottle bronzer sheens, no waxed torsos or backs, and, though strong, healthy, and masculine, neither man would look at home in the films *Troy*, *Alexander*, or even at the White Party.

Their masculine beauty and fitness stems from manual work and closeness to the earth, instead of separation from it. Both men display the physical "imperfections" that mainstream gay culture struggles to obliterate in its (ultimately impossible) war on aging and physical mediocrity. These guys walk, talk, and smell like the men they are.

There are, no doubt, skid marks on their briefs and in that we can find both a lesson and a sense of relief.

Suppose we gay men have gone too far in our quest for bodily perfection and eternal youth, erasing the men who do not live up to these rigid standards from our cultural landscape, while fearing someday that we too may be erased.

Perhaps Ledger and Gyllenhaal, albeit unintentionally, are reminding us not to take ourselves too seriously, to reject the alienating standards of male beauty we buy into. Hey, if Heath Ledger can have thinning hair and slender biceps and Jake Gyllenhaal can have moles and a bit of fur on his lower back, why can't the rest of us?

But is it possible that we are afraid of connecting with that imperfect part of ourselves? Gay men are no strangers to rejection and, although society is changing, most of us grew up feeling rejected, fearful, and profoundly self-hating. This may be why we feel a kinship with the fear and isolation in Ennis del Mar,

the fear that if he and Jack show their love for each other and build a life together they will be killed. But it is this fear that finally imprisons del Mar, aging alone in a small trailer with only the memory of his lover and their time on Brokeback Mountain to keep him company.

Unlike Ennis, the average urban gay male is surrounded by other gay men and can often number many friends and lovers. I am not sure if this makes us more connected to one another or more competitive, jaded, and distant. In either case, like Ennis, we construct our own prisons, be they material possessions, images, relationships, gyms, bars, or clubs. Or, like Jack, the archetypal dreamer and seeker, we seize our dream, often risking our lives in the quest. Often, throughout life, we do both.



Actors Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in a production shot during Brokeback Mountain in 2005.

Perhaps *Brokeback Mountain* resonates so deeply because we see so much of ourselves in the movie's heroes. Finally here is a film that tells a story closely related to our own, and there is something crucially liberating and validating about that, because it gives us permission to tell our own stories, even if they seem as insignificant to us as Ennis' life did to him.

I imagine Ennis' daughter, someday after her father's death, opening his closet and finding the two blood-encrusted shirts entwined together beside a postcard of Brokeback Mountain.

In that moment, she will see the part of her father's story kept from her...the part that explains the deep loneliness she perceived in him, so similar to the cavern of emotion that fills us, the viewers, as the credits to this film roll in theaters across the nation, reminding us that telling our stories is an integral part of life and crucial to any form of attachment.

And without attachment, connection, and, ultimately, love, we are all stuck in our own trailers, remembering the things we'd change, or the words we'd say, if we ever had a chance to go back to that mountain.

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