

CULTURE SCREEN QUEER FILM

That “Gay Cowboy Movie” Queer People Reflect on 15 Years of “Brokeback Mountain”

by [Donald Collins](#)

Published on December 16, 2020 at 10:00am



Heath Ledger as Ennis Del Mar, left, and Jake Gyllenhaal as Jack Twist in Brokeback Mountain (Photo credit: Focus Features)



It has been 15 years since Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) went off to herd those sheep. Director Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* premiered in U.S. theaters for the first time on December 9, 2005 to a storm of controversy and excitement. Widely considered a watershed moment for "[New Queer Cinema](#)," a term coined in 1992 by scholar B. Ruby Rich, *Brokeback* introduces the melancholic tale of the troubled relationship between two "cowboys" over the course of two decades. Starring, at the time, up-and-coming heartthrob actors Ledger and Gyllenhaal, the film caused a frenzy for its undaunted depiction of sex, desire, and love between two men.

The men meet and fall in love during a summer herding sheep in the pristine isolation of Wyoming's (fictional) Brokeback Mountain. As years pass, both marry: Ennis to sweet, doleful Alma Beers (Michelle Williams) and Jack to outgoing, ambitious Lureen Newsome (Anne Hathaway). They have families. Ennis stays poor; Jack grows rich. The men intermittently meet for clandestine "fishing trips" and motel rendezvous. Jack schemes for a way for them to build a life together, away from society, while Ennis doesn't believe such a thing is possible. Ennis's fear and inability to believe in—or try for—a future together, and Jack's relentless pursuit of it, drives a wedge between them. Eventually, Jack dies. The details of his death are left up to interpretation in both story and film: hate crime or accident?

Adapted from Annie Proulx's 1997 sparse and haunting [short story](#) of the same name, *Brokeback Mountain* was a passion project of screenwriters Diana Ossana and Larry McMurty. It took eight years to make it to screen; the script was widely admired, but no one seemed brave enough to touch it. From the beginning, the film was circled by both the intrigue and the stigma of being "that gay cowboy movie," mired in both homophobic backlash and critical aversion to addressing gayness. Critics from mainstream outlets like the [Houston Chronicle](#) and the [Los Angeles Times](#) sidestepped the film's queerness by claiming *Brokeback* was nebulously "about love." Certain conservatives and religious—particularly Catholic—groups saw the story as an attempt to glorify homosexuality, which they perceived as a sin and threat to the nuclear heterosexual family unit. One exceptionally [baffling review](#) by Steven Greydanus for the Christian site *Decent Films* openly admitted to *Brokeback*'s artistic value (3.5/4 stars) while giving it a failing moral grade (F) for being "post-Christian and post-human."

Perhaps the most widespread homophobia directed toward the film was the sheer amount of casual mockery and derision it faced both online and off. The late Heath Ledger, who took playing the role of Ennis to heart, [openly criticized such reception](#) and bristled during the many cringeworthy press tour interviews, where hosts only wanted to hear about the sex scenes. Finally, *Brokeback* was snubbed at the Oscars when *Crash* won Best Picture in 2006, an upset many perceived as the Academy playing it "safe" (i.e. straight). Fifteen years later, queer viewers have a range of opinions about *Brokeback Mountain* that don't necessarily lie neatly in pro- and anti-*Brokeback* camps. Many queer people have a bittersweet, critical, or conflicted relationship with the film; alternatively, other queer folks have myriad reasons why they like it and why it's meaningful to them. Below, six queer creatives reflect on *Brokeback Mountain*'s enduring, complex legacy and its indisputable impact on queer media and American audiences.



Benjamin Lindsay (he/him), managing editor at *Backstage* and writer based in New York City

I was only 13 at the time [*Brokeback Mountain* came out in theaters], but I distinctly remember this being “the gay cowboy movie.” I wouldn’t have pinpointed it as such at the time, but [the film] was a litmus test for me to gauge safe spaces and relationships were I to ever express my own queerness. Were some friends treating it as a punch line? Yes. Were some family members hostile to the notion of two men sleeping together? Yes. Were others enthusiastic about it existing? Yes. Little asides and responses like that were definitely markers [of] who I could and could not comfortably invite into my coming out. It was also around that time that I began taking an interest in filmmaking and arts analysis in the way that I do for a living today, so even beyond my sexuality, the work of Ang Lee and these actors [was] pretty impactful in terms of style and “prestige” aesthetic. I still cry every time I watch it.

Queer representation need not always be trauma-based, or rooted in a forbidden love or darkness and self-hatred, nor conclude in the violent death of the gay character. I think the stories we’re getting today, by and large, diverge from such troubling plot devices. And while *Brokeback* does fall [into] them, I’ll maintain that, for the story it’s telling—and speaking to the reality of queer people in that time and place—it reads authentically and is executed compassionately. I think it’s still a beautiful film.

Fran Tirado (he/they), writer and producer of queer content based in Los Angeles and New York City

I watched *Brokeback Mountain* about a year after it came out [when] I was going into my first year of college. I was very isolated. I was missing my boyfriend, who I was doing long distance with. I didn’t feel like I really fit in at school and was looking for something to create solace. And I remember watching *Brokeback Mountain* and having a very emotional experience. I don’t know if I cried, but I do remember thinking that the film was surprising and beautiful. It was so made fun of and ridiculed that, in my head, it was only a [meme](#). So when I finally saw that it was a real cultural object, I remember really loving it—and being a little critical of it too—but really loving it.

We’re never going to stop telling stories like [*Brokeback Mountain*], which are stories about cis white gay men going through a hardship surrounding their coming-out story. A lot of folks draw a line from *Brokeback Mountain* to the story of Matthew Shepard, a gay man who was murdered in Wyoming. But while Shepard’s death received national coverage, organizers had long struggled to achieve the same visibility for the deaths of black trans women, such as Marsha P. Johnson. It’s frustrating to watch films about cis white gay men get made over and over and over again, and get greenlit and lauded for being truly *fine*. *Brokeback Mountain*, when it comes down to it, is a *fine* movie. But it took what? Almost a decade and a half for *Moonlight* to get made. And [Moonlight is an excellent movie](#). We’re going to get 20 *Brokeback Mountains* before we get another *Moonlight*. I think that’s a really brutal reality.

Read This Next

[Bitch Comes to a Close](#)

April 12, 2022

[Knock It Down:](#)

by Jenna Wortham

April 11, 2022

[“X” Is a Slasher Film with an Important Message about Sex Work and Pornography](#)

by Laura LeMoon

April 11, 2022

[10 Essential Books About Writing](#)

by Nylah Burton

April 6, 2022



Ravi Teixeira (they/them), cartoonist based in Salem, Massachusetts

I watched *Brokeback* when I was probably too young to be watching *Brokeback*. My friends were all goth and gay, and they were like, “Have you seen *Brokeback Mountain*?” all giggly. It was kind of our little scandalous thing that we did; we all had sleepovers and watched *Brokeback Mountain* and *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999)—the quintessential gay movies. Before I had moved and met all these new friends I was raised very conservatively by folks who only brought up gayness as a joke.

I think overall there has been progress [regarding queer representation in media]. I’m very happy with the progress that has been made for trans people. I also love how many lesbians—and other women-who-love-women adjacent folks—have more diverse representation, [often in kids’ media](#). It’s not necessarily [visual] representation that matters the most; it’s who is making the thing. I work in comics, and I have to say comics are leading the way for diverse voices. All of Tillie Walden’s work, Mariko Tamaki’s [Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me](#) (2019) and Emily Carroll’s [When I Arrived at the Castle](#) (2019) are awesome examples.

Brokeback Mountain is inherently about homophobia, destruction and tragedy; it’s not “wholesome” gay representation. But neither are the lives that gay people are living. I think there definitely is a big problem with a lot of gay media being about pain. I would like to see stories about gay people having a fun time and being happy. But the reality is being a gay person isn’t all about being fun and happy. I don’t live in a world without homophobia, so I don’t expect film and TV and games and comics to [create] worlds without homophobia.

Eric Cervini (he/him), historian and author of [The Deviant’s War: The Homosexual vs. The United States of America](#) based in Los Angeles

I was only 13 years old and deeply closeted when [*Brokeback Mountain*] came out, and it was remarkably easy to compartmentalize the film as a “historic accomplishment” that had nothing to do with me. I probably subconsciously avoided watching it to avoid confronting the feelings that it would have inevitably provoked. Finally, after coming out at the age of 18, I watched it. When you’re so deeply in the closet, and when you spend so much energy telling yourself that you couldn’t possibly be gay, it’s very easy to see aspects of queer culture as irrelevant. It wasn’t until I watched it (and had my heart broken by the story) that I understood its relevance to my own life and the lives of so many queer Americans.

I remember the Oscar wins and the significance of [the film’s] victories, but above all, I primarily remember the jokes: straight male comedians in television sketches, mocking the characters in tents, joking about lube. That certainly didn’t help me become more confident in my coming out journey, and I’m glad that norms in Hollywood and the comedy world have since changed. I’m very grateful that there are more queer characters [onscreen]. But unfortunately, Hollywood still condones straight actors playing queer roles. These casting decisions are slaps in the face to the countless queer actors who face a lifetime of prejudice in the industry; they’re so often excluded from straight roles. What’s more, casting straight actors in queer roles sends a message to viewers that queer identity is

Read This Next

[Bitch Comes to a Close](#)

April 12, 2022

[Knock It Down:](#)

by Jenna Wortham

April 11, 2022

[“X” Is a Slasher Film with an Important Message about Sex Work and Pornography](#)

by Laura LeMoon

April 11, 2022

[10 Essential Books About Writing](#)

by Nylah Burton

April 6, 2022



simply a performance—something you can turn on or off if you act well enough. As our community fights conversion therapy, mental illness, and violence, this signal from Hollywood—which can and should be an agent for positive social change—is inexcusable. So, although *Brokeback* was groundbreaking, I look forward to a world in which queer stories are told entirely by queer creatives.

“*Brokeback Mountain*” is inherently about homophobia, destruction and tragedy; it’s not “wholesome” gay representation. But neither are the lives that gay people are living.

 TWEET THIS

Michelle Kim (she/her), cultural critic, journalist, and artist based in New York City

I first watched [*Brokeback*] when I was a teenager. To be honest, the film didn’t rock my world back then as a closeted kid. I do remember being really moved by the “I wish I knew how to quit you line,” which spun in my head for days or weeks. I think this subconsciously instilled within me this idea that my first great love, or any great love, had to be so fierce and powerful to the point where it was like, dependency or addiction. The movie does depict a dysfunctional and ultimately abusive relationship; Ennis punches Twist, but they keep being magnetically drawn together, and you get the sense that Ennis’ anger and violence stems from his internalized homophobia passed down to him from his father. Although Ledger—that beautiful angel—delivered a great performance, I wonder how much this movie has contributed to the myth that all violent homophobes are actually closeted.

A lot of what I had known about the film at the time of watching it came from people dismissing it as a “gay cowboy film” and making crude jokes about anal sex. Now having watched the film again in my adult life, I see how wrong those assessments were. I would argue that Ennis and Jack are actually both bisexual because it seems like they were both genuinely attracted to and able to love women, though perhaps their bond with each other was stronger than that of their heterosexual marriages. Now that I identify as bisexual, I felt like I could finally read the film through that lens and get a more complex understanding of the characters.

I don’t think queer representation has progressed that much in the past 15 years, unfortunately—at least in American mainstream media. Alice Wu’s lesbian, Chinese American rom-com *Saving Face* (2004) came out one year before *Brokeback Mountain* did, but it’s not as remembered in the queer film canon, likely because it wasn’t as palatable to white film critics. *Brokeback Mountain* is a queer film that was ultimately praised by white, straight

Read This Next

[**Bitch Comes to a Close**](#)

April 12, 2022

[**Knock It Down:**](#)

by Jenna Wortham
April 11, 2022

[**“X” Is a Slasher Film with an Important Message about Sex Work and Pornography**](#)

by Laura LeMoon
April 11, 2022

[**10 Essential Books About Writing**](#)

by Nylah Burton
April 6, 2022



audiences, and a ton more have been made since. Now, I'd rather have great films made for and by the queer community that aren't concerned with being palatable at all.

Hilary Weaver (she/they), freelance writer and editor based in New England

Brokeback Mountain came out when I was in eighth grade, and I didn't know anything about it. I was raised in mid-Missouri, and I was largely taught that films like *Brokeback* were not appropriate for children, nor were they discussed in my home. I was definitely already questioning my sexuality at that point, but I didn't have the language to name what I was feeling. Now, I'm 28, I've been out for nearly eight years, and I'm engaged to a wonderful nonbinary human. But I'm still unpacking all that internalized homophobia. The first time I saw *Brokeback* was in October of this year. My partner grew up in Manhattan and told me they'd sneaked into the movie with their middle school friends and that it was their queer root. When I finally watched the movie, I kind of felt as if I had redeemed something for my 14-year-old self; I was finally giving her back such a crucial part of queer culture that she had missed at a pivotal age.

So much has changed about queer representation in media since I was growing up in the Midwest. The kids in my former school district seem to be so much more open-minded about queerness, probably thanks to queer storylines being more mainstream in TV and film. We have a long way to go, but the fact that I, as someone who pretty much only writes about queer culture, am always busy with commentary on writing about things like [Happiest Season](#) (2020) or *The Prom* (2020), says a lot. But, as much as I think coming-out stories are necessary, we still haven't broken through the narrative that queer stories have to be sad or have bittersweet endings. We have such a dearth of stories about queer people just living their lives without their families being toxic or some kind of gaslighting or abuse being part of the storyline. It will be refreshing when we have more media that features queer people—without the plot revolving around the fact that they're queer. It's up to us now to write those stories.

Responses have been edited and condensed for clarity and length.

Editor's note: This story has been updated to remove mention of Amanda Milan, whose death came after the deaths of Marsha P. Johnson and Matthew Shepard. [12/17/2020 at 3:00 p.m. PST]

[Read this Next: What Happens to Queer People Who Don't Have a Chosen Family?](#)



BY DONALD COLLINS

[View profile »](#)

Donald Collins (he/him) is a writer and trans educator based in LA. He is the co-author of the award-winning memoir *At the Broken Places: A Mother & Trans Son Pick Up the Pieces*, and his work has appeared in *VICE*, *Salon*, and *PopMatters* among others.

THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS

Vibrator Vixen

Sex Toy Collective

bitchmedia
a feminist response to pop culture



© 2022 BITCH MEDIA | [PRIVACY POLICY](#)

About

[Who We Are](#)

[FAQ & Contact Form](#)

[Our Staff](#)

[Board of Directors](#)

[Contributors' Guidelines](#)

[Get Email Updates](#)

Bitch Magazine

[Check the status of your subscription](#)

[Find Bitch Magazine On Newsstands](#)