Two recent films: Brokeback Mountain and Walk the Line

Joanne Laurier, David Walsh
5 January 2006

Brokeback Mountain, directed by Ang Lee, screenplay by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, based on a short story by Annie Proulx; *Walk the Line*, directed by James Mangold, written by Mangold and Gill Dennis

Brokeback Mountain by Taiwanese-born, American-educated director Ang Lee follows the relationship of two young men who forge an intense connection that spans 20 years. It is a liaison ultimately destroyed by social taboos, bound up with the locale and the historical period.

Based on a 1997 short story by author Annie Proulx, the film tells the story of Ennis (Heath Ledger) and Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) who get hired to tend sheep for a nasty, exploitative rancher (Randy Quaid) on Brokeback Mountain in the summer of 1963. Driven by poverty and lack of opportunity to brave the mountain's terrifying beauty and dangers, the boys develop a camaraderie that is heightened when they succumb to a moment of sexual passion. Taken aback by the physical and emotional impact of the act, they both reaffirm their heterosexuality, pledging that the association will terminate when they bring the sheep down from the mountain. ("This is a one-shot thing we got going on here.")

Four years later, Jack makes an overture to Ennis and they meet again. Ennis is now married with two small children, living from hand to mouth in small-town Wyoming. A failed rodeo cowboy, Jack has found economic stability in Texas by marrying a former rodeo queen whose father owns a farm equipment distribution company for which he goes to work. Although their financial positions are quite different, they both suffer from emotionally deprived lives.

Henceforth, the irresistible force of their attraction under the given social conditions becomes the source of personal unhappiness, as well as unending pain for their families. Jack seeks solace in male prostitutes in Mexican border towns, while Ennis is physically constricted to the point of paralysis. So complete is their ruination ("Because of you Jack, I'm like this. I'm nothing and nowhere"), that those most adversely affected by the relationship—wives, children and parents—retain a certain loyalty and compassion despite bitterness over perceived betrayals and disappointments. In contradictory ways, an understanding exists in the families that whatever they have suffered in the fall-out of the Ennis/Jack obsession pales by comparison to the torture experienced by the pair.

The film ends in 1983. Ennis, who has previously rejected Jack's suggestions that the lovers openly make a go of it, finds himself able to make a breakthrough. It is sadly too late.

That the tragedy of the Ennis/Jack affair is fundamentally social in character is underscored by the fact that their love is only possible in a place—the mountain—that is apart from society and whose purity consists in the fact that it is untainted by bigotry and intolerance. ("Bottom line is...we're around each other an' this thing, it grabs hold of us again...at the wrong place...at the wrong time...and we're dead.")

Screenwriter Diana Ossana explains in the movie's production notes: "Ennis and Jack are very poor country boys. Because of the difficulty of where they've grown up, it's always about survival for them; not just financially, but physically, with the snow and the wind and the rain and the harsh landscape. Brokeback Mountain is very removed from the rest of the world and the rest of life. It's private up there, there's no intrusion, and they feel comfortable. When they come back down off Brokeback and they're back in their small towns, everything closes in on them again."

While *Brokeback Mountain* is not without weaknesses—it is relatively predictable and overall lacks complexity—the film is sincere and has an appreciably angry tone. Lee has done a credible job representing working class types and depicting their problems. Ennis's wife Alma (Michelle Williams) is well played. Both Ledger and Gyllenhaal give fine performances, although at times Ledger's emotional inflexibility strains. In his depiction of Ennis's pinched, tightly wound affection for his children, Ledger strikes a realistic note.

A certain richness and multiplicity, however, is never quite attained in the characterizations. Working class life is more imagined from afar, as if through a looking glass, than presented with a deep degree of understanding, and, therefore, dynamism. As commendable as it is that Lee portrays ordinary people with sensitivity, he still falls somewhat short. The question arises: If Ennis is so utterly incapable of emotional articulation, why does Jack fall so hard for him? The years between 1963 and 1983 saw many changes that would inevitably have worked upon the protagonists with consequences not envisioned by the filmmakers.

Nonetheless, it is difficult not to see in the film opposition to the reactionary nostrums of the Bush administration and its Christian fundamentalist base. Whether by accident or design, the movie's two central locations—where Ennis and Jack would have faced repression had they chosen to come "out"—are Texas (home of Bush) and Wyoming (home of Cheney). The recurring image from Ennis's childhood of a brutally slain homosexual farmer evokes

the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, the 22-year-old gay student from the University of Wyoming.

Brokeback Mountain serves as something of an antidote to the incessant homophobic harping against the "unnaturalness" of gay sexuality. It presents in its place the unnaturalness of sexual suppression.

—Joanne Laurier

James Mangold's *Walk the Line*, about the life and struggles of singer Johnny Cash, is a weak and largely formulaic film. It remains a problem that filmmakers presented with golden opportunities (including resources and technology and acting talent) to examine complex and fascinating phenomena do so little with them.

Cash, who died in October 2003, was a significant and compelling figure in American music from the mid-1950s onward. Born in Arkansas in 1932 and raised in an experimental New Deal cotton-farming community in the Mississippi Delta, Cash carried through his life a belief in the struggle for social justice. It was not accidental that he experienced the peak of his fame during the heady years of the late 1960s, following the release of his *At Folsom Prison* live album in 1968. Whatever his patriotic illusions and religiosity, it remains a fact that Cash made the strongest point of contact with audiences during the most radical years in the postwar era.

As Richard Phillips noted in a *World Socialist Web Site* obituary two years ago: "Cash was deeply religious and remained close friends with figures like firebrand preacher Reverend Billy Graham for much of his life. Not a few US presidents, including Richard Nixon, claimed him as their own. At the same time Cash unapologetically identified with the most downtrodden and oppressed, expressing his opposition to US prison policies and the plight of Native Americans, and constantly searching musically for ways to give voice to their hopes and concerns."

After performing for US troops in Vietnam, Cash spoke out against the war, commenting that it "just made me sick. I'm not supporting that war or any other war.... Maybe Vietnam has taught us a hard lesson to not be involved in foreign wars. Maybe that's the lesson we've learned. I hope we have." In 2003, Cash "told his singer/songwriter daughter Rosanne to convey his opposition to the impending invasion to audiences at her concerts."

And there was his hostility toward the country music establishment and the dreadful blandness of its contemporary, market-oriented sound: "If I hear the word demographics one more time, I'll puke," he told a reporter.

Was it not possible to convey any of this in a film about his life? Was it inevitable that Cash's life be reduced to a) trauma over the death of a beloved brother at an early age, along with the coldness of his father, b) a lengthy, finally requited passion for singer June Carter, and c) his struggle with an addiction to pills?

People live in a world produced by social and historical processes and enter into life-determining relations with these processes. They are often unaware of the fact. Nonetheless, it remains the single most important truth about their lives. Artists used to know something about this. Early in the twentieth century, it would have been taken for granted that such an artist's life would have been linked "unsystematically, but consciously and continuously," to the background of the New Deal, the postwar period, the radicalization of the 1960s and its aftermath. This would have added a third dimension, and a critical third dimension, to any film about Cash's life.

Instead of the old Hollywood formula for a biographical work, which largely sanitized or concealed the subject's private life and focused on the struggle for success or recognition (for classical composers, a commentator notes, the recipe went: "major artist suffers block, meets muse, achieves immortality, fade up music"), we have a new one, which emphasizes the artist's "private demons," usually childhood trauma or addiction (drugs, alcohol), or both. The old formula, as foolish and often untrue to detail as it was, offered more objective knowledge, including at least an attempt at some sense of social development, and also promoted "cultural uplift" in a rather watered-down version.

Now we learn that A was sexually abused and that B drank herself to sleep each night, and rarely is an attempt made to root the particular contribution within a historical context. The artist contributes because he or she has surmounted a purely personal obstacle, quite apart from any wider currents in culture or society. Since there is no grasp of the powerful forces helping to nourish and flowing through the artist's work, the latter is reduced to the rather tepid level of intense "self-expression."

Mangold's film treats Cash's life from 1944 to 1968, from the death of his brother to his marriage to June Carter and victory over his addiction to amphetamines. We see Cash (Joaquin Phoenix) in the air force in Germany, mastering the guitar and working on his first material. There is his first marriage to Vivian (Ginnifer Goodwin), which ends in divorce, his encounter with Sun Records' Sam Phillips (Dallas Roberts) and his first success in music. Cash finds himself increasingly infatuated with Carter (Reese Witherspoon), with whom he tours. He becomes a major figure in country music, but his addiction, picked up on the road, worsens and threatens to destroy whatever stability there is to his life. He manages to win his "muse," Carter, and she, in turn, helps him overcome the drug problem. They sing together, in triumph. Music, credits.

Phoenix conveys a portion of Cash's ferocity and depth, but Witherspoon, who is talented and charming, comes nowhere near capturing June Carter's substantial sensuality, a sensuality inextricably linked to her family's extensive role in the history of American folk and popular music.

This is not a malicious or embarrassing work; the viewer simply feels that Mangold has not genuinely tackled *a single one* of the complex and potentially rich problems bound up with the lives of Cash and Carter.

—David Walsh