

Brokeback Mountain: a toast

Article

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O'Brien, A. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9527-4076>
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[Figure 1]

At the 2008 Screen Actors Guild awards, Daniel Day-Lewis was awarded a prize for his lead role in *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007). He took the opportunity to pay tribute to Heath Ledger, who had died less than a week earlier. Of *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), Day-Lewis declared that 'that scene in the trailer at the end of the film is as moving as anything that I think I've ever seen'. There is an ambiguity about quite which sequence Day-Lewis refers to. The film ends with Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) alone in his trailer, communing with the remnants (a postcard and a shirt) of his tragic love affair with Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal). But minutes before Ennis had been sitting and talking with his daughter, Alma Jr. (Kate Mara), and any emotional intensity achieved in the film's final instants can only be properly appreciated, I think, when 'that scene in the trailer' is understood as a synthesis of both passages.

In some respects this is yet another reminder of how any scene's emotional resonance is largely contingent on its relationship with previous scenes, a virtual truism in most serious discussion of film drama. But the relationship between these two sequences is considerably more complex than it first appears, and there is a striking shift in tone once Alma leaves the trailer; the father-daughter exchange had been a faltering, uncertain but tentatively optimistic meeting, and is replaced by something raw, unselfconscious, backward looking – one sequence is governed by prospect, the following one by retrospect.ⁱ If the dynamic between these tonally contrasting passages can be said to offset one another – to put it crudely, we reach a middle ground between optimism and pathos – then the resulting 'flatness' is vividly reflected in the textures of the *mise-en-scène*, which are neither homely nor bleak. Ennis's physical environment does not announce his fate in the way we might expect from a spectacular melodrama. Learning of his daughter's plan to marry, the father pours two glasses of wine and initiates a toast – but because they use tumblers, the meeting of glasses lacks the customary 'clink'. Instead we hear a dull thud which is, I believe, indicative of a broader sensation, one that permeates the final scene's whole; a sensation of moderate, muted poignancy. The clunk of the glasses coming together is the sound of someone who had not expected to celebrate or socialise, but who is doing so nevertheless. It is a gesture of love and community, but one which carries with it an audible, textural reminder of limited resources and reduced means.ⁱⁱ What could so easily have been a scene of vivid privation – 'heartbroken man retreats into grubby seclusion' – instead becomes a restrained evocation of *something like* poverty and loneliness.

Counter-voluptuous

Imagining what this scene might have been, in order to better appreciate what it is, is not a fanciful exercise. Firstly, at many other points throughout the film, Ang Lee appears to have been very comfortable developing an unambiguous, declarative *mise-en-scène*. The gaudiness of Jack Twist's (Jake Gyllenhaal) marital home (in which crystal wine glasses are available but unused), and the puritanical minimalism of his parents' home,

are particularly vivid examples [Figures 2 and 3]. The film's tragic trajectory and melodramatic register would suggest that a final scene *could*, without awkwardness or inconsistency, illustrate for an audience full-blooded hardship and sadness. In a previous issue of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, George Toles reminded us that 'destitution can readily acquire a gemlike sparkle in the edifice of cinema illusion' (2013: 7), and the refusal of *Brokeback Mountain* to provide such pleasures should be understood as crucial. What we see might be better encapsulated by the words of Susan Sontag, who found in Robert Bresson's work 'counter-voluptuous' endings ([1964] 2011: 68).

Secondly, the digressions from Annie Proulx's originating short story are a vivid reminder of what this scene could so easily have felt like. The story, which is narrated in retrospect, begins with a present-tense prologue (distinguished by italics), as a kind of snap shot of 'Ennis now' which finally segues into a free-indirect recollection.ⁱⁱⁱ It is worth quoting in full, if only to see the persistence with which Proulx evokes the impoverishment of Ennis's situation (in the fullest sense of the word) through the textures he encounters:

Ennis Del Mar wakes before five, wind rocking the trailer, hissing in around the aluminum door and window frames. The shirts hanging on a nail shudder slightly in the draft. He gets up, scratching the grey wedge of belly and pubic hair, shuffles to the gas burner, pours leftover coffee in a chipped enamel pan; the flame swathes it in blue. He turns on the tap and urinates in the sink, pulls on his shirt and jeans, his worn boots, stamping the heels against the floor to get them full on. The wind booms down the curved length of the trailer and under its roaring passage he can hear the scratching of fine gravel and sand. It could be bad on the highway with the horse trailer. He has to be packed and away from the place that morning. Again the ranch is on the market and they've shipped out the last of the horses, paid everybody off the day before, the owner saying, "Give em to the real estate shark, I'm out a here," dropping the keys in Ennis's hand. He might have to stay with his married daughter until he picks up another job, yet he is suffused with a sense of pleasure because Jack Twist was in his dream.

The stale coffee is boiling up but he catches it before it goes over the side, pours it into a stained cup and blows on the black liquid, lets a panel of the dream slide forward. If he does not force his attention on it, it might stoke the day, rewarm that old, cold time on the mountain when they owned the world and nothing seemed wrong. The wind strikes the trailer like a load of dirt coming off a dump truck, eases, dies, leaves a temporary silence. (1-2)

Notwithstanding the quality of the prose, this seems to me a relatively straightforward staging of tragic solitude; moreover, the sense of routine and ritual gives the impression of Ennis having lived like this for a considerable period of time. This is not a dynamic situation, but a state of being in which one man's material environment is an unambiguous statement on (and consequence of) his emotional staleness. The textural details – shuddering shirts, chipped enamel, fine gravel – are not simply evocative, but are obstacles to Ennis's fantasising. He wants to be led by his memories, and even seems to have developed a technique for elongating their hold over his daily routine, but life's materials obstruct him. We are told that Ennis is 'suffused with pleasure', but this is, crucially, in spite of those niggles which constitute his physical reality; the tired body, the insufficient shelter, the ill-fitting boots. He has come a long way since 'owning the world', and Proulx evokes that distance for us by registering the setting through Ennis's consciousness. His is a mind which seems to have grown weary of bodily, material engagements.

Significantly, the film does not begin its trailer scene with Ennis already entrenched in this habitat, but on the grass outside, affixing numbers to his mailbox. In some respects this is a direct contradiction of Proulx, who writes of Ennis being forced to leave, but of course the trailer is a structure which always has suggestions of impermanence. On paper, Ennis's fate seems to be written; on film, we see or sense nothing quite so emphatic. Alma arrives, and Ennis welcomes her inside. The film has not departed completely from the idea of Ennis living in reduced comfort, and almost straight away Alma tells him that he needs more furniture – and yet she smiles warmly, and wraps her fingers around the mug which he brings. [Figure 4] Moments later, Alma's hands take on a more nervous quality, as she announces that she will be getting married. Registering her father's discomfort, Alma fixes her eyes upon him, and the film begins a sequence of medium close-ups in which the nature of Ennis's and Alma's interpersonal glances is *the* vital currency of the scene's expressiveness. Neither the film nor the characters pay particular heed to the mugs or the chairs, or anything that we would regard as the material constituents of the film's world. It is a given that any film adaptation will not present the same amount and quality of information as its literary source, but one can see in Proulx's writing an abundance of sensory details which would lend themselves to an affective film sequence – wind, dirty utensils, laboured movement, coffee boiling over – and that have been decisively, creatively, omitted.

Father and daughter

What would it have meant, for those famous final moments in which Ennis caresses Jack's shirt, had the film followed the spirit (and textures) of Proulx's story more closely? The shirt would surely have emerged as a solitary relic of warmth, softness and intimacy in an environment and lifestyle now utterly void of those qualities. As it happens, Ennis comes across the shirt as something of an afterthought. Having waved farewell to Alma, Ennis returns to the trailer, and finds that she has left her sweater. He sees that Alma has already gone, and so begins to fold it; Ennis holds the sweater between his chin and his chest, and arranges it smoothly and quickly, before briefly holding it to his face and taking it to towards his wardrobe. (The jumper seems to be made of thick wool, and so presumably holds Alma's fragrance – but is Ennis savouring and recalling this smell, or learning it for the first time? We don't see the father and daughter embrace, after all.) It is an ordinary and extraordinary moment, a quintessentially parental gesture from a man struggling to fulfil the role of a parent, and a quintessentially domestic gesture from a man struggling to determine the extent and nature of his rootedness.

This moment also crucially influences how we understand the film's ending, for it is whilst putting away Alma's folded jumper that Ennis sees Jack's shirt, and gently caresses the postcard of Brokeback Mountain. The final action is saved from mawkishness by the fact of Ennis having been similarly tender towards Alma's clothing [Figure 5]. Not only are we reminded that Ennis loves, and is loved by, people who are still alive, but the very act of stroking the clothes of an absent loved one is made to appear considerably less fetishistic or morbid than it might otherwise have become. We are invited to recall a lovelorn Martha Edwards (Dorothy Jordan) early on in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), rather than an unstable Scottie

Ferguson in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958). This is the behaviour not only of obsessive, sorrowful and lonely mourners.

We do not see Alma get up to leave, but I like to entertain the possibility that she deliberately leaves her sweater (as young lovers might do) in order to ensure another meeting. Talking to Ennis about her upcoming wedding, Alma seems acutely aware of the fragility of their relationship, and also of his gradual retreat from 'normal' social engagements. (Although she of course cannot comprehend how painful and confused the very notion of a 'normal social engagement' will have become for her father.) Yes, he agrees to come to the wedding, but she would have good reason to fear that he might still find more excuses not to, and a young woman with Alma's compassion and warmth might well turn to a playful ruse for the sake of having her father at her wedding. By whatever means it was left, Alma's jumper acts a crucial counterweight to Jack's shirt; it softens the contrast in a potentially crude dichotomy of 'happy past' and 'unhappy present', and ensures that Ennis's life is not shown to us as one defined by emotional inertia.

There are superficial, but nevertheless telling, comparisons we can draw out between the ending of *Brokeback Mountain* and the ending of *Late Spring* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1949). As in Lee's film, *Late Spring* ends with a father (Shukichi Somiya, played by Chishu Ryu), alone, immediately after his daughter's departure; and for both Alma and Noriko (Setsuko Hara), marriage is the destination. Needless to say, Shukichi is not suddenly thrust into squalor, but the house to which he returns is characterised – in contrast to Ennis's trailer – as a stage for loneliness. To a large extent this is achieved through the shift we see, and feel, from a home populated by Noriko's belongings to one which is now impoverished; Ozu's celebrated mastery of repetition and variation ensures that this lack is vivid even if it is not emphasised. In contrast to the centripetal home of *Late Spring*, *Brokeback Mountain* offers up a range of domestic settings (from the lovers' mountain-top tent onwards), many of which are dysfunctional facades, and there is no obvious reference point for a stable and satisfying home life. In other words, *Brokeback Mountain* deliberately forsakes, or is obliged to forsake, the 'empty-nest' poignancy which can be achieved in films when a once-social home becomes hollowed out by the departure of young people. *Brokeback Mountain* reaches for something less conventionally emotive, and possibly more complex. The trailer is a new space, and even if it houses a man who currently lives alone, it is not haunted by the absence of anyone. Instead we see it become enriched and enlivened, albeit briefly, by Alma.

Taking up a stance

Brokeback Mountain is to some extent about intolerance, but we must not lose sight of the way in which it holds Ennis at least partly responsible for the failure of his relationship with Jack; he is a frustratingly reactive protagonist, and it is hard not share Jack's disappointment in his passivity. Adrian Ivakhiv writes of how 'films display a refinement and precision of expressive detail in a person's taking up a stance in the world and acting on that stance' (2013: 144); the tragedy of *Brokeback Mountain* is to a large extent built on Ennis *not* doing that. Learning of Alma's engagement, Ennis's instinctive reaction is to retreat into himself and mumble excuses for his absence from their imminent wedding. Until he changes his mind.

He stands, walks to the kitchen, gathers a bottle and glasses, pours wine, and proposes a toast. Admittedly this is a humble ‘stance in the world’, but we should appreciate that it is uncharted territory for Ennis. He began the film as the object of Jack’s flirtatious gaze [Figure 6], and has spent much of it being carried on the wave of Jack’s active love and devotion. Ennis is not a man of initiative, and this has been a source of pain for him and many others. Toasting his daughter’s engagement is, in this sense, a gesture of emerging self-assurance and responsibility; not a celebratory marker of something achieved, but the signal of a shift in selfhood which is a work in progress.

It would be a mistake to exaggerate, however, the sanguinity of *Brokeback Mountain*, even if the film does refuse to plunge Ennis into irreversible loneliness. Yes, in toasting the bride and groom, Ennis could be signalling a fresh outlook and a new approach to his life and his family; according to this reading, the toast is a precursor to what will happen at the actual wedding (presumably with appropriate glasses) in the near future. But it is hard to dismiss the suspicion that Ennis could be performing his father-of-the-bride duties now in lieu of a public performance, rather than in preparation for one. Is this a dress rehearsal, or the most that Alma can expect from him? The question is left unresolved, in part because the sequence ends with the toast (‘to Alma and Kurt’) and the meeting of glasses, and any further exchanges between them are left to our imagination. Quite what the toast ‘does’ remains ambiguous, but it is at least tangible and reciprocated (unlike the uncorking of champagne, for example), and this is significant. When Ennis touches Jack’s shirt and postcard shortly after, we see and hear something quite different – objects and actions as conduits to a past that, of course, cannot respond. The gestures are self-pitying, the closing line (‘Jack, I swear...’) is mumbled, Ennis’s voice subsumed into the swelling music. The toast, on the other hand, had been a meeting of equals, announcing a new kind of ordinariness – a quietly seismic shift in one man’s attitude to his world made audible through the sound of cheap glasses not reverberating.

Adam O’Brien is Teaching Fellow in Film and Television Studies at the University of Bristol. *Transactions With the World*, an ecocritical study of New Hollywood cinema, is forthcoming from Berghahn Books.

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Christopher Sharrett's alternate reading of this scene describes it as 'exceptionally bleak, modified only a little by the arrival of Alma Jr. and her announcement of her wedding' (2009: 26); but Alma's visit begins the scene and occupies most of its time, and so must surely be considered more than a modification.

ⁱⁱ Larry McMurtry's and Annie Proulx's screenplay, which was published in 2006 alongside Proulx's story, indicates that Ennis reaches for 'jelly glasses' (64), and it is to the film's benefit that this was not taken to mean comically inappropriate glasses.

ⁱⁱⁱ

This opening did not feature in the story's first appearance, in an issue of *The New Yorker* in October 1997.