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Cutting Through the Cultural Chaos — The Meaning of “Brokeback Mountain”

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Sometimes, it's the contradictory headlines that tell the story. Last week, *USA Today* released a prominent article with the headline: “‘Brokeback’ Rides Into the Mainstream.” The same day, *The Los Angeles Times* featured a story with the headline, “Can ‘Brokeback Mountain’ Move the Heartland?.” The two articles were poles apart.

USA Today pushed the movie, famously featuring a long-term homosexual romance between two cowboys, as “charting new frontiers.” Yet, those new frontiers are only among the cultural elites clustered in New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. The movie isn't showing elsewhere.

The paper claims: *With its epic feel, powerful performances and heartbreaking story with a timely theme about gay love, it would seem to have everything voters at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences look for. Signs indicate that this might be the right movie at the right time. “The culture is finding us,” says Brokeback producer and Focus Features co-president James Schamus. “Grown-up movies have never had that kind of per-screen average. You only get those numbers when you’re vacuuming up enormous interest from all walks of life.”*

From all walks of life? The movie is showing in only five theaters in three cities — all with large homosexual populations. This is a consummate example of the media talking to themselves.

More: *The film might find its place in history as a cultural landmark. “It’s a really important movie for a number of reasons,” says Michael Taylor, a film producer and chair of the University of Southern California’s School of Cinema and Television. “The myth of the cowboy grew over so many years mostly because there were so few actual cowboys to contradict the myth. This movie turns the myth on its head. To sort of humanize that icon by making him gay is more interesting in what it says about cowboys as a symbol than what it says about homosexuality in cinema.” . . . And at a time when gay marriage has been making news, Brokeback’s humanity, presented through universal themes of longing and loss, could open minds, some say. “It comes at a critical time,” says Taylor. “The polls seem to indicate that most of the country does have a greater tolerance for homosexuality. Brokeback Mountain attains a sort of grand Romeo and Juliet level of tragedy that we don’t see very often in contemporary movies. If it does nothing else than convey that love transcends any gender bias, it may turn out to be a seminal film.” Schamus says the goal of the filmmakers was to make “a really good movie,” not to make a political statement.*

Right. Compare that to *The Los Angeles Times*: “Brokeback Mountain” seems to have everything going for it: great reviews, a remarkable opening weekend and dominance in the first wave of the Hollywood awards season, underscored Tuesday by seven Golden Globe nominations, the most of any film. But there’s one important landmark the film has yet to reach — roping in a mass audience. Over the next several weeks, the movie about two handsome young cowboys falling in love with each other — dubbed by some wags the gay “Gone With the Wind” — will be released across the United States in cities where its themes of repressed sexuality and cultural intolerance may prove a tougher sell than they have in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, with their concentrations of cineastes and gay and lesbian populations.

Yesterday, Frank Rich of *The New York Times* added his view, calling the movie a “home run.” His analysis: *Whether it proves a movie for the ages or as transient as “Love Story,” it is a landmark in the troubled history of America’s relationship to homosexuality. It brings something different to the pop culture marketplace at just the pivotal moment to*

catch a wave. Heaven knows there has been no shortage of gay-themed entertainment in recent years. To the tedious point of ubiquity, gay characters, many of them updated reincarnations of the stereotypical fops and fussbudgets of 1930's studio comedies, are at least as well represented as other minorities in prime-time television. Entertainment Weekly has tallied nine movies, including "Capote" and "Rent," with major gay characters this year. But "Brokeback Mountain," besides being more sexually candid than the norm, is not set in urban America, is not comic or camp, and, unlike the breakout dramas "Philadelphia" and "Angels in America," is pre-AIDS.

Rich sees deeper lessons here. *The truth is that the millions of moviegoers soon to swoon over the star-crossed gay cowboys of "Brokeback Mountain" can probably put up with the sight of "two guys going at it." It's the all too American tragedy of what happens to these men afterward that neither our hearts nor consciences can so easily shake.*

Once the theater critic of *The New York Times*, Rich is now an editorial columnist, and his hatred of Christian conservatives is often on display. But, does anyone think for one minute that Frank Rich has any real knowledge of what most Americans think? Does he really believe that the American mainstream is ready to see "two guys going at it" on the big screen? Is he right? We may soon find out, when and if the movie is released nationwide.

I reject the claim that the makers of this film have no political agenda. I must also reject the claims that this movie, showing in three cities, demonstrates that mainstream America is ready to celebrate homosexual sex on the movie screen. Nevertheless, I do believe that this movie is a cultural landmark, part of a pattern of normalizing homosexuality — a process Hollywood producers and their liberal friends in the media are only too happy to advance.

FOR FURTHER READING: See my commentary, "[Sexual Confusion and the End of Friendship](#)," December 14, 2005. Also, listen to *The Albert Mohler Program* of December 9, 2005, "["Brokeback Mountain and What it Means for America."](#)

SEE ALSO: Bryan Curtis, "[Frank Rich — The Butcher of the Beltway](#)," published at *Slate.com*, December 12, 2005. Curtis's conclusion: *One of Rich's colleagues offered me a theory about his place in the Times universe. The writer said that whatever grief the Times catches for being too liberal is counterbalanced by the grief its New York-based correspondents get for not being liberal enough. New Yorkers assume most Timesmen share their lefty political inclinations but are too constrained by balance and integrity to smear it all over the news pages. Therefore, it is the opinion pages—Rich and Krugman's columns in particular—where they turn for reaffirmation. It's a kind of airtight ideological bunker that, under slightly different circumstances, would make for a great Frank Rich column.*

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