INTERNAL HYBRIDS:
THE WESTERNER AS MELODRAMATIC VICTIM

CHRISTOF DECKER

Throughout the history of American film, writing about melodrama has evolved in a variety of ways. In early industry-related reviews the term might denote any type of film with a strong emotional appeal. Then, as certain themes and narrative elements became conventionalized, it was applied more narrowly to categories like the woman's film, indicating that melodrama and gender were increasingly seen in conjunction. Against this feminization of melodrama (and the concomitant notion of a "masculine" realism), a revisionist debate developed in the 1970s which uncovered the melodramatic dynamic at work in many supposedly male action genres, and at the same time attempted to demonstrate the aesthetic and cultural complexity of melodramatic forms hitherto seen to be simplistic and culturally inferior. Drawing on the seminal work of authors like Peter Brooks this reconsideration of melodrama as an influential cultural mode rather than an isolated genre for women has recently been carried even further. Scholars like Christine Gledhill and, in particular, Linda Williams have argued that the melodramatic tradition must be seen as the formative force for the evolution of American cinema, and that it has been a major, if contradictory, component of a popular democratic culture—creating, shaping, and making operative democratic structures of feeling.[1]

Against this background of conceptualizing melodrama as, on the one hand, a generic term, and on the other, a cultural mode of representation, this article sets out to address an issue that is pertinent to both: the question of how melodramatic elements have been introduced into other genres in order to create mixed or hybrid forms. In particular, I will focus on the confrontation and conflation of western and melodrama, two seemingly incompatible generic frames. Following Janet Staiger's suggestion that the discourse on cultural hybridity should be applied with caution when discussing the Hollywood practice of mixing generic codes,[2] I want to argue that the conflation of western and melodrama can rightfully be called (in Staiger's terminology) an *internal hybrid*—in

particular when it attempts to redefine masculine relationships in homosexual terms. Yet, I also want to suggest that despite the recent emphasis on melodrama as a democratizing force, with regard to generic mixtures its cultural and political function tends to be more ambiguous, as much an agent of liberation as of containment and (sometimes) even repression.

Genre Theory: Purity Versus Hybridity

The notorious difficulties of trying to define film genres are by now an oft-repeated story. Genres have been understood as abstract categories characterized by specific textual and structural elements, they have been viewed as cultural contracts based upon audience expectations, or they have been extrapolated from industrial practices and classifications.[3] Yet, as Janet Staiger and others have pointed out, all of the different approaches are marred by methodological inconsistencies and contradictions, ranging from tautological definitions (based on preexisting samples) to idealized notions of generic purity. Still, the growing literature on film genres underlines that generic codes are among the crucial theoretical concerns for an understanding not just of the history of film aesthetics but of Hollywood's system of production and its cultural functions.

In a recent theoretical introduction John Frow usefully argues that genres can be conceived of as frames organizing and structuring the knowledge produced by individual texts. As acts of communication, they consist of formal features, themes, ways of addressing an audience, and a variety of rhetorical aims. Echoing earlier structuralist theorists like Thomas Schatz, who differentiated between a static deep structure and a dynamic surface structure, Frow points out that the relationship between structure and event, abstract category and concrete object, class and phenomenon, or context and text is characteristic of many different art forms and media. By regarding individual texts as performances of contextual elements, he indicates that the generic frame itself is constantly in motion, delimiting the range of variations yet also readjusting its shape according to the internal dynamic of the performances. This historical dialectic of frame and performance may be confined wholly to a specific generic code which is, presumably, relatively easy to define. Yet it is also involved when we turn from the internal dynamic of genres to their systemic interaction with other genres.

Needless to say, individual genres are *not* easily definable and this becomes particularly obvious, as Janet Staiger makes clear, once we focus on generic mixtures. However, in accordance with authors like Thomas

Schatz, Steve Neale, or Barry Langford, she does not argue for an abandonment of the search for generic classifications but rather for a more sophisticated, historically informed analysis. The main thrust of Staiger's argument is a repudiation of what she calls the purity hypothesis. This hypothesis has two aspects: on the one hand the notion that Hollywood films can be arranged into clear-cut and easily identifiable categories, and on the other that the history of American film is characterized by a shift from pure types to an increasing number of hybrid forms. For the purposes of her argument Staiger may be exaggerating the impact of the purity camp, yet her insistence on a thorough historical grounding of genre criticism is highly convincing. As Langford's recent study makes clear, the sample of films used for the definition of "pure" generic types is usually too small and unsystematic, or it excludes (as with the B-westerns and serials) whole groups of productions which would (and should) presumably have an impact on the definition of the genre. Thus the purity hypothesis is very often built on strategic exclusions which unduly simplify the historical variety generated within the Hollywood system of production.[4]

Furthermore, as Langford points out, the models for describing the historical change of genres seem to be incapable of grasping the contingent and chaotic logic of commercial production cycles. Too often they rely on traditional teleological patterns of genre histories—like the movement from classicism to reflexivity, from innovation to exhaustion—which tend to neglect the simultaneity of countervailing cultural forms and forces. For example, at the height of the gangster film cycle in the early sound era, Edward G. Robinson appeared in *The Little Giant* (Roy Del Ruth, 1933) and comically deconstructed the tough gangster image he had helped to create with *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930). This, in particular, may be seen as Janet Staiger's main point: The history of American film is not characterized by a steady movement toward hybrid forms. Rather, mixing generic codes has been an established practice all along. As she indicates, the economic pressure to standardize but also to differentiate products may be one explanation for this simultaneity of pure and impure forms. Yet, the aspiration to and parallel cancellation of purity can also be related to the cultural formation of Hollywood. With regard to the presentation of objectionable (usually sex and violence related) material it allowed the studios to have it both ways: to present a serious depiction but also its comic (or otherwise hybrid) deconstruction and thus to insulate themselves against possible cultural repercussions.[5] Furthermore, as agents of popular culture, the simultaneity of purity and impurity allowed the studios to emphasize an air of playfulness and

irreverence, which strategically set them apart from the seriousness of high culture or other belief systems like religion.

Thus, arguing primarily from a historicist point of view, Staiger suggests that the dialectic between pure types and mixtures—however difficult they actually may be to describe and define—is not a new or even postmodern phenomenon but has been characteristic of American cinema since its inception. An important consequence of this argument, then, would be to study much more systematically than in the past the various modes and practices of creating hybrid forms and, just as with genre history, to historicize their changing patterns. Yet Staiger does not believe that the term hybridity would be very useful for this endeavor, claiming that its emergence in the field of postcolonial studies has imbued it with cross-cultural meanings—e.g. the relationship between colonizer and colonized—that are not as relevant for American film. She suggests "inbreeding" instead, which as an alternative term has not really taken hold (her other suggestion "pattern mixing" appears to be more helpful because less metaphorically loaded). Yet she also concedes that genre mixtures—just like the postcolonial notion of hybridity—may indeed *be* concerned with questions of power and authority. For these films, Staiger proposes the term "internal hybrids" which would denote "films created by minority or subordinated groups that use genre mixing or genre parody to dialogue with or criticize the dominant."[6] The adjective "internal" is meant to emphasize the intracultural character of these negotiations, referring to and taking place within (American) national culture. Given the international impact and appeal of Hollywood narratives (and the recent reflections within American Studies about the transcultural implications of "America") I find this terminological delimitation to be inadequate (and ultimately unnecessary).[7] Yet for the purposes of this article, I want to bracket these larger implications in order to focus on the relationship between pattern mixing and questions of cultural power. In particular, I want to examine the contribution of melodramatic elements to the creation of internal hybrids.

On the Conflation of Western and Melodrama

Mixing generic codes can take place at a variety of textual levels and the wide range of potential combinations and conflations indicates that the resulting textual artifact may be at the same time highly unique and structurally complex. In some cases the individual generic ingredients may remain recognizable and the mixture may stress the incompatibilities between them; in others they may begin to blend, superimposing and

finally merging the generic frames to create a new form. Following Thomas Schatz, pattern mixing can involve a genre's iconography, narrative structure, characters, or setting but also the values and conflicts ritualistically worked through and (temporarily) resolved at the end of the film.[8] Indeed, how internal hybrids engage with questions of power primarily depends on how they reconsider and reframe the basic cultural contradictions and themes addressed by the genres that are combined. If it is difficult to make generalizations about specific elements of individual genres—e.g. the function of technology in science fiction or the role of music in musicals—the case of hybrid forms seems to be even more elusive and historically variable. Yet before moving on to a closer investigation of a selected group of historical examples, a few introductory remarks on the conflation of western and melodrama may be helpful.

Within the context of the ritual approach and terminology developed by Thomas Schatz, the conflation brings together a genre of determinate space, in which conflicts are caused by a specific setting, with a genre of indeterminate space emphasizing the clash of individual and civilization. The struggle for control of a (putatively) historical environment in the western is combined with the potentially more abstract conflict between an individual and his or her cultural context in the melodrama. Consequently, the values of social order, enforced and upheld by means of violence, are juxtaposed with the values of social integration which, at least as an ideal, may result from the recognition of having been unjustly victimized.[9] In order to understand the allusion to the determinate space of the western, iconographic markers (such as cowboy hats and revolvers) and elements from the setting (such as horses and a visual cue of limitless natural space) appear to be indispensable. The melodramatic code, on the other hand, is less bound to a concrete physical environment. Rather it is related to an interpersonal or systemic constellation that causes the suffering and victimization of an individual character who then struggles to find ways and means of expressing his or her predicament.[10]

Thus the pattern mixing of western and melodrama creates a semiotic struggle over the meaning of *space*, which cannot maintain its form in terms of the respective generic traditions but has to be adjusted and changed. In contrast to the spatial dimension, the temporality of the compound seems to be less controversial. Both the western and the melodrama are at heart backward-looking, often nostalgic genres emphasizing a sense of loss and creating pity for characters who, through forces such as modernization and urbanization, have become victims or outsiders.[11] If the crucial struggle, then, is over the meaning of space, it is easy to see that gendered conceptions of these competing spaces exist

which can be traced to cultural precursors like sentimental literature or James Fenimore Cooper's historical novels.[12] The sentimental notion of home or domestic space as a feminine sphere is contrasted with the open western spaces in which virile actions take place. The mixing of western and melodrama thus opens up an imaginary third space in which the gender typologies of the two genres may be questioned and redefined, thereby contaminating the putative purity of traditional gender roles.

One of the crucial cultural functions of these forms of pattern mixing, then, is to engage in a more open (and often more liberal) discourse on sexuality and gender identities, creating indeed internal hybrids that contest and attack the status quo. Yet, it is important to realize that the reconceptualization of certain ideological tenets also goes beyond questions of sexuality and that internal hybrids are also interesting for their aesthetic ruptures and tensions that distinguish them from the more unified and coherent examples of generic purity. Indeed the mixture of western and melodrama seems to create a paradoxical conflation that blocks an easy form of ritualistic resolution and instead highlights the sense of an insurmountable impasse or *aporia*. Within the melodramatic tradition the status of home as an unattainable yet highly valued ideal of innocence is critically undermined since the westerner can only make his (usually temporary) home in the space between civilization and wilderness, and thus beyond the reach of a civilizing feminine influence.[13] For the western tradition, on the other hand, the mythological dimension of the westerner as a (highly ideologized) representative of national promise, independence and freedom is deconstructed by showing him as a victim of society, an emasculated and frequently obsolete character who has lost the power to assert himself (and, by implication, his culture's superiority) by violent means.[14] Mixing the western and the melodrama thus contaminates crucial generic elements such as home, freedom, and independence and, as a result, may serve to challenge dominant gender roles and to engage with a crisis of national identity.

Barry Langford has argued that the standard genre histories of the western have focused too exclusively on the prestige A-productions from the late 1930s to the 1950s, neglecting the vast output of pre-war B-westerns or series-westerns. Though the western is usually seen to be a relatively pure genre, Langford's critique indicates that the choice of films to make up a representative sample usually attests to a certain cultural bias—in this case the selection of sophisticated "adult" westerns, which, judging from the total output of western films, may be less typical than hitherto assumed. Still, the broad outlines of the western genre's history as becoming more self-reflexive, until filmmakers from the New Hollywood

Cinema began to rework and revise its traditional codes in the late 1960s, seem to be commonly accepted.[15] Indeed, I want to argue that the 1960s may be seen as a period of transition, in which the emergence of internal hybrids mixing western and melodrama contributed to the recodification of the western genre.

However, my primary interest is not to engage in a general discussion of genre history but rather to contrast the genre hybrid *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969)—framed by a brief analysis of *The Misfits* (John Huston, 1961) and *Lonesome Cowboys* (Andy Warhol, 1968)—with the more recent example *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), which in its fictional space recalls the 1960s and thus may serve as a retrospective counterpoint to the earlier interrogations of this critical cultural and film-historical period.[16] In both cases the function of melodrama is to question gender roles, in particular concepts of masculinity and male identity. Yet, I want to argue that the discourse on homosexuality opened up by these internal hybrids differs markedly: While *Midnight Cowboy* in its heterogeneous aesthetic form negotiates the contradictory political and cultural aspirations of classical mainstream cinema, Underground film and the New Hollywood Cinema, *Brokeback Mountain* appears to be much more concerned with the classical cinema's ideal of aesthetic unity.[17]

This formal and stylistic difference—on the one hand intensifying the awareness of pattern mixing, on the other reducing it—creates very unique forms of hybridity. It also serves to reinvestigate the image of the 1960s. *Midnight Cowboy* presents this period as a time of sexual liberation (though less joyful than angst-ridden and pathological) and the mythology of the westerner as exhausted and ridiculous. *Brokeback Mountain*, in effect, inverts this pattern: It recalls the 1960s as a rigidly intolerant time and retraditionalizes the view of nature as a space in which the true identity of the westerner may find its expression and a temporary home. Both films may thus be seen as internal hybrids challenging dominant gender stereotypes, but they draw on the respective generic traditions in very different ways. While *Midnight Cowboy* stresses the clash between various representational strategies, *Brokeback Mountain* tends to harmonize them, drawing on the sentimental melodrama to make the implicitly homoerotic relationship of western heroes more explicit but not threatening.

Pattern Mixing in the 1960s: *The Misfits* and *Lonesome Cowboys*

In many respects the 1960s can be seen as a time of transition for the cinema: The demise of the studio system created far-reaching structural and institutional changes, while hitherto marginalized or neglected cultural spheres—such as exploitation filmmaking, Underground film, the European new waves, or television—began to have a more noticeable effect on mainstream Hollywood narratives.[18] As the culture industry was breaking up (only to reorganize itself in the 1970s), the consensus that dominant American myths and ideologies could be upheld by seamless filmic texts crumbled accordingly. One of the crucial films to address this feeling of disillusionment in the early decade was *The Misfits*, written by Arthur Miller and directed by John Huston. Mixing elements from the western and the melodrama, it can be seen as an early interrogation and revision of the western genre, if not, through the prominent placement of Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable, of a whole cinematic tradition. Contrasting it with *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), John Barsness called it "the first film (not, in all probability, the best) to recognize an implicit need to treat the West in other than mythic patterns."[19]

The central symbolism of the film revolves around the concept of not fitting in, of being a misfit. It applies to Roslyn (Marilyn Monroe), the divorcee suffering from the vulgar desires she creates in men, to Gay (Clark Gable), the ageing cowboy who tries to defend the ideals of independence and freedom against the encroachments of modern life, and to Perce (Montgomery Clift), the self-destructive drifter and rodeo rider. It also applies to the minor characters Guido (Eli Wallach) and Isabelle (Thelma Ritter), who are both longing for, but disappointed by, love, and, finally, to the wild mustang horses hunted down in the climactic sequence at the end. Gay even calls them "misfit horses," thereby stressing the metaphorical character of the animals as well as, by implication, of the human beings that chase them.

In his classic analysis, Robert Warshow described the westerner's air of loneliness and melancholy as an integral part of his heroic stance, maintaining at once his distance to the female sphere and his position in a potentially limitless natural space. *The Misfits* is also pervaded by a sense of loneliness, but it takes on a more extreme form. By merging the western codes with the melodrama the westerner is recast as a victim of society and this sense of victimization shifts his indigenous loneliness to the more profound feeling of disillusionment and despair. If, as Isabelle indicates, cowboys are the last "real men," then the final scenes of the film in which

they undertake the pointless hunt of the few remaining wild horses—as opposed to hundreds in the "old days"—demonstrate that the natural resources allowing men to prove themselves have vanished. Modern society has destroyed the westerner's natural environment and is irrevocably encroaching on his freedom. Roslyn and Perce, who accept the damaging consequences of this constellation, represent the melodramatic forces at work in the film. They are trying to kindle Gay's feelings of empathy for the creatures, whose death would not change the westerner's situation but only delay the realization of his status as a victimized outsider.

The generic codes of the western are primarily introduced through iconography, setting, and action: the Nevada desert, the bull-riding, the hunting of mustang horses. Yet they immediately radiate a broken and contaminated quality, ill-fitting in a hybrid generic frame that eventually privileges the forces that make a traditional western story impossible.[20] The urban space of Reno as well as Roslyn's divorce belong to a modern world inhospitable to the westerner and other characters like Guido, the car mechanic and ex-bomber pilot, who calls up the idealized masculine space of the combat film genre. Gay expresses his desire to go to the country in order to be able to live, yet once the group arrives in Guido's half-built house, its incomplete state, just like the misfit horses, serves to highlight, rather than defuse the feeling of alienation.[21] Though the notion of home fuels the yearning for a different, a better life, it is shown to be a vain hope, an illusion irrevocably destroyed by the experiences of all the major and minor characters.

In Roslyn's case, the suffering is made explicit from the beginning, making her the central emotionalizing, and, within the story's parameters, feminizing force of the film—protecting the animals' rights to live, crying as Perce, joyfully it seems, hurts himself. But the men, too, have a (melodramatic) longing for home affecting their gender identities. Gay, in a drunken stupor, is deserted by his children and pathetically cries out, while Perce displays his hysterical personality as the group first meets him talking on the phone with his mother (later revealing a smoldering conflict with his step-father). In this sense, as an attack on the ideology of the American family as an idealized social unit, the film continues the critical tradition of the social melodrama that began in the late 1920s and gained renewed strength, on the stage and in the cinema, after the war.[22] The subordinated groups (from Staiger's definition) mixing genres "to dialogue with or criticize the dominant"[23] are socially conscious writers like Arthur Miller (and other artists such as Tennessee Williams or Elia Kazan whose subordinated status was often, though not always openly,

related to questions of ethnicity and sexual orientation) who use the strategy of pattern mixing to question dominant notions of masculinity and femininity as the basic building blocks of culture and society— demythologizing American ideals and dreams by recounting broken promises and futile aspirations.[24]

However, there is a further dimension to the film that makes it a complex and interesting example of internal hybridity. As Guido visits Gay and Roslyn who have begun to renovate his half-built house in the desert, he looks into one of the closets in their bedroom. Briefly, he notices glamorous photographs of Marilyn Monroe from the 1950s, tacked against the inside. Roslyn quickly closes the door, yet this brief scene makes the film-historical intertextuality of *The Misfits* explicit. The hybridity of the film is not only meant to deconstruct gender identities, it also consciously mixes character and star persona, fictional illusion and non-fictional reference. With Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe, and Montgomery Clift, two generations of film acting and Hollywood stardom are brought into an ambiguous collision. Gable is reenacting his persona of a domineering and controlling masculinity—the script even includes a breakfast scene similar to his pairing with Claudette Colbert in *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934)—but is figuratively, and in the final scenes almost literally, losing his grip on this image. Monroe nervously shifts between enticing siren, mature actress, and victim of the male gaze, making an autobiographical reading of the film almost inevitable. Finally, Clift with his searching performance, externalizing his repressed inner struggle, most convincingly demonstrates that the character types and genre forms of the classical Hollywood era are exhausted, superseded by a more fragile image of masculinity. Creating an internal hybrid with *The Misfits* thus serves a double purpose: it allows Miller and Huston to reinvestigate and redefine hegemonic gender identities but at the same time to reflect upon the cinematic imagination as a major component contributing to their hegemonic form.

If *The Misfits* can be seen as a critical interrogation of mainstream cinematic traditions, the 1960s also saw the rise of feature-length Underground films entering into an intertextual and intercultural dialogue with Hollywood.[25] Here, too, creating mixed forms was a crucial strategy for the deconstruction of dominant gender identities, although the aim was much more explicitly a transformation of sexual norms. In 1968 Andy Warhol (with Paul Morrissey) directed *Lonesome Cowboys*, a "loony Western parody"[26] that also represents an internal hybrid in Staiger's sense. Although the film relied much less than *The Misfits* on melodramatic elements—primarily in its exaggerated and excessive

performances, which in contrast to mainstream melodrama are deliberately camp—it belonged to the contextual frame of 1960s cinema, against which a production like *Midnight Cowboy* (to be discussed in the next section) had to position itself. Indeed, the parodistic stance vis-à-vis the western genre, rather than its melodramatic hybridization, enabled it much more forcefully to perform a radical break with established narrative traditions, and, by negation, to contribute to an alternative imaginary realm of gay cinema.[27]

As with other Warhol films, the break in *Lonesome Cowboys* occurs at two levels: first, by drawing upon certain generic western stereotypes—the setting, horses, costumes—and then changing their signifying function, queering them by means of performance. Indeed, right from the beginning, the film creates the sense of being a disrespectful travesty, an attack on the mainstream as much as a subcultural ritual. Second, and from today's perspective perhaps more importantly, *Lonesome Cowboys* creates a temporally and spatially discontinuous, ruptured aesthetic that stresses its deviation from Hollywood's norm of continuity and unified seamlessness. The camera frequently pans and zooms, yet these movements are not in support of a dramatic story but rather inspect and observe parts of the actor's bodies; furthermore, jump cuts stress a temporally discontinuous narrative. Alternating with this sense of fragmentation and disruption are long takes—creating a sense of immediacy and contingency, stressing the aimlessness of conversations and the mysterious dynamic of "real life"—which the Warholian underground aesthetic at this point shares with documentary film.[28]

While these stylistic and narrative devices bring out much more strongly than the aesthetic of *The Misfits* a notion of alterity, the mixture of genre elements attests to the changing representation of sexuality in the 1960s. A woman (Viva as the female lead Ramona) and her (gay) male companion find themselves in a deserted western ghost town. They meet a group of cowboys who at times remain separate, at times interact with Ramona. In their separate camp the men negotiate the nature and intensity of their bonding—ranging from loving couples to scenes of aggression and jealousy. Eventually two of the newly arrived young men decide to move to California, leaving behind the disappointed group. The interaction with Ramona, on the other hand, is primarily violent and aggressive. She constantly teases the men—sometimes alluding to their fragile masculinity which the film's parodistic stance has foregrounded—and they finally try to rape her.[29]

However, as indicated, the fragmented narrative is less linear and logical than this may sound. At one point in the film, the Sheriff changes

into women's clothes, and the whole group, including Ramona, begins to dance. Many other scenes, including long conversations between the young men who have joined the male community, have an episodic quality that eschews formal coherence. As they talk about their haircuts and shirts, filmed in close shots, the iconography of the westerner is introduced as a mere combination of signs, a masquerade and disguise used to titillate and play with. Following Jack Stevenson, these scenes are an obvious reflection on, and variation of, the tradition of "physique cinema," posing films that were shot (for the home market) "in a look-but-don't-touch aesthetic."[30] Beautiful half-naked men flexing their muscles or fighting playfully were shown in these films to which *Lonesome Cowboys* adds the western setting, their conversations, and a more knowing narcissistic self-awareness of being an object for the camera's gaze.[31]

At the same time, the representation of sexuality is gradually moving towards pornography, and the hybrid quality of *Lonesome Cowboys* is also created by the conflation of western codes and the explicit depiction of sexual acts (though at this point still soft-core). As Ramona and a young man (Tom Hompertz) are trying to make love, the ambiguous (and often derogatory) function of woman as both seductress and threat to male bonding is played out in the realm of bodily contact and communication.[32] However, as Stevenson indicates, even though *Lonesome Cowboys* partially thrives on the spectacle and attraction of showing sexual acts, in the end it is more intellectually inclined than pornographic: "Films like *Flaming Creatures, Scorpio Rising, My Hustler*, and *Lonesome Cowboys* had always been art films masquerading as sex films."[33] The internal hybrid created by Warhol's (and Morrissey's) film thus primarily aims at the parodistic and performative deconstruction of male stereotypes, and it achieves this end by queering western codes of male behavior, and by a disruptive experimental narrative.

Urban Victims: *Midnight Cowboy*

I have argued so far that films like *The Misfits* and *Lonesome Cowboys* can be regarded as internal hybrids in Staiger's definition, i.e. as attempts to challenge gender identities from a minority perspective by mixing generic codes. For the 1960s they suggest a cultural and cinematic redefinition of gender, which took the presumed purity and stability of western codes as its point of departure and then went on to dismantle them, on the one hand, by means of parody and "aberrant" forms of sexuality and, on the other hand, via the melodramatic discourse of victimization. This latter strategy for creating hybrid forms became the

central device of *Midnight Cowboy*, the John Schlesinger film from 1968 recounting the story of young Joe Buck (Jon Voight), who moves from a small town in Texas to New York City in order to become a success, only to experience a prolonged period of decline and disintegration—ranging from sexual exploitation, distrust, poverty, and self-abuse to the core melodramatic constellation of being unable to establish and maintain a home.

Through its heterogeneous stylistic elements as well as the scenes of a Factory-like party (including, incidentally, Viva and Paul Morrissey) *Midnight Cowboy* was trying to negotiate a complex aesthetic and cultural position between the melodramatic hybridization of the western and its deconstructive travesty in the Underground cinema. In contrast to *The Misfits*, which seemed to signal an endpoint of long-held self-delusions (and, in retrospect, as both Clark Gable's and Marilyn Monroe's last film, it indeed represented an ending), *Midnight Cowboy* was indicative of a beginning as one of the first movies from the New Hollywood Cinema to capture the new youth audience and to prove the commercial viability of more daring and innovative films.[34] Viewed today, it exhibits some of the faddish preoccupations of late 1960s cinematic storytelling—like the youth-oriented pop soundtrack and the mildly funny fantasy sequences with the two main protagonists—which create an overloaded and cluttered impression. Yet these diverse elements may also be interpreted as signs of overdetermination shaping an anxiety-ridden filmic text that is at the same time upholding and undermining the image of the westerner, linking "perverse" forms of sexuality with urban life, and questioning the hold of cinematic myths of masculinity on the cultural imagination.

At the time perceptive critics such as Stephen Farber found fault with the film's stance of condescension towards his main character Joe Buck, who is presented as a hick and "pathetic, put-upon schnook."[35] In particular the bus ride from Texas to New York City (accompanied by the ubiquitous theme-song "Everybody's Talking") bears this assessment out as Joe is seen to be listening to a portable radio with growing enthusiasm, while the up-coming hostility of strangers is already foreshadowed by a few brusque encounters. The basic dramatic situation also rehearses the somewhat stale story of an optimistic yet naive and innocent hero moving from the country to the big city to make his fortune, only to experience defeat. But despite the triteness of its formula *Midnight Cowboy*, as a mixture of western and melodramatic elements, does manage to open up a discursive space that, just like *The Misfits*, critically addresses the relationship between cinematic representation and questions of gender.

One of the crucial reversals taking place is the movement from the west to the (eastern) city. The west as an open, mythological space has vanished, transplanting the westerner into an alien environment where he becomes a victim of sophistication and the tough city life. However, as Joe Buck mentions, he is a "not for real" cowboy—a young man consciously trying to model himself after the cinematic western heroes. The function of Joe as an iconographic quote from a bygone tradition is thus more obvious than in *The Misfits*. This may also be the point where Farber's feeling of condescension is rooted: The critical reflection upon the genre's history within the film's omniscient parts is more sophisticated than the main character's awareness of it, making him at the same time pitiable and pathetic. For example, the film begins in a deserted drive-in cinema, the camera zooming out to reveal a huge, empty screen in the glaring daylight, while galloping horses and shouting cowboys are heard on the soundtrack. At once establishing the importance of the cinema for the creation of collective images and nostalgically marking its decline as a cultural institution (later scenes take place in the cinema but more often in front of television sets), this brief exposition frames all subsequent scenes involving the western iconography as a mixture of homage and anachronistic masquerade.

Various events indicate that Joe Buck's story, and the hybrid form in which it is told, is meant to be understood, on the one hand, as a realistically presented yet melodramatically inflected tale, and on the other hand, as an allegorical depiction of the all-American self caught between the bleak reality of urban space and the moral "perversion" of contemporary (urban) youth cultures. At one point, Joe's companion Enrico "Ratso" Rizzo (Dustin Hoffman), with whom he shares a dilapidated flat in an abandoned building, remarks that the way Joe dresses—what Ratso calls Joe's "cowboy crap"—is "faggots' stuff." Hurt and surprised, Joe defends himself that John Wayne is "no fag," yet the film's depiction of male prostitution (the 42nd Street milieu) and the references to the dangerous allure of the sexually liberated underground seem to indicate an irreversible process of cultural re-signification. The return to a simpler, more innocent past via the (cinematic) role model of the westerner (a poster of Paul Newman in cowboy gear is tacked to the side of Joe's mirror) appears to be forever blocked. If the all-American boy has degenerated to a "cowboy whore," the crisis of masculinity is allegorized as a national crisis.

In contrast to *The Misfits*, this shift from hetero- to homosexuality is the most radical break with earlier hybridizations of western and melodrama. Prefiguring later depictions of New York City (e.g. in Martin

Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* from 1976), *Midnight Cowboy* juxtaposes its narcissistic male protagonist with panic-stricken memories of violent rape and a pathological interdependence of religion, sexuality, and money. Many allusions in its fast-paced narrative remain fragmentary, yet the objectification of men hustling on 42nd street is established explicitly by shot/reverse-shot editing patterns that are usually indicative of the male gaze—an active male protagonist watching and objectifying a woman. In these scenes the film's status as an internal hybrid is foregrounded by drawing on the editing shorthand of sexual desire but shifting it into an all-male environment.

If *Midnight Cowboy* is understood as an allegorical depiction of a crisis of masculinity, the relationship between Joe and Ratso represents the crucial melodramatic constellation at the core of the narrative, a story of male bonding between two outsiders—the all-American stud and the crippled son of Italian immigrants. Yet, as Stephen Farber indicates, it remains insulated against the connotations of a gay subculture: "The whole relationship with Ratso has very indirect, almost furtive suggestions of homosexuality that are quickly glossed over."[36] The two protagonists are victimized by a hostile and alien environment threatening their survival and making it impossible for them to create a decent home. As a consequence, they are forced to enter into the trappings of hustling or the sexually liberated underground. Eventually they can only free themselves by leaving the city, thereby upholding the ideologically charged ideal of a simpler, healthier, and more innocent way of life. However, just as they are approaching their destination, the weakened Ratso dies and the film concludes with the "tragic" impossibility of maintaining male friendships.

Ratso dies as Joe is discarding his cowboy gear on their way to Florida, and this anchors the hybrid form firmly in the melodramatic discourse. Not only is the feeling of victimization made manifest and visible with Ratso's lifeless body (and the indifferent reaction of the other passengers on the bus), the climactic point of Ratso's death also displaces the "threat" that their relationship could imply more than just "innocent camaraderie."[37] In this way, the basic pattern of *Midnight Cowboy* appears to be rather traditional. It shares two crucial elements with the woman's film (e.g. the maternal melodrama) but also with the melodramatic depiction of masculinity in the prison films (both beginning in the silent era but gaining complexity in the early 1930s).[38] On the one hand, overpowering external forces beyond the control of the main protagonists compel them to indulge—temporarily and without affecting their basic innocence—in transgressive forms of behavior and experience. On the other hand, these forces also foreclose the possibility of creating an

ordinary home, which would signify recognition by, and integration into, mainstream culture.[39]

In contrast to (some of) the older melodramatic narratives, *Midnight Cowboy* does not enter into a deeper analysis of the overpowering social and cultural forces but rather presents the two main protagonists as outsiders—either belonging to an ethnic group suffering from discrimination or economic deprivation, or to a rural milieu incapable of comprehending urban sophistication (and shrewdness). Joe's misplaced cowboy outfit thus initiates a contradictory process of signification not atypical of the New Hollywood Cinema. As a quote from the western genre it recalls the seeming simplicity of a bygone era evoking a feeling of nostalgia. Yet as a deliberate masquerade shown to be incongruous in its urban context, it also provokes a hostile mainstream reaction to an individual life-style which could be interpreted by a countercultural audience as a comment on its own marginalized status in the late 1960s. In the end, however, the melodramatic discourse—creating pity for the failed longings and naive aspirations of the protagonist—serves to contain and normalize the subversive implications of the underground milieu alluded to in the film. *Midnight Cowboy*, then, does not aim for the level of formal and thematic disruption of *Lonesome Cowboys*, but it nevertheless manages to create an internal hybridity that, in its heterogeneous representation of fragile and ambiguous masculine identities, is expressive of a genuine cultural struggle.

Rural Victims: *Brokeback Mountain*

If *Midnight Cowboy* transplanted the westerner—in this case a "not for real cowboy"—into an urban environment to initiate his transgressive experiences, *Brokeback Mountain*, based on a short story by Annie Proulx, returns to the wide open spaces of the western genre. Set in rural Wyoming (and Texas) in the 1960s and covering a time span of twenty years, the film represents a remarkably faithful literary adaptation (though with some crucial changes) of an unhappy love story between two young men—Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal). They meet while herding sheep together but in subsequent years are reunited only occasionally while leading separate lives in heterosexual relationships. Like *Midnight Cowboy*, the film mixes melodramatic and western codes to create an internal hybrid interrogating gender identities; moving beyond the earlier production it narrates an openly acknowledged homosexual relationship. Yet, I would argue that, juxtaposed with the notion of hybridity from the 1960s, *Brokeback Mountain* redefines two

crucial aspects: On the one hand, it recalls the 1960s, not as a time of sexual liberation but as a time of repression and violence; on the other hand, it retraditionalizes the function of natural space by suggesting that finding one's true self may be achieved in the vast open space of (American) nature.

Consequently, although the film may at first appear to be a plea for tolerance concerning sexual preferences, both redefinitions give it a more ambiguous and politically conservative twist. The first redefinition—the repression thesis—rewrites the discourse of sexual liberation that the New Hollywood Cinema had advocated. The second redefinition—the retraditionalization of nature—restabilizes codes from the western genre which the films in the 1960s seemed to have irrevocably undermined. Thus, although *Brokeback Mountain* openly presents a story of homosexual love, it also continues the tradition of preemptively insulating itself against possible attacks: by creating a distance to the countercultural discourse on sexuality of the 1960s and by reaffirming traditional myths about the cultural role of nature.

The function of melodrama in this process of negotiating the film's position vis-à-vis the cultural mainstream is equally ambiguous. The atmosphere of repression fuels the emotional impact of the film, forcing the male protagonists to disavow and suppress their true desire and turning them into pitiable victims of intolerance and violence. Yet, by displacing their struggle with overpowering forces into the mythical realm of western nature, *Brokeback Mountain* also depoliticizes its implications. Symbolizing at the same time a space of sexual transgression and a reaffirmed traditional realm of male identity formation, the natural environment signifies a deliberate but also, in the end, unthreatening escape fantasy.

The film is thus partially working against the western genre revisions and parodies of the 1960s, and it is also aiming for a different aesthetic form. In contrast to the disruptive and experimental narratives of Underground film or the cluttered and heterogeneous aesthetic of the New Hollywood Cinema, *Brokeback Mountain* follows the classical cinema's ideal of stylistic and dramatic unity. All of the major narrative parameters—like mise-en-scène, the continuity of time and space, the use of diegetic and extra-diegetic music, make-up or costumes—are employed to aid in the illusion of a nostalgically reimagined time gone by. The presentation of beautiful young actors as the main protagonists (one deviation from Annie Proulx's less prettified local color realism) might be an allusion to the history of "physique cinema," yet it evokes less the tradition of posing films than the contemporary aesthetic of advertising, shared also by the long shots of sublime natural environments.[40] One

major difference, then, with regard to *Midnight Cowboy* is the sense of unity and closure achieved in spite of the film's generic hybridity. The western elements—clothing, tending animals, the relation between man and the natural environment—are seamlessly merged with the melodramatic battlefield of domestic space.

In contrast to Proulx's story, the feminine sphere gains visibility and importance, yet it is the men's inability and impossibility of creating a common home that causes the overriding sense of suffering and denial. In their makeshift home on top of Brokeback Mountain (recalling similar scenes of cooking and eating in *Midnight Cowboy*), their performances are characterized by evasive glances and tongue-tied conversations signifying the difficulties of expressing (true) feelings. But they gradually overcome their inhibitions until their first sexual encounter makes clear that this relationship goes beyond the typical rituals of male bonding, which usually privilege the sphere of action over the sphere of communication.

This shift to an open, yet in the larger cultural context impossible homosexual relationship is the most obvious way of undermining the westerner's hegemonic gender identity. Other traditional character traits are also affected by this process of hybridization. Although both Ennis and Jack are shown to be engaged in typical activities supposedly asserting their masculinity—from rodeo to fist-fights—the function of violence is more complex. For the classical western films Robert Warshow argued that the genre represented an accepted cultural way of introducing violence as a creative, civilizing influence. In *Brokeback Mountain*, on the other hand, violence becomes primarily a destructive force, a form of patriarchal punishment making alternative life-styles impossible. Ennis recalls the lynching of a gay couple of which he suspects his father to have been one of the perpetrators, while Jack, who dies at the end of the film, becomes a victim of the same type of rural violence symbolizing intolerance and hatred of sexual difference. Both protagonists are thus victimized, Jack actively and Ennis passively—the latter having internalized the patriarchal law of repression through the traumatic and complicitous experience of witnessing the scene of the crime.

The melodramatic discourse of victimization is an integral part of Annie Proulx's story, but the film adaptation adds to it a layer of conventional moralism that helps to contain some of the rougher local color elements of the story. This is how Ennis and Jack first meet: Ennis leaning motionless against a wall with his hat pulled down, Jack kicking his old truck as he exits from it. Ennis is wearing a white hat, Jack's hat is black; Ennis continues to stand shy and motionless while Jack, with a self-confident, inviting pose, gazes at him openly and with curiosity.

Shot/reverse-shot-patterns of this type, expressive of sexual desire, are repeated over the course of the film, yet the first few expository scenes establish Jack as the aggressive evil seducer—the villain—and Ennis as the passive and innocent victim. After their first sexual encounter, Proulx's original version indicates that "without saying anything about it both knew how it would go for the rest of the summer, sheep be damned."[41] The film, however, has Ennis leave the camp to return to the sheep—accompanied, on the soundtrack, by foreboding and ominous sounding notes—only to find one of the lambs killed. As he is watching the bloody and ravaged body of the dead animal, he is metaphorically looking at himself, a wounded creature forced into an act of sinfulness. In contrast to the short story, but in accordance with the hybrid tradition of *Midnight Cowboy*, *Brokeback Mountain* thus superimposes the transgression of homosexuality with the religious discourse of good and evil, making homosexuality at the same time appear to be a sin and a disease in need of being "fixed."[42]

At the end of the film, the conflation of western and melodrama achieves its most intense and convincing form. As Ennis watches, yearningly, a postcard of Brokeback Mountain tacked to the side of his and Jack's shirts, hanging in a silent embrace, the melodramatic discourse about loss—lost time, lost love, the unbearable loss of a partner through death—merges with the existential loneliness and melancholy of the westerner, compressed, at this point, into a brief and universal moment of affective power.[43] Yet concerning its cultural politics, the internal hybridity of *Brokeback Mountain*, and in particular the contribution of its melodramatic elements, appears to be more ambiguous. Though not as angst-ridden as *Midnight Cowboy*, the melodrama of *Brokeback Mountain* seems to be a crucial strategy, not only for emotionalizing the "daring" topic of sexual transgression but also for containing its more radical implications.[44] It contributes to a process that I have called *preemptive insulation*: the attempt to gauge preemptively the reaction of the public to a depiction of taboo subjects and to adjust the aesthetic design accordingly so as not to challenge and alienate the viewers.[45] Recalling the 1960s, *Brokeback Mountain* criticizes the intolerance of rural societies, yet at the same time it revivifies the mythology of finding one's true self in the vast space of American nature, thus affirming an anti-urban ideology deeply rooted in the same imaginary realm. While the film thus movingly recounts the unhappy love story between two men, the melodramatic discourse of sinfulness and disease (or involuntary infection) frames the "perversion" in conventional homophobic terms—though victims, they deserve to be punished for an aberrant form of behavior.

The Ambiguous Cultural Politics of Melodrama

To conclude, the conflation of generic codes from the western and the melodrama, which, following Janet Staiger, I have called internal hybrids in this article, can be seen as a cultural strategy of breaking taboos. In the examples discussed, hybridity helps to question traditional concepts—and filmic representations—of masculinity and femininity, including sexual orientation, but also of related categories like ethnicity and social class. Undermining and redefining western codes comments on larger issues related to national identity and the utopian promises of a cultural archetype—the westerner—seen to be taking American civilization to the wilderness. Conversely, the conflation also reframes the discourse on the innocence of home at the heart of the melodrama. Both ideals—the national promise of the westerner and the purifying quality of home—are at risk in the hybrid forms.

For the internal dynamic of the mixtures, I have argued that the melodramatic elements can be seen as the decisive way of breaking up the western codes from within, of introducing alien elements and thus infiltrating the (supposed) purity of a classic genre. In Linda Williams's assessment sketched at the beginning of this article this might be seen as yet another contribution of the melodramatic mode to a democratization of American culture. However, I believe that my results are more contradictory. If opening up discussions about gender, sexuality, and the nation can indeed be seen as an important step for the transformation of cultural values and ideologies, what I have called preemptive insulation may also make the aesthetics of challenging hegemonic culture into a force of complicity and cooptation. Thus, the cultural politics of hybrid forms based partially on the melodrama may, on the one hand, aid in the critical deconstruction of dominant concepts and ideologies, but, on the other hand, they may also be delimited by the desire of appealing to and being recognized by mainstream culture.

This is where genre mixtures and genre parodies seem to part ways: If the democratization of culture is seen to be a process furthered by the emancipatory treatment of themes as well as its aesthetic form, then *Brokeback Mountain* primarily appears to generate the desire for new fictions, while *Lonesome Cowboys* attempts to disturb and readjust our frames of perception. In contrast to the underground aesthetic of rupture and discontinuity, the aesthetic unity of *Brokeback Mountain* can be seen as an attempt to create a stylistic and formal analogy for the hoped for, yet impossible union of the couple. The ending—the death of the loved one—creates shock and sadness yet the sense of stylistic unity and closure

achieved by the film offers itself to the viewer as a substitutionary object.[46] As Steve Neale has argued about the melodramatic form, the sad ending refuels the hopes for the next encounter with a similar fiction and thus returns us, again and again, to stories about separation, loss, and imaginary reunion.[47] The aesthetics and politics of internal hybrids must therefore ultimately be related to the difficult, if not antagonistic, relation between underground and mainstream cinema. I have suggested that the melodrama can be seen as one way of introducing controversial underground material and of negotiating its position vis-à-vis the mainstream. If this implies a constant crossing-over and translation of cultural material, then it should also be clear that the study of internal hybrids points to a contrary, more hostile and less reconciliatory logic. Using melodramatic codes to create internal hybrids is firmly anchored in a consensus oriented, integrative, and commercial ideology of the cinema and its cultural functions to which the practices and representational forms of avant-garde and underground films stand not just in opposition but in contempt. If the new cultural paradigm of the melodrama as a democratizing force is to gain acceptance and recognition, then it seems to me that this intracultural rift—and the powerful contradictions it entails—will have to be interrogated more comprehensively.

Notes

[1] As Linda Williams puts it, "Melodrama can be viewed, then, not as a genre, an excess, or an aberration, but as what most often typifies popular American narrative in literature, stage, film, and television when it seeks to engage with moral questions. It is the best example of American culture's (often hypocritical) attempt to construct itself as the locus of innocence and virtue" (Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001, 17). It does so by presenting a "story that generates sympathy for a hero who is also a victim and that leads to a climax that permits the audience, and usually other characters, to recognize that character's moral value" (Linda Williams. "Melodrama Revised." In *Refiguring American Film Genres. History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998, 58). For the discourse on the melodrama in literature and film see Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976; John G. Cawelti. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance. Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976; Thomas Elsaesser. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama." In *Movies and Methods, Volume II. An* Anthology, ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1985, 165-189; Christine Gledhill.

"The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation." In *Home Is Where the Heart Is. Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's* Film, ed. Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1987, 5-39.

[2] See Janet Staiger. "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History." In *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003, 185-199.

[3] For a recent overview of genre theory see John Frow. *Genre*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006; of film genres see Barry Langford. *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005; Steve Neale. *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge, 1999.

[4] See Langford, *Film Genre*, 1-28.

[5] This process of "insulation" is developed in detail in my study of the social melodrama; see Christof Decker. *Hollywoods kritischer Blick: Das soziale Melodrama in der amerikanischen Kultur 1840-1950*. Frankfurt: Campus, 2003.

[6] Staiger, "Hybrid," 197.

[7] On the revisionary discourse within American Studies see John Carlos Rowe. "Post-Nationalism, Globalism, and the New American Studies." *Cultural Critique* 40 (Fall 1998): 11-28; Heinz Ickstadt. "American Studies in an Age of Globalization." *American Quarterly* 54.4 (December 2002): 543-562.

[8] See Thomas Schatz. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981, 14-41.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Linda Williams might argue that this sense of victimization is already built into the "pure" structure of many male action genres and thus that this would not necessarily imply a hybrid form. Though this may sometimes be true, I am here more concerned with the narrower understanding of melodrama as a genre, like the woman's film, rather than with Williams's mode of representation. In particular, I am interested in the question of how a seemingly excessive influx of melodrama may usurp and redefine the internal dynamic of a putatively pure type; see Williams, "Melodrama."

[11] See Williams, *Playing*, 10-44.

[12] On the history of these literary forms see Winfried Fluck. *Das kulturelle Imaginäre: Eine Funktionsgeschichte des amerikanischen Romans 1790-1900*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997.

[13] For the importance of the concept of home see Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field" and Williams, "Melodrama."

[14] On the mythology of the western genre see Langford, *Film Genre*, 54-67, and the still pertinent analysis by Robert Warshow. "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner." In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, 401-416.

[15] See Langford, *Film Genre*, 54-67.

[16] A similar juxtaposition is suggested, though not elaborated on, in Roger Clarke's review of *Brokeback Mountain*. See Roger Clarke. "Western Special: Lonesome Cowboys." *Sight and Sound* 16.1 (January 2006): 28-32.

[17] On the formal and narrative elements of classical Hollywood cinema see David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge, 1988.

[18] See Thomas Elsaesser. "American Auteur Cinema: The Last—or First—Picture Show?" In *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwarth, and Noel King. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004, 37-69.

[19] John A. Barsness. "A Question of Standard." *Film Quarterly* 21.1 (Autumn 1967): 37.

[20] At the time, this mixture caused strong criticism. For example, Lawrence Grauman, judging the film to be an artistic failure, wrote, "In the first place, two-thirds of the work is not film at all, merely a photographed melodrama written by a playwright who is obviously sensitive to the requirements of the theater: exaggeration, dependence on dialogue, avoidance of visual or verbal understatement." See Lawrence Grauman, Jr. "*The Misfits*." *Film Quarterly* 14.3 (Spring 1961): 51.

[21] On the different connotations of alienation, in particular alienation of labor, see Paul Blumberg. "Sociology and Social Literature: Work Alienation in the Plays of Arthur Miller." *American Quarterly* 21.2/pt. 2 (Summer 1969): 291-310.

[22] See Decker, *Hollywoods kritischer Blick*, 434-491.

[23] Staiger, "Hybrid," 197.

[24] According to John Barsness, the mixed reaction to the film in the early 1960s was caused by the persistent influence of the western myth: "In the end, it is the failure to view the film *outside* of those pervasive assumptions that confuses the reviewers." See Barsness, "A Question," 35.

[25] See Parker Tyler. *Underground Film. A Critical History*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1995 (1969); David E. James. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, 119-149.

[26] Jack Stevenson. "From the Bedroom to the Bijou: A Secret History of American Gay Sex Cinema." *Film Quarterly* 51.1 (Autumn 1997): 28.

[27] On the history of Underground film in the 1960s see James, *Allegories*; Stevenson, "From the Bedroom;" and the early, critical assessment by Tyler, *Underground Film* (with a short section on the film, 225-228). Incredibly, Clarke mentions that the film is still banned in the UK, which I have been unable to verify. See Clarke, "Western Special."

[28] See Tyler, *Underground Film*, 221-235.

[29] For an analysis of the film within the context of gay cinema and the Warholian universe of "superstars" see Mark Finch. "Rio Limpo: *Lonesome Cowboys* and Gay Cinema." In *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*, ed. Michael O'Pray. London: British Film Institute, 1989, 112-117. The author highlights the difficulties of categorizing the film, which in his opinion is neither a western, nor pornography nor an underground film. Rather, for Finch it is characterized by a detached and passive stance of refusal, a "limpness" (117) permeating the performances.

[30] Stevenson, "From the Bedroom," 25.

[31] The narcissistic connotations of the Underground aesthetic are the central point of Tyler's early critical analysis.

[32] One consequence of the play-acting in films of this kind, in Tyler's view, is a representation that appears to be more open and daring in terms of its sexuality, yet is at the same more detached and virtual. He writes, "Perhaps we have a new sexuality here: the superstar's. This would be a sort of mutually tolerant, good-natured narcissism in which sex is a public demonstration whose feelings are best relished by the participants later on, in the screening room. This goes for homosexual as well as heterosexual playacting. Which is all deeply part of the ambisexuality. Whenever or however someone fucks, he fucks himself as much as another." Tyler, *Underground Film*, 227. However, as Marc Siegel points out, at the time showing these films established important meeting places for queer audiences. See Marc Siegel. "Doing It for Andy." *Art Journal* 62.1 (Spring 2003): 6-13.

[33] Stevenson, "From the Bedroom," 28.

[34] Writing in 1970, Stephen Farber notes about its impact, "The changing movie audience, talked about for a long time, has finally registered its preference with unmistakable clarity. The two favorites of the youth audience last summer, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Easy Rider*, will probably be two of the highest-grossing films of all time." Stephen Farber. "End of the Road?" *Film Quarterly* 23.2 (Winter 1969/1970): 3.

[35] Ibid., 5.

[36] Ibid., 6.

[37] Ibid., 7.

[38] On the terminology of the woman's film and the genre context of the 1930s see Tino Balio. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Enterprise, 1930-1939.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993, 179-312.

[39] See Decker, *Hollywoods kritischer Blick*, 224-309.

[40] See Elisabeth Bronfen. "Die tragische Liebe zweier Cowboys in Ang Lees *Brokeback Mountain.*" *epd Film* 3 (2006): 26-29.

[41] Annie Proulx. "Brokeback Mountain." In *Close Range: Brokeback Mountain and Other Stories.* London: Harper Perennial, 2006, 291.

[42] The condensed, fatalistic moral of the film—"if you can't fix it you've got to stand it"—is taken literally from Proulx's short story (indeed it is its last sentence; see Proulx, "Brokeback," 318). Yet in the story the reference of "it" is more open—it may refer to a repressed desire involuntarily awakened in Ennis or to the cultural context that the couple finds itself in, making a different life-style impossible. The film makes the reference more explicit: As Ennis is initiated into the sinful realm of gay desire, "it" signifies the infection (and subsequent disease) caused by Jack.

[43] At various points in the film, the loneliness of Ennis is underlined by the sound of howling wind in the background (e.g. when his wife mentions that he was lonely as a child, when she reproaches Ennis by calling his friend Jack Nasty, and again as his daughter visits him in his trailer to announce her getting married). Although

this may be a rather obvious way of signaling his existential loneliness, it enlarges the atmospheric space of his last poverty-stricken trailer home and demonstrates that Ennis represents a more real (i.e. less idealized) westerner from the revisionist period.

[44] Roy Grundmann has argued that the film expresses a middle-class morality culminating in the humanist message that "sexual freedom is a human right, whose suppression can be physically and spiritually lethal" (51). On the one hand, *Brokeback Mountain* is "banishing unromantic promiscuity beyond national borders" (52), but on the other hand, it represents an implicit promotion of gay marriage (with Ennis's last words "I swear" as its most obvious indication). Due to this ending (added in the process of adaptation), Grundmann views the film as a "liberal-minded nod to gay mainstream politics" (52); see Roy Grundmann. "Brokeback Mountain." *Cineaste* 31.2 (Spring 2006): 50-52.

[45] Historically, what I call preemptive insulation has its roots in the perfection of self-censorship in the 1930s. My point here is that it not only applies to relatively straightforward genre films but also to genre hybrids. On the history of censorship see Richard Maltby. "The Social Evil, The Moral Order and the Melodramatic Imagination, 1890-1915." In *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1994, 214-230; Decker, *Hollywoods kritischer Blick*, 297-309.

[46] In a related sense, Bronfen suggests that the freedom signified by the postcard at the end is synonymous with the imaginary freedom of the cinema itself; see Bronfen, "Die tragische Liebe zweier Cowboys."

[47] See Steve Neale. "Melodrama and Tears." *Screen* 27.6 (November-December 1986): 6-22.

Passionate Politics:
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from the Early Republic to the Present

Edited by

Ralph J. Poole and Ilka Saal
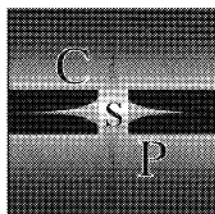
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