BROKEBACK AND OUTBACK

BRIAN MCFARLANE WELCOMES THE LATEST COMEBACK OF THE WESTERN IN TWO DISPARATE GUISES

FROM time to time someone pronounces 'The Western is dead.' Most often, the only appropriate reply is 'Long live the Western!' for in the cinema's history of more than a century no genre has shown greater longevity or resilience. If it was not present at the birth of the movies, it was there shortly after the midwife left and, every time it has seemed headed for the doldrums, for instance in the late 1930s or the 1960s, someone—such as John Ford with *Stagecoach* (1939) or Sergio Leone and, later, Clint Eastwood—comes along and rescues it for art as well as box office. Western film historian and scholar Edward Buscombe, writing in *The BFI Companion to the Western* in 1988, not a prolific period for the Western, wrote: 'So far the genre has always managed to renew itself ... The Western may surprise us yet.'

And so it is currently doing on our screens in two major inflections of the genre: the Australian/UK co-production, John Hillcoat's *The Proposition*, set in
outback Australia in the 1880s; and the US film, Ang Lee’s Brokeback Mountain, set largely in Wyoming in 1963, lurching forwards to the 1980s. It was ever a characteristic of the Western, and a truism of writing about it, that it reflected more about its time of production than of the period in which it was set, that it was a matter of America dreaming about its agrarian past. And if these two new films recall Westerns of the past in, say, iconography or narrative moves, they are both indubitably products of their own times, articulating contemporary notions and stances while securely placing their stories in particular historic moments. For me, the ghost of John Ford hovers over these films, though both would probably have surprised and shocked him in several ways. They each touch on prejudices intransigently held and acted upon in their respective periods (and by no means past history in 2006); they each reveal a Fordian fascination with the landscape; and Brokeback Mountain particularly evokes the classicism of his narrating and shooting style. They are nevertheless far from being just the sum of their influences, however gratefully one seizes on them as upholding what may be the screen’s greatest generic tradition.

The eponymous ‘proposition’, as everyone by now must know, in John Hillcoat’s grim, taxing and utterly compelling film is that put by Captain Stanley (Ray Winstone), English officer in charge of a gaol in a little town in outback Queensland. There has recently been a criminal outrage involving rape and murder and Stanley has captured Charlie Burns (Guy Pearce, note-perfect in his dangerous intensity) and his young brother Mikey (Richard Wilson). Stanley will release Charlie and Mikey if Charlie will find and bring in their psychopathic brother Arthur (Danny Huston), whom Stanley believes to be the chief culprit. If Charlie refuses the proposition, Stanley will hang Mikey on Christmas Day.

The plot, then, contains such characteristic features of the Western paradigm as the quest and the bounty-hunter approach to lawful vengeance. The quest involves Charlie’s long search through unforgivingly harsh country and draws satisfyingly on the complexities of motive involved. ‘We’re family, all of us,’ says Arthur to Charlie in a meditative sunset moment, and Charlie, dispatched to shop one brother for the sake of another, can’t make a truthful response to this. The proposition has been made to him in the name of an oppressive regime and, as the film moves inevitably towards the Christmas reckoning, it seems less and less likely that Charlie will be able to meet its terms.

This central narrative line is certainly engrossing enough, and it echoes so many Westerns in which the protagonist is charged with finding an outlaw and bringing him in, and in the course of the search and the journey the labels of
'hero' and 'villain' become more than a little blurred. The search for Arthur, found lurking in the stony recesses of the outback with the remnants of his gang, recalls Ford's majestic *The Searchers* (1956) as Charlie rides solitarily through rigours of climate and terrain, his motives becoming clouded, as John Wayne's did in the US classic.

The film recalls *The Searchers* in other ways too. Just as it is no longer possible to see Charlie as merely either brutal criminal or, sentimentally, loving brother of the younger Mikey, so too, as Stanley's domestic life is revealed, his wife's picket-fenced garden a fragile bulwark against the hostile environment, it is not possible simply to view him as the tool of a justice system devised in a remote land. The attempts Mrs Stanley (played with a beautiful tremulous composure by Emily Watson) makes to preserve the decorums of meals and hospitality and the garden-buffer against an often appalling reality inevitably recall Martha Edwards (Dorothy Jordan) and any number of other Western wives.

On a second viewing, this touching sense of the relationship between the Stanleys—he trying to protect her from the brutalities that are part of daily life here, she trying to maintain rituals and standards she has learnt in another country—feels like an even more powerful strand of the film's meaning. This is the sort of life that is threatened in such a setting; it also stands for the sort of life that needs to be preserved if civilisation isn't to go under.

Again and again the film's iconography, through the superlative camerawork of AFI-winner Benoit Delhomme, confirms its lineage: there are images of men on horseback against vast natural panoramas; the scruffy town has that air of being arbitrarily plonked down and that lonely edged, half-finished look that Western towns so often had; the Cobb and Co. coach; women watching men ride away. In the case of the squalid shanty presided over by the cultivated drunk, Jellon Lamb (John Hurt—either cruelly aged or victim of cosmetic terrorism), it is not just that it recalls the cantina in *The Searchers* but also that Lamb's film ancestors include all those tippling doctors and newspaper editors who unsteadily upheld old-world erudition in unlikely settings. Lamb quotes George Borrow (now, that's even more unusual in films than in life, I'd say), just prior to holding a knife to Charlie's throat and promising 'Unhand me or I'll slit your fucking throat', orotundity giving way to the needs of the moment.

Just as Ford's Ethan Edwards (Wayne) nurses an obsessive hatred of Indians that occludes his rationality, so this film treats the Aborigines as objects of fear and loathing, as if they scarcely belonged to the same species. Lamb insists, 'We are white men sir, not beasts', just before uttering the threat above, and he speaks
scornfully of how 'Mr Darwin spent time studying the aboriginals. He infers we shared a common heritage—monkeys', his British accents stressing his 'otherness' and his certainty of assumed superiority. Later, having roped Charlie, he asks rhetorically, 'What is an Irishman but a nigger turned inside out?'

The film, both in Hillcoat's direction and singer-songwriter Nick Cave’s screenplay, is too intelligent to let the vile but educated Lamb’s views stand as wholly representative of the colony’s British rulers. In an early scene, a group of Aborigines is led into the gaol in chains, where they are brutally treated by a police sergeant who is ordered out by Stanley. Stanley corrects a colleague by saying of the prisoners that they don't 'hide' in caves, they 'live' there, acknowledging their prior possession of this inhospitable territory. He is not depicted as the 'gutless' man, too weak for the job, that some of his underlings mutter about; he is a man in an ugly place trying to do an ugly job without losing all vestige of decency in the process, and Winstone’s performance magisterially registers every nuance of this complex man. His work is not made easier by Fletcher, his effetely callous supervisor (a bizarrely but effectively cast David Wenham). When six rebel blacks are brought into the gaol, Fletcher orders: 'Do the job I brought you here to do. If you kill one, make sure you kill them all'—that is, to 'avoid their law of reciprocity'.

The hatred and fear of the Indigenous are dispersed over several characters here, rather than being focused in one as it is with Ethan Edwards, but it is alarming in its pervasiveness. The film ends—and at my second viewing (a regular screening rather than a preview), only one other person and I were still present in the cinema—with a series of appalling black-and-white photographs of Aboriginals scattered among the credits, of Aboriginals in chains and of white men beating them. Those in the substantial audience who didn’t wait for the credits missed this statement of, one assumes, the film-makers’ intentions as far as Indigenous people are concerned. They may be seen as capable of vicious action—one neatly spears Charlie above his left nipple—but they are the dispossessed and it is not surprising that they should strike back with whatever comes to hand. And it ought to be added that a spear does less damage (Charlie’s wound is dressed with mud) than a rifle (Charlie’s rifle blows half the Aboriginal’s head away). In a system built on repression and hierarchy they, the original owners of the land—not that they think of themselves as ‘owners’—are pushed to the bottom of the pyramid and they retaliate when and as they can. The Proposition, by not sentimentalising them, by not offering noble-savage images, makes as powerful a statement on their behalf as any Australian film has.
In the film’s production notes, Hillcoat says:

I have always wanted to make an Australian Western. I became convinced that both through the mythic force of the rugged Australian landscape and the country’s brutal history, the legendary power of the Western genre could be reinvented in a specifically Australian context. There are the epic themes of conflict between the law & the outlaw, the oppressor & the oppressed, man & nature. The cruel reality of the Australian frontier is the story of violent conflict; white on white, white on black, black on white, and black on black. Our mission was to depict this Australia as never seen before.

It is not exaggerating to say that he has achieved this aim. The Proposition has created a world of violent action and cruel injustice and of attempts to make something gentler in the face of its hostility—and of not succeeding.

Ang Lee, one of those directors (like, perhaps, Michael Winterbottom) whose every new film arouses pleasurable expectations of genre-crossing and -subversion, has made a Western of classical beauty and tragic stature in Brokeback Mountain. Too much has been written about this as a ‘gay Western’ and even more about how the Western has inveterately espoused homosocial relations between men thrown together in the rigours of frontier living. (Is there anyone alive who wants to hear again about Montgomery Cliff and John Ireland comparing their weapons in Red River?) Let us just accept the fact that in this film two men find a passionate love and need for each other that leaves the rest of their lives looking makeshift, and take it from there.

Lee’s source is Annie Proulx’s brilliant, achingly minimalist short story which in thirty pages encapsulated the desolating trajectory of two interconnected lives. These were lives that had their moments of exhilaration but in the end could find no panacea and no consolation beyond what the tale’s last line stoically accepts: ‘... if you can’t fix it you’ve got to stand it’. The screenplay by Larry McMurtry and co-producer Diana Ossana draws closely on Proulx’s sparing dialogue: they have worked together before on television miniseries derived from McMurtry’s fiction (Dead Man’s Walk, 1996; and The Streets of Laredo, 1995). I’m not familiar with these but what Brokeback Mountain most potently exhalles is the bleak beauty of The Last Picture Show (1972) from McMurtry’s great novel and screenplay. It has the same end-of-things poignancy, with more than a whiff of the tragic.

Like The Proposition, Lee’s film has a lot to do with figures in a landscape. In 1963, two cowboys, Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), about twenty years old, are hired to mind a flock of sheep in the isolation of
Brokeback Mountain, Wyoming (Alberta, Canada, standing in majestically for Wyoming). The towering, craggy landscape looks on non-judgementally as they go about the chores, not talking much, dealing with the bitter cold of the nights when one of them is meant to sleep with the sheep. On one such night, the more outgoing of the two, Jack, tells Ennis to come into the tent and within minutes they are hungrily making love. They assure each other next morning that they ‘ain’t queer’—and the course of the rest of their lives is set.

Hewing close to the equally spare plotting of Proulx’s story, the film traces the desultory marriages, the children, the jobs, the mainly unrewarding contours of their next twenty years, punctuated with ‘fishing trips’ on which the one real thing about their lives finds brief needy expression. ‘We could a had a good life together,’ says Jack, who has married a rich Texan called Lureen (Anne Hathaway). But Ennis knows that, given the prejudices of the times and places, ‘This thing grabs hold of us in the wrong place we’re dead.’ Whereas the stark, sunset-drenched beauties of The Proposition’s Western setting is polluted by hideous racism, the snow-capped glories and neat little towns of Brokeback’s Wyoming are a fastness for the homophobia Ennis was forced to watch as a child. And just as the Australian film doesn’t sentimentalise the Aboriginals, who can be as vicious as anyone else, albeit with more cause, Brokeback doesn’t make saintly martyrs of its two main characters and doesn’t withhold sympathy from the women whose lives they mess with—and mess up.

It begins on a dark empty landscape through which a car can just be seen eating up the miles and the visual bleakness is accentuated with a melancholy twang of guitar on the soundtrack, and it ends with Ennis solitary, his life contracted to a barely furnished trailer. Inside its cupboard door, beneath a postcard of Brokeback (‘all we’ve got’, Jack once said of Brokeback) on a clothes hanger is the shirt and denim jacket Jack had been wearing when they once wrestled on Brokeback, and the blood on it is Ennis’s. The moment when Ennis has held the shirt to his face and wept as he stood in Jack’s childhood room after his death recalls the aching tenderness of Martha Edwards with brother-in-law Ethan’s jacket in a famous moment in The Searchers. Both moments testify to the mute power with which inanimate objects can be invested. Into his trailer just before the end, Ennis’s daughter, a sweet girl who loves him, comes to tell him she is getting married and wants him to come. He says he’ll be there and then, in a film full of departures, he watches as she drives away, the trailer door shuts and the last view is through its small window. This is what Ennis’s life now is, and Jack’s ashes are in the family plot, his wish for them to be scattered on Brokeback ignored.
This is a supremely accomplished film. At two-and-a-quarter hours and with not all that much happening, it is perhaps a shade overlong for those accustomed to more action. The scenes in which Jack and Ennis are together punctuate the film in a way that recalls Nick Cave’s statement, reported in the Sunday Age (25 September 2005), on the moments of violence in his screenplay for The Proposition: ‘They were really just punctuation points between [sic] a fairly meditative, slow kind of film.’ For those to whom what happens among people matters more than physical incident, the length will not be a problem. Brokeback’s discretion in its narrative procedures, its avoidance of the sexually graphic, is matched by the classical restraint of Rodrigo Prieto’s camera work, a classicism that invokes comparisons with Ford, again, or with Howard Hawks. Ang Lee seems to be the kind of film-maker who trusts his material as they did, though his range may well be broader than theirs.

He is also, particularly on the evidence of this film, a supremely perceptive actors’ director. In a work that is quietly and momentously about people and how they behave towards each other, he gives his actors psychological and emotional room to move. The initial watchfulness that gives way to a stunted blokish camaraderie and then to something very much more is etched in the faces of Gyllenhaal and Ledger. Gyllenhaal, cult hero of Donnie Darko (2001) and a dozen other modest films, acquires new stature here as the rodeo-riding son of a mean-spirited father and anxiously devoted mother, but it is Ledger who astonishes. He’s been a satisfactory Ned Kelly (2003) and personable youthful lead in Australian and US films and television for a decade. Until now, I’ve had trouble putting a face to his increasingly well-known name. Now, though, the face taut with pain and loss and need, the lips cautious of letting words out, the eyes uncertain of what to show, whatever he goes on to do this is how he’ll stay in the mind. The burden of the film’s emotional weight falls on him and he is equal to the demands.

The actresses who play the wives, Michelle Williams as Ennis’s troubled, affectionate Alma and Anne Hathaway as Lureen, the sassy, coiffured Texan lady who marries Jack, are written and acted with generosity and insight, and the film’s edges are filled with astutely realised minor figures such as the nasty-eyed boss Joe Aguirre, played by Randy Quaid, who later refuses to re-employ Jack, telling him, ‘You guys sure found a way to make the time pass up there.’ He has spied on them in the isolation of Brokeback Mountain, that symbol of what mattered in their lives.

Here are two films that actually seem made for grown-ups. Liberal intentions and generic ancestry won’t necessarily produce a good film but, allied to seriously advanced film-making skills as they are here, the results can make you almost abject with gratitude.