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Critic's Notebook

## Brokeback Spoofs: Tough Guys Unmasked

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Gay cowboys, it seems, are shaping up to be like "Who's on first?" or "the aristocrats": a joke that keeps on giving. While the "Who wants to see that?" humor columns about ["Brokeback Mountain"](#) have waned, online parodies of the gay-cowboy movie are still proliferating faster than the curatorial video sites — including youtube .com, [gorillamask.net](#), and dailysixer .com (which has a section called "Brokeback Spoofs") — can keep up with them. Some of them are stupid. Some are droll and great. But as commentary on the forms and ceremonies of proto-gay relationships, they're surprisingly sharp, and worth taking seriously.

All of the parodies assume the same form: they're trailers for imagined mashups that combine elements of "Brokeback Mountain" with other movies. The actual mashups, of course, don't exist; only these trailers do. They're made anonymously or by comedy troupes or design shops, like Chocolate Cake City and Robot Rumpus, both of which give their web addresses at the end of their parody videos, "Brokeback to the Future" and "The Empire Breaks Back." (The creators who stay anonymous might be trying to avoid nagging copyright issues.)

If they're well made, the parodies can presumably serve as a calling card for those who sign their work; some of them are viewed hundreds of thousands of times. Generally, though, the "Brokeback" spoofs are nothing but labors of love, or gay panic, or both.

The parodies typically use Gustavo Santaolalla's sexy, mournful theme from "Brokeback Mountain," together with the title cards from that movie's trailer, to reframe clips from another movie. It works almost every time: a gay movie seems to emerge when scenes between male leads, or a male lead and a supporting actor, are slowed down, set to make-out music and bumpered by portentous cards that say things like, "A truth they couldn't deny." The editing, and the use of slow motion, do suggest that close-ups, especially viewed at length, are intrinsically erotic. All that these parodies need to do to set up the relationship is show one man's face in protracted detail, and cut to the other man, who seems to watch with the same rapt attention that the viewer has been compelled to give by the slow-mo. A gay subtext suddenly seems plain as day.

But what's more adroit about these parodies is the use they make of the dialogue from the movie they're mashing up with "Brokeback." Very little "Brokeback" dialogue has been repurposed here, with the exception of two of the ranch hand Jack Twist's impassioned lines "It's nobody's business but ours," and "God, I wish I knew how to quit you!" — which turn up now and then when a parodist gives up trying to make the point another way. Most of the parodists don't give up, though, and strive to tease a gay plot out of what's already in the older movies, all of which, unlike "Brokeback Mountain," are already available on DVD, so they can be manipulated using software like iMovie.

These movies — ["Heat,"](#) ["City Slickers,"](#) ["Titanic,"](#) ["Fight Club"](#) — throw up plenty of evocative lines for use by the parodists. Almost every scene in which a wiser man is trying to encourage a naïf to follow his dreams, for example, seems to double as a gay dialogue. "Stop trying to control everything, and just let go, let go!" Tyler Durden ([Brad Pitt](#)) says to [Edward Norton's](#) unnamed character in "Fight Club." In the "Brokeback" parody, the line seems to be part of a pushy seduction. In the "The Empire Breaks Back," Anakin Skywalker says: "Something's happening. I want more, and I know I shouldn't." At another time, Palpatine advises him: "In time, you will learn to trust your feelings." When the lines are run together in the parody, they again work convincingly as a love scene.

Other Hollywood-hero problems, put in new context, seem like cries from the heart by gay men. In ["Point Break,"](#) [Keanu Reeves's](#) character, Johnny Utah, wails, "I can't describe what I'm feeling"; when this line comes in "Point Brokeback," the parody, it seems to express Johnny's inability to face his gay desires. (For frisson, or maybe for authenticity, some of the parodies use scenes with actors, like Mr. Reeves and [Tom Hanks](#), who have played gay characters in other movies.)

A problem of the traditional sci-fi hero, particularly the time traveler, is that he can't describe his relationships to other people; if he's traveled back in time, can he be his mother's contemporary? This is true for Marty McFly, Michael J. Fox's character in ["Back to the Future,"](#) which was one of the first movies to appear in a mashup parody with "Brokeback Mountain" (predictably: "Brokeback to the Future"). In the scene that the parodists borrow, Marty introduces Dr. Brown ([Christopher Lloyd](#)), saying, "This is my — uh — Doc. My uncle. Doc!" In the new framework, this introduction sounds like the confused, stammering introduction that a closeted young man might make of his older boyfriend, whom he's trying to pass off as a boss, an associate, an uncle.

Similarly, when Frodo ([Elijah Wood](#)), introduces Sam ([Sean Astin](#)) in the appealing "Lord of the Rings" mashup, he's asked, "Your bodyguard?" Sam corrects him, "His gardener."

Nearly 60 years ago, Leslie Fiedler argued that the great American novels of the 19th century dramatize a love story between men, typically a white man and a man of color: Ishmael and Queequeg, Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, Huck and Jim. He made his brilliant academic career on this startling thesis, which he went on to demonstrate in "Love and Death in the American Novel" in 1960. Now Fiedler's thesis seems to apply to Hollywood movies as well, but the thorough close-readings that have refined and broadened Fiedler's argument this time have been provided not by graduate students, but by online pranksters using little more than laptops, a broadband connection and Final Cut Pro.

My favorite of the parodies, however, didn't require much technology or even editing, just a good sense of double entendre scenes of emotional intensity between men. It's the "Brokeback" mashup with "Heat," the underrated [Michael Mann](#) movie with [Al Pacino](#) and [Robert De Niro](#). "Heat" was a psychological tango movie, with the alpha actors playing a police detective, Vincent, and a bad guy, Neil, respectively. They're supposed to be talking about the cops-and-robbers life, but in "Brokeback Heat," which just replays without legerdemain a whole scene between them, they seem for all the world to be talking about their love, and gay love generally, and their unwillingness to be straight.

"So then, if you spot me coming around that corner, you just gonna walk out on this woman?" Vincent asks. "Not say goodbye?"

"That's the discipline," Neil says.

"That's pretty vacant, you know," Vincent says.

"It is what it is," Neil replies. "It's that or we'd both better go do something else, pal."

"I don't know how to do anything else," Vincent says.

"Neither do I," Neil says.

"I don't much want to either," Vincent says.

"Neither do I," Neil says.

Taken straight or as a sendup, this is simply Mr. Pacino and Mr. De Niro playing a smoldering scene. And what they mean by it is no business but theirs.