



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong  
**Research Online**

---

Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers

Faculty of Social Sciences

---

2010

# Taking the Word 'Out' West: Movie reception and gay spaces

Scott J. McKinnon

*University of Wollongong*, [scottmck@uow.edu.au](mailto:scottmck@uow.edu.au)

---

## Publication Details

McKinnon, S. (2010). Taking the Word 'Out' West: Movie reception and gay spaces. *Participations: journal of audience and reception studies*, 7 (2), 341-359.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

# Taking the Word 'Out' West: Movie reception and gay spaces

## **Abstract**

This paper explores intersections between film reception and definitions of urban space, particularly the inner-city, gay neighbourhoods of Sydney. The reception in the Australian print media of two American movies is examined in the light of controversies provoked by the geographic location of potential screening venues. *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1977) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2007), each inspired discussion in the Australian media about whether they would or would not (should or should not) be screened in areas outside the inner-city. These discussions reveal a great deal about the role of the movies in the history of a city and about the historically and spatially constituted nature of attitudes to homosexuality.

## **Keywords**

gay, reception, spaces, movie, taking, west:, 'out', word

## **Disciplines**

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Publication Details**

McKinnon, S. (2010). Taking the Word 'Out' West: Movie reception and gay spaces. *Participations: journal of audience and reception studies*, 7 (2), 341-359.

## **Taking the Word 'Out' West: Movie Reception and Gay Spaces**

Scott McKinnon

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Volume 7, Issue 2 (November 2010)

### **Abstract**

This paper explores intersections between film reception and definitions of urban space, particularly the inner-city, gay neighbourhoods of Sydney. The reception in the Australian print media of two American movies is examined in the light of controversies provoked by the geographic location of potential screening venues. *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1977) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2007), each inspired discussion in the Australian media about whether they would or would not (should or should not) be screened in areas outside the inner-city. These discussions reveal a great deal about the role of the movies in the history of a city and about the historically and spatially constituted nature of attitudes to homosexuality.

**Keywords:** Space, film, reception, gay men, *Brokeback Mountain*

The inner-city of Sydney has been both praised and condemned for providing a home to the community and culture of gay men. It has been variously defined as a liberated, sophisticated space and as a degenerate, diseased space; an area from which gay culture can be dispersed and an area in which it must be contained. Conflicts over the meaning of space have played a significant part in the history of Sydney's gay male communities. In this paper, I investigate the role that movies have played in these conflicts and argue that the ways in which film has intersected with the spaces of the city have inspired disagreement over how those spaces should be defined. An analysis of the reception in the print media of two American films reveals these intersections between cinema and the city. While *Word is Out:*

*Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1976) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2006) were screened some thirty years apart, each provoked conflicts over the meaning of space and about the spread of gay male culture beyond the inner-city.

The geographically, as well as the historically, constituted nature of sexual identity has become a significant area of investigation in the historiography of sexuality. Central to this has been an understanding of the importance of the meanings attributed to urban space. 'Space' for these purposes can be thought of, as suggested by cultural geographer Doreen Massey, as "... the articulation of social relations which necessarily have a spatial form in their interactions with one another" [1]. Drawing from this, 'place' can then be thought of as "... particular moments in such intersecting social relations". In this way, space is understood less as a solid form than as constant states of negotiation and contestation, formed and reformed by the interactions of those who meet within or who construct, inhabit, police, subvert and otherwise make use of them.

Gay and lesbian use of space has been a critical element in the development of urban gay cultures. George Chauncey has argued that, 'Struggles over the control of space have been central to gay culture and politics throughout the twentieth century' [2]. He argues that gay culture has developed in part through the tactics used by gay people '... to put the spaces of the dominant culture to queer purpose'. The development of spatially-defined gay communities has been a significant factor in the history of urban life in Sydney. The Kings Cross and Darlinghurst areas began to develop a reputation as gay spaces from at least the 1930s, when rapid growth in the building of rental apartments provided affordable and private accommodation for single young men, many of whom would once have lived in the more monitored and regulated space of boarding houses [3]. By the 1960s the area was home to bars, saunas and cafes openly catering to gay clientele [4], and in 1978 Oxford Street saw the first of the now annual gay pride Mardi Gras parades. From the 1980s onwards, King Street in the inner-western suburb of Newtown emerged as a second home for the city's gay culture. In 1998 cultural geographer Lawrence Knopp noted of Sydney that, 'Only in a few other places might one find such a highly sexualized and politically successful gay male culture in an urban environment...' [5].

In part, the development of these communities reflects a politics of visibility defined in spatial terms. Michael Warner notes the heteronormativity of public space in which "... lesbians and gay men have found that to challenge the norms of straight culture ... is to disturb deep and unwritten rules about the kinds of behaviour and eroticism that are appropriate to the public [6]." Warner offers the useful example of a public kiss which, between a man and a woman, will generally go unremarked or may even be applauded, but for two men or two women may lead to derision or even violence.

While phrases such as 'behind closed doors' and 'in the closet' had generally denoted the private space in which homosexuality was to be contained, the gay liberation movement of 1970s Sydney specifically contested such policing of space by calling for gays to come 'out of the bars and onto the streets' [7]. 'Coming out' was not just a personal, but a political act. Gay people came out as individuals by telling friends and family about their sexuality. They came out as a community by visibly occupying public space.

This paper concentrates specifically on issues related to gay men, acknowledging that issues of lesbian visibility and women's use of space are determined by a further range of factors beyond the scope of this research. As Knopp notes, the use of space by gay people in Sydney (and other gay communities in large cities) must be understood not only in terms of sexuality, but also of race, class and gender. Within gay culture, the use of space has predominantly reflected the concerns of middle-class, white men, often to the exclusion of others [8]. This highlights the unstable nature of any meaning attributed to city space, which may not only reflect conflict between gay and straight, but also within the gay community.

The drag queens of the 1994 film *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* offer a useful introduction to the subject of the sexual geographies of Australia. In that film, Felicia (Guy Pearce) and Mitzi (Hugo Weaving) with transsexual woman Bernadette (Terrance Stamp) famously leave the safety of their inner-city pub and head into the wide-open spaces of outback Australia. When the trio visit the town of Cooper Pedy, Felicia is bashed by a homophobic mob, an event which causes Bernadette to contemplate their transgression into an unwelcoming space. She tells Felicia:

It's funny, we all sit around slagging off that vile stink-hole of a city, but in its own strange way it takes care of us. I don't know if that ugly wall of suburbia's been put there to stop them getting in or us getting out.

The trio eventually manage to queer the heart of Australia but, by movie's end, Mitzi and Felicia have returned to their inner-city home and are performing again at their local pub. In many ways, the film is a reflection on space. The humour lies in the attempts (some successful, some not) of these aliens in a strange land to connect to others beyond that suburban wall. It defines the inner-city as a gay space and 'outback' Australia (with the occasional exception) as straight. As suggested by Australian gay activist Rodney Croome, 'We find in *Priscilla* that Australian tolerance is ... geographically defined' [9].

Film and cinema-going have played important roles in the development of Sydney's gay culture and have pushed the topic of homosexuality into the spaces of the city. The Queer

Screen Mardi Gras Film Festival, for example, is held in conjunction with a two-week program of cultural and sporting events which lead up to the night of the annual parade and dance party. Held most recently in cinemas on Oxford Street and in Newtown, the Queer Screen festival has since 1997 featured a weekend of programming at Parramatta, and has recently begun a travelling festival which takes a series of films to towns and cities outside Sydney, including Katoomba, Byron Bay and Hobart.

An American documentary, *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1976), is believed to have played a particularly significant role in Sydney's gay history. Having watched the film as part of a 1978 film festival titled 'Images of Gays', local gay activist Ron Austin had the idea of holding in Sydney the type of gay pride event that was seen in the film. He envisioned a kind of 'apolitical street party' which was subsequently dubbed a 'mardi gras' [10].

*Word is Out* is a collection of interviews with twenty-six gay and lesbian Americans, talking about their lives and experiences dealing with a homophobic world. The film was very positively reviewed by broadsheet newspaper *The Sydney Morning Herald*, with the reviewer describing it as '... an uncompromising challenge to all those hardliners who persist in defining people in sexual terms...' [11].

The screening of the film at the 'Images of Gays' festival created enormous discussion about gay rights politics among those in the audience [12]. Local gay newspaper *Campaign*, calling the film a 'profoundly honest documentary' [13], described the festival screening in glowing terms:

It was an amazing human experience: a theatre chock-a-block full of gay and non-gay women and men hooting, laughing, cheering and crying. It was a communal wave of human emotion: anger, joy, compassion and sorrow. More than anything, it was a mass sensation of pride. Pride at being human, pride at being gay, pride at being human and gay.

This event was held at the Paris Theatre in Darlinghurst, not far from the start of Oxford Street. The film also screened at a number of other inner-city art-house cinemas in Sydney in the late 1970s, including the Mayfair Theatre [14] in Castlereagh Street of the Sydney CBD, the Filmmakers Cinema [15] in Darlinghurst and the Ozone Cinema [16] housed in the Paddington Town Hall on Oxford Street. These screenings, none of which were reported to have met with any problems, all took place in, or within walking distance of, the gay territory of late 1970s Sydney. An intended 1983 showing of the film well beyond that territory in the

suburb of Parramatta, twenty-three kilometres west of the city centre, was another story altogether.

That screening was planned by a group called The Stonewall Collective, organisers of gay pride festival Stonewall Week, commemorating the New York riots of the same name. In a change from tradition, 1983's festival was held in venues around Parramatta, a deliberate strategy by The Stonewall Collective to move out from beyond the gay ghetto. *Word is Out* was to be shown at the Parramatta Town Hall in three separate screenings on the 29th June 1983, including a morning screening planned specifically for local school students [17]. All three screenings were banned, however, by Parramatta Mayor Stan Dixon, who refused to let such an event take place on council property. Mayor Dixon was quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* as having instigated the ban because 'we don't want to be seen as encouraging that type of thing' [18]. The mayor further explained that there had been a 'gigantic wave of protest' from a range of people, including church groups, about council property being used to show this film [19].

A local alderman was also reported to be against the viewing because '... he was worried about the film's effect on young people, and concerned that the council should do what it could to discourage the spread of AIDS in the community' [20]. Town Clerk, R. G. Muddle, told *Campaign* that, 'The Council is taking this action because it is unwilling to have its property used for the display, particularly to young people, of films which may encourage homosexual behaviour' [21].

These were local politicians who saw themselves as protecting their community from an outside influence. It is not that the film existed that concerned them, but rather that it might have reached into their council area, onto their property, into their space. Kelly McWilliam has noted similar concerns in protests around the screening of a gay film festival at the newly opened Brisbane Powerhouse cultural centre in 2000, suggesting that what protesters '... presumably found most threatening ... was the [film festival's] potential to make the Brisbane Powerhouse's – and, by extension, Brisbane's – tacit queerness explicit ...' [22]. Almost twenty years earlier, the Parramatta councillors were acting to isolate their space from the intrusion of homosexuality for fear that even after the screening some stain would remain.

The organisers of the Stonewall Week were open in their intention to address gay men and lesbians outside the inner-city. The week was given the tagline, 'We Are Everywhere' [23] and statements to the press made a point of stressing that there was a significant gay population in the west of Sydney. What is interesting to note, however, is that most reports in the gay and 'mainstream' press saw the event as pushing out from the inner-city into the west, rather

than simply making the local gay populations more visible in their local neighbourhood. Gay people may have lived in the west, but they were not seen as the creators of gay culture. Gay culture was to be brought to them from the inner-city.

This is particularly evident in discussions of another Stonewall Week event, a parade through the streets of Parramatta. A report in a gay newspaper about the parade was headlined 'How the West was Won' and began:

In American history, the west was the great frontier, the place where fortunes and reputations were made. In Sydney on Saturday June 25, the Gay Community launched its our (sic.) own west, with the annual Stonewall Commemoration taking place in Parramatta.

The article continued, '... the march was a well-aimed thrust at the heartland of conservatism. And given Sydney's population distribution, the move out into the west can be justified as taking it to the masses'. The author wondered where the Stonewall march should take place the following year, 'Shall we venture further west and try Campbelltown? Or should we try the North Shore, and watch the blue rinse set shudder in horror at the advance of homosexuality?' [\[24\]](#)

This journalist sees the inner-city as the home of gay culture and community, which must act to 'thrust', 'venture', 'advance' and 'launch' 'out' into the west and north. This is seemingly in contrast to the argument that gay people 'are everywhere' and reveals how gay identity is defined by its association with a visible community. That community is one which occupies public space and such occupation of space is most likely to be located in the inner-city. The gay inhabitants of suburbs beyond the inner-city are therefore defined as non-existent by heterosexist groups and as in need of assistance to become visible by gay rights groups.

In response to the banning of *Word is Out*, one of the organisers of Stonewall Week told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that such an act by the Council was insulting to the 'tens of thousands' of homosexual ratepayers in Parramatta. He argued, 'We are not trying to recruit anyone to be gay by this film – people are born gay anyway. We are trying to help people out there who may be gay by showing them problems others have had, and some of the history of the gay movement' [\[25\]](#). Thus, while noting the gay population of the suburbs, the film was still an attempt to help people 'out there' without access to the community and visibility inherent to the inner-city.



Various correspondents to *The Advertiser* stated their views on the right of homosexual people to be a visible part of the space of the suburb. One wrote on 29th June, 'I feel I must protest through your newspaper about the Gay-Lesbian march, through our beautiful Christian city of Parramatta. Let it go back to Oxford St, Sydney where it has (sic.) previously held and keep Parramatta clean and healthy and fit for our children and children's children to breath, minus gay plague [26].'\_ Interesting to note is the desire to see visible culture maintained within a defined area, an area which this correspondent presumably saw as already polluted. Although clearly not in favour of the rights of homosexual people, the letter is mainly concerned with the space of the suburb being damaged.

The early 1980s were the first years of the AIDS crisis in Australia, and the views expressed by this letter-writer and the alderman quoted above reflect the widespread labelling of gay men and the spaces they inhabited as diseased and polluted. AIDS heightened, while providing an ostensibly 'medical' excuse for, the desire to prevent the broadening of gay culture beyond the inner-city. The fear that gay people's use of public space could taint it was elided with a new more literal fear of infection. Days before the Stonewall Week march, local 'morals' campaigner Fred Nile called for restrictions to be placed on all gay men to prevent the spread of AIDS. These included a ban on all gay travel to and from Sydney, as well as the closing of gay bars and the removal of gay teachers from classrooms. He believed that such a ban could begin with 'the banning of a gay rally at Parramatta tomorrow' [27].\_ AIDS was used as new material within homophobic and heterosexist discourses to justify the continued argument that homosexuality be restricted to the private sphere or, at the very least, to the purportedly polluted spaces of the inner-city.

George Chauncey, investigating 1930s New York, describes 'a range of forces - informal as well as official, oppositional as well as dominant - seeking to exert definitional and regulatory power over the production of urban space' [28].\_ An investigation of the reception of *Word is Out* reveals similar forces at work in 1980s Sydney. The screening organisers, acting as oppositional forces, attempted to alter the dominant meaning of the spaces of western Sydney, specifically Parramatta. In so doing, they acted against the containment of gay culture within inner-city space while simultaneously reinforcing notions of the inner-city as the only possible origin of that culture. Dominant forces in the shape of the Parramatta councillors enforced their regulatory power over the space, denying access to an explicitly homosexual gathering. In so doing, they made explicit the previously implicit heterosexuality of the space of the Town Hall.

This highlighting of the nature of the space has important consequences. As argued by Chris Brickell, "Heterosexuality is invisibly visible. Heterosexuality is visible in that it is (often) all there is, yet it is also invisible in that it is not recognised as heterosexuality" [29]. When

heterosexuality is invisible, homosexuality can be denied access to space with the argument that *all* sexuality is inappropriate in the public sphere. When the heterosexual nature of space is made explicit, such an argument fades away. The restriction of homosexuality to the private sphere or from the majority of public spaces rests upon the public role of heterosexuality remaining unmarked. So gay activists, by organising screenings of *Word is Out* and the various other activities of Stonewall week, were not only acting to make homosexual people visible, they were also making the rest of Parramatta's population visible as (hetero)sexual.

By the time of the release of *Brokeback Mountain*, some thirty years later, the city of Sydney and its gay culture had experienced significant change. Legislative developments, beginning with a degree of protection against discrimination on the basis of sexuality in 1982 [30] and the decriminalisation of sexual acts between men in 1984 [31], had removed many of the everyday hazards experienced by gay people. Massive changes in the acceptance of homosexuality significantly altered the lived experience of gay people and the reception of gay culture in Sydney. Much of the reception of *Brokeback Mountain* focussed on what acceptance of the film could be expected to say about the acceptance (or otherwise) of homosexual people in society. This was often interpreted in spatial terms, as the media contemplated whether the absence of the film from the cinema screens of a particular suburb was positive or negative.

Leigh Boucher and Sarah Pinto have argued that the reception of *Brokeback Mountain* in Australia is best analysed as 'a cultural event' [32]. The film was the subject of a massive amount of media reporting which contemplated this 'mainstream' and 'Hollywood' representation of a homosexual love story. The inclusion of Australian star Heath Ledger provided a local angle for reporters and the rural cowboy theme was frequently compared with Australian rural mythologies [33]. Reception of *Brokeback Mountain* in Australia was also influenced by what were seen as the film's artistic intentions. That its director was best known for art-house fare, and that its narrative revolved around a same-sex love affair, were both interpreted as seemingly in conflict with a film that had big-name stars and Hollywood studio backing.

In both Australia and the United States, the media reception of the film often also focussed on the matter of whether the film would be shown in cinemas beyond the inner-city. Questions were raised over whether a film that was both 'art' and 'gay' would or should attract an audience outside areas with a visible gay population. This is particularly interesting given that the city does not feature at all in *Brokeback Mountain*. The spaces represented in the text of the film are almost entirely rural and the two lovers find temporary freedom not in the gay spaces of the inner-city but in the wilderness. For Ennis and Jack, the determinedly political visibility of inner-city gay communities is either inaccessible or threatening and they search for

safety in seclusion. As stated by Boucher and Pinto, "... *Brokeback* forced the contemplation of the often-elided existence of homosexuality in non-urban spaces" [34]. However, as I will argue below, the fact that both of the lovers at the heart of the narrative were male would largely define *Brokeback Mountain* as an inner-city film.

A release strategy frequently used by film distributors may well have generated much of this discussion. Under such a strategy, a film is initially released in a limited number of cinemas, before gaining wider distribution once publicity and audience word-of-mouth has generated a bigger interest. If such a strategy was being used in this case, as claimed by distributor Roadshow [35], then the fact that the film was at first available on a relatively small number of screens had little to do with fears that it would not be well accepted outside the inner-city and more to do with general distribution practice. If a deliberate strategy, then it proved to be an extremely effective one. A determination to read wider meaning into the reception of the film led several newspapers to condemn the distributor, arguing that the decision not to show the film in the city's west was an insult to the residents of western Sydney. As a result, some local residents demanded that the film be shown at their local cinema; surely a dream result for any film promoter.

Sydney suburban newspaper *The Macarthur Chronicle*, for example, reported that *Brokeback Mountain* would not be screened at the local multiplex, Campbelltown Greater Union 9 Cinemas, telling readers that 'if you want to see the movie that has everyone talking, you'll have to hop in your car [36].' Campbelltown resident Terri Evans was quoted as being 'disgusted' by this decision and the fact that she would need to travel to Newtown to see the film. She told *The Chronicle*, 'It's branding us as unintelligent and unsophisticated and presumes that we are not interested in watching films which are slightly arty or confront social issues.'

Tabloid newspaper *The Sun-Herald* adopted an equally insulted tone on behalf of residents of Sydney's west in an article headlined 'Gay cowboy cinema snub – Heath Ledger's Oscar-nominated role judged too sophisticated for millions of Australians' [37]. In a notable reflection of changing times, the article quoted the mayor of Campbelltown, Russell Matheson, who appeared unconcerned by the homosexual storyline and eager to be seen supporting a local star. He stated, 'I find it strange that a movie with an Australian actor with the international recognition of Heath Ledger is not being seen across the state.' The spokesman for the Campbelltown Greater Union 9 told the paper that they had been flooded with calls from cinema-goers inquiring about the movie, stating that 'we could definitely fill cinema after cinema.'

*The Sun-Herald* managed to find several western suburbs' locals who had travelled to the inner-city to see the film. David Potts, a '31-year-old plumber from Campbelltown' who 'drove an hour' to attend a screening at the Academy Twin Cinema in Oxford Street, Paddington, told the paper, 'I'm a heterosexual male from Campbelltown and it made me feel ... it was the emotion, the heartache'. Potts' neighbourhood and his sexuality were combined in this quote to suggest a personal identity which, despite the implied expectations, was still able to enjoy a gay, inner-city film.

Interesting to note is the suggestion that *Brokeback Mountain* was a 'sophisticated' film and one which a 'sophisticated' cinema-goer would presumably want to see. Rather than arguing that their neighbourhoods needed to be protected from an incursion by homosexual themes, those interviewed in these articles are concerned that the decision not to show the film in their local cinemas reflects the negative light in which their neighbourhoods are viewed. Cultural geographer Dereka Rushbrook has noted that gay neighbourhoods are often used in a city's promotional materials to '... serve as markers of the cosmopolitan nature of the metropolis' [38]. Similarly, an audience for a film about homosexual characters is used here to serve as an indicator of that neighbourhood's relative level of sophistication. There is also an implicit accusation of elitism against the inner-city in much of this reporting, with the film distributors assumed to be (middle-class) inner-city types who are making unfair assumptions about the relative sophistication of the (working-class) west.

Sophistication was not, however, what some people saw *Brokeback Mountain* as indicating. Conservative newspaper columnist Miranda Devine believed the film to be misogynistic, arguing that the depiction of the two lead characters' wives reflected a disquieting disdain for women [39]. Devine reported on a screening of the film at the Academy Twin, telling readers that a 'gay friend' had advised her that the mainly gay male audience had laughed at the suffering of the female characters. Devine states that her friend had reported a queue for the film 'as long as at the Mardi Gras', but that 'far from finding a respectful audience for the first mainstream manly homosexual love story, he says the crowd laughed and hooted throughout'. She continued:

In a gut-wrenching scene, the wife stumbles on her husband passionately kissing Jake Gyllenhaal's character and almost collapses. Her anguish provoked the most laughter in that Oxford Street audience, my friend says. 'It was a 'ha ha, sucked in' laughter, like 'gay men prevail', says my friend, who was shocked by the callous attitude.

Devine's description of the crowd as an 'Oxford Street audience', rather than a 'Paddington audience' or an 'Academy Twin audience' is a clear eliding of gay space and gay identity. Oxford Street is home to most of Sydney's gay nightclubs and many gay shops and cafés, and in this context is a synonym for 'gay'.

The theme of misogyny was approved of in a letter to the editor responding to Devine's piece. Relating the actions of the audience both to their sexuality and to the neighbourhood in which they lived, Russell Edwards of Drummoyne wrote,

Miranda Devine has a good nose. But I didn't need to see *Brokeback Mountain* on Oxford Street, with an audience of jeering locals, to pick up on its not-so-subtle hidden message. Maybe that's why Roadshow, as *The Sun-Herald* reported last month, was reluctant to screen it anywhere west of Newtown. Many of us blokes out here in the suburban badlands actually like women [40].

To Edwards, who also described the film's 'unrelenting misogyny' [41] in a letter that week to *The Australian* newspaper, the film was an indicator not of the sophistication of the neighbourhood in which it was seen but of the misogyny of that neighbourhood's inhabitants. In this light, the inner-city becomes the home of women-hating homosexuals, while the suburbs are a safe place for women and the men who love them. Interesting to note is the fact that Drummoyne is a comfortably middle-class suburb located only slightly farther west of the city centre than Newtown. The real difference in the way they are perceived comes from Newtown's visible gay population.

Another letter, also responding to Devine's piece, took an entirely different view both of the film and the cinema in which it was screened. John Goldbaum argued that:

My elderly same-sex partner and I saw *Brokeback Mountain* at the Academy Twin in Paddington at the first session on the day it opened. ... There was no inappropriate laughter or hooting. When we emerged moist-eyed from the theatre, the next session's larger audience was queued up and they too appeared to comprise mainly heterosexual family groups, some with teenage children. ... Miranda Devine has managed to find disrespect and misogyny where none existed [42].

As a resident of Potts Point, the Academy Twin was Goldbaum's local cinema and so this letter, ostensibly about a movie and a movie audience, can be seen equally as acting in defence of a neighbourhood and a form of sexual identity.

The reception of *Brokeback Mountain* in the local newspaper of one small town is worth a short diversion and a quick trip hundreds of kilometres north from Sydney, to the town of Bowen on the coast of northern Queensland. The possibility that *Brokeback Mountain* would or would not screen in Bowen's Summergarden Cinema was considered in a series of articles in *The Bowen Independent*. The paper at first reported that cinema operator Ben de Luca would not be screening the film due to simple 'economics' [43]. De Luca told the paper that he had recently shown two art-house films which had run at a loss, and that while he had no problem with the content of *Brokeback Mountain*, he 'had filled his quota of "controversial or what is known as art film".'

A correspondent to the paper approved of this decision, although not of the reason for making it. Pastor Patrick Russell of the 'Bowen Christian Family Centre' told the paper that the decision not to screen the film should have been made on moral grounds, with economics playing too great a role in modern life [44]. Reflecting arguments made against *Word is Out* in the 1980s and a continued connecting of gay culture and disease, he argued, 'With AIDS at epidemic levels, promoting such a lifestyle shows a blatant disregard for society's well being'.

Contrary to Pastor Russell's intentions, *The Independent* reported shortly after that, 'since a letter condemning the movie appeared in the *Bowen Independent*', Mr De Luca of the Summergarden Cinema had 'been besieged by people wanting to see the film [45].' Mr De Luca claimed that, 'There was a big response to that letter ... For the two weeks after it appeared, my phone did not stop ringing.' He was, therefore, planning to screen the film as soon as a copy could be obtained. *The Independent* followed up with stories advising that a copy had been obtained and the film was about to be shown, [46] that the 'much anticipated' film was an option for weekend entertainment [47] and that the film had become a 'surprise hit with Bowen audiences' [48].

So the spread of *Brokeback Mountain* well beyond the spaces of the inner-city became a point of substantial interest to the local media. The combining of art-house pretensions and homosexual themes were presumed sufficient to turn the locals of Bowen away, and so its success could be seen as nothing but a 'surprise'. While at least some of the reporting (particularly the attribution of the level of interest in the film to Pastor Russell's letter) perhaps suggests more a degree of playfulness and marketing nous on the part of cinema-owner than actual cause and effect, the media attention reflects a definite concern with any meanings that could be ascribed to the local area as a result of the success of this American homosexual love-story.

The reception of *Brokeback Mountain* in Australia reveals a great deal about the intersections of film and space, particularly conflicts over the meaning of space. While some believed that the film *should* be contained in inner-city spaces for moral reasons, others believed that it *would* be contained in inner-city spaces for economic reasons. While some believed that a failure to have the film screened in their local areas was an insult to the area and a suggestion of a lack of sophistication, others believed that a suburb free from the film was a suburb free from the misogyny and/or the disease of the inner-city gay community. Revealed through the investigation of the reception of a particular film are the conflicts over definitions of space.

Lawrence Knopp has argued that 'The city and the social processes constituting it are most usefully thought of ... as social products in which material forces, the power of ideas and the human desire to ascribe meaning are inseparable. The same holds true for various sub-areas within the city' [49]. Particularly revealed through the reception of *Brokeback Mountain* is this desire to ascribe meaning to the spaces of the city. The film was not merely a set of images on a screen, but was a cultural event through which various classifications of urban and rural space were analysed and debated.

Having commented on the Stonewall Week celebrations in Parramatta almost thirty years before, local 'morals' campaigner Fred Nile was still actively speaking out against homosexuality and gay culture when *Brokeback Mountain* was released. He argued in this case that the film should be banned from cinemas, allowing it no access to public space at all. According to Nile, this was a movie which should only be available to homosexual men on video to watch in the space of their own homes [50]. Across a period of time in which notions of sexuality and access to public space had changed significantly, Nile's opposition to change remained constant. While his opinion arguably occupied a fringe position in popular debate around this particular film, it remains nonetheless a clear example of the continually contested nature of homosexuality as a visible element of the public domain.

Between the local cinematic releases of *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* in 1978 and *Brokeback Mountain* in 2006, gay culture became an increasingly accepted part of Sydney's cultural landscape. What I hope to have revealed here are the continued conflicts over the meanings of space in the city (and beyond) and the ways in which films about homosexuality have at times inspired and incited those conflicts. Certain inner-city areas continue to be defined as gay spaces; at times, or from perspectives, degenerate, at others sophisticated. The possibility that a gay film will reveal something about the space in which it is screened continues to cause interest and, at times, concern. What is clear is that the role of a movie in the history of a city is often as much about the spaces with which the film

intersects or into which it intrudes as it is about the series of images projected onto cinema screens.

## References

- Boucher, Leigh, and Sarah Pinto. "I Ain't Queer": Love, Masculinity and History in *Brokeback Mountain*', *Journal of Men's Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2007, pp. 311-330.
- Brickell, Chris, "Heroes and Invaders: gay and lesbian pride parades and the public/private distinction in New Zealand Media Accounts", *Gender, Place & Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 163-178
- 'Brokeback set for screening', *Bowen Independent*, 17 March 2006, p7
- Chauncey, George, "Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets", in Joel Saunders (ed.), *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, pp. 224-260.
- Cinema listing, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July 1978, p39.
- Cinema listing, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 August 1978, p23.
- Cosic, Miriam, 'Ultra-selective moral crusaders', *The Australian*, 13 January 1006, p13.
- Croome, Rodney, 'Review of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert', [WWW Document] URL [http://www.rodneycroome.id.au/other\\_more?id=64\\_0\\_2\\_M11](http://www.rodneycroome.id.au/other_more?id=64_0_2_M11) (visited 1 June 2009).
- Cuming, Angela and Sams, Christine, 'Gay cowboy cinema snub – Heath Ledger's Oscar-nominated role judged too sophisticated for millions of Australians', *The Sun-Herald*, 5 February 2006, p3.
- Devine, Miranda, 'Gay cowboy movie a chick flick with a whiff of misogyny', *The Sun Herald*, 5 March 2006, p15.
- Dubose, Martha. 'Absorbing work on gay lifestyles.' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 July 1978, p6.
- Edwards, Russell, 'Letters to the Editor: Misogyny mountain', *The Australian*, 9 March 2006, p13.
- Edwards, Russell, 'Your View: Blokes in the Badlands', *The Sun Herald*, 12 March 2006, p30.
- Franklyn, Lee, 'Word is Out - Now!' *Campaign: Exploring your lifestyle*, May 1978, p3.
- Fraser, Vicki, 'Gay Ghettos for the New Millenium: Oxford Street meets Mogenic.com and the question of queer space', conference paper, *Queer Space: Centres and Peripheries*, University of Technology, Sydney, 2007.
- 'Gay cowboys film sad story for local screens', *Bowen Independent*, 18 January 2006, p3.



'Gay rights are human rights: five films on gays (advertisement)', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 June 1979, p48.

'Gleanings: Cowboy movie', *Bowen Independent*, 3 May 2006, p4.

'Gleanings: Surprise hit', *Bowen Independent*, 12 May 2006, p4.

Goldbaum, John, 'Your View: Miranda misses the mark', *The Sun Herald*, 12 March 2006, p30.

'How the West was Won', *Oxford Weekender News*, Issue 63, 30 June 1983, p1.

Knopp, Lawrence, 'Sexuality and Urban Space: Gay Male Identity Politics in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia', in Fincher and Jane M. Jacobs (eds), *Cities of Difference*, New York Guilford Press, 1998, pp. 149-176.

Massey, Doreen, *Space, Place and Gender*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999

McWilliam, Kelly, 'We're Here All Week: Public Formation and the Brisbane Queer Film Festival', *Queensland Review*, Vol 14 No 2, 2007, pp. 79-91.

Monaghan, David. 'Council's film ban may lead to court.' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 June 1983, p2.

'Parramatta Council cancels out,' *Campaign Australia*, July 1983, p4.

Peach, Ricardo, 'Queer Cinema as a Fifth Cinema in South Africa and Australia', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Technology, Sydney, 2005

Pride History Group, 'Who's Who: Ron Austin', [WWW Document] URL

[http://www.pridehistorygroup.org.au/modules.php?op=modload&name=PagEd&file=index&to\\_pic\\_id=34&page\\_id=19&ppart=3#section3](http://www.pridehistorygroup.org.au/modules.php?op=modload&name=PagEd&file=index&to_pic_id=34&page_id=19&ppart=3#section3) (visited 20 Jun 2009)

'Rodeo tryst voted out', *The Macarthur Chronicle*, 7 February 2006, p3

Rushbrook, Dereka. 'Cities, Queer Space, and the Cosmopolitan Tourist', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1-2, 2002, pp. 183-206.

Russell, Patrick, 'Letters to the editor: Gay film no shows, but ...', *Bowen Independent*, 25 January 2006, p2.

'Stonewall Week', *Oxford Weekender News*, Issue 61, 9 June 1983, p1.

Warner, Michael, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002

Watt, Bill. 'Nile Demands Gay Travel Ban: Proposals to halt spread of disease', *Daily Telegraph*, 24 June 1983, p3.

Willett, Graham, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000

Wotherspoon, Garry, *City of the Plain: History of a Gay Sub-Culture*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1991

'What's on in Bowen this weekend', *Bowen Independent*, 5 May 2006, p12.

'Your Opinion: The fall of Parramatta', *The Parramatta Advertiser*, 29

## Notes

[1] Massey, Doreen, *Space, Place and Gender*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 120

[2] Chauncey, George, 'Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets', In *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, edited by Joel Sanders, 224-260. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, p224

[3] Wotherspoon, Garry, *City of the Plain: History of a Gay Sub-Culture*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1991, p70

[4] Ibid., p158

[5] Knopp, Lawrence, 'Sexuality and Urban Space: Gay Male Identity Politics in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.' In *Cities of Difference*, Ruth Fincher and Jane M. Jacobs (eds), p149-176. New York: Guilford Press, 1998, p167

[6] Warner, Michael, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002, p. 25

[7] Fraser, Vicki, 'Gay Ghettos for the New Millenium: Oxford Street meets Mogenic.com and the question of queer space', conference paper, *Queer Space: Centres and Peripheries*, University of Technology, Sydney, 2007, p1

[8] Knopp, op. cit., p154

[9] Croome, Rodney, 'Review of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*', [WWW Document] URL [http://www.rodneycroome.id.au/other\\_more?id=64\\_0\\_2\\_M11](http://www.rodneycroome.id.au/other_more?id=64_0_2_M11), (visited 1 Jun 2009)

[10] 'Who's Who: Ron Austin', website of the Pride History Group, [http://www.pridehistorygroup.org.au/modules.php?op=modload&name=PagEd&file=index&to\\_pic\\_id=34&page\\_id=19&ppart=3#section3](http://www.pridehistorygroup.org.au/modules.php?op=modload&name=PagEd&file=index&to_pic_id=34&page_id=19&ppart=3#section3), accessed 20 Jun 2009

[11] Dubose, Martha. 'Absorbing work on gay lifestyles.' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 Jul 1978, p6.

- [12] Peach, Ricardo, 'Queer Cinema as a Fifth Cinema in South Africa and Australia', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Technology, Sydney, 2005, p215
- [13] Franklyn, Lee, 'Word is Out - Now!' *Campaign: Exploring your lifestyle*, May 1978, p3.
- [14] Cinema listing, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 Jul 1978, p39
- [15] 'Gay rights are human rights: five films on gays (advertisement)', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 Jun 1979, p48
- [16] Cinema listing, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Aug 1978, p23
- [17] 'Stonewall Week,' *Oxford Weekender News*, 9 Jun 1983, 1.
- [18] Monaghan, David. 'Council's film ban may lead to court.' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 Jun 1983, p2
- [19] Ibid, p2
- [20] Ibid., p2
- [21] 'Parramatta Council cancels out,' *Campaign Australia*, July 1983, p4.
- [22] McWilliam, Kelly, 'We're Here All Week: Public Formation and the Brisbane Queer Film Festival', *Queensland Review*, Vol 14 No 2, 2007, p79-91, p86
- [23] 'Stonewall Week', *Oxford Weekender News*, Issues 61, 9 Jun 1983, p1
- [24] 'How the West was Won', *Oxford Weekender News*, Issue 63, 30 Jun 1983, p1
- [25] Monaghan, op. cit., p2
- [26] 'Your Opinion: The fall of Parramatta', *The Parramatta Advertiser*, 29 Jun 1983, p4
- [27] Watt, Bill. 'Nile Demands Gay Travel Ban: Proposals to halt spread of disease.' *Daily Telegraph*, 24 Jun 1983, p3.
- [28] Chauncey, George, op. cit., p225

[29] Brickell, Chris, "Heroes and Invaders: gay and lesbian pride parades and the public/private distinction in New Zealand Media Accounts", *Gender, Place & Culture*, Vol 6, No 2, p166

[30] Willett, Graham, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, p162

[31] Ibid., p164

[32] Boucher, Leigh, and Sarah Pinto. "I Ain't Queer": Love, Masculinity and History in *Brokeback Mountain*', *Journal of Men's Studies* 15, no. 3 (2007), p314

[33] Ibid., p312

[34] Ibid., p319

[35] Cuming, Angela and Sams, Christine, 'Gay cowboy cinema snub – Heath Ledger's Oscar-nominated role judged too sophisticated for millions of Australians', *The Sun-Herald*, 5 Feb 2006, p3

[36] 'Rodeo tryst voted out', *The Macarthur Chronicle*, 7 Feb 2006, p3

[37] Cuming, Angela and Sams, Christine, op. cit., p3

[38] Rushbrook, Dereka. 'Cities, Queer Space, and the Cosmopolitan Tourist', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 1-2 (2002), p190

[39] Devine, Miranda, 'Gay cowboy movie a chick flick with a whiff of misogyny', *The Sun Herald*, 5 Mar 2006, p15

[40] Edwards, Russell, 'Your View: Blokes in the Badlands', *The Sun Herald*, 12 Mar 2006, p30

[41] Edwards, Russell, 'Letters to the Editor: Misogyny mountain', *The Australian*, 9 Mar 2006, p13

[42] Goldbaum, John, 'Your View: Miranda misses the mark', *The Sun Herald*, 12 Mar 2006, p30

[43] 'Gay cowboys film sad story for local screens', *Bowen Independent*, 18 Jan 2006, p3

[44] Russell, Patrick, 'Letters to the editor: Gay film no shows, but ...', *Bowen Independent*, 25 Jan 2006, p2

[45] 'Brokeback set for screening', *Bowen Independent*, 17 Mar 2006, p7

[46] 'Gleanings: Cowboy movie', *Bowen Independent*, 3 May 2006, p4

[47] 'What's on in Bowen this weekend', *Bowen Independent*, 5 May 2006, p12

[48] 'Gleanings: Surprise hit', *Bowen Independent*, 12 May 2006, p4

[49] Knopp, op. cit., p151

[50] Cosic, Miriam, 'Ultra-selective moral crusaders', *The Australian*, 13 Jan 1006, p13

### **Biographical Note**

Scott McKinnon is a doctoral student at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Contact Scott: [scott.j.mckinnon@student.uts.edu.au](mailto:scott.j.mckinnon@student.uts.edu.au)